



My five cents...

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

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The saying goes that everything is bigger in Texas. SCR 20, which was passed by the Senate Administration committee this week, would make this true for even our knives. It designates the Bowie knife, made famous by Jim Bowie when he carried it during the Battle of the Alamo, as the official knife of Texas.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. School Finance

This week, the Senate passed HB 3, the school finance bill. With 110 amendments proposed for this bill, there was approximately 8 hours of debate in determining what the bill would contain. As currently written, it will give teachers and librarians a \$5,000 pay raise, fund full day pre-k for low-income students, and increase base funding per student in each school district. The bill also increases funding for dual language programs, dyslexic and special education students and career and technology education. The bill will now head back to the House and a conference committee made up of members from both chambers will work out the differences within the bill.

2. Monuments Bill

To ensure we are protecting the history of our state and all of its monuments, the Senate has passed Senate Bill 1663. This bill requires a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to remove, relocate or alter a monument which is at least 25 years old located on state property, or on the campus of a public university or campus. For local monuments at least 25 years old, a supermajority vote by city councils, commissioners court, school board or other local government entities would be required to make any changes. For newer local monuments it would require a simple majority. Monuments and memorials can include statues, portraits, cenotaphs (such as the one at the Alamo), and names of parks.

3. Fantasy Sports

The Texas House has passed House Bill 2303, which would classify fantasy sports as a game of skill, not of chance, therefore legalizing it in the State of Texas. Fantasy sports games allow individuals to draft real players from the various sporting leagues to create their own fictional team. The players' statistics are then compiled and the team with the highest overall ranking wins. All of this is done either through an online website or on an app.

In early 2016, Attorney General Ken Paxton issued a nonbinding opinion stating that fantasy sports sites are online gambling, which is illegal, and critics of the sites would agree. Supporters believe they are solely based on skill and should be designated as legitimate. This bill is now in the Senate.

4. Sunset Bills

As a member of the Sunset Commission I have authored a number of bills which would continue agencies which were under Sunset review this past year, including HB 1501 for the Behavioral Health Executive Council (BHEC) and HB 1504 for the Texas Medical Board. Both of these bills were passed out of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee this week. The BHEC would create an umbrella agency for the Licensed Counselors, Social Workers, Psychologists and Marriage and Family Therapists.

Each individual board would retain their independence and have oversight of scope of practice and disciplinary actions. The Executive Council, made up of licensed and public members from each individual board, would take care of all of the administrative tasks for each board. These two bills will now head to the Senate floor for approval.

5. TEA 'Do Not Hire' List

Senate Bill 1256, which recently passed the Senate and has been sent to the House, would create a statewide registry maintained by the Texas Education Agency. The registry would list individuals, including former school employees, who have been determined to have engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a student, committed a crime against another person, or engaged in a prohibited misconduct. The registry would be used by public and private school administrators as a way to check potential new employees and keep them from hiring someone who had been let go from another school district, due to one of these misconducts.

The bill would also ensure that if a school employee has engaged in an unlawful act or solicited or engaged in an inappropriate act with a student or minor, they must be terminated from a public or private schools. This builds upon the standards implemented through SB 7, which was passed during the 85th Session (2017), and expanded the requirements for school district officials to report misconduct, and increased penalties for not reporting.

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