

Legislator slams Galveston County indigent care decision

By WES SWIFT | Posted: Friday, July 12, 2013 12:20 am

A key state lawmaker wasted no time making known his displeasure with the Galveston County commissioners' recent decision to lower the threshold for indigent care, saying the decision violated a state law that provided funds to help the University of Texas Medical Branch rebuild after Hurricane Ike.

State Rep. Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, criticized the decision during a committee hearing Thursday at the state capital.

Turner said the county agreed in 2009 to raise the eligibility rate from 21 percent of the federal poverty level to 100 percent to secure funding to rebuild the medical branch campus, which was ravaged by Hurricane Ike in 2008.

The county's action last month, which lowered the eligibility rate to 35 percent, flew in the face of that agreement, he said.

"It's not just an agreement — it's the law," Turner said.

State Rep. Greg Bonnen, R-Friendswood, who also sits on the committee, said he thinks the county and state lawmakers can resolve their differences.

"I think we all care about caring for the indigent, and I think we can meet with (Turner) and resolve his concerns" Bonnen said.

Turner's comments came as the appropriations committee considered HB 5, a bill authorizing revenue bonds to build facilities for universities across the state. The bill includes \$40 million for UTMB to build a health education center.

The county's decision left Turner scratching his head.

"I'm not opposed to (the health center funding), but someone needs to help me understand why we should approve this \$40 million when we've already forwarded \$150 million in 2009 and they're not following the law," he said.

County commissioners in favor of lowering the threshold argued that keeping the eligibility at 100 percent was financially unsound. Indigent health care expenses drained available funding and forced the county to dip into a reserve fund created by a tax hike dedicated to funding care for the poor.

Turner said he's talked to representatives from UTMB and received an email from County

Commissioner Ryan Dennard outlining the financial reasons behind the decision. While he understood the commissioners' reasoning, Turner said they were told by one of their own members, Commissioner Stephen Holmes, that approving the measure would violate state law — and proceeded regardless. The proper protocol, he said, would have been to approach the legislature and seek a change through the law.

“I have yet to talk to anyone from (the Galveston County area) that can justify this action,” Turner said. “I can't tell anyone what to do, but we all have an obligation to follow the law.”