



My five cents...

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

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Contact: Sydni Mitchell
Tel: 512-463-0103

This week the Texas Forestry Association (TFA) was recognized at the Capitol. TFA is a nonprofit organization with a goal to advance forestry and enhance the state's forest resources. Covering 12 million acres, the forest area of East Texas has created more than 130,000 jobs, with a total economic impact of more than \$30.3 billion dollars.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Mental Health Consortium

This week SB 10, which creates the Texas Mental Health Consortium, was heard and passed out of the Senate Health and Human Services committee. This Consortium will be made up of an advisory board of representatives from the state's health-related higher education institutions, and nonprofit organizations which focus on mental health.

They will be tasked with creating mental health initiatives, helping to create stronger collaboration between medical schools, improve research for mental health and expands mental health telemedicine for children. It would also create mental health hubs in each region of the state with psychiatrists, social workers and other mental health professionals. This bill will now move to the full senate for approval.

2. Fido Friendly Patios

On a nice day, many Texans like to enjoy being outside and possibly enjoying an outdoor patio at their favorite restaurant with their friendly pet. Senator Kelly Hancock has filed SB 476, also known as the Fido-Friendly Outdoor Dining Act, to allow restaurant patrons to bring their dogs along with them to restaurants across Texas to patios and sidewalk cafes. Some of the requirements include a sign stating dogs are allowed should be posted; no food is prepared on patio; pets must be able to get to the outdoor area without walking through the restaurant interior, be on a leash and not sitting on a chair.

Currently, many restaurants have to comply with stringent rules to allow this, including an application and fee. This bill would alleviate all extra expenses and processes they must go through. As a dog owner myself, I was happy to co-author this bill.

3. Ethics Commission Reform

In 1991, Texans approved an amendment which created the Texas Ethics Commission (TEC), which is an administrative entity overseen by the Legislature who determines their powers and duties. TEC is responsible for ensuring elected officials and political action committees are in compliance with all laws passed by the Legislature, and providing a due process to protect those who may have had a complaint filed against them. Senator Brian Birdwell has filed Senate Bill 548, of which I am a coauthor, to ensure that TEC has clear direction on how to carry out the duties prescribed to them by the Legislature. The bill provides clarifications and protections for those who may have had a penalty brought against them, or specifying the timeline for when certain actions may be completed.

4. Teacher Salary

This coming Monday, February 25, the Senate Finance Committee will hear the bill layout and testimony on Senate Bill 3, by Senator Jane Nelson. This bill provides a \$5,000 across-the-board pay raise to all classroom teachers in Texas. This will be done by creating a new allotment in a school districts budgets which will only be used for pay raises in addition to a teachers current salary.

The average salary for a teacher in Texas is \$53,000, with the average starting salary starting at just about \$47,000. However, for most teachers in school districts within Senate District 3, the average can be much lower. I am a co-author on this bill, as I believe the Legislature should do what it can to ensure our teachers are taken care of, as they play an integral role in our children's lives. To watch the committee hearing, please visit <https://capitol.texas.gov/>.

5. Official Food of Texas

Did you know that pecan is the State's official pie, or Chili is the official dish, and tortillas and salsa are the official snack of our great state? There are 16 different designations for official foods in Texas, however, the one designation missing is the official food of Texans. This session, House Concurrent Resolution 57 has been filed with an intent to remedy that, and make tacos the official food of Texas. The resolution even provides lists for the various ingredients that can be made into a taco, but the great thing about a taco is that you can put whatever you want in it. To see all other state symbols of Texas including our state bread, crustacean, dog, grass or horse you can visit <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/symbols.html>.

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