



# My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

For immediate release  
February 2, 2023  
word count: 745

Contact: Shelby Conine  
Tel: 512-463-0103

It's Groundhog Day! Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow this week, indicating six more weeks of winter; unwelcome news after ice storms covered much of the state this week. The iconic groundhog made his 137<sup>th</sup> appearance and records of his predictions go back to 1887.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. Abbott names new border czar**

This week Governor Abbott named long-time Border Patrol agent Mike Banks to be the new Texas Border Czar. He will report directly to the governor and ensure border security strategies are fully executed in Texas. He will work collaboratively with the Texas Military Department, the Department of Public Safety, and other relevant agencies to continue Operation Lone Star. Mike Banks was the Border Patrol Weslaco Station Patrol Agent in Charge. He has over 30 years of federal law enforcement experience. He's worked in multiple stations stretching the length of the US-Mexico border. Before joining the Border Patrol, he was a member of the US Navy Military Police. The unprecedented crisis at our southern border demands action and Governor Abbott has stepped up to the plate to address it. I appreciate his continued leadership on this issue.

## **2. SFA Board of Regents approves change to salaries**

At a recent meeting, the SFA Board of Regents approved mid-year salary increases for university employees, an increase in non-resident fees, and an increase to university meal plans and housing. Employees will receive a six percent increase to their base salary after the board approved the \$3.5 million expenditure. Interim President Dr. Steve Westbrook said the board requested this increase from the University of Texas System after they decided to affiliate. The SFA board voted last year to affiliate with the University of Texas System rather than remaining independent. The transition requires legislation, which I am excited to carry with Rep. Travis Clardy this session. The legislation will ensure that the university retains the name Stephen F. Austin— a measure of great importance to the university, the community, and to me.

## **3. Comptroller receives \$363 million in grants for broadband**

Comptroller Glenn Hegar announced this week that the agency will receive \$363 million in federal grants to increase access to affordable, reliable broadband to more than 150,000 homes and businesses in Texas. The US Treasury's award will go to the Bring Online Opportunities to Texas (BOOT) program. The BOOT program is a competitive grant program administered through the Texas Broadband Development Office. The program is designed to fund broadband infrastructure projects that cover the last few miles to your home or business. Qualified projects will be located in a designated areas, invest in capital assets, and address critical needs in the community it serves. The office will begin accepting applications for the funds later this spring.

#### **4. Caleb's Law filed in Senate**

Senate Bill 129, also known as Caleb's Law, was filed by Senator Drew Springer recently. The bill would strengthen penalties for offenders who possess child pornography. Child pornography laws have not been updated since 1989 and the current laws are ill-equipped to handle changes in modern technology. The changes will work to keep kids safe and strengthen punishments for those convicted. The bill includes degrees of punishment based on the amount of materials possessed. It also has enhancements for materials depicting children under the age of 10 and for those taking care of children and receiving money from the state. The law's name comes from Caleb Diehl, a high school senior who went missing in March 2015.

#### **5. Winter weather resources, TDEM resources**

Winter Storm Mara swept through much of Central and Northeast Texas, causing dangerous driving conditions and power outages across the state. Ice accumulated on roadways, tree branches, and power lines, which caused some outages and many fallen branches. Many state agencies monitored the ongoing weather situation and worked to keep Texans safe, including the Public Utility Commission, Texas Division of Emergency Management, and ERCOT. It is important to note that any power outages experienced during this storm were not a result of lack of capacity on the grid. Those were due to power lines being down due to the storm. We appreciate the hard work of all our first responders and everyone who worked around the clock to keep Texans safe and warm. For more information from TDEM about resources available to you, visit <https://tdem.texas.gov/disasters/january-2023-winter-storm>.

###