



My five cents...

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

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The Legislature adjourned Sine Die for hopefully the last time this year after completing our third special session. While we accomplished many great things for the state over the past ten months, I'm glad to be back in East Texas.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Redistricting maps finalized, sent to the Governor

The Legislature has finished the third called special session of the year and completed the challenging redistricting process. The state grew substantially over the past decade which forced the ideal district size for State Senate districts to increase to 940,178 people. Due to these changes, Senate District 3 (SD-3) saw some changes in the makeup of the district. Previously, SD-3 comprised of 19 East Texas counties including the northern half of Montgomery County. After the redistricting process, SD-3 will no longer include San Jacinto County or Montgomery County. Instead, the district will now include the greater part of Jefferson County, including Beaumont, Nederland, Port Neches, Groves and part of Port Arthur. I have represented part of Montgomery County and all of San Jacinto County since I took office in 2007, so I will dearly miss all of the friends I have made in those areas. However, I am looking forward to meeting the people of Jefferson County and representing them. I will be running for re-election in the newly drawn district, but I will still represent my current district until the 88th Legislature convenes in 2023 and I am sworn in. It's been one of the greatest honors of my life to represent East Texans in the Legislature, and I hope to continue doing just that.

2. Property tax relief measures pass both chambers

In the waning hours of this special session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 1 and Senate Joint Resolution 2, which puts a constitutional amendment before Texans to lower their property taxes. SJR 2 will increase the homestead exemption from \$25,000 in appraised home value to \$40,000, equating to a 60 percent increase over existing law. Additionally, school districts will be held harmless which means the money for the property tax cut will come from the state. Both chambers approved the measure unanimously and now it's up to voters in May 2022 to approve the constitutional amendment.

3. Funding secured for higher education capital projects

After Governor Abbott added higher education improvements to the special session call, the House and Senate worked quickly to put together a proposal for over \$3 billion in capital projects for higher education institutions. Every region of the state will see an investment from the state in campus improvements. In Senate District 3, Stephen F. Austin State University received over \$44 million for an Interdisciplinary and Applied Science building and Lamar State College - Orange received over \$37 million for a new academic building and information technology services. CCAPs are bonds that are secured with tuition and other charges but are paid back out of state funds over a series of years. The Legislature appropriated \$325 million in federal American Rescue Plan funds as a down payment for these projects.

4. Bill clarifies eligibility for tuition benefits for dependents of fallen first responders

The House and Senate both passed House Bill 133 this week which clarifies eligibility for higher education tuition benefits for children and dependents of fallen first responders. The law came about after a Fort Bend County deputy was killed by friendly fire in May of 2020. Deputy Caleb Rule was survived by his wife and four children, including his daughter who graduated from high school the day he passed. Because she was already 18 at the time of his death, she did not qualify for tuition survivor benefits. Therefore, the Caleb Rule Act was passed to increase survivor benefits to include college-aged children to receive tuition assistance. The legislation was passed unanimously in both chambers and now heads to the Governor's desk.

5. WorkForce Solutions Deep East Texas providing services to Texans with barriers to employment

WorkForce Solutions Deep East Texas is providing vocational rehabilitation services to East Texans over the age of 14 with a disability that presents a barrier to seeking employment. That could be mental health conditions, deafness, alcoholism, learning disabilities, or other impairments. WorkForce Solutions can help connect clients with professionals to verify disabilities, so Texans do not have to come with a diagnosis in hand. Services are catered to each individual and can include professional training, social learning experiences, or even vehicle modifications for those with physical disabilities. To learn more, visit <http://twc.texas.gov/jobseekers/vocational-rehabilitation-services>.

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