

Abilene Chamber of Commerce

88th Texas Legislature

PRIORITIES

The mission of the Abilene Chamber of Commerce is to develop and promote the economic growth and quality of life in the Abilene area. The Abilene Chamber and its 1,300+ members believe free enterprise and job creation are the solution for creating a higher quality of life for Abilene residents. The Abilene Chamber, on behalf of its members and affiliates, will pursue a pro-growth agenda that creates an environment that encourages job growth, population growth and entrepreneurship.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Abilene must continue to be a leader in the State of Texas in developing the key infrastructure to attract, grow and retain quality jobs. We will do this by having innovative programs to offer new businesses and industries, programs to encourage existing businesses to retain and expand workforces, programs that tie education to workforce needs and tax structures that do not stand as barriers to economic development but create a pro-business environment.

Workforce Economic Development

- Support innovative and flexible career and technology education pathways in conjunction with public schools and community colleges, where appropriate, to meet the needs of Texas employers
- Support legislative efforts to provide incentives to encourage business participation in education and workforce development initiatives.
- Support access to quality and affordable childcare.
- Support measures that give school districts the financial flexibility to meet the needs of their students.
- Support investment in rural Texas, including growing our state's broadband infrastructure.
- Support efforts to expand access to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) in K-12 grades and offer rigorous high school STEAM courses, including computer coding. Support teacher advancement initiatives, like differentiated pay, to help alleviate the shortage of STEAM teachers in our public schools. The Abilene Chamber recognizes the extreme importance of access to STEAM courses for the quality of education now and for our workforce in the future.
- Support legislation that strengthens accountability on career and technology money allocation. Support requiring districts that receive funding for career and technology to offer courses that prepare students with a blend of on-site or virtual on-site training, based on their needs of curriculum delivery. Support increased funding for online curriculum and online testing.
- Support industry-aligned early college models, like Industry Cluster Innovative Academies including P-TECH, that include career guidance, mentoring, and applied learning opportunities.

- Community colleges should be supported in maximizing the use of dual-credit courses and other creative partnerships with high schools and four-year universities. The Texas State Technical College System, with its effective pay for performance model, is worthy of support and replication in other systems.

Rural Economic Development

- Support state-appropriated economic development funds for rural areas. Also, support the Texas Agriculture Finance Authority (TAFA) at its current funding level to finance economic development activities in rural areas and streamline TAFA to make it more "user-friendly."
- Support production of adequate supplies of all forms of energy at competitive prices.

Tax Related Issues

- Support legislation that would give economic developers a wide range of tools to use to enhance efforts to attract new businesses and industries and to encourage retention and expansion of existing firms.
- Support continued use of a locally approved ½-cent sales tax collected by cities to fund economic development efforts.
- Oppose efforts to reduce local control of these funds or efforts to limit the uses of these funds. Because these funds are local funds, taxpayers should retain the right to manage their use so long as they are used for local economic development purposes.
- Support efforts to clarify that the purpose of the sales tax funds is to serve as economic development tools, including education and workforce training.

TEXAS 2050 Plan

- Support TEXAS 2050: A Framework for Long-Term Economic Growth in order to continue the level of economic development success that Texas has had in recent years. The plan, developed and endorsed by a broad range of statewide business groups, includes taking a long-term view of human capital, investment capital, innovation, education, tools to compete and infrastructure.

EDUCATION

Abilene is a hub for education for the Big Country area. Our Pre-K-12 public schools prepare students for careers or further education opportunities. The city is home of Abilene Christian University, Hardin-Simmons University, McMurry University, Cisco College, Texas State Technical College-West Texas and Texas Tech University's Health Science Center Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy and Public Health.

Higher Education

- Support an appropriation request made by Abilene Christian University to construct and operate an advanced nuclear reactor in Abilene for the development of safe, reliable and commercial electricity generation in Texas.
- Support funding TSTC's signature Returned-Value Funding Model at a minimum performance-based commission of 36%, the rate the Legislature initially implemented when the formula was first enacted during the 83rd Regular Session, in

recognition that consistently honoring the commission continuously incentivizes high rates of job placement in high demand fields paying high salaries

- Support expansion of TSTC's commercial driver's license program, both by growing existing CDL programs and standing up new ones, to meet the state's transportation needs; (This one is already in the works for the Abilene Campus, but additional funding will help to grow the program)
- Support establishment of sustainable capital funding for TSTC
- Support growing TSTC programming and campuses, generally, to meet the burgeoning workforce needs of Texas
- Support critical items for the Texas Tech University System, particularly for anything related to the Health Science Center in Abilene, which trains students as nurses, pharmacists and public health workers
- Support increases in the Texas Equalization Grant Program.

ARTS & TOURISM

Abilene is a leader in the attraction of tourism and the development of the arts. Tourism is a key economic development program, and the arts and other quality of life enhancements are becoming increasingly important in the retention and attraction of people to the community. As such, the Abilene Chamber will encourage the development and improvement of facilities that enhance the city's efforts to expand these efforts as an effective economic development strategy.

Arts

- Support high-quality arts education and learning in all schools through the employment of certified arts education teachers and partnerships with community arts organizations. Maintain current fine arts education requirements.
- Protect use of Municipality Hotel Occupancy Tax (HOT) to fund the arts.
- Encourage municipalities that levy the HOT to maximize the full, allowable 15% arts allocation.
- Support securing COVID-19 Relief Funds from the \$1.8 billion distributed to communities and counties with fewer than 500,000 residents and the \$3.2 billion distributed directly to cities and counties with populations greater than 500,000 residents.
- Promote the important role the legislature's investment of public resources in the arts plays in the vitality, economic health, and civic pride of communities all across Texas.
- Support and promote the Texas Commission on the Art's Cultural & Fine Arts District Program for the strong role it plays in harnessing the power of cultural resources to stimulate economic development and community revitalization.
- Support bills filed that increase transparency of MHOT and County HOT reporting to the Texas Office of the Comptroller.
- Support the Texas Commission on the Arts "Exceptional Item" to increase funding for the Arts Organization Grant by \$3 million.
Support the Texas Commission on the Arts "Exceptional Item" to increase funding for the Cultural District grant program by \$5 million

Tourism

- Preserve full funding for state tourism promotion (Office of the Governor, Economic Development and Tourism). State tourism promotion is a self-funded program with a dedicated funding source – 1/12 of the state hotel occupancy tax (HOT).
- Maintain school start date law (4th Monday in August) and proactively seek to eliminate exemptions and waivers.
- Ensure dedicated HOT funds are used for their intended purposes.
- Preserve the Event Trust Funds. Abilene will be applying for these funds to attract national events to the Taylor County Expo Center and Youth Sports facility.
- Preserve state funding for beneficial travel and tourism programs at Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas Historical Commission (THC), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA).
- Support comprehensive transportation infrastructure planning and support (Move Texas Forward coalition).
- Support policies which enhance workforce development.
- Support collection of local hotel occupancy tax on AirBnB's and other online lodging brokers.

MILITARY/VETERANS

Abilene will continue to be a leader in the United States in its support of the military. The Abilene Chamber supports continued local funding of mission support and will continue to provide support for local troops and their families. Additionally, the Abilene Chamber will support its Military Affairs Committee in all federal, state and local initiatives to protect and enhance and expand missions for Dyess Air Force Base.

- Enhance legislation that assists Texas military families by reducing barriers to full employment by authorizing reciprocity agreements for professional certifications and licensures by eliminating the “substantially” language in S.B. 1200 from the 86th Regular Session.
- Support legislation to limit unwanted commerce and activities near a military installation.
- Appropriate money for the Defense Economic Adjustment Assistance Grant (DEEAG) program to fund military value projects that strengthen Texas military installations.
- Support legislation to expand Texas Military Value Revolving Loan Fund opportunities through additional funding.
- Support legislation that improves workforce development programs for military personnel and veterans.
- Support legislation and regulatory reforms that accelerate and advance the seamless transition of our Texas Veterans into the Texas workforce. These efforts should maintain an emphasis on providing more accelerated skills attainment and certification solutions, while scaling post-secondary efforts that convey more college credit for prior learning and occupational experience with a focus on high demand occupational needs.
- Encourage state agencies and local governmental entities to enter into mutually beneficial Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSA) with military installations to provide services and goods (at market rates). Examples could be solid waste services on base by a city, or TxDOT providing street/road maintenance services on base, at a normal financial rate.

BUSINESS & TRANSPORTATION

The Abilene Chamber will work to maintain a probusiness environment that allows West Texas employers and business owners to thrive. Any regulatory change that adversely impacts business should be pursued only as a last resort after all free-market solutions have been tried and only after a reasonable cost/benefit analysis shows economic growth will not be adversely affected

- Support designing and constructing of a new ramp at Abilene Regional Airport to park, fuel and load Texas Forest Service aircraft.
- Support efforts to keep Texas a right-to-work state and oppose agency shop legislation.
- Support free-market principles for the corporate sale of liquor. Texas is the only state in the nation that disallows publicly traded companies from selling liquor.
- Oppose legislation that would make private entities subject to open records laws or force the release of proprietary information in governmental entities' contracts with businesses.
- Oppose any legislation that would alter the Texas Franchise Laws affecting direct sales to consumers by manufacturing companies (for example, automotive sales), except laws which already exist.
- Uphold Texas' prohibition of the direct sales of vehicles to consumers.
- Maintain franchise tax relief for small business.
- Support any and all measures that add access to Abilene through major transportation corridors, particularly in light of regional growth opportunities.
- Support improved highways, ports of entry and other infrastructure that facilitates trade, increases the effective flow of goods and services, promotes tourism, and increases public safety wherever these improvements can improve economic opportunity and state productivity.
- Support the continued use of public-private partnerships and reauthorizing the use of Comprehensive Development Agreements (CDAs). Enhance mechanisms that allow project sponsors to access private capital to supplement state or local funds to build infrastructure. We also support efforts to remove statutory or legislative restrictions or limitations on the number or nature of local comprehensive development projects where there is local support for such projects that address local or regional transportation needs.
- Oppose efforts to mandate workers' compensation coverage.
- Oppose legislation that imposes new laws or regulations on employers that are nonsubscribers to workers' compensation.
- Support and preserve the current regulatory structure that prevents lawsuits against employers and property owners who provide workers' compensation insurance.

HEALTHCARE & HUMAN SERVICES

As a healthcare hub for the region, Abilene's medical facilities and practices are vital to its growth. The Abilene Chamber supports a variety of measures to strengthen healthcare and human services.

- Support legislation establishing both statewide and Taylor County Local Provider Participation Funds (LPPFs). This program provides much-needed funding of services to Medicaid patients.
- Support establishment of community college programs to get more nurses onto the hospital floors. A coalition of Hendrick Medical Center, Texas Tech University Health Science Center and Cisco College would enhance nursing teacher pay and speed the education process to get professionals working in hospital and clinic settings more quickly.

- Support Family Code legislation, brought by Christian Homes of Abilene, to simplify the child adoption process.

WATER

Access to reliable water resources continues to be a key issue for many Texas communities to maintain job and population growth. Abilene must continue to develop long-term and short-term strategies for securing resources.

The Abilene Chamber supports the exploration of new and evolving options, including:

- Desalination of brackish ground, surface and sea water
- Aquifer storage and recovery
- Conjunctive uses of ground and surface water
- Innovative reuse and conservation technologies
- Broadening water markets through the involvement of the private sector

In examining any new legislative proposals to promote alternative or innovative water supply strategies, the Abilene Chamber will:

- Oppose efforts to alter the existing structure of water rights laws in Texas in any matter that would weaken the legal and property interest of existing holders of water rights.
- Monitor the implementation of any programs to increase or enhance the enforcement of water rights, including new watermaster jurisdictions, to ensure that existing water rights are protected and that any costs of new enforcement programs clearly reflect the value of the resource and the fair allocation of costs among water rights holders.
- Oppose any efforts to modify or weaken the status of senior water rights as defined by the courts.

AGRICULTURE

The Abilene Chamber supports agricultural businesses and individuals, providing the food and fiber for the United States and the World. Agriculture in the Big Country is a \$1 billion enterprise, by far one of the largest sectors of our economy.

- Support continued funding of the Texas Boll Weevil Eradication Foundation and its successful efforts in eliminating the pest enemy of cotton.
- Support the Texas Department of Agriculture through adequate funding to ensure fulfillment of existing statutory duties.
- Support programs that aid in the economic development of rural communities.
- Support expansion of affordable broadband service to rural Texas.
- Support the Go Texan marketing program, encouraging consumers purchase Texas-grown and Texas-produced products.