



My five cents...

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

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While the Legislature has officially passed the 70th day, the halfway point of the session, most of the work is done in this last half of a long marathon.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Individual Graduation Committees

During the 84th Legislative Session, SB 149 was passed which created a special graduation committee for students who have been unable to pass up to two of the five end-of-course exams currently required to graduate from high school. These individual graduation committees (IGC), made up of parents, principals, counselors and teachers, must consider a variety of factors to determine a student's eligibility for graduation, including grades, coursework, attendance rate and the scores on college entrance exams. Students are required to pass all of the courses required to graduate in order to be eligible for the IGC process, and must complete additional remediation and completion of a project in the area in which they failed the exam. When the bill was originally passed in 2015, it was set to expire in 2017, and then was moved to expire in 2020.

After four academic years, data shows that IGCs are being used judiciously for deserving students. SB 213 was recently heard in the Senate Higher Education Committee, which extends the sunset date to 2023 to ensure this opportunity remains available for deserving students.

2. Hunting Feral Hogs

Texas is currently home to one of the largest feral hog populations in the United States with an estimated 2-3 million hogs in the state, with a large part of that population being in East Texas. They can cause millions of dollars worth of damage on the land of farmers and property owners, as well as disrupt the natural patterns of other animals. In an attempt to address this issue, the Legislature has previously passed legislation allowing individuals to hunt feral hogs from helicopters and hot air balloons, and passed laws allowing a landowner to kill a feral hog if they are destroying their property at that time, without a hunting license.

Senate Bill 317, by Senator Bryan Hughes, would allow a hog to be killed at anytime, whether they are destroying property at the time they are killed or not, without a hunting license. The hope of this provision is to enable landowners to further protect their property from damage.

3. Legal Age to Purchase Tobacco

National data shows approximately 95 percent of adult smokers began smoking before they turned 21, with many starting even younger. Currently, seven states and 380 cities have increased the minimum legal age of tobacco purchase to 21. Supporters of increasing the age state that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the addictive effect of nicotine and nicotine addiction, and that it can inhibit the development of the brain and its cognitive functions. Those against the increase don't believe it will stop those under 21 from accessing tobacco. SB 21 has been filed and recently heard in the State Affairs Committee. This bill would raise the minimum legal age of tobacco distribution, possession, purchase, consumption and receipt of cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and tobacco products from 18 years of age to 21.

4. Dogs on Patios

A few weeks ago I wrote about SB 476, also known as the Fido-Friendly Outdoor Dining Act. This week it was passed off the Senate floor and is now on its way to the House. This bill would allow restaurant patrons to bring their dogs along with them to restaurants across Texas which have patios and sidewalk cafés. Some of the requirements include a sign stating dogs are allowed should be posted; no food is prepared on patio; pets must be able to get to the outdoor area without walking through the restaurant interior, be on a leash and not sitting on a chair.

5. Battleship Texas

This week in 1945, the Battleship Texas supported the landings for the battle of Okinawa, which was the final great amphibious assault during World War II. This great ship, which also served in World War I, carried many soldiers and provided support during landings all throughout World War II. When it was retired, it was given to the State of Texas and now sits as a memorial at the San Jacinto Monument in Houston.

As part of the duties of the Senate Finance workgroup I currently Chair, we are working to secure funding to ensure the Battleship will be able to remain in tact and available for future generations to tour and experience.

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