

HARVEY KRONBERG'S QUORUM REPORT

TEXAS POLITICS REPORTING SINCE 1981

PO BOX 8 AUSTIN, TEXAS 78767

VOICE: 512.292.8191

EMAIL: KRONBERG@QUORUMREPORT.COM

[Close this Page](#)

[Print this Page](#)

July 14, 2025 3:08 PM

Kronberg: Legislative assault on local control undermines emergency response capacity

Disaster victims should not be held hostage to vacuous political ideologues choosing war with cities and counties rather than collaboration with them. The outcome is there for all to see.

*"Any mayor, county judge that was dumb ass enough to come meet with me, I told them with great clarity, my goal is for this to be the worst session in the history of the Legislature for cities and counties" – Then-Speaker **Dennis Bonnen** to **Michael Quinn Sullivan**,*

Citing that now infamous quote is not particularly intended to offend the former speaker. Instead, it perfectly encapsulates the zeitgeist of the past decade of Republican legislative leadership towards cities and counties. State preemption of local control hit a high-water mark with now-Speaker **Dustin Burrows** so-called **Death Star** bill and has been followed by any number of efforts to expand those preemptions and undermine local officials' to prepare and to react.

These images are seared into our collective memory: Homes submerged in the wake of **Hurricane Harvey**, the deadly cold and dark of **Winter Storm Uri**, and just this month, the tragic flash floods that devastated communities in the **Texas Hill Country**. For Texans, natural disasters aren't a matter of "if," but "when."

While the **Texas Department of Emergency Management** response to the flooding in **Kerr County** was robust, the harsh truth is local communities bear the brunt of these increasingly frequent and severe events. Recent legislative actions have demonstrably hampered their ability to adequately prepare and respond, ultimately putting lives and property at greater risk.

This isn't merely an abstract debate about fiscal policy. It is a tangible threat to every Texan.

With Kerr County flooding as the backdrop to the special session, it will be interesting to see if leadership's attitudes towards local control have been impacted the reach of the TV cameras that will be monitoring the hearings for action. One of the most significant impediments comes in the form of a financial leash.

While **House Bill 30** introduces a more transparent "disaster debris rate" for documented post-disaster cleanup costs, it also notably repealed a previous provision that allowed local governments to exceed the voter-approval tax rate without an election in the year *following* a declared disaster. While the old rule may have had its flaws, its removal, without fully compensating mechanisms for

immediate, broad-spectrum recovery needs ties the hands of local governments dealing with disasters. It's a reform that for some localities in practice become more of a restriction.

But perhaps the most damning evidence of the legislature's short-sightedness comes from *failed opportunities*.

Consider the fate of **House Bill 13** from the 89th session. This vital piece of legislation sought to create a statewide grant program to improve local disaster warning systems and enhance communication infrastructure. It was inspired by devastating wildfires and designed to prevent the very kind of loss we just witnessed. Yet, despite the clear and present danger, HB 13 did not even receive a hearing in the Senate.

The events in Kerr County tragically underscore this failure. It's a bitter irony that concerns over the "cost" of proactive measures ultimately led to a far greater human and economic toll in disaster recovery going forward.

Although it failed to pass this session, the ongoing Republican war against local governments was further demonstrated in **House Bill 19**. While proponents applauded it as a measure for "fiscal accountability," HB 19 would have severely restricted local governments' ability to issue debt and raise property tax revenue. It would have capped annual debt service at a mere 20% of the average property tax collections over the preceding three years. It would have also limited local bond and tax rate increase elections exclusively to the November uniform election date, potentially delaying crucial infrastructure projects needed for mitigation.

More critically, HB 19 would have placed significant new restrictions on *Certificates of Obligation (COs)*, a common tool for cities and counties to finance essential public works without a lengthy bond election process. By shortening maturity periods, increasing the number of signatures required for protest petitions, and narrowing the allowable purposes for COs, the legislature attempted to erect new hurdles for local leaders attempting to fund immediate needs like drainage improvements, emergency facility upgrades, or even basic repair infrastructure. When a city needs to quickly reinforce a levee or upgrade a critical water pump station in a flood-prone area, these newfound bureaucratic tangles and financial limitations may mean the difference between proactive protection and reactive disaster.

And let's not forget the astonishing fact that Texas has left hundreds of millions in federal hazard mitigation grant money on the table.

Over the past decade, Texas has **relinquished \$225 million** in federal funds specifically intended for disaster protection. Furthermore, of the \$820 million Texas received after Hurricane Harvey, then-Land Commissioner **George P Bush** left **\$505 million unspent** nearly eight years later (and that doesn't reflect his refusal to allocate funds to Harris County).

This isn't a funding problem from Washington; it's a character problem in Austin. It represents a massive lost opportunity to build critical resilience *before* disasters strike, forcing communities into far more expensive and devastating post-disaster recoveries.

Finally, it should not go unnoted that the Governor has once again put a ban on “taxpayer-funded lobbying” on the special session agenda. While a favorite of Republican party convention-goers, this attempt to silence speech on behalf of duly-elected officials would severely hamper advocacy on behalf of city and county voters.

The poster child for opposing a taxpayer-funded lobbying ban is now Kerr County Rep. **Wes Virdell**, who voted against HB 13. Advocates of prohibiting local governments from hiring lobbyists argue say that local reps and senators should speak for their districts. But that amounts to very little for communities of interest. Thanks to the miracles of modern redistricting, elections are decided in a primary election in which increasing numbers of policy makers fear the inflamed “grassroots” more than they do the broader electorate that turns out in general elections.

Rep. Virdell’s vote reflected an ideology, not a constituency.

The legislature often champions "local control," yet in the critical arena of emergency management funding and mandates, this philosophy appears selectively applied. Local leaders, who are closest to the ground and best understand their communities' unique vulnerabilities, too often find their hands tied by state-level policies that seem to prioritize abstract fiscal constraints over the immediate, life-saving needs of their constituents.

We are not holding our breath, but it’s time for a critical re-evaluation.

Policymakers must shift from a reactive "clean up after the mess" approach to a proactive "prevent and mitigate" strategy.

Disaster victims should not be held hostage to vacuous political ideologues choosing war with cities and counties rather than collaboration with them. The outcome is there for all to see.

By Harvey Kronberg

IID 32747

© Copyright July 14, 2025, Harvey Kronberg, www.quorumreport.com, All rights are reserved