



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This week marks the end of the first month of the legislative session. Senate committees are beginning to hold hearings and the Capitol is buzzing with constituent groups and association visits.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. State of the State

On Wednesday, at a joint session of the Texas Senate and House, Governor Abbott gave the State of the State address. He began by sharing that Texas has remained "exceptional" and expressed optimism that Texas' economy, even with the recent oil downturn, continues to be strong and is the 10th largest in the world. We are also number two in the nation for the number of Top 500 companies in our great state.

The Governor laid out the emergency items in his budget, which included \$500 million to improve and overhaul child protective services and ensure we are protecting the most vulnerable children of our state. He also shared a priority to ban sanctuary cities in Texas and his intention to maintain \$800 million, which was allocated last legislative session, in spending on border security. His other emergency items included calling for a convention of states to amend the U.S. Constitution and a renewed effort to address ethics reform in the state.

2. Sanctuary Cities

As I mentioned above, Governor Abbott has added the ban of sanctuary cities in Texas to his list of emergency items. Senator Charles Perry has filed SB 4, which would ban entities, such as cities, counties and colleges, from implementing policies to refuse to enforce federal immigration laws. Entities would be denied state grant funds, if their law enforcement agencies failed to honor requests from Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers to hand over immigrants in custody for possible deportation. There is also a top-down provision in the bill, which means that an entity in violation, could lose their state grant funds and cause every entity under them to lose their funds as well.

3. Small Schools Funding

This week, Representative Trent Ashby and I filed SB 678 and HB 1390, to correct the formulas which fund certain small schools at a lower level. Currently, if a school has an average daily attendance of 1,600 and covers less than 300 square miles, they receive a smaller portion of state funds than a district with the same attendance which covers more than 300 square miles. This bill will alleviate this practice and provide an equal funding formula for all schools in Texas. With an equal multiplier, many schools will be provided additional funding, which will go a long way in helping to improve the education of our students.

A change in the funding formula will affect approximately 450 schools across the state of Texas. This legislation would allow communities the option of maintaining local governance of their school board without having to work around a punitive formula.

4. Eminent Domain

Since entering the Senate, I have fought for the rights of private property owners. During the 81st Legislative Session, I sponsored the Landowner's Bill of Rights to guarantee property owners receive a complete and easily understandable description of their rights when facing the prospect of eminent domain. Because of this, I was happy to co-author Senator Schwertner's SB 626, SB 627 and SB 628, all bills which address eminent domain in our state.

SB 626 will help to strengthen private property rights by providing more information to landowners and require there be certain disclosures for condemning entities. SB 627 will update the Landowner's Bill of Rights to explain to landowners their right to negotiate survey terms and recover damages caused by the survey. SB 628 helps to reinforce the ability of a property owner to buy back condemned land by defining what information a condemning entity must show in order to keep the condemned land and prevent buy back.

5. Superintendents at the Capitol

The Texas Association of School Administrators held their midwinter conference in Austin this week. My staff and I had the opportunity to attend two of the Education Service Center Region breakfasts as well as welcome many Superintendents from East Texas to the Capitol office.

As Senate District 3, with its 101 school districts, is a predominantly rural area, the concerns and needs of its school districts vary from those of a more urban district. Because of this, I appreciate opportunities to talk with educators to better understand how decisions made in Austin are impacting local schools.

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