



My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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For the first time since 1878, Texans will see their first total solar eclipse next month. Total solar eclipses are rare because the sun, the moon, and the Earth must align such that the moon moves in between the sun and the Earth. Only people who are within the path of totality will be able to see the full effects of the eclipse. The path of totality encompasses a large swath of Texas including the DFW metropolplex, Tyler, Austin and the Hill Country, and Del Rio. The eclipse will happen on April 8.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Maternal Medicaid coverage extended to 12 months

Starting this month, Texas is extending coverage for postpartum care to 12 months for eligible Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) recipients. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, which administers the programs, announced that anyone who is enrolled in Medicaid or CHIP who is pregnant or becomes pregnant is eligible for the extended coverage. Services covered by the programs include regular medical checkups, prescription drugs and vaccines, hospital care and services, X-rays and lab tests, vision and hearing care, specialty care, mental health care, and treatment for pre-existing conditions and special health needs. The agency projects approximately 137,000 women will benefit from 12-month postpartum coverage over the next year. Supporting women in the critical months after giving birth is essential to ensuring they can care for the families and themselves.

2. Texas Department of State Health Services announces grants for health centers

The Texas DSHS is offering an additional \$40 million for Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) in Texas that are offering expanded services to underserved and uninsured Texans. Last year, almost \$20 million in grants were awarded to FQHCs and similar, eligible health centers. The grants were used to build new clinics, renovate existing facilities, purchase equipment, and hire staff and health care providers. Grants ranged from \$500,000 to \$1 million and were awarded to 35 entities. These projects have served more than an estimated 200,000 patients. The continued funding and increase in funding for FQHCs expands access to health care for communities that are underserved. I was happy to work with the Chair of Senate Finance Joan Huffman to ensure funding for these clinics was included in the budget.

3. SFA new president announced

Last month, University of Texas System regents named Dr. Neal Weaver as the sole finalist for president of Stephen F. Austin State University. Dr. Weaver is currently the president of Georgia Southwestern State University, a member of the University of Georgia System. He has held that position for seven years. Before that, Dr. Weaver has held various positions across four public university systems over the span of his 33-year career in higher education. Dr. Weaver's candidacy was recommended by a presidential search advisory committee chaired by UT System Chancellor James Milliken. Representatives from the SFA faculty, students, alumni, and community leaders were also on the search committee. Dr. Weaver earned a doctoral degree in organizational leadership from The University of Oklahoma, a Master of Business Administration from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, and a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma Panhandle State University. He is originally from Oklahoma City. Welcome to the SFA community, Dr. Weaver!

4. Lamar State College Orange breaks ground on new student success center

Last month, LSCO held a Groundbreaking Ceremony for the new Student Success Center. The new center will be in the historic former First Baptist Church of Orange, which will be renovated extensively to support a streamlined enrollment process and other student services. However, elements of the original structure will be preserved, like the stained-glass windows and the building's exterior. Staff from departments such as student services, financial aid, admissions, recruiting and advising will all have offices in the new center. LSCO is hoping to complete the project by the end of this year.

5. Comptroller announces grants to combat opioid overdoses

Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar announced \$25 million in grant funding is now available to distribute medication to reverse opioid overdoses through the Opioid Abatement Fund Council (O AFC). Governmental entities, nonprofits, and business entities are eligible to apply for this funding. Last year, a first-round of payments totaling almost \$50 million were awarded to political subdivisions from the Opioid Abatement Trust Fund. Naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdoses, has been lifesaving in communities hit by the opioid crisis. With the ongoing flow of fentanyl across our southern border, Naloxone is a game changer for first responders and other community members.

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