



My five cents...

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

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Last week, the House passed its version of the state budget for the next two years. It differs in some significant ways from the budget the Senate passed. In order to reconcile our differences, we'll convene a conference committee with 5 members from each chamber to work out the details. I'm honored to once again serve as a conferee for the state budget.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Texas to gain two new congressional seats

The US Census Bureau released preliminary data this week that outlined total population in the US and in each state and which states would be gaining or losing congressional seats. Texas is set to gain two new seats in the US Congress, the most of any state in the nation. That will bring Texas' total congressional delegation to 38 congressmen and women. Florida, Colorado, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon are each gaining one seat. Seven states will lose a seat, including California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. This data reflects a population shift from northeastern areas to southern and western regions of the US. Texas is now the second most populous state and saw the largest population increase, gaining nearly 4 million people over the past ten years. The rest of the Census data will not be released until this fall, at which time the legislature will start the process of redrawing US Congress, State House, State Senate, and State Board of Education districts.

2. Governor Abbott requests information from counties about financial impact of border crisis

This week, Governor Abbott sent a letter to county judges across the state asking them to assess the financial impact the current border crisis has had on their counties, including costs they have incurred and those they anticipate to incur. This information will be used to formally request that the federal government reimburse these costs in full, since decisions at the federal level led to the humanitarian crisis at the border. He also encouraged county judges to get a resolution of support for the State's request from their Commissioners Court.

3. \$11.2 billion in federal funds released to schools

This week Governor Abbott, Lt. Governor Patrick, and Speaker Phelan announced the release of \$11.2 billion in federal funds for Texas public schools. The funds are aimed at helping schools recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and address students' learning loss. These funds will support the recovery effort over the next three years. Due to federal requirements, only two-thirds of the funds are available immediately. The last third will be distributed when the US Department of Education approves it.

4. Battleship Texas restoration continues

Last session, the legislature passed Senate Bill 1511, a bill I authored that would pledge state resources toward saving the historic Battleship Texas. The battleship is the last of the dreadnoughts that fought in both World War I and World War II. Since it's heyday, the ship has fallen into disrepair, with salt water corroding the steel hull. There is also a system of pumps constantly pushing water out of the hull, which is the only thing keeping the ship upright in the Houston Ship Channel. That pump system at one time was pumping 2,000 gallons of water an hour out of the ship. After repairs began, including filling the lower part of the hull with foam, those pumps only pump 3 gallons out an hour. In accordance with the bill, the ship will soon be floated to a dry dock in Galveston for further repairs. Meanwhile, an extensive restoration effort has been undertaken by volunteers in Pasadena. These volunteers are restoring the ship's artifacts like anti-aircraft guns and spotlights. Years of wear and tear left these precious artifacts with chipped paint and rust. I'd like to thank all of the volunteers who have worked countless hours to restore the Battleship Texas to her former glory!

5. Over 1.7 million doses of COVID vaccine coming to Texas

The Department of State Health Services announced that more than 1.7 million COVID-19 vaccines are headed to Texas next week. Over 700,000 of those doses are the first dose of the two-dose Moderna and Pfizer vaccines and were allocated to almost 1,000 providers in 129 counties. Those providers will also get over 570,000 second doses. The final 470,000 doses are first and second doses and were allocated to pharmacies, federally qualified health centers, and dialysis centers. So far, more than 23.4 million doses have been distributed in Texas and more than 36 percent of Texans have received at least one dose.

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