



# My five cents...

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

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The 86th Legislative Session has come to an end. I believe it was a successful 140 days, and we accomplished a lot for the people of Texas.

My weekly column will now revert back to a monthly column and I will continue to keep you updated as to what is happening not only at your state Capitol, but also in your state.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

## 1. Rural Broadband

Senate Bill 14, with I authored, has been sent to the Governors desk to be signed into law. This bill will help to 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. 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. This will help rural Texans to not only have access in their everyday lives, but also for their businesses.

## 2. School Finance

On one of the last days of session, both chambers passed House Bill 3, the school finance reform bill. This bill includes \$6.5 billion for public education, while increasing the state share of education from 38 percent to 45 percent. This includes raising the base funding per student from \$5,140 to \$6,160 per student. It raises the minimum salary schedule for employees, and provides an pay increase of, on average, \$4000 for classroom teachers, counselors, librarians and nurses. It fully funds Pre-K for the states most needy children, and provides additional funding for dropouts and students in residential treatment centers. It also reduces recapture payments by school districts, and lowers school property tax rates eight cents statewide in 2020 and 13 cents in 2021, on average. I am proud to be a part of a Legislature that has put our students first and ensuring they are provided the education they deserve and need.

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

Senate bill 2, the Texas Property Tax Reform and Transparency Act, has been sent to the governor and would require cities, counties and other taxing entities to receive voter approval before levying 3.5 percent more property tax revenue than the previous year. Community Colleges, hospital districts and those entities with the lowest rates (those with tax rates of 2.5 cents per \$100 valuation, or less) must receive voter approval before they can pass an 8 percent revenue growth. It also creates a disaster provisions which allows those entities in a disaster-declared area to utilize an 8 percent voter-approval rate for two years if values return to pre-disaster level, or three years if they do not return.

### **4. Teacher Retirement System**

The Legislature has passed Senate Bill 12, which will shore up the state's Teacher Retirement System (TRS) pension system. Under current state law, the legislature is not able to approve an increase in the monthly payments retired teachers receive, unless TRS is 'actuarially sound' or financially healthy and able to pay off its debts in less than 31 years. The state is contributing an additional \$1.11 billion towards the pension fund to ensure that it remains actuarially sound. This funding will also enable the Legislature to provide retirees with a one-time "13th check" beyond the monthly allocation they currently receive.

### **5. Driver Responsibility Act**

As of January 2018, approximately 1.4 million Texans had suspended licenses for not paying surcharges in the Driver's Responsibility Program. This program authorizes the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to assess surcharges to an individual based on certain traffic offenses. These charges can range from \$100 for a few traffic infractions to \$2000 for driving while intoxicated. If a driver is unable to pay the fee within 105 days, their drivers license is suspended. Critics of this program believe this program leaves low-income drivers with costly bills, without their drivers licenses and in a cycle of debt.

The Legislature has passed House Bill 2048 which will eliminate this program and eliminate the surcharges assessed to drivers. Drivers licenses suspended only because of a failure to pay a DRP surcharge will be reinstated.

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