

SUBJECT: Revising qualifications for membership on the Texas Veterans Commission

COMMITTEE: Government Reform — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 4 ayes — Swinford,, Callegari, Casteel, T. Smith

0 nays

3 absent — Allen, R. Cook, Gallego

WITNESSES: None

BACKGROUND: The Texas Veterans Commission helps veterans and their dependents and survivors receive the state and federal benefits to which they are entitled. The commission also trains and certifies county officers who provide services to veterans, distributes information about veterans benefits, and assists other state agencies with services or resources directed toward veterans. The agency has regional offices in Houston and Waco, with 27 field and hospital offices throughout Texas.

Government Code, sec. 434.003 governs membership on the commission, which includes six members appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the Senate. Members must be Texas residents. At least four members must have been honorably discharged or honorably released from active military service, and at least one member must be a disabled veteran. No two members may live in the same senatorial district, and not more than one member may be from a senatorial district composed of a single county.

In November 2001, voters amended the Texas Constitution, Art. 3, sec. 25, to require that the state be divided into senatorial districts of contiguous territory and that each district be entitled to elect one senator. Previously, the Constitution provided that a county was entitled to no more than one senator, but this provision had not been enforced for many years because it conflicted with federal equal-population requirements for legislative districts.

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DIGEST: HB 66 would delete the existing provision that not more than one member of the Texas Veterans Commission may be appointed from a senatorial district composed of a single county.

The bill would take effect November 1, 2003.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 66 would eliminate an obsolete provision that hinders the appointment of more than one Texas Veterans Commission member from a major population center of the state. Currently, three senatorial districts are wholly contained within Harris County, two within Dallas County, and one each within Bexar, Travis, Tarrant, and El Paso counties. The current law has been interpreted to mean that if an appointee lives in one of these nine districts, then the governor may not appoint another person who lives in any of these single-county districts. Another person from the same areas could be appointed merely because they live in a district that crosses a county line.

Amending the law would conform the Government Code with updated language in the Texas Constitution and would allow the governor to draw from a larger pool of eligible appointees from these major population centers. The limit of no more than one appointee per senatorial district would remain unchanged and help ensure regional balance on the commission.

OPPONENTS SAY: No apparent opposition.