



My five cents...

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

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Mark your calendars for this year's sales tax holiday on August 11th-13th. The law exempts most clothing, footwear, school supplies and backpacks which are priced under \$100 from sales and use taxes.

The law also allows layaway purchases of these items to qualify for the sales tax exemption. All sellers in the state are required to honor the sales tax holiday, so it's a great time to get prepared for the upcoming school year while saving some money in the process.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. Special Session has Begun

The 85th Legislative, First Called Special Session began on July 18th. In the first week the Senate passed important Sunset legislation which will continue agencies such as the Texas Medical Board, Texas Social Worker Examiners and Texas Professional Counselor Examiners. The House has also passed their own versions of these bills.

Governor Abbott called for 19 additional items including property tax, school finance reform, pro-life issues and caps on local and state spending to be addressed during this special session. The Senate has already passed bills on all of these items, and now they have been sent to the House for consideration.

2. Bonuses and Benefits for Teachers

Senate Bill 19 has passed the Senate, and will give Texas teachers bonuses and help to improve the benefits of retired teachers. Beginning in September 2018, \$193 million will be allocated for bonuses over the next two years. A teacher who has six to 10 years of experience, will receive a \$600 bonus and a teacher with more than 10 years of experience will receive a \$1000 bonus.

The bill also allocates \$212 million to help cut deductibles for retired teachers who are under 65 years of age by half, lower the costs for retirees who take care of adult disabled children, as well as reduce the premiums for retirees 65 years and older. Education is and always will be the most important issue the Legislature considers, and we must ensure our future generations are

receiving a quality education. As this often begins with our teachers, I believe it is important to ensure we are providing for them through these bonuses and additional help with benefits.

3. Maternal Mortality Taskforce

The Senate approved a bill this week that will allow the work of the state's Maternal Mortality Task Force to continue until 2023. The Task Force was created to study why Texas has seen a recent dramatic spike in deaths of mothers during pregnancy and within a year after giving birth. While maternal deaths have risen across the United States in recent years, the rise in deaths of Texas mothers has been even higher. The purpose of the Task Force is to determine the cause of this spike and try to find solutions to this problem. The bill needs to be approved by the House before it can be sent to the Governor for final approval, but the Senate's passage of this bill is an important step toward protecting Texas mothers.

4. Border Security

In recent years, the amount of money the State spends to protect our borders has grown substantially. While I believe it is necessary to use the states funding to ensure our border is secure, the ultimate responsibility should fall to the Federal government, not the taxpayers of Texas. I was happy to see that the Federal Government has allotted \$2.3 million to the Texas Military Department to continue their border security efforts through the end of this year. While this amount does not cover the costs of securing our borders, I do think it is a good step towards the Federal government taking responsibility.

5. Texas Gold

While Texas has long been known for things such as cowboys, oil and cattle, we could very soon be known for gold as well. In 2015, Governor Abbott authorized the Texas Comptroller's Office to create the state's first bullion depository. This depository, which would be the first state-regulated gold vault in the nation, could also hold deposits of gold and other precious metals from cities, businesses, individuals and countries.

When the system is fully operational, it would work more like a bank handling transactions. As the depository grew, the state would be able to earn revenue from the storage fees. Currently, Texas pays approximately \$1 million a year to store its gold at the New York depository. Construction will begin in September of 2017, and it is slated to open in December 2018.

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