



My five cents...

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

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Twenty-seven of my colleagues and I signed a letter to the Public Utility Commission this week urging them to correct the billing errors related to last month's winter storm. According to the Independent Market Monitor, ERCOT allowed emergency pricing to continue for almost a day and a half longer than necessary, resulting in \$3.2 billion in overbilled charges. Correcting these billing mistakes is a critical step in reforming the system.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Senate Bills 5 and 15 referred to Senate Transportation Committee

Last week, Senate Bills 5 and 15 were referred to the Senate Transportation Committee that I chair. I filed these two bills and they've been designated as priority bills by the Lt. Governor. Senate Bill 5 relates to the creation of a state broadband office and expanding broadband access across the state. Broadband access was also deemed an emergency item by the governor. Senate Bill 15 relates to personal data privacy protection and is referred to as the Texas Consumer Privacy Act Phase I. This bill would ensure that certain state agencies that have access to your personal data cannot sell that data to third parties and would prevent anyone who has access to the data from re-selling it. Getting bills referred is an important step in moving these two critical pieces of legislation through the legislature. Now that they've been referred, the committee set a time next week for a public hearing. If they pass out of committee, then they'll be heard by the entire Senate.

2. Bill filing deadline eminent

Friday March 12 marks the 60th day of the legislative session, which is the last day members can file new legislation. The only exceptions are for local bills and bills that relate to an emergency item set by the governor. This bill filing deadline marks an important turning point in session. Now, once bills are heard and voted out of committee, the Senate as a whole may begin voting on and passing legislation out of the chamber. As bills start to move, the pace of session accelerates and important decisions about pending legislation will be made. If there is a bill you are particularly passionate about, please reach out to one of my offices to let us know your thoughts.

3. TPWD seeking public comment on statewide hunting regulation proposals

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department recently released their new statewide hunting regulation proposals for the 2021-2022 hunting seasons. One of the proposed changes is removing the prohibition on trailing wounded deer with dogs in Angelina, Hardin, Nacogdoches, Orange, Shelby, and Tyler counties. Additionally, it would allow for the trailing of wounded deer with no more than two dogs on a leash in Jasper, Newton, Sabine, and San Augustine counties. The new regulations would also add crossbows to the definition of lawful archery equipment, among other provisions. Currently, TPWD is seeking public comment on these changes. The online comment portal closes March 24.

4. Operation Lone Star launched by the state to address situation at the southern border

Texas Department of Public Safety and the Governor's office launched Operation Lone Star this month to combat the smuggling of people and drugs across our southern border into Texas. DPS officers will be integrated with Texas National Guard troops that will deploy to key areas that are considered high threats for smuggling activity. Air, ground, marine, and tactical border security assets will all be used in the effort. This move comes on the heels of a surge in immigrants at the border, especially in unaccompanied minors, in the past four months due at least in part to the Biden administration relaxing immigration policies the Trump administration had in place. With an increase in border crossings, both legal and illegal, the governor declared the situation a crisis.

5. TEA releases guidance for schools after mask mandate lifted, announces extension of hold harmless

The Texas Education Agency released guidance for school districts last week following the governor's executive order ending the mask mandate and other business restrictions in the state. School districts may continue their current health and safety protocols unless their local school board votes to proceed otherwise, which they now have the full authority to do.

The state also extended the hold harmless provision for school districts. That means the state will fully fund school districts even if they have seen a drop in student attendance during the pandemic. Instead, they'll be funded on the number of students who attended before the pandemic began.

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