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Voters to decide on Tier 1 funding in November

By GENE TRAINOR

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Voters statewide will have a say in whether Texas develops more top research universities on the level of the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station.

A referendum on the state's November ballot will ask voters whether to redirect money in the largely untouched Higher Education Fund toward creating Tier 1 schools. If it is approved, about \$425 million would be available, said state Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas.

The \$425 million would be part of a \$680 million package in a companion bill that sets up incentives for the state's seven designated "emerging" universities to become major research schools, Branch said. He helped sponsor that Tier 1 bill, which is awaiting the governor's review.

The University of Texas at Arlington, the University of North Texas and the University of Texas at Dallas are in the running to become the next Tier 1 school. Supporters say having a major university in Fort Worth-Dallas could create thousands of jobs through research and technology developed at the schools that is then spun off to area companies.

The other emerging schools are Texas Tech University in Lubbock, the University of Houston, the University of Texas at El Paso and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

UT-Arlington President James Spaniolo and UNT President Gretchen Bataille said they are pleased with the legislation.

But Spaniolo estimated that it would take about a decade to determine which universities are on target to become the next Tier 1 titan.

"It is not a guarantee of anything," Spaniolo said of the legislation. "But it gives the seven emerging research institutions the chance to compete to earn resources that will help them pursue major research university status."

What is Tier 1?

An institution typically achieves Tier 1 status by spending more than \$100 million a year on research; offering doctoral degrees in at least 50 academic areas; doing well in national rankings, such as *U.S. News & World Report's* America's Best Colleges report; and being a member of the Association of American Universities, the club for the 62 leading research institutions in the United States and Canada.

In Texas, only UT-Austin, Texas A&M in College Station and Rice University in Houston have that status.

Branch lamented that the intense competition to get into UT-Austin shows the need for more nationally ranked schools in Texas. Otherwise, Texas will continue to lose thousands of outstanding students to out-of-state schools, he said.

If voters approve the \$425 million referendum, schools would be eligible for the funding if they spend at least \$45 million a year on research and are designated an emerging university, according to the companion bill.

They must also meet four of six additional criteria, ranging from having a \$400 million endowment to awarding 200 doctorates a year.

The Higher Education Fund, which the money would be drawn from, was created in 1984 and 1993 to allow universities to buy land, upgrade buildings and buy materials, state officials said.

The bill that sets up the Tier 1 system now goes to Gov. Rick Perry for his signature. Perry supports adding more top research schools but cannot commit to signing the bill until he reads the final version, said his spokeswoman Katherine Cesinger.

Branch said he is ecstatic about the overall outcome.

"It's a game changer for Texas and for higher education for Texas," he said.

Tier 1 The Legislature has set up a \$680 million package that would allow seven state-designated "emerging" universities to become the next major research institution. They include UT-Arlington, UNT and UT-Dallas. The funding would be set up as

follows:

\$425 million. Voters will be asked in November whether to redirect money in the state Higher Education Fund to creating Tier 1 institutions. To compete, a university would have to spend at least \$45 million a year on research and be designated an emerging institution. It would also need to fulfill four of the six criteria: Award at least 200 doctorates a year; be recognized for scholarship and research; have an endowment of at least \$400 million; have high-achieving freshman classes; have a high-quality faculty; and have excellent graduate schools. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board would define the criteria, such as for a high-achieving freshman class.

\$126 million. Research University Development Fund. The seven emerging universities and UT-Austin and Texas A&M can compete for this matching money. The money would be awarded based on how much money the schools spend on research.

\$80 million. Texas Centers of Excellence Fund. Money would be awarded based on the number of at-risk students enrolled, graduation rates and degrees awarded to students majoring in math, science, engineering, nursing and other high-need fields.

\$50 million. Texas Research Incentives Program. This program would be open only to emerging universities. Grants would be awarded based on the money a school raises for research and faculty recruitment. A school that receives at least \$2 million would get a 100 percent match; a school that receives between \$100,000 and \$999,999 would get a 50 percent match.

Source: State Rep. Dan Branch