



My five cents...

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

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As I look back on this year and all that was accomplished during the 86th Legislative Session, I am once again reminded that it could not have been done without you. While you are making your own resolutions for your personal life and businesses, the Senate is doing the same thing through its interim charges and interim hearings, as we plan for the 87th Legislative . I look forward to this next year and working together to make a difference for our state. Happy New Year!

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. **Feral Hogs**

Along with nine other states, Texas has received an approximately \$1.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help fund feral hog control and eradication programs in our state. This program was created by the 2018 Farm Bill to respond to the threat that feral hogs pose to agriculture, human and animal health, the ecosystem, and personal property. 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. The funding will include loaning hog traps to farmers, ranchers and landowners in an attempt to address the problem.

2. **Senate Finance Hearing**

Earlier this month, the Senate Finance Committee, on which I serve, held its first interim hearing. We discussed spending limits in the state and examined options for strengthening restrictions on certain appropriations defined in state statute. We looked at options to ensure available revenues that may be above the state's spending limit are reserved for tax relief for Texans. We also discussed the business personal property tax, which is the tax on the value of a business' inventory and equipment. Testimony was heard on the economic and fiscal effects of possibly increasing the exemptions for this tax, as well as what would happen if it was eliminated overall. The committee will create an interim report before next session, which will include our recommendations regarding all interim charges, including these.

3. STARR Test

During the most recent legislative session, concerns were raised that the STARR tests may be too advanced for the grade levels of the students taking the tests. To address these concerns, the Legislature ordered a study to evaluate whether STARR passages and questions were written at an appropriate grade levels for students to understand, and whether these tests align with the state's curriculum standards.

The first part of this study was recently released and showed for the 2018-2019 school year, between 93 percent and 100 percent of the questions in the five subject areas, for the third through eighth grades tests, aligned with curriculum standards. They also concluded that between 86 percent and 97 percent of the passages in the reading and writing tests were readable. The study will continue next year with the 2019-20 STARR tests.

4. Adoptions Increasing in Texas

In the 86th Legislative Session, the Texas Legislature increased spending for community-based foster care by approximately \$67 million, and increased the rates paid to foster care providers by \$12 million. Support was also expanded for kinship caregivers, those who commit to caring for young family members..

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services recently announced the number of children adopted from the state's foster care has reached a four-year high and just over half of these children had been adopted by family members. 20,000 children left the Texas foster care in the last year, with the number of children leaving foster care outnumbering those entering into the system by more than 1,700 children. To learn more about the adoption process in Texas, you can visit AdoptChildren.org.

5. Agencies Evaluating Licensures

At the beginning of December, all state agencies in Texas were asked by Governor Abbott to review and overhaul their licensing requirements. They were urged to do this with a focus on providing Texans "the opportunity to earn a living free from unnecessary state intrusion." They were directed to trim licensing regulations, reduce fees and educational requirements for certain professions, and determine where appropriate, licensing barriers for individuals with criminal records could be removed. They were also asked to reduce license applications fees to 75 percent or less of the national average for comparable occupations. I will keep you updated, as this process continues.

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