



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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On March 2, we celebrate Texas Independence Day! On that day in 1836, a delegate from each of the 59 existing settlements in Texas signed the Texas Declaration of Independence. This document officially declared Texas' independence from Mexico and created the Republic of Texas. The delegation met at Washington-on-the-Brazos and also organized the interim government, naming Sam Houston commander-in-chief of the republic's military forces.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Teacher Vacancy Task Force releases recommendations

Last week, the Teacher Vacancy Task Force released recommendations to help with teacher retention and recruitment. The task force was established in March of last year by Governor Abbott to examine the challenges teacher's face and why teachers are leaving the profession. The state is facing a severe teacher shortage and school districts are doing their best with the resources they have. The task force included teachers and school administrators from across Texas. The task force developed three key areas that need to be addressed: compensation, training and support, and working conditions. According to the task force, teacher's need an increase in overall compensation, including benefits, and additional strategic compensation strategies. There is also a need to improve the teacher pipeline, expand training and support for teacher mentorship, and provide access to high-quality instructional materials. Lastly, the task force identified working conditions that led to a lack of value for teachers' time and a need to ensure culture and discipline supports. To read more about the task force's findings, go to tea.texas.gov/tvtf.

2. Senate Bill 3 filed, raises homestead exemption to \$70,000

This week Senator Paul Bettencourt filed Senate Bill 3 and Senate Joint Resolution 3 which would raise that homestead exemption to \$70,000. This would be a 75 percent increase in the current homestead exemption which is currently \$40,000. All 31 members of the Texas Senate, including me, have signed on as co-authors to the bill and the constitutional amendment. This change would provide an additional \$341 in savings on school taxes for the average homeowner each year. Senate Bill 3 is one of Lt. Governor Dan Patrick's top priorities. Delivering property tax relief has never been more important as property values and inflation rise. I look forward to voting for this important legislation and working with our counterparts in the House to pass meaningful property tax relief.

3. Jobs and Education for Texans grant application now available

The Texas Workforce Commission announced the agency is now accepting applications for Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grants. JET grants are given to public junior, state, and technical colleges, and Texas independent school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, and the Windham School District. The funding is for career and technical education programs, including equipment, in those education entities. The education courses lead to a license, certificate, or post-secondary degree and many include dual-credit and technical education programs. The JET program also supports employers by preparing students for careers in high-demand jobs in local businesses. The program currently has \$8.6 million available. Applications are now open with a deadline of March 14.

4. Senate Bill 2 raises illegal voting penalty

The Senate State Affairs Committee voted out Senate Bill 2 this week. The bill, authored by Senator Bryan Hughes, would increase the penalty for illegal voting from a misdemeanor to a second degree felony, which was the penalty prior to 2021. Illegal voting has been a felony for almost 50 years, and this bill treats it with the degree of seriousness it deserves. This bill is also a priority of the Lt. Governor this session and I look forward to working with the rest of the members of the Senate and the House on this legislation.

5. TxDOT developing record \$100 billion plan for projects

The Texas Department of Transportation is proposing a record \$100 billion unified transportation plan that will increase the number of projects approved over the next ten years. This is projected to be \$15 billion more than the 2023 Unified Transportation Program (UTP) and is based on revenue for the state, derived from the growth in Proposition 1 revenues. The projects would improve congestion, maintain roadways, and increase safety across the state. TxDOT currently has more than \$33 billion in transportation projects under constructions throughout Texas with more than 7,000 transportation projects underway or scheduled to break ground in 2023. TxDOT will be evaluating projects for inclusion in the 2024 UTP through May.

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