



My five cents...

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

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As we head into the holiday season and you gather with friends and family, I want to wish you a very merry Christmas from my family to yours.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. **Texas Commission on Judicial Selection.**

I am grateful to Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick for recently appointing me to serve as a legislative member on the Texas Commission on Judicial Selection. This commission was created in 2019 by the 86th Legislature to study and review the method by which statutory county court judges, including probate court judges, districts judges and appellate justices and judges are selected for their office in Texas. The commission has been charged with considering the fairness, effectiveness and desirability of how a judicial officer is selected through partisan elections. They must also consider methods of judicial selection that have been proposed or adopted by other states and look at alternative methods and their merits for selecting a judicial officer. The commission is required to submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the governor and Legislature no later than December 2020.

2. **Rusk State Hospital groundbreaking**

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to attend the groundbreaking for the new \$200 million construction project at Rusk State Hospital. This new construction will include a 225,000-square-foot patient complex, which will house a 100 bed non-maximum security unit and a 100-bed maximum security unit. A new administrative building is also included in the new construction. The Texas Legislature has appropriated \$745 million for the construction of more modern facilities to replace outdated buildings at various state hospitals around Texas. Many of the buildings at Rusk State Hospital are approximately 130 years old, and cannot meet the needs of the people they serve. As a part of this revitalization effort, Rusk State Hospital will be able to continue to provide services to those in need and provide job opportunities to its local communities.

3. New system at DPS

The Texas Department of Public Safety has announced they will unveil a new appointment system at driver's license centers next year. The hope is this system will help to reduce the hours-long wait many Texans have had to endure in recent years. The new system will allow individuals to look at the local offices around them, choose their preferred office and book appointments up to six months in advance. Workers at the various centers will be able to estimate how long a driver's transaction will take and plan accordingly, to help cut down on wait times for other customers. Some people will be able to wait at the centers on "standby" in case someone does not show up for their appointment, and if no spots open, they can then make an appointment for another day. The Legislature appropriated approximately \$200 million, which has allowed DPS to hire more than 500 employees to fill vacancies at the various centers across the state.

4. Low unemployment in Texas

October marked the fifth consecutive month in Texas of record low unemployment rates with 3.4% rate of unemployment. This is the lowest rate of unemployment since the state began tracking it back in 1976. Approximately 297,100 new jobs have been added this year. This included 9,700 jobs in the trade, transportation and utilities industry, followed by professional and business services with 6,300 jobs and education and health services with 5,300 additional jobs. I am proud to serve Senate District 3 in the Texas Senate and work ensure that this continued growth remains a positive for our great state.

5. Christmas ornament

To commemorate the Capitol's history, every year since 1996 a unique ornament has been created. The proceeds of this annual tradition support ongoing Capitol conservation and educating the public about the history of the Capitol and its grounds. The 2019 Christmas ornament was inspired by the famed Lone Star locomotive. It highlights historic details that include a tall smokestack, steam whistle, bell, boilers and cattle guard, which is typical of a steam train in the late 19th century. The locomotive is decorated with Texas Lone Stars, Texas Flags and a holiday wreath that features the Capitol Dome. The railcar is filled with Sunset Red granite as it makes its way toward Austin to become part of the Texas Capitol. If you would like to buy your own ornament and have a little piece of Capitol history, you can visit texascapitolgiftshop.com.

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