



My five cents...

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

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Contact: Sydni Mitchell
Tel: 512-463-0103

Happy New Year! I hope your holidays were filled with family and friends, as I know mine were.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. Preserving the Alamo

In 2015, the Texas Legislature dedicated \$32.5 million, as well as \$75 million in 2017 for upgrades and preservation of the Alamo. Earlier this month, the Senate Finance Committee held a meeting to discuss how the General Land Office (GLO) was using this funding. Recently, there has been some concern as to how the money was being spent on the upgrades and preservation. The Committee encouraged the GLO to work towards being more transparent in the preservation efforts, including the work done by the various public-private partnerships which exist to help oversee the work on the Alamo. It is important that the Legislature and Texans know their money is being spent responsibly. As this is one of our state's most prized monuments, we should ensure that its legacy lives on to tell the story of the brave men and women at the Battle of 1836 and its siege.

2. Guns in Churches

During the 85th Legislative Session, a law was passed which allowed churches to have armed volunteer security teams, and exempted them from paying certain state fees to license the volunteers. This was done as many of these churches may be rural, and unable to afford these fees. After the tragic shooting in Sutherland Springs, there was much discussion as to whether guns should/could be allowed in churches, specifically could congregants carry within the church. Because of this Lt. Governor Dan Patrick asked Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to issue an opinion to help clarify these questions.

Attorney General Paxton's opinion was recently released and states that unless the church has posted signs outside their doors forbidding guns on the premises, the volunteer security teams as well as the churches congregants are allowed to carry on church owned property.

3. Providing a Safe Workplace

In December, the Texas Senate Administration Committee, on which I serve, met to review the Texas Senates current sexual harassment policy and consider new improvements. The Senate has had a policy in its employee handbook since 1995. Some suggestions made were to ensure that the sexual harassment training done in the Senate was taken by every employee, as well as to shore up any holes in the current policy which may exist. It is important that we have a policy that covers not only Senate employees, but also the Senators themselves. I will be working closely with the other committee members, and members of the Legislature to ensure we are providing a safe workplace for all.

4. Honoring a Veteran

Governor Greg Abbott recently awarded the Texas Legislative Medal of Honor posthumously to Master Sgt. Travis Watkins, who enlisted in the Army in 1939. He was awarded the bronze star for his service during World War II, but it was his sacrifices on the battlefield during the Korean conflict that has caused his legacy to live on for several decades.

After 30 men in Master Sgt. Watkins unit were surrounded by enemy fire, he took command of the group and established a perimeter defense. While exposing himself to enemy fire, he moved from foxhole to foxhole encouraging his men while giving them direction. Watkins was later shot by machine gun fire and was paralyzed from the waist down. He later ordered his men to escape, all while refusing evacuation as he knew it would slow down their retreat. Master Sgt. Watkins passed away two days before his 30th birthday and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman. We are forever grateful for men and women like Watkins who make sacrifices so that we can live free.

5. Resolutions

As I look back on this year and all that was accomplished during the 85th Regular Legislative Session and the Special Session this summer, I am reminded that it could not have been done without you. In the upcoming year, my staff and I will be working towards and getting ready for the next legislative session, as well as serving on the Sunset Commission, with over 30 agencies going under review. It is because of your feedback that I have a better understanding of what is needed for East Texas. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve you in the Texas Senate, and I look forward to this next year and continuing to work to make our state great.

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