



My five cents...

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

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On October 13, 1845, voters in Texas overwhelmingly approved an ordinance to accept annexation into the United States by a vote of 4,245 to 257. They also adopted the state's first constitution.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Hookset Brothers Combat Recovery wins Governor's volunteerism award

The Governor's office announced the Governor's Volunteer Award recipients this week and a local East Texas nonprofit was among the awardees. Hookset Brothers Combat Recovery was awarded the Innovation in Volunteerism Award. The Bullard-based group provides free hunting and fishing trips to aid veterans recovering from combat-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The nonprofit was started by three brothers, themselves wounded veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They engage volunteers to support over 100 combat veterans and their families each year. The organization also provides Gold Star Families with hunting and fishing excursions while serving as male role models to help children and young family members heal. They offer an alternative approach to help veterans cope with the effects and trauma they sustained in defending America and her allies abroad. Congratulations to the Hookset brothers!

2. ERCOT Selection Committee appoints two to board of directors

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas received two new board members this week, the Public Utility Commission announced. The two new board members are Paul Foster, president of Franklin Management, and Carlos Aguilar, president of Texas Central Partners. Foster will serve as the chair of the ERCOT board. During the most recent legislative session, the Legislature restructured the make up of the ERCOT board and instituted changes in how members are appointed. The board went from 16 members to 11 members that now have to be selected by the ERCOT Selection Committee. The new directors will serve along with the other statutorily-designated members of the ERCOT board: the Chairman of the PUC, the Public Counsel of the Office of Public Utility Counsel, and the CEO of ERCOT. With the addition of these two members, the ERCOT board now has the minimum number of three voting members required to function.

3. Community Outdoor Outreach Program grant applications available

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department announced grant applications are now available for the Community Outdoor Outreach Program (CO-OP). The program recognizes that community groups often face barriers to connecting Texans to the outdoors. CO-OP grants provide funding to organizations to help overcome those barriers. These grants support community-based conservation and outdoor recreation activities for programs that engage under-represented audiences. Grant awards range from between \$5,000 to up to \$60,000 and can be used to support personnel, training, travel, food, park fees, and other program supplies. Applications for grants are due by 5 pm on November 1. To apply, please visit

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/business/grants/recreation-grants/community-outdoor-outreach-program-co-op-grants>.

4. Update on the Legislature's third special session

The end of the Legislature's third called special session is in sight. This special session will come to a close on Tuesday, October 19th as required by state law, which mandates special sessions only last 30 days. The most important process the Legislature has undertaken during this special session is redistricting. Though the timeline has been compressed due to delays in receiving the Census data because of COVID-19, the Legislature has managed to get much of the work done. The State Senate and State Board of Education maps will be voted on by the House on Friday, October 15th. If they pass, they will go to the Governor for his signature. The Texas House maps were passed by the House this week and now head to the Senate for a hearing in the Redistricting Committee also on Friday. Lastly, the new US Congressional maps were heard in a House hearing this week and will be voted on mostly likely over this weekend.

5. Senate passes its plan for American Rescue Plan funds

This week the Senate passed its proposal for how to spend the \$16.3 billion in federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Some highlights include:

- \$7.2 billion to balance the Unemployment Compensation Fund which was drained during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- \$3.5 billion in salaries and benefits for public safety employees;
- \$2.5 billion in state and local hospital surge staffing;
- \$500.5 million for broadband infrastructure;
- \$75 million for rural hospitals;
- \$100 million for the Texans Feeding Texans program that supports food banks and home-delivered meals.

There are many other important causes supported with ARPA funding in the bill. It will be voted on by the House on Friday, October 15th.

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