The quiet race for speaker of state House
It's one of Texas' big power positions, but winning it isn't easy -- and if you lose, look out

BYLINE: Dave McNeely, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Before the March 12 primary elections, all cameras were focused on the hot Democratic race for governor. And then in the April 9 runoff, they were on the race for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate.

But out of the view of the cameras, another quiet contest was, and still is, going on all over the state -- to determine who will be the next speaker of the Texas House of Representatives.

Part of the process is choosing the choosers. While many of the 150 people who will assemble in Austin in January to vote on a speaker are already known, some were being decided in the primary elections. Others are yet to be selected in the November general election.

Of them all, fewer than a third have ever been through the pressure cooker of a true hard-fought speaker's race.

Between now and January, their apparent choices are:

* The current speaker, Democrat Pete Laney of Hale Center, who has held the job since 1993.

* The House's longest-tenured Republican, Tom Craddick of Midland, who has wanted the job for most of the time Laney has held it.

* Some of the Republicans who hold committee chairmanships under Laney, such as Edmund Kuempel of Seguin or Brian McCall of Plano, who have balanced their desires to get the 76 votes necessary to be speaker with their loyalty to Laney.

"I'm really seeking to be everybody's second choice," McCall said diplomatically.

The presiding officer of the Senate, the lieutenant governor, is chosen in a statewide election. But the speaker is chosen by the House from among its members.

The position is one of the most powerful in the state. The speaker appoints committees and their chairmen and can have an impact on which bills are heard on the House floor.

The races used to occur every two to four years, when there was a tradition that no one would hold the job for more than two two-year terms.
But that was back when Texas also had two-year terms for statewide offices, and the speakership was viewed as a stepping stone to other statewide offices. Since Texas switched to four-year terms for most statewide officials in 1974, and since speakers have come to realize how much power they have, there have been just three speakers, all Democrats: Billy Clayton, Gib Lewis and Laney.

Laney was Clayton's chairman of the perk-controlling House Administration Committee, which oversees parking and office spaces, and was Lewis' chairman of the powerful State Affairs Committee.

Laney says his main goal after becoming speaker was to "put the House in a position where our kids and grandkids weren't reluctant to say their father or grandfather had served in the Legislature." And he wanted to be a members' speaker -- "to make sure everybody had their say, regardless of philosophy."

Speaker tensions

It has been a decade since the last speaker's race. These are grueling undertakings for the House members who go through them, because the members have to make some tough choices.

At the most, 42 of the 150 House members who will vote in January for a speaker were members of the Legislature during the last speaker's fight in 1992.

Rep. Clyde Alexander, D-Athens, was involved in that race but is retiring this year. "The big thing on your mind is survival," he said. "Your future is on your mind -- and pure paranoia -- balanced with your thought about what's best for the House and best for the state."

Many House members and lobbyists hate speaker races. It makes them choose sides. And for House members, their political future, at least in the House, could depend on picking the right horse.

Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin, was in the House before being elected to the Senate in 1984 and went through a couple of speaker races.

Whom you vote for can determine whether you get a chairmanship or vice-chairmanship, or at least an important committee, Barrientos said. He said he chose right in 1975 and got a relatively rare appointment as a freshman to the powerful appropriations committee.

Getting where the action is "can have a significant impact on the development of an issue you care about -- or the death of it," Barrientos said.

The spoils perhaps necessarily go to those who helped someone get elected. And those who didn't often are consigned to the back benches, at least for a time.

After winning the speakership in 1993 over Jim Rudd, a Democrat from Brownfield, Laney was more benign than some of his predecessors. Rudd, who served out his term after losing to Laney and then became a lobbyist, said he has been treated well by Laney.

In the past, losing candidates for speaker sometimes have had to move, if they could, to the Senate, statewide office or Congress -- or even leave the state for a few years -- before they could again have any clout in the Capitol.

Some legislators feel real or imagined pressure from campaign donors to either play along with the Craddick effort or lose support and influence and see their political careers sag.

Craddick did not return phone calls requesting an interview.

Texas bipartisanship
This will be the first real speaker’s race in which the Republican Party will be not just a major force -- there were 57 Republicans in the House in 1992 -- but a majority. The partisan lineup at the outset of the 2001 regular session was 78 Democrats and 72 Republicans.

In 2003, after redistricting controlled by the Republican-dominated Legislative Redistricting Board, there are expected to be at least 80 Republicans.

Some observers have thought having a Republican House majority makes the race a slam dunk for Craddick. Indeed, some Republicans thought loyal to Laney -- David Swinford of Dumas, John Smithee of Amarillo, Lois Kolkhorst of Brenham, Dennis Bonnen of Angetlon -- jumped ship early this spring and pledged to vote for Craddick.

They were convinced by their political consultant, Bryan Eppstein -- also a legislative lobbyist -- that Craddick was going to be the eventual winner and that it was time to get on board.

Eppstein, whose clients also include Craddick, Kuempel and McCall, said he concluded after several of Laney's key Democratic committee chairmen announced their retirements that there would be 82 Republicans in the next House.

"The party of the majority should, unless there's extenuating circumstances, have the opportunity to elect the speaker," Eppstein said. He said he told his clients -- including Kuempel and McCall -- that he thought the most likely victor is Craddick.

Republican Party delegates voted at their convention in early June to require their House members to agree to vote as a caucus for speaker, and to bind all the Republicans to vote for whomever the caucus chooses.

But the requirement has no force of law, and if it was designed to help Craddick, it backfired. Twenty-three Republican House members signed an open letter to newspapers saying they thought the requirement flew in the face of the bipartisan President George W. Bush lauded while he was governor. Before the convention ended, Craddick sent out a memo asking that the effort be halted.

"Any resolution passed by this body would be nonbinding and consequently irrelevant," Craddick's memo said. "I would never support abridging the right of any member to vote for the candidate that he or she feels is best qualified to be speaker of the House."

But the party passed it anyway. Craddick has pledged that if he's elected, he'll continue appointing members of both parties to chairmanships. But Laney backers warn that a Craddick speakership will result in dividing the House along party lines.

Laney and Craddick were friends when they attended Texas Tech University in Lubbock in the 1960s. But that friendship became strained over the past decade after Craddick worked, at first behind the scenes and then openly, to elect more Republicans, with an eye on replacing Laney as speaker with a Republican -- perhaps himself.

The normally patient Laney in 1999 finally busted Craddick from the chairmanship of the Ways and Means Committee he had appointed him to in 1993.

"When you have individuals who are trying to make this a partisan place and divide the aisle, and want to unseat you, it's hard to put much trust in their judgment," Laney said.

Some Austin lobbyists and Republican partisans have already declared Craddick the next speaker, but Laney appears unruffled and confident.

The Laney team has been buoyed that apparent attempts to help Craddick have backfired, including mailers by a group that targeted some Republicans who supported Laney. None of those Republicans lost their primary bids.
Laney's allies also are hoping a strong statewide Democratic ticket for the top of the ballot will help Democrats in close House races.

Meanwhile, Republican McCall is touring the state, courting members and candidates on both sides of the aisle -- though not challengers to incumbents.

"Anybody who wants to be speaker should have to go through this process," he says, "visiting every member in their district and looking at their district through their eyes. Nobody can understand the House like someone who's run for speaker -- getting to know each member, learning about each member. They want what's best for their district and for Texas."

dmcneely@statesman.com; 445-3644

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