



# My five cents...

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

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March is always a busy month in the Capitol as many people make their way to Austin during spring break. We enjoy seeing everyone, but there is no spring break for legislators as committee agendas are full of potential legislation.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

## 1. Teacher Retirement System

Everything is bigger in Texas and that includes the state's Teacher Retirement System (TRS), one of the 13th largest pension funds in the world which provides retirement benefits to over 420,000 people. The last few sessions, the Legislature has allocated funds to ensure TRS is financially stable and this session will be no different. Senate Bill 12, by Senator Huffman and of which I am a co-author, has been filed to address these costs. It will increase the states', districts' and active employees pension contributions over a six-year period, as well as provide a '13th' check to all retired school employees in an amount equal to their current monthly pension check during the 2020-21 budget cycle. The Legislature has made a commitment to these teachers and it is our job to make sure we are keeping that promise in ensuring they are receiving their benefits.

## 2. Supplemental Budget

This week, the Senate passed Senate Bill 500, also known as the supplemental budget bill. The supplemental is used to cover outstanding expenditures that may have arisen after the last biennium's budget was adopted. Of the \$6 billion allocated in this bill, most of it will be directed to cover Harvey related costs. This includes approximately \$900 million for school districts impacted by lowered property values and attendance decreases caused by Hurricane Harvey. \$100 million has been allocated to harden schools related to school safety, as well as additional funding to increase the state's contribution to the Teacher Retirement System. A state flood plan and other disaster prevention plans would also be funded, contingent on legislation passing to cover these costs. I talk about some of these bills in the item below.

## 3. Disaster Relief Bills

The Senate has filed Senate Bills 6,7 and 8, with the funding allocated in each amounting to \$1.8 billion in disaster relief for Texans. Senate Bill 6 would require the Texas Department of Emergency Management to create a disaster response plan for local officials in cities and counties. Senate Bill 7, would create a 'resiliency fund' of \$900 million from the state's Economic Stabilization Fund (also known as the Rainy Day Fund) to help local communities draw down billions more in federal recovery funds for flood projects. Approximately \$200 million of these funds would be used to draw down federal funds to construct nearly 27 miles of coastal levees in Orange County, which lies within Senate District 3, and to shore up nearly 30 miles of existing coastal levees in Port Arthur and Freeport. Senate Bill 8 would direct the state's water planning agency to create the first statewide flood plan in Texas.

#### **4. School Finance**

The Senate and the House have each filed their versions of a school finance reform bill. In addition to Senate Bill 3, the teacher pay raise bill, and Senate Bill 2, the property tax reform bill. Senate Bill 4 contains proposals for fund full-day pre-k, incentives for school districts to improve their third-grade reading performance, increase funding for low-income students and potential funding for teacher merit pay. There are many aspects of this bill that are still being considered in terms of changes in school funding formulas.

The house version, House Bill 3, combines many aspects of the three Senate bills into one. it would provide an increase for base funding per students, funding for property tax reform, help to reduce recapture payments and funding for school districts to offer a merit pay program. The Senate and the House will have to work together to ensure that we are able to provide effective school finance reform.

#### **5. Shelbyville Basketball Team**

It was a very proud moment for Senate District 3 when we heard that an East Texas boys basketball team had won State Championship. The Shelbyville ISD Dragons are now the UIL Boy's State Basketball Tournament Champions after they beat their opponents in San Antonio this past week. On their path to the championship, the Dragons outscored their opponents by a margin of 531 points to 343. I would like to congratulate the team on their win and hope that all teams in East Texas are successful in their futures.

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