



My five cents...

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

For Immediate Release
September 26, 2018
word count: 745

Contact: Sydni Mitchell
Tel: 512-463-0103

Don't forget the deadline to register to vote in the upcoming November election is October 9th. Early voting will be from October 22nd through November 6th. If you have not registered to vote or have questions about your registration, Please visit www.votetexas.gov or call 1.800.252.VOTE (8683).

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. Teacher Retirement System

In August, the Teacher Retirement System of Texas Board of Trustees considered raising the premiums by \$50 a month for TRS-Care, which is the health insurance program provided to retired teachers in the state. This was proposed, due to a projection in August that TRS would have a \$410 million shortfall in their budget in fiscal year 2021 if premiums were not raised.

While TRS has put into place cost containment measures to lower this shortfall, measures must be taken to ensure it is made whole. With the premiums not being raised, the Legislature must come back during the upcoming legislative session, as they have in previous sessions, and find ways to adequately funds TRS-Care and cover the shortfall. I will be working very closely with other members of the Legislature to ensure we are providing the benefits these teachers have earned.

2. Border Security

At the end of August, the Texas Veterans Affairs and Border Security Committee met to hear testimony on interim charges related to border security. These included studying opportunities to create public safety partnerships, and how a partnership between state, local and federal governments to enforce federal immigration laws can be implemented. They also reviewed cross training programs offered in other states which allow U.S. Border Patrol agents to be certified as state peace officers, and how Texas could implement this program.

One thing that is often not thought of when discussing border security, is invasive species such as Carrizo cane. This plant, which as been compared to bamboo but thicker, can grow along the

riverbanks and get so high it can serve as a natural shelter for those who may be smuggling arms, or human trafficking. The committee looked at ways to eradicate these invasive species.

3. Superintendent Tour

As I mentioned in my last column, I have begun meeting with the superintendents from the 101 school districts within Senate District 3. These meetings provide me an opportunity to hear their concerns and ideas, and helps me to know where my focus should be in the upcoming legislative session. Things I have heard so far include ensuring Career and Tech courses, which are appropriate for rural areas, are recognized and count towards a school districts funding and accountability. We also discussed teachers health insurance and retirement, adequate and equitable funding for schools, school safety measures, and the recruitment and retention of teachers.

I am grateful to all who have attended for taking the time to meet with me, and I will continue to work to ensure we are providing our students with an education that will help them succeed in their future careers and lives.

4. Exploring Dual Credit

The Texas Senate Higher Education and Education Committees met towards the beginning of September to discuss dual credit opportunities across the state. They looked at the impact of House Bill 505, which was passed in the 84th Legislative Session and took away the limit of how many dual credit courses a student may take and in what grade they must be in. The committee also discussed how to improve advising for students in dual credit programs to ensure students are taking the right courses, and that they will be able to transfer to the higher education institutions of their choice. These findings will be used to put together legislation in the upcoming 86th Session, which begins in January.

5. NASA Aerospace Scholars

NASA's Johnson Space Center has announced they are currently accepting applications for Texas High School Aerospace Scholars. Those selected will utilize their mathematics, science, technology and engineering skills by participating in interactive lessons on NASA activities related to space exploration, earth science, and aeronautics. Students who are successful in the program will have the opportunity for an onsite summer experience at NASA's Johnson Space Center to take part in briefings by NASA engineers and scientists, and a hands-on design challenge to plan a mission to Mars.

High school juniors who are U.S. citizens and Texas residents must submit their applications by the deadline of **October 22, 2018**. More information and applications for this exciting program are available at <http://HAS.aerospacescholars.org>.

###