



My five cents...

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

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This week the Senate passed Senate Bill 1, the Senate's version of the budget for this year. The budget includes over \$11 billion for children and teacher public education support, \$8 billion for mental health support, including an almost \$20 million increase for children's mental health programs, and over \$25 billion for highway improvements and new construction. The budget is a reflection of our priorities this session and took over six weeks to put together.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Governor issues executive order prohibiting vaccine passports

This week Governor Abbott issued an executive order prohibiting government-mandated vaccine passports, including for the COVID-19 vaccine. This order applies to state agencies and political subdivisions in Texas. It prevents those agencies from requiring proof of vaccination to receive services. It also prohibits entities that receive public funds, including private entities, from requiring documentation of vaccine status to receive any service or enter any place. Texans' vaccination status is a private health matter, and as such should be protected from any forced disclosure. Currently, the COVID-19 vaccine is not mandatory.

2. Texas Senate passes election security bill

The Texas Senate passed Senate Bill 7 last week, which is aimed at protecting election integrity. It sets the early voting hours to start at 6 am and finish at 9 pm. It requires voting to occur inside a building with certain regulations. Voters would have to enter the building unless unable to because it was a risk to their health. The bill also prevents local officials from sending out mail-in ballot applications to all voters, whether they're eligible to vote-by-mail or not. Voters have to request a mail-in ballot on their own volition. Elections officials are allowed to post instructions on how to vote by mail on their website. There are several other provisions in the bill that strengthens election security and integrity for all our future elections.

3. Texas receives 2.5 million doses of vaccine this week

The Texas Department of State Health Services announced that Texas received 2.5 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine this week. That marks the most Texas has received in a single week thus far. Texas has now administered more than 11.8 million doses. Nearly 7.8 million people have received at least one dose, and more than 4.3 million Texans are fully vaccinated. Almost 20 percent of Texans are fully vaccinated. This comes as hospitalization rates for Texans have fallen dramatically. East Texas hospitals are seeing numbers as low as they've been since last spring. East Texas hospital leaders credit increasing vaccination rates and lasting immunity for the drop in COVID-19 hospitalizations. With those rates decreasing, the CDC has also released new guidance about travelling within the United States for fully vaccinated people. Those who are fully vaccinated can travel safely within the US and no longer need to get tested or quarantine before or after travel, unless a destination requires it.

4. First day of STAAR cancelled due to disruptions

Texas students were preparing to take the STAAR test starting this week but were hampered by widespread technical glitches that forced many students offline or prevented them from logging in. The Texas Education Agency advised districts to stop online testing for the day while the vendor tried to resolve the problem. At least three tests were effected by the glitch, including the fourth grade writing exam and the seventh grade writing and English I exams. TEA has waived grade promotion requirements for students in fifth and eighth grades, so the assessment is aimed at finding a benchmark for where students are. COVID-19 has led to an extensive disruption in student learning and assessing where students are is the first step to correcting that disruption. However, that becomes difficult when online STAAR testing is interrupted. TEA worked to get the students back online by the next day.

5. East Texas 5th grader raises money for slain DPS Trooper's family

A Houston County 5th grader donated all of her winnings from showing her hog at the Houston County Youth Fair and Livestock show to the family of fallen DPS Trooper Chad Walker. Last month, Trooper Walker was shot multiple times after stopping to aid a driver near Mexia. He later died of his injuries at an area hospital. Latexo ISD student Aubrey Waits heard about the tragedy and decided to donate her winnings to the family. Other donations began to come in on top of Aubrey's and the fifth grader ended up raising about \$10,000 for the family. I offer my condolences to the family of Trooper Walker.

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