



# My five cents...

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

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Fall brings the hope of cooler weather, the changing of the leaves, time with family and one of my favorite fall traditions...hunting season. Thankfully, East Texas has something for everyone.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

## **1. Superintendents Tour**

As a Texas State Senator, education has always been a top priority of mine. As I represent a predominantly rural area, the concerns and needs of its school districts vary from those of a more urban district. Because of this, it is important for me to stay in touch with educators across East Texas to better understand how decisions made in Austin are impacting local schools.

In addition to visiting with parents and teachers throughout the year, I make a special tour to meet with the 101 Superintendents from Senate District 3 before each Legislative session. My staff and I have begun this tour and it will continue into October. It provides me the opportunity to learn what is best to help ensure our children have the educational tools they need to be successful. I appreciate all of the Superintendents for taking the time to meet with me.

## **2. Earthquake Monitoring in E. TX**

During the 84th Legislative Session, the Legislature allocated \$4.5 million to fund what is known as the TexNet Seismic Monitoring Program. This program has placed 22 permanent seismograph stations and 36 portable stations in key locations across the state to monitor seismic activity that has affected our state in recent years and determine the cause of these earthquakes.

Two of these locations will be in East Texas, one located in San Augustine and the other in Marshall. These locations were chosen as there has been seismic activity around these areas. The research will help state policy makers to respond and ensure the public is safe. You can find more information about TexNet and their research by visiting [www.beg.utexas.edu/texnet](http://www.beg.utexas.edu/texnet).

### **3. Texas and Refugees**

In light of security concerns, Governor Abbott released a statement stating Texas will leave the federal refugee program unless Congress agrees to pass its plan for a stricter resettlement process. Under the plan, only those refugees the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and the Director of National Intelligence can certify as not posing any security threats would be accepted. In addition, the State would maintain the number of refugees accepted in 2016 rather than accept the U.S. State Department proposed 25% increase of refugees for the 2017 fiscal year.

Governor Abbott's main concern is for the safety of Texas residents. In order to balance empathy for displaced peoples with security of the state, he believes this plan to be in Texas's best interest. Were Congress to not approve the plan, Texas would continue to support both private and nonprofit refugee agencies through Jan. 31, 2017 before withdrawing from the program.

### **4. TEA and Special Needs**

Recently, a report came out regarding a performance based monitoring program the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has implemented since 2004, which sets an 8.5 percent benchmark for special education enrollment in public schools. The system was originally created to prevent schools from identifying students for special education when it was not required.

Criticisms have risen as some believe this program is keeping certain students with special needs from receiving the educational resources they need. Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath has committed to review this monitoring program to ensure it is not unfairly being administered. I have heard from many constituents who are concerned about this report. I will continue to monitor this to ensure our students are receiving the appropriate education they deserve and schools are accurately reporting information.

### **5. Senate Finance Committee Hearing**

This past month the Senate Finance Committee, on which I serve, held a hearing to discuss and monitor legislation passed during the 84th Legislative Session including; tax relief for property owners, support and enhancement of graduate medical education, and the phase out of the franchise tax. After hearing testimony on these and other issues, the committee will determine if legislation is needed to improve, enhance or complete implementation of previous legislation.

As we get closer to session, our job as members of the Senate Finance Committee will be to ensure we are working towards a balanced budget and stay within our means as a state. While we will not receive the official numbers for where our state's budget will be until January, it is expected we will have a shortfall due to the impact of low oil prices and a slower economy.

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