



# My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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It's officially fall! September 22 marked the official start of autumn. Hopefully that means some cooler weather.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. Port Arthur LNG obtains approval to expand gas plant project**

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved the permit that authorizes the Port Arthur Liquid Natural Gas plant project to expand into Phase 2, including the addition of two liquefaction trains capable of producing up to 13 million tons per annum (Mtpa) of liquefied natural gas. That would increase the total capacity of the facility from 13 Mtpa currently to 26 Mtpa. Sempra, the company that owns the plant, expects the expansion will help meet the future domestic demand for liquid natural gas supplies and international demand. The second phase of this project will continue to create new, high-paying jobs in the region and benefit the local economy. Texas is a leader in energy production and I applaud Sempra's decision to expand their footprint in Southeast Texas.

## **2. Comptroller predicts increase in revenue estimate**

At an interview during Texas Tribune's annual conference, TribFest, Texas Comptroller Glenn Hager predicted that the state will have more money available to spend than previously thought. During the 88<sup>th</sup> Regular Session, legislators passed a balanced budget that totaled \$321.3 billion. Lawmakers also made use of an over \$30 billion surplus from the previous fiscal year. Now the state's accountant says there will be additional revenue, driven mainly by an increase in insurance premiums. Hager did not say exactly how much extra funding will be available, but that number should be released in his October update. How and if the additional money is spent could come up during a potential special session that Governor Abbott has said will begin next month.

## **3. General Land Office approves \$68M in mitigation projects in East Texas**

Earlier this month, the General Land Office (GLO) announced the approval of over \$68 million for six mitigation projects in Deep East Texas, with \$42 million for broadband and interoperable radio communications infrastructure through the Deep East Texas Council of Governments

(DETCOG). Other projects are in the cities of Hemphill, Ivanhoe, and Woodville and Sabine County for street improvements and Jasper County for community resource centers, reconstruction of roadways, and installing elevated water tanks. The DETCOG project will increase connectivity in the region, which is especially essential during a disaster. Businesses, local governments, emergency responders, and other organizations cannot effectively respond to a disaster without broadband access. These projects are critical to Deep East Texas and I'm appreciative of all the work DETCOG and the GLO have done to ensure this funding was made available.

#### **4. Stephen F. Austin State University celebrates 100 year anniversary**

This month SFA celebrated its centennial with four days worth of events and parties. The occasion brought thousands of students, alumni, staff, and community members to the campus to commemorate 100 years of SFA. The university opened its doors for the first time on September 19, 1923. It was initially part of the Texas State University System, before becoming an independent university on 1969. This year, the university voted to join the University of Texas System. When SFA opened, there were only 270 students enrolled and classes were held in borrowed buildings in downtown Nacogdoches. Today, SFA has around 11,000 students on a sprawling campus.

#### **5. Broadband infrastructure funding update**

In the past several years I have focused on broadband access for rural Texas, and Texas will soon see an influx of new funding toward bridging the digital divide. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) announced this summer that Texas will receive roughly \$3.3 billion in federal funding for broadband deployment. These dollars represent Texas' allocation of the \$42.5 billion in funding from the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program (BEAD) funded through the Federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. The Texas Broadband Development Office has submitted a plan to the NTIA for the use of these federal dollars and will by the end of the year submit additional required planning documents to the NTIA. The bulk of the \$3.3 billion could then be made available as early as the end of next year or the beginning of 2025. Meanwhile, Texas Voters will have the chance in November to vote on Proposition 8, which creates a new Broadband Infrastructure Fund to expand high-speed broadband access. If approved by the voters, Proposition 8 will provide an additional \$1.5 billion of funding allocated by the Texas Legislature to increase broadband access and closing the digital divide.

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