



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

For immediate release
April 27, 2023
word count: 744

Contact: Shelby Conine Vestal
Tel: 512-463-0103

May is right around the corner which means we only have a month left in this Legislative session. Deadlines are looming for bills to reach certain benchmarks. It's a race to the finish!

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Bill moving SFA to UT-System passes House, going to Governor

This week, Senate Bill 1055 passed the House unanimously, 148-0, with even Speaker Phelan voting for the bill (the Speaker typically votes 'present not voting' on most bills in the chamber). I appreciate the House author, Representative Travis Clardy, and his work on this legislation. I also want to thank our partners at the University of Texas System and Stephen F. Austin State University for all of their work on this bill. The university received input from students, faculty, alumni, community members, and other interested parties before making the decision to affiliate with the UT-System. Both the university and the system stand to benefit from this partnership, and I look forward to the Governor signing this historic legislation. Congratulations to both SFA and the UT-System!

2. House passes state employee parental leave bill with changes

This week, the House passed Senate Bill 222, a bill I authored to give state employees paid parental leave. I was happy to work with Representative Will Metcalf, who carried the bill in the House. The House made some changes to the bill, including extending the amount of paid maternity leave offered to state employees and paid paternity leave. The House's version of the bill gives both parents 60 days of paid leave, which equates to about six weeks of leave. The Senate's version of the bill gives four weeks of paid maternity leave and two weeks of paid paternity leave. We will have to appoint a conference committee to work out the details between the two chambers and ensure that state employees are given the benefit of paid parental leave. I look forward to working with our House and Senate colleagues to give an appropriate amount of paid leave for state employees who are starting or growing their families.

3. Lamar University, SFA receive Summer Merit Program grants

The Texas Workforce Commission and Governor Greg Abbott announced 12 grants totaling almost \$1 million to Texas universities and community colleges for science, technology,

engineering, and math (STEM) summer youth camps through the Governor’s Summer Merit Program. These funds provide scholarships for more than 1,500 students aged 14-21 to attend STEM summer camps that prepare them for future work in high-demand industries. The Summer Merit Program offers students an introduction to advanced technologies and manufacturing, aerospace and defense, biotechnology and life sciences, information and computer technology, petroleum refining and chemical products, and energy. Two universities in Senate District 3 are recipients of the grants. Lamar University received just under \$100,000 for 180 scholarships for camps with hands-on learning opportunities in computing and programming. Stephen F. Austin State University received \$100,000 for 140 scholarships for project-based learning activities. The camps at SFA will include fieldwork opportunities, field trips, and STEM career-oriented events and activities.

4. Nursing grant programs bill passes Senate

This week the Senate passed Senate Bill 2059 by Senator Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa. The bill seeks to address the ongoing nursing shortage in the state by establishing several grant programs at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. These grant programs would enhance access to clinical training and support faculty for clinical training. Multiple nursing shortage workforce evaluations pointed to lack of clinical training capacity as the primary obstacle to educating more nurses. Senate Bill 2059 would create the Clinical Site Nurse Preceptor Grant program, the Clinical Site Innovation and Coordination Program, the Nursing Faculty Grant Program for part-time positions, and the Nursing Faculty Grant Program for clinical training. Providing state support for expanding access to nurses clinical training is critical as we come out of the pandemic.

5. Bill updating school marshal program passes Senate

The Senate unanimously passed a bill that would continue to improve the school marshal program. Senate Bill 2407 by Senator Kelly Hancock would require school marshal training to include training provided by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training Center, also known as ALERRT. ALERRT, which is housed at Texas State University in San Marcos, is considered the gold standard in active shooter response training. If we want to continue to improve safety in our schools, it is imperative we give those who are charged with protecting students the best training and tools possible.

###