



My five cents...

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

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We have made it through the first month of session. This week, Texas Association of Counties held their legislative day, and we were able to welcome Judges and County Commissioners from Senate District 3 to the Capitol.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. State of the State

Each session, the Governor addresses a joint session of the Texas Senate and House to give the State of the State. In this he provides an overview of how the State is doing, as well as to list his emergency items for session. These emergency items are important, as it enables the Legislature to begin working on these issues and pass legislation during the first 60 days of session. We are constitutionally restrained from passing any other legislation until after this deadline.

On Tuesday, Governor Abbott shared his emergency items for this session. These included an increase in pay to help recruit and retain teachers, limiting property tax increases for homeowners, providing support for school districts to ensure our campuses are safe for students, improving and increasing funding for school counselors and other mental health providers, as well as a focus on Hurricane Harvey recovery.

2. State of the Judiciary

Much the same as the State of the State, the Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice gives the State of the Judiciary to a joint session of the Texas House and Senate. This week, Chief Justice Nathan Hecht called for a reform to the way Justices are elected and making it more about their qualifications rather than their political beliefs. When they serve they must be impartial arbiters, no matter which party they may align with. He also called for lawmakers to pass legislation to reform our states current bail system, as it has recently been called unconstitutional by federal judges. He also asked for the ability to modify court procedures following a natural disaster like Hurricane Harvey, and increase mental health assessment in our jails.

3. Property Tax Bills

The Senate Property Tax Committee held its first hearing this week on SB 2, which would prevent local entities, such as cities and counties from raising their property taxes more than 2.5 percent, without voter approval. This threshold would not apply to those taxing units with potential property and sales tax collections of \$15 million or less.

Cities and counties can currently collect an additional 8 percent in revenues without an election. With the provisions of this bill, if voters do not approve an increase, the entity would be forced to set a tax rate that only allows it to collect revenues from existing properties which are less than 2.5 percent over the previous year. The next steps for this bill is to pass committee and then the Senate floor.

4. Sporting Goods Sales

In 1993, legislation was passed which allowed up to 94 percent of the Sporting Goods Sales Tax, to go to the State Parks and Wildlife Commission, and the other six percent was earmarked for the Texas Historical Commission. Over the last 20 years, parks have only received about 40 percent of their allocation. Senator Lois Kolkhorst has filed SB 526 and its enabling legislation Senate Joint Resolution 24, which would amend the Texas Constitution to guarantee state parks and the Historical Commission receive all of the collections from the sporting goods tax.

If passed by the Legislature (joint Resolutions require the approval from two-thirds of the Senate and House to pass) the proposed amendment must then be approved by voters during the November general election. From 1993 to 2017, Texas collected approximately \$2.5 billion in revenue from this tax. This funding could go towards ensuring our parks and historical locations are maintained and available for current and future generations to enjoy.

5. Sweetwater Rattlesnakes

This week, the Sweetwater Jaycees brought about a dozen of their slithering friends, the rattlesnake, and featured them in the open rotunda of the Capitol. Since 1958, they come to Austin annually to raise awareness for the world's largest rattlesnake roundup in Sweetwater, Texas. The roundup started as a way to help local farmers and ranchers get rid of rattlesnakes causing them and their livestock problems. In addition to rounding them up, they also milk them for their venom which is collected and used for medical research, as well as an antidote for snake bite victims. While I did not visit these snakes, I believe some of my staff got up close and personal with them.

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