LAST PROSE OF SUMMERS

Texas Legislature Faces Tax Problem

By DAVID HACKETT
(Note: Ed Summers is vacating his usual space to allow a guest columnist to present views on a matter of importance. He will return to his column next week.)

Every year the country boys gather in Austin to consider the problems of the great state of Texas. They come from the sparsely settled counties of West Texas, from the flat plains of the Panhandle, from the piney woods of East Texas and from the poverty-stricken counties of the Rio Grande Valley. In Austin they legislate for the people of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, and the handful of other cities that comprise one-half the state’s population.

Majorities
Although the thirteen urban counties represent half the population, the other 239 counties control both houses of the legislature by comfortable majorities. By a law passed in 1936 cities were limited to seven representatives up to 700,000 population, and one for each 100,000 after that. Harris county has eight representatives now, but would have been eligible for twelve in 1960.

They Got Scared
The country boys got scared though, because they realized they could not pass a law limiting population in cities. At first they tried to limit the cities to nine representatives, but this was amended to allow one representative for each 200,000 population over one million. This law will give Houston ten representatives in 1960.

Only by weighting their ballots even heavier were the country boys able to keep control. Now the country representative represents an average of 30,000 people, while the city man represents 50,000 to 100,000. Under the new law a Houston representative will represent 120,000 people.

Small Pay
A state representative must have a private source of income, since the pay is small, and only for sessions that are usually short. For this reason most of the representatives are small-

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town lawyers who are easily susceptible to financial allurement. This is not called "bribery" any more, it is now called a "legal retainer fee." This is the way so many insolvent insurance companies kept in business. Of course it would be unfair to accuse all representatives of dishonesty, but in no state today do the lobbies operate unashamedly out in the open to control the legislature.

More Taxes
The important question facing these men in Austin is the need for more taxes. In the past the issue has been evaded: now it can be put off no longer. Texas needs to pay teachers more, colleges need more money, mental hospitals are inadequate, the prisons are overcrowded, and our state lags far behind others in the development of turnpike highways.

The Most Weight
Whichever tax plan is adopted it will bear most heavily on the cities, yet they will not have much say in the final decision. It remains to be seen if the oil and gas, or the manufacturing lobby will carry the most weight with the country boys.