



My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Contact: Shelby Conine Vestal
Tel: 512-463-0103

Next week, the nation will celebrate Independence Day. The Fourth of July commemorates the ratification of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, establishing the United States of America. Our Founding Fathers made history in declaring our independence from Britain 247 years ago and establishing this great nation. Happy Fourth of July!

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Grand opening of improved Rusk State Hospital

This month, I was thrilled to attend the grand opening of the new \$200 million patient complex and administration building at Rusk State Hospital. I have worked on this project with other members of the Legislature and the Lt. Governor since 2015. The Rusk State Hospital improvement project opened the door for the improvement of all the state's state hospitals, which is ongoing. The state has committed \$3.2 billion since 2017 for the replacement, renovation, or expansion of state hospitals in Austin, Kerrville, Rusk, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas. The new Rusk State Hospital includes 100-bed non-maximum-security unit and an expanded 100-bed maximum-security unit. It also has single-person rooms, natural light, outdoor spaces, and a variety of therapeutic, recreational, and social experiences for patients to prepare for life outside the hospital. Mental health care is essential for many Texans, and it is imperative that the state continues to support and expand access to services statewide.

2. Governor calls first, second special sessions on property tax relief

As the last day of the 88th regular session came to a close, Governor Abbott called the First Called Special Session of the 88th Legislature. Property tax relief and border security were the only two items on the special session call, therefore the only things the Legislature could address. However, the House and the Senate could not come to an agreement on either issue. On the last day of the first special session, the Governor called the Legislature back into a second special session. The Second Called Special Session of the 88th Legislature will have a singular focus – property tax relief. Currently there is disagreement over whether to put the entirety of the almost \$18 billion toward lowering school district property tax rates or to allocate part of that relief to increasing the homestead exemption to \$100,000. Increasing the homestead exemption would create an ongoing benefit for homeowners, while compressing school district taxes would

have to include continuing increasing funding from the state for school districts to maintain the benefit.

3. TEA meets federal special education requirements, ending federal oversight

This month, the US Department of Education sent a letter announcing that the Texas Education Agency has fulfilled all the needed requirements to comply with federal special education law. The Department's Special Education Program's office will remove special conditions it had placed on TEA. The federal oversight began in 2018 when the Education Department informed the state it was out of compliance with special education standards, specifically when evaluating students for special education services. Over the past several years, TEA and the Education Department have worked to ensure students needing special education services were identified and given access to those services.

4. Texas to receive \$3.3 billion in federal broadband funding

This week, the federal government announced over \$40 billion for broadband expansion will be distributed nationwide. Texas will receive \$3.3 billion of that funding, more than any other state and more than \$1 billion more than the next largest share of funding. The funds are aimed at providing high-speed internet access to the nearly 2.8 million households without access in Texas. According to the Texas Broadband Development Office, 85 percent of Texans who lack high-speed internet live in rural communities. Broadband access is a necessity in an increasingly digital landscape. Health care, education, and business are all routinely conducted online or supplemented online. Without access to high-speed internet, rural Texans are left behind in an increasing digital divide. Continued investment in the expansion of internet availability statewide is necessary to ensure rural areas receive access to broadband.

5. Texas ranks number one for Best Business Climate

In yet another survey, Texas is named number one – this time for Best Business Climate. Business Facilities magazine's 19th annual ranking report focused on over 60 factors that site selection teams use during corporate relocations or expansion projects. Last year, Texas attracted more than 1,000 projects, more than double the second-highest state, according to the magazine. Texas was rewarded for the amount of capital investment in the state, job creation, diversity of industries, infrastructure, and its business-friendly regulatory and tax climate.

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