



My five cents...

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

For immediate release
May 18, 2017
word count: 724

Contact: Sydni Mitchell
Tel: 512-463-0103

While essential bills are being passed by both Chambers and sent to the Governor, there is still much to be done, such as passing our state's budget. As I write this column, we have approximately 11 days left in the 85th Legislative Session.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Straight party Ticket Vote

The Texas Senate has approved House Bill 25 which would end straight-ticket voting for all elections in Texas. Beginning in 2020, voters will not be able to automatically cast their ballot for every candidate from a single party. Supporters of this bill believe straight-party voting has the potential to pull a voter's attention away from down-ballot candidates for certain offices, which most directly affect the voter. By eliminating this 'one punch' system, it could incentivize people to ensure they have researched and are fully informed as to who is on the ballot. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 41 states do not allow straight-ticket voting.

2. Voter Fraud in Nursing Homes

State law allows Texans with disabilities and those who are at least 65 years old to request a mail-in ballot. Many times this includes the voters who reside in nursing homes and state homes. Recently, there have been many reports of voter fraud within these homes, due to facility staffers or other manipulating the resident's absentee ballots. Senate Bill 2149 was recently passed out of the Senate State Affairs Committee which would create a process to protect these individuals.

During early voting, for nursing homes that request five or more absentee ballots, counties would send election judges to deliver the ballots. They would be able to oversee and provide additional assistance to the residents of these facilities. This would in effect, make these nursing homes temporary voting locations. Senate Bill 2149 has bi-partisan support to not only protect these citizens, but to also crack down on voter fraud.

3. Teacher Misconduct

The Texas Legislature has passed Senate Bill 7, which lays guidelines for dealing with improper relationships between teachers and students. Under the rules of this bill, a principal and/or superintendent could be charged with a felony, punishable by up to two years behind bars, if they fail to report improper teacher conduct to authorities. It would also revoke pensions from teachers convicted of felonies involving a student.

Teachers will receive training on how to properly handle personal relationships and communications with students. They would also have to sign a pre-employment affidavit disclosing whether they have been charged or convicted of an improper relationship with a child. I believe this bill is a great step towards ensuring the well-being of our students.

4. Bulletproof Vests

In the last few years, we have seen many of our police force injured and sadly killed due to violence. While some law enforcement agencies across the state have funding to purchase protective gear for their officers, not all do. Senate Bill 12, of which I have co-authored, has passed the Texas Legislature. This bill will help local, county and state law enforcement agencies to buy high-quality protective vests and body armor (including ballistic plates and plate carriers) for field officers. The grant program will be housed under the Governor's Criminal Justice Division. These vests and plates, which are capable of stopping a high powered rifle, will go a long way in ensuring those who protect our state, are protected themselves.

5. Veto Period

As session is slowly drawing to a close, more bills are being passed by both chambers and sent to the governor's office. Upon receipt, the governor has 10 days to review and either sign or veto a bill before it automatically becomes law. In addition, the governor has the power of line-item veto for the budget, where he can remove certain provisions listed, without killing the entire budget.

While the Legislature may in theory override a veto with a two-thirds vote, that is impossible if session has ended. Because almost all legislation is finally passed in the last days of session, there are very few bills the Legislature could revive should the governor veto it. This makes the governor's veto a very powerful tool as it can completely shut down legislation despite its passage by the Legislature. I will continue to keep you updated as we finish out the last few days of session.

###