



My five cents...

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

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Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow on Groundhog Day, signaling 6 more weeks of winter. Since 1887, the groundhog in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania has been central to the legend of Groundhog Day, celebrated every February 2. Let's hope he's wrong this year.

Here are five things happening around the state this week:

1. **Texas Water Development Board authorized \$44.5 million in Flood Mitigation Assistance**

Last month, the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) approved \$44.5 million in FEMA grants for their Flood Mitigation Assistance program. The Flood Mitigation Assistance program is a competitive grant program that provides funding to states and local communities for projects that reduce or eliminate the risk of repetitive flood damage. TWDB administers the FEMA grant program for Texas. Eleven grants for Texas projects were approved, including four in Senate District 3. Montgomery County was awarded \$10.07 million for acquisition projects, Orange County was awarded \$1 million for elevation projects, the City of Pearland was awarded \$1.35 million for elevation projects, and the City of Vidor was awarded over \$400,000 for acquisition projects. That totals over \$12.5 million for Senate District 3 flood mitigation projects, a much needed investment in our more flood-prone areas.

2. **Texas economy ranked 9th largest in the world**

According to the most recent GDP data from the International Monetary Fund, Texas entered 2021 as the world's 9th largest economy, overtaking Brazil who was ranked 9th since 2015. This ranking places Texas in front of other large global economies such as Canada, South Korea, and Russia. Texas has a GDP of \$1.9 trillion, whereas the US total GDP totals around \$21.4 trillion, making it the world's largest economy. It's a good time to be in business in Texas and we look forward to continued growth in 2021.

3. **Governor Abbott Names Broadband as an Emergency Item in State of the State Address**

This week, Governor Abbott delivered his State of the State address in Austin. During the half-hour speech, he touched on topics ranging from the pandemic and the vaccine effort to the Texas economy and job growth. In the speech, he named five emergency items, a designation that will allow legislators to vote on and pass legislation before the 60-day mark. One of the emergency items was expanding broadband access. Lack of rural broadband has been an issue in the state for a long time and something I've been working on for several years. The global pandemic has only shown us just how necessary high-speed internet is for telehealth, education, and business. This session I have filed legislation with Rep. Ashby that would expand broadband access. I'm thrilled the governor has made this subject an emergency item and know that we will be working diligently to pass meaningful reform to get rural Texans the high-speed internet they need.

4. US Military Medical Professionals Treating COVID-19 Patients in Lufkin

Lufkin is one of three cities across the state that military medical personnel are deploying to in response to the ongoing pandemic. They will also be deploying to Abilene and Eagle Pass. The medical personnel will be supporting local hospitals and frontline workers in treating COVID-19 patients. The military medical professionals will be working at St. Luke's Lufkin. The hospital is also planning to expand by opening a third COVID-19 unit in preparation for another influx of cases. This all comes as two new vaccination hubs opened in East Texas. The newest hubs in Jasper and Palestine join existing hubs in Liberty County and Montgomery County.

5. Big Thicket National Preserve Issuing Free Feral Hog Trapping Permits

The Feral Hog Trapping Program is offering free hog trapping permits in the Big Thicket National Preserve. The feral hog population is becoming a problem in that area, which covers parts of Jasper, Polk, and Tyler counties. Feral hogs can be aggressive and outcompete other native animals for food, water, and resources, throwing the existing ecosystem out of balance. Hunters are allowed to trap and kill as many hogs as they can. Last year, around 250 feral hogs were removed and the preserve is hoping for even more removals this year. The program issues 50 free permits on a first-come, first-serve basis. Hunters are allowed to bring one trap and one feeder and hogs in the trap must be killed with a firearm only. No hunting dogs are allowed while hog trapping in the area. The program runs until the beginning of general hunting season in November. Permits are available at the Big Thicket's Visitor Center.

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