



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This week we celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a visionary leader and made an invaluable impact on our country.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Budget filed in both the House and Senate

Now that the members are sworn in and both the Governor and Lieutenant Governor are sworn in, the legislature can begin the work of the people. The first step is the filing of the budget by both the House and the Senate on their respective ideas of what the budget should be. This week, Representative Greg Bonnen and Senator Joan Huffman each filed their versions of the budget in their respective chambers. The senate budget, Senate Bill 1, includes \$15 billion for additional property tax relief, including \$3 billion to increase the homestead exemption to \$70,000, fully funding public education, \$3 billion in additional funds to invest in the state's mental health resources, \$600 million for school safety initiatives, \$500 million for Gulf Coast Protection District projects, and much more. This document highlights the priorities of the legislature. The process of building the final budget takes weeks of committee hearings and deliberations between the Senate and the House and will likely take most of the session to complete. I look forward to working with my colleagues on the budget for the next biennium!

2. Houston Astros honored in Senate

This week, the Senate hosted the Houston Astros to celebrate their World Series championship. Members of the team were honored with a resolution on the Senate floor and they also brought the World Series trophy. The Astros defeated the Philadelphia Phillies in six games to win their second championship. The final game of the series was played at Minute Maid Park in Houston last November. The series was also notable for having the first World Series no-hitter since 1956. A combined effort from four Astros pitchers achieved the feat in Game 4. Congratulations on an amazing season and World Series win!

3. TxDOT makes \$250 million available for transportation alternatives

TxDOT announced the agency is making \$250 million available for sidewalks, bike lanes, shared-use paths, and other projects to enhance walking and biking transportation options across the state. The federal funding is aimed at reducing the number of pedestrian and bicyclists fatalities, which have risen in past years. The funding will help communities plan and build walking and biking infrastructure. TxDOT is hosting virtual workshops to help municipalities and organizations as they apply for this funding. To learn more, visit <https://www.txdot.gov/business/grants-and-funding/bicycle-pedestrian-local-federal-funding-programs.html>.

4. State parks celebrating 100 years

This year is the Centennial Celebration of Texas State Parks. To commemorate 100 years, every state park will host at least one special event in 2023. In January, many state parks in North Texas and on the coast are hosting fishing events for kids. There is also a photo contest with a new theme for each season of the year. Participants have the chance to win a State Parks Pass, a \$100 H-E-B gift card and more. The Bullock Texas State History Museum is also hosting a new traveling art exhibit that features more than 30 Texas State Parks. Thirty notable Texas artists were commissioned to create works celebrating parks across Texas. The exhibit runs in Austin from January 7 to April 30 and will then travel to several museums later this year and next year. It will be on display in Tyler in 2024. There is also a commemorative book that highlights the collection and is available online to purchase. For more information on events happening at parks near you, visit www.TexasStateParks.org/100years.

5. DETCOG helps challenge federal broadband map

Recently, the Federal Communications Commission released a broadband coverage map that suggests most of Deep East Texas has access to broadband. Members of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments (DETCOG) have encouraged the community to challenge the maps, as they are misleading and do not accurately reflect the reality of broadband access, especially in rural areas. The map was compiled by using data from internet service providers in the area. The coverage map will help determine how much funding states receive from the federal government for broadband projects. It's important that the maps accurately reflect access in the state. Challenges can be issued based on whether if a provider denies your request for service, has a waiting list longer than 10 days, or requires extra fees for installation. For more information, to see the map, and to verify and challenge coverage areas, go to <https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov/home>.

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