

BILL ANALYSIS

H.B. 695
By: Martinez
Higher Education
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Rio Grande Valley is one of the fastest-growing regions in Texas, as well as the United States. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most underserved areas of the state in regards to legal education and legal representation, as the nearest law schools are located in San Antonio, Austin, and Houston. A study conducted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board identified South Texas as a viable site for a new public law school given that the region's ratio of lawyers to the general population is disproportionately low compared to the state average. H.B. 695 seeks to increase the opportunity for students in the Rio Grande Valley to attend law school by providing for the establishment of a public law school in the region.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

H.B. 695 amends the Education Code to authorize the governing board of a university system to establish and operate a law school in Cameron County or Hidalgo County. The bill authorizes the governing board to do the following:

- in administering the law school, to prescribe courses leading to customary degrees offered at other leading American law schools, and to award those degrees;
- to assign responsibility for the law school's management to a general academic teaching institution in the system; and
- to accept and administer gifts and grants from any person or entity for the law school's use and benefit.

The bill subjects the establishment of the law school to funding availability, either through appropriation or from another source, but prohibits the appropriation of state funds for that purpose for a state fiscal biennium ending on or before August 31, 2027.

H.B. 695 requires the governing board of a university system that intends to establish a law school under the bill's provisions to notify the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and requires the THECB, if it receives more than one such notification, to determine based on certain criteria which of the governing boards may establish a law school. The bill requires the applicable governing board, before doing so, to request that the THECB prepare a feasibility study to determine the actions the system must take to obtain accreditation of the law school. The bill requires the THECB to deliver a copy of the study to the governing board and to the chair of each legislative standing committee with jurisdiction over higher education.

EFFECTIVE DATE

On passage, or, if the bill does not receive the necessary vote, September 1, 2021.