



# My five cents...

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

For immediate release  
May 27, 2021  
word count: 743

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The last week of session is coming to a close and the long nights have stretched into the early hours of the following mornings. We're sprinting to the finish of an unusual session and passing consequential and substantial legislation.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. Budget Conference Committee Report approved by Senate**

In one of the last steps the State budget needs for approval, the Senate passed the final version of the budget this week. This session's budget appropriates \$248.5 billion in All Funds for the 2022-2021 biennium. In all, it maintains our commitments to education we made last session, strengthens public safety, and invest in our future, all while practicing fiscal restraint. It includes over \$30 billion to address transportation needs, including \$26.5 billion for highway planning, design, construction, and maintenance; \$3.1 billion to fund enrollment growth for public education; \$200 million for Gulf Coast protection and mitigation efforts; \$30 million for new rural and urban community mental health beds; and \$34 million for pay raises for TDCJ correctional officers at maximum security units, among other priorities. I'd like to thank Senator Jane Nelson, Representative Greg Bonnen, my fellow members of the Senate Finance committee, and the House Appropriations committee for all the hard work and dedication to putting together a fiscally responsible budget.

## **2. Broadband Office bill update**

This session, Representative Trent Ashby and I put an emphasis on passing meaningful broadband reform to expand broadband services in our state. This week, the House and Senate Conference Committee convened and we worked out the differences between our two bills to come up with the final product. House Bill 5 will create the Broadband Development Office within the Comptroller's office. The office will serve as a resource for information about broadband service and digital connectivity in the state and for federal programs. It also directs the office to create a broadband development map that will identify areas that are not served or are underserved and the percentage of addresses that have access to service. This map is necessary to be eligible for certain federal funds that could help expand broadband access.

Working on this legislation was one of the highlights of this session and one of the most important and impactful bills of session.

### **3. Texas House approves Name, Image, and Likeness bill**

In the last few days before their deadline, the Texas House passed Senator Creighton's Senate Bill 1385. This bill would allow student athletes at Texas universities to earn compensation for use of their name, image, and likeness for things like promotional appearances and product endorsements, so long as they're not engaged in official team activities. Recently, several other states have passed similar legislation after a national movement by student-athletes brought awareness to the issue. Texas would be the 17th state to pass such legislation. This bill will keep our state institutions of higher education competitive with other schools and states that now allow this practice, especially in terms of recruiting top tier talent.

### **4. Freedom to Worship Act passes the Senate**

House Bill 1239 passed the Texas Senate late last week. This bill, sponsored by Senator Angela Paxton, would ensure that houses of worship are protected from being forced to close under any emergency powers in the future. During the COVID-19 pandemic, certain emergency orders forced churches and other houses of worship to shut their doors. This bill would guarantee Texans' right to freedom of religion and free exercise of religion, rights that are promised and protected by the First Amendment. Worship and the community that comes with it are essential to many Texans lives. This legislation recognizes that and ensures that no law, emergency order, local ordinance, or other mandate can deny Texans that right.

### **5. Bill to allow for employer-driven workforce training passes**

As the home to 50 Fortune 500 companies and with an economy that would qualify as the ninth largest globally, Texas has an obligation to the businesses that are here and those that move here to provide the best workforce possible. As such, Senator Bettencourt sponsored House Bill 4361 which passed the Texas Senate this week. This bill is aimed at ensuring businesses in Texas can find and hire employees who are qualified and have the correct training to work there. This bill would allow employers to issue a request for proposal to any higher education institution to offer off-campus workforce education or other programs that could count toward college credit.

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