

# THE BOND BUYER

## Texas cuts red tape for issuers amid pandemic uncertainty

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's partial suspension of the Open Meetings Law has allowed the bond industry to proceed with upcoming issues, though many have been sidelined by market turmoil, according to industry executives.

"That's been very helpful," said Carol Pumbo, partner at McCall Parkhurst & Horton, the state's leading bond counsel firm, adding that bond lawyers and disclosure counsel are still uncertain about procedure in the crisis atmosphere.

"Everybody's trying to get their mind around what's going on," said Pumbo, who advises the state on bond issues. "It's obviously a strange time, and we'll have to see how things evolve."



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Like other states, Texas is trying to deal with a COVID-19 pandemic when the full dimensions of the crisis are not yet known.

On Thursday, Abbott will hold a televised town hall meeting with other state officials to address issues facing the state amid the pandemic.

"We are aggressively working to expand our COVID-19 testing capabilities, protect the most vulnerable populations, and ensure that health care professionals and all Texans have access to the supplies and resources they need," Abbott said in announcing the meeting.

Under statewide emergency provisions, government officials do not have to convene in a physical space and can conduct business over the phone or online.

In a move that could affect local bond measures, Abbott also announced that local governments could suspend May 2 elections until the general election Nov. 3.

The Fort Worth suburb of Southlake is among the cities that have bonds on the May 2 ballot along with general city elections. So, far the city has made no decision on postponing the vote.

"The situation is so fluid that we're taking a look at that," a spokeswoman for the city said, noting that the city council had postponed its next two scheduled meetings.

Amarillo is asking voters to approve \$275 million of bonds less than four years after a similar proposal was rejected. But the city council has not considered yet whether to postpone the election.

For Texas school districts, the decision whether to postpone is especially tricky, as many schools are not expected to hold classes.

In New Braunfels near San Antonio, the Comal Independent School District has \$397.7 million on the May 2 bond ballot. No change in the election date has been announced, as the board has not had a chance to meet. The district has suspended classes through April 2.

On Wednesday, Comal County announced its first case of COVID-19 as county officials issued a disaster declaration good for seven days.

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In the West Texas college town of Lubbock, the board of Lubbock Independent School District decided in a teleconference to delegate emergency authority to the superintendent for 45 days. The authority is designed to allow the superintendent “to react to the situations that may be present in the district during the state-declared disaster period in order to mitigate the public health risks of COVID-19.”

LISD Superintendent Kathy Rollo proposed extending spring break by one week, during which students would receive online instruction. Principals will get guidelines for their staff and will decide who will come in and who will work from home. “We need the staff to come in so we can make some plans,” Rollo said.

In the Dallas ISD, a middle school student was diagnosed with the COVID-19 virus on the Friday before the district closed classes for spring break. No further infections have been reported.

Texas Education Agency commissioner Mike Morath announced that standardized testing had been delayed and that the agency was working with districts on distance learning and other issues.

“TEA has already waived a host of regulations, allowing schools to quickly pivot to provide instruction and support in ways they never have before,” Morath said in a statement.