



My five cents...

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

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On March 2, 1836, 59 delegates signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, formally declaring independence from Mexico and forming the Republic of Texas. We celebrate their bravery, courage, and resolve still today.

Here are five things happening around the state:

1. Broadband Development Office embarks on listening tour

This month, the Broadband Development Office embarked on its statewide listening tour, planning twelve stops in communities around the state. The aim of the listening tour is to gather insights and information from the community about internet access to develop the state's first broadband plan. The listening tour is key to developing the plan, which is set to be completed this summer. Stops in East Texas include Beaumont and Tyler. While the Beaumont event has already occurred, the Tyler event will be held on April 6. If you cannot attend these events, the Office encourages you to fill out the broadband survey found here:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Texas-BDO-2022>.

2. Senate Business and Commerce Committee holds interim hearing on electricity

The Senate Committee on Business and Commerce held an interim hearing to review actions taken by ERCOT, the PUC, and other entities over the winter and conduct oversight of the implementation of Senate Bill 3 from last session. We heard testimony from various state agencies and stakeholders on the state of the electric market in ERCOT. As vice chair of the committee, myself and other members heard updates on what has been done to strengthen the ERCOT grid since Winter Storm Uri, including increasing communication among the electric and gas industries, winterizing facilities, and improving transparency and communication with the public. The committee also heard testimony about studies being done by the Public Utility Commission to explore changes to the electric market design to increase reliability and performance of the grid. This work was directed by the Legislature following Winter Storm Uri, as the Legislature recognized that the State must do all it can to prepare for future extreme weather.

3. Oil and gas waste disposal permit application withdrawn from Railroad Commission

Last week, the examiners presiding over the permit application for PA Prospect, a Montana-based oil and gas waste company, to open an oil and gas waste disposal site in San Augustine recommended that the Texas Railroad Commission deny the permit. The company has now asked the RRC to withdraw their application without prejudice. This issue is one I have been watching closely as there has been significant community opposition to the facility due to environmental and other concerns. As such, I've written a letter with Representative Trent Ashby to the RRC asking them to withdraw the application *with* prejudice to ensure that this application cannot be resubmitted. We feel it is warranted here in light of the numerous discrepancies in the application and the fact that the Texas Board of Professional Geoscientists issued a Notice of Violation to the geoscientist who prepared the application. The withdrawal of the application is a victory for this community nonetheless.

4. Texas hosts two space ports and NASA

Texas is unique many ways, but one that sets it apart is truly out-of-this-world. Texas is home to three space-related entities, including Blue Origin, SpaceX, and NASA's Johnson Space Center. NASA's human space flight program has been headquartered in Texas since the 1960s. The newcomers to space travel were created more recently. The two private commercial space flight companies are headed by two of the world's richest men, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. Jeff Bezos, founded Blue Origin in 2000 with the goal of developing partially and fully reusable launch vehicles that can ferry passengers safely to and from space. Its launch site is in Van Horn in West Texas. Elon Musk founded SpaceX in 2002 and is more focused on developing rockets that would enable humans to visit and even live on other planets. SpaceX's launch site is near Brownsville in South Texas. Texas embraces the forward-thinking technology of all three space sites and how they push the boundaries of what is possible.

5. SFA receives grant for girls outdoors program

Earlier this month, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department announced they awarded \$2 million in Community Outdoor Outreach Program grants to 41 recipients. One recipient was Stephen F. Austin State University for the East Texas Adventure Girls Science Academy. They received over \$57,000 to continue their work guiding 100 middle school girls from diverse backgrounds through a transformative series of East Texas outdoor adventures and overnight expeditions to Mission Tejas and Caddo Lake state parks. Congratulations!

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