



My five cents...

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

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Christmas has been a favorite holiday of mine since I was a young boy. Of course, I was lucky to grow up in a toy factory where my father, Talley Nichols, manufactured toy cap guns. As you gather with friends and family during this Christmas season, I wish you a very Merry Christmas from my family to yours.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. Bill Filing

On November 14th, the Texas Legislature began filing bills for the 85th Legislative Session, which begins on January 10th. While not all problems or issues constitute the need for a new law, there are some that do. I have filed bills to limit the growth of property taxes, give general law municipalities authority to protect its citizens and ways to protect landowners. These bills represent some of the priorities brought to me by the citizens of Senate District 3. Further bill filing is still a possibility, and I would encourage your ideas and input. It has been an honor to represent you in the Texas Senate and I look forward to working for you in the upcoming session.

2. Veteran Agricultural Land Exemption

In addition to the bills listed above, I also filed Senate Bill 175, which would prevent agricultural exempt land from reverting back to non-agriculture land if the property owner is a member of the armed services who has been deployed or stationed outside of the state. This legislation builds upon last session where many bills were passed to assist our veterans such as Senate Bill 833, which allowed property owners who were absent from the state because of military service to retain their homestead exemption.

The Texas Legislature recognizes that while many policies for veterans are established on the national level, we should do what we can for those who live in our state. Like most Americans, my family and I enjoy a great many freedoms every day, many of which we take for granted. Without the men and women who serve and make sacrifices in the armed forces, that would not be possible.

3. Sunset Commission

This month, the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission met to vote on recommendations for the Railroad Commission of Texas and the Texas' Employee Retirement System (ERS). We also heard testimony and reports on the Texas Board of Chiropractic Examiners, Texas Board of Nursing, Texas State Board of Podiatric Medical Examiners and the State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners.

An important part of the Sunset process is hearing from the public on these various agencies. There are different ways you can get involved, including providing public comment on the Sunset Commission website and/or coming to the Capitol at the time of a hearing to provide your testimony. You can find the reports and how to provide public comment by visiting www.sunset.texas.gov.

4. Protecting Our Children

In response to reports that thousands of children had gone unseen by Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers, a special workgroup, made up of Senate Finance Committee members, was recently created to examine ways to help the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to fix the situation. The workgroup has recommended spending approximately \$76 million to allow DFPS to raise salaries by \$12,000, to stem chronic employee turnover and add 50 new special investigators, 50 new investigative caseworkers and 36 new support staff members.

The workgroups recommendations will now be sent to the Legislative Budget Board, who will decide on how to proceed. CPS workers do a very important job in ensuring the children of our state are safe, and I am confident these recommendations will go a long way in helping to connect abused and neglected children with a support network.

5. Christmas Ornament

In 1996, Nelda Laney, the wife of then Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, realized the Texas Capitol needed its own unique Christmas ornament to adorn the Christmas Trees at the Capitol. The ornament became an annual tradition with the proceeds of the sales going to support ongoing Capitol conservation, maintenance programs and educating the public about the history of the Capitol and its grounds.

The 2016 Capitol ornament features a replica of the 20+ foot Capitol Christmas Trees, which are placed in the Senate and House Chambers. The ornament is decorated with lone stars, garland and Capitol ornaments from the past. To buy your own and have a little piece of Capitol history, you can visit www.texascapitolgiftshop.com.

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