



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Contact: Shelby Conine
Tel: 512-463-0103

On January 25, 1839 the official flag of Texas was adopted by the Third Congress of the Republic of Texas. It specified the look of the iconic Lone Star Flag that we know and love today. The colors were chosen to signify certain attributes: red for courage, white for purity and liberty, and blue for loyalty. The Texas flag is the only flag of an American state that previously served as a flag for an independent country.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Starting pay at state hospitals and state supported living centers increases

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) announced it is increasing salaries and starting pay at state hospitals and state supported living centers to combat staffing shortages and bring hospital beds back online. HHSC said there are 700 state hospital beds offline due to a shortage of staffers. The commission is hoping to recruit and attract workers, reduce vacancies, and bring more beds back online. There are approximately 1,805 openings in state hospitals and 2,137 openings in state supported living centers. Registered nurses with three years' experience could have starting salaries as high as \$90,000 per year. Psychiatric nursing assistants and direct support professionals would start between \$17.50 and \$21.00 an hour depending on experience. Current employees are also receiving salary increases.

2. Bill filed to make catalytic converter theft a state felony

Senator John Whitmire and Senator Carol Alvarado jointly filed Senate Bill 224 which seeks to increase the criminal penalty for catalytic converter theft. For the past several years, there has been a marked increase in thefts of catalytic converters. Even when thieves are caught in possession of stolen catalytic converters it can be difficult to prove the case. This bill seeks to increase the penalty for stealing catalytic converters to a state jail felony and makes it easier for law enforcement to charge those who possess catalytic converters unlawfully. The bill adds additional penalties for criminals who stole catalytic converters while in possession of a firearm. Criminals engaging in catalytic converter theft have become violent and there have been many stories from around the state of Texans being injured or killed during the theft. It is time to give law enforcement more tools to combat these violent crimes.

3. Senate committee assignments announced

This week Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick released committee assignments for the 88th Legislature. I was honored to be reappointed as chair of the Senate Transportation Committee and remain a member of Senate Finance, Business and Commerce, Local Government, and Redistricting Committees. The Senate Finance Committee will begin holding hearings next week to start the budget process. Each state agency will come before the committee and discuss their appropriations request with the committee. Members of the committee will have the opportunity to ask questions and get further clarification on details of the budget before further deliberations begin.

4. Afghan soldier arrested as US-Mexico border has federal immigration charges dropped

Abdul Wasi Safi is a former Afghan special forces intelligence officer who worked directly with US forces in Afghanistan. During the collapse of the Afghan government, he was unable to escape the country on any of the US military flights out of Kabul. He became a target of the Taliban once they took over the country. He went into hiding for months before he trekked across countries and continents to make it to the US-Mexico border in an attempt to join his brother who lives in Houston as a US citizen. He was apprehended by federal authorities and charged with a criminal misdemeanor. He has spent nearly four months in a detention center, but now an assistant US attorney asked the judge this week to dismiss the case against him in the interest of justice and the judge agreed. He will now continue on his journey toward asylum and will hopefully be released and reunited with his brother soon.

5. Jim and Margaret Perkins honored for higher education initiatives

This week it was my pleasure to honor Jim and Margaret Perkins on the Senate floor for all of their contributions to our communities, specific in higher education. This year, they were recognized with the 2023 Texas Higher Education Distinguished Service Award. Leaders from more than 100 institutions of higher education chose them for their work supporting East Texas students, institutions, and communities. Starting in 2014, the Perkins worked with Tyler Junior College to establish a scholarship program for local high school graduates known as the "TJC Promise," which has supported hundreds of students pursue post-secondary education. Congratulations to the Perkins for this tremendous achievement!

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