

Millions for UT Austin research in limbo after budget proposals



By [Phil Prazan](#) Published: January 26, 2017, 7:37 pm Updated: January 27, 2017, 4:37 am

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J.J. Pickle Research Campus (KXAN Photo)

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AUSTIN (KXAN) — Millions of state research dollars will not flow to the University of Texas at Austin if a proposed Texas budget becomes law. When the State Senate announced its first

form of the next two year budget, more than \$500 million were not there from the year before for “special items” across Texas higher education. Thursday, university leaders made their case to key lawmakers to keep many programs.

Low oil prices and dedicating money to highway upkeep caused the 2018-19 budget to be billions of dollars short of the 2016-17 budget. State Comptroller Glen Hegar announced lawmakers will decide what to do with \$104.9 billion. Two years ago, it was \$113 billion.

The Senate proposed budget eliminates all “special items,” unique programs universities use to attract graduate students and faculty. The money each university is allocated per student remains stable.

\$3.76 million for the McDonald Observatory in West Texas is not funded. Almost \$6 million for two programs at the JJ Pickle Research Campus is not funded; the Bureau of Economic Geology and the Institute for Geophysics. The Marine Science Institute in Port Aransas, around \$2.5 million, is not in the proposal.

“The funding for these special items allows UT to operate world class programs in areas that aren’t covered by formula funding,” said UT Austin President Greg Fenves to the Senate Finance Committee. “From oil and gas research to the analysis of natural disasters, to the scientific exploration of the earth and deep space, these programs make vital contributions to our state.”

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Fenves described how these state funds help leverage around \$53 million coming outside of the state budget.

Chairwoman of the Senate Finance Committee Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, said in tough times the state will act just like a household budget. “You have to look at the things you have to pay for, your needs. And if you’ve got extra money, you add on your wants,” said Sen. Nelson, explaining over and over to university leaders that the proposal was “a starting point.”

She created a special work group to look at more than 350 special programs across state universities to decide if Texas can do without them. She describes her focus to be student centered; focusing on the classroom instruction.

‘And there are some things, some programs that were close to my heart that we just can’t afford to do this session,’ said Sen. Nelson.

In the weeks ahead, university leaders will make their case that other programs are crucial to the state. The “special items” will be major sticking points as the House and the Senate agree on a single budget at the end of the session.

The Texas House does not cut the programs, but their proposed budget is over the amount the state will be able to spend this session.

If the University System wants to continue the programs without state aid it's likely leaders would have to raise tuition or reach out to donors with big pockets willing to give. The majority of higher education funding comes from two places, the state and tuition students pay to attend class.

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