



My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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I hope your Thanksgiving was filled with family, friends, and wonderful food. We all have much to be thankful for. Now, the holiday season is upon us!

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Stephen F. Austin State University votes to join University of Texas System

During a special called Board of Regents meeting on Tuesday, November 29, the SFA Board of Regents voted to affiliate with the University of Texas System. The vote came after a months long process during which four university systems made proposals to SFA. Other systems that made offers included Texas A&M University System, Texas State University System, and Texas Tech University System. The system affiliation evaluation subcommittee met with each system, collected public comment, and reviewed written proposals from each system. The subcommittee focused on five areas while evaluating their options: SFA's ability to remain autonomous, culture and fit, transition, financial impact, and intangibles. The UT System made a strong financial pitch, committing \$80 million in Permanent University Fund (PUF) bond proceeds in year one to capital projects at SFA. UT System also committed to \$1 million in annual student scholarship and \$5.5 million to increase faculty salaries. Overall, UT System estimated it would provide \$124 million in additional value over the first four years. One key aspect of affiliating with a system for SFA was maintaining their name, mascot, and colors. UT System has assured the Board of Regents that the university will maintain their identity, including the name, mascot, and colors.

2. TEA announces new facilities requirements for school safety, \$400M in safety grants

This month, the Texas Education Agency announced their new facilities standards to improve school safety. In conjunction, Governor Abbott announced an additional \$400 million in grant funding to help school districts replace and upgrade doors, windows, fencing, communications, and other measures outlined in the facilities requirements. The new facilities standards included requirements that exterior doors, exterior classroom doors, and portable building doors must be closed, latched, and locked unless actively monitored or in a secured area. Any windowed doors on the ground level or windows adjacent to doors must be reinforced with entry-resistant film unless within a secured area. Campuses must have exterior door numbering, radio signal repeaters,

and exterior secure master key lock boxes. Schools will also be required to conduct weekly exterior door sweeps and provide an exterior door numbering site plan to local law enforcement entities.

The \$400 million in grant funding is allocated on a per-pupil basis, however small and rural districts will receive a base allocation of \$200,000. The grant will allow for spending on security-related items, but schools must first spend on items necessary to comply with the new rules. Once those standards are met, remaining funds can be spent on other eligible security-related costs as defined by the grant program.

3. Bill filing for 88th Legislative Session begins

Legislators are ready and gearing up for next session. As of November 14, bill filing for the 88th Legislative Session has begun. Over a thousand bills have already been filed with many more to come before the Legislature convenes on January 10 next year. I've filed two bills already, one regarding maternity leave for state employees and the other relating to continuing transportation funding. This is an important time of year for policymakers to begin to set the agenda for the next session and find out what our colleagues are interested in as well.

4. AT&T unveils new cell tower in Jasper to boost connectivity

This month, AT&T announced an expansion of its network in the Jasper area, boosting wireless connectivity. The new tower brings Band 14 spectrum to the area. Band 14 is nationwide, high-quality spectrum for FirstNet, which can be used to enhance public safety. AT&T has invested \$5 million in Jasper over the past several years and \$70 million in the Beaumont area. These investments enhance speed, performance, and coverage for our communities.

5. Over \$300M grant approved for UT-Tyler Medical Education Building

Earlier this month, the University of Texas Board of Regents gave final authorization for UT-Tyler School of Medicine's new Medical Education Building. The total project cost of the building is \$308 million. The building will support interdisciplinary education for graduate medical students, resident training, and nursing training for students. It will also play a role in the medical education program expansion through the UT Health East Texas Health System. It will provide outpatient and specialty clinical services with exam rooms, specimen collection and processing, and imaging facilities. The project is expected to be completed in March 2025.

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