



# My five cents...

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

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After four weeks of hearing from every agency in the State, the Senate Finance Committee has finished the first step towards finalizing the state's budget. We will now move into workgroups to work out the details.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

## 1. Rural Broadband

Beyond using it to shop online or watch Netflix, high speed internet has become an essential for everyday life and for businesses; from sales and ordering supplies, to logistics, medical recording, training and educational materials. There are large areas of rural Texas that do not have access to high speed internet or even cell phone coverage, many of them within Senate District 3.

I have filed SB 14, which would help increase access to broadband internet for rural areas in Texas. This would be done through the help of Texas Electric Cooperatives (Co-Ops). These Co-Ops are member-owned non-profits, which have over 300,000 miles of distribution lines throughout rural Texas. By utilizing their existing electricity infrastructure, they would be able to deploy broadband to the members they serve and meet their need for high speed internet.

## 2. Sunset Bills

I wanted to update you on the continuation of the Sunset process. After about a year of review and hearings, the Sunset Advisory Commission makes recommendations which are incorporated into legislation for each agency. These pieces of legislation will continue through the Senate and House, like all other bills.

As a member of the Sunset Advisory Commission, I will be filing bills for several agencies including the Texas Medical Board, Texas Real Estate Commission, Texas Finance Commission, and the Behavioral Health Executive Commission, which includes Psychologists, Marriage and Family Therapists, Professional Counselors and Social Workers. As these bills continue through the legislative process, I encourage you to take part and come to the Capitol to testify on these or any other bills when they are heard in committee.

### **3. Property Tax Relief**

Last week, I told you about the Senate Property Tax Committee hearing SB 2. This week it was passed out of committee on a 4-0 vote. This bill would prevent local entities, such as cities and counties from raising their property taxes more than 2.5 percent, without voter approval. Cities and counties can currently collect an additional eight 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. This bill will now head to the Senate floor in the coming weeks. A similar bill has also been filed in the House.

### **4. Parents and Vaccinations**

Texas is one of 18 states which allows parents to opt out of vaccinating their children because of philosophical or religious beliefs. There has long been many discussions and debates on both sides of this issue. Currently law requires a parent, who wants to find out how many students are vaccinated in their child's school, to file an open records request.

Senator Kel Seliger has filed SB 329, which would give parents the ability to obtain information on the immunization rate from their school districts, without an open records request. School districts would have to identify, by vaccine type, the number of students who do not have up-to-date vaccinations, the number with medical and nonmedical exemptions, and those who have been admitted with pending immunization documents. The state health department would also have to produce a biennial report on the number of outbreaks in the State of vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization rates. In addition, the Texas Education Agency would be required to produce an annual report on the immunization status of students for each school district and campus.

### **5. Nobel Prize Winner**

This week, the Senate recognized Dr. James Allison, a world-renowned pioneer of cancer immunotherapy, on winning the 2018 Nobel Prize in Medicine. Dr. Allison is the Chair of the Department of Immunology, and the executive director of the Immunotherapy Platform at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. He was honored for his discovery of cancer therapies that stimulate the immune system to attack tumor cells. These treatments have extended the lives of thousands of people with advanced disease. The drugs he has helped to develop have been approved to treat melanoma, lung cancer, Hodgkin's lymphoma and cancers of the kidney, bladder, liver and stomach.

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