



My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This month Houston and the Gulf Coast were devastated by Hurricane Beryl, which made landfall Monday, July 8 near Matagorda. Thirty-six Texans died during and after the storm and 2.3 million were left without power, some for almost two weeks. Hearings were held in Austin to assess the response and hold utility companies accountable that did not perform well, including CenterPoint Entergy.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. BDO accepting proposals for broadband grant funding

The Broadband Development Office (BDO) recently released a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for \$729.9 million in state and federal funds. Bringing Online Opportunities to Texas (BOOT) is a competitive grant program to build last-mile broadband connections that increase high-speed broadband service to Texans. Proposed projects for this funding will provide service to unserved and underserved locations in targeted counties that demonstrate the greatest need for broadband service, as determined by the BDO. Qualifying projects must deploy broadband service to the entirety of the unserved and underserved broadband serviceable locations in an eligible county. Eligible counties in East Texas include Liberty County, Trinity County, and Newton County. While these are the counties eligible for this program, other programs exist that extend to other areas. Awards will be a minimum of \$1 million and a maximum of \$125 million. Proposed projects must be complete and operational no later than December 31, 2026. Applications are due by August 26, 2024.

2. TRS lowering premiums for next year

The Teachers Retirement System announced it will be lowering TRS-Care Medicare Advantage monthly premiums for next year. This is due to a current surplus balance of over \$3 billion. Retirees will see a decrease in premium costs between \$60 and \$407 per month next year. In addition, TRS is also allowing a limited-time enrollment opportunity for eligible TRS-Care Medicare Advantage participants. Most TRS-Care retirees who are eligible for Medicare will be eligible for the limited-time enrollment opportunity. For more information, visit <https://www.trs.texas.gov/Pages/Homepage.aspx>.

3. Texas AG secures \$1.4B settlement with Meta over biometric data privacy

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton secured a \$1.4 billion settlement with Meta, formerly known as Facebook, over capture of personal biometric data without authorization required by law. It is the largest settlement ever obtained from an action brought by a single state. This is the first lawsuit brought and settlement obtained under Texas' "Capture or Use of Biometric Identifier" (CUBI) Act. The lawsuit centered on a feature Meta added in 2011 initially called Tag Suggestions. The feature used facial recognition software on virtually every face contained in the photographs uploaded to Facebook, capturing records of the facial geometry of the people depicted. Actions such as these are considered capturing biometric identifiers of Texans, which is against the law unless the business informs the person and receives their consent first. Meta will pay the state \$1.4 billion over the next five years.

4. TWIA considering up to 10 percent rate hike

The Texas Windstorm Insurance Association's (TWIA) Actuarial and Underwriting Committee recommended that the TWIA Board of Directors approve a rate filing to increase rates by 10 percent for 2025 TWIA policies. The TWIA Board will meet on August 6 to consider the Committee's recommendation, the rate adequacy analysis, and stakeholder feedback when voting to decide the required rate filing with the Texas Department of Insurance. TWIA's board is mindful of insurance costs on policyholders and has only raised rates once over the past five years. However, based on a 2024 actuarial analysis, TWIA rates would need to increase by 39 percent for residential policies and 45 percent for commercial policies in order to be actuarially adequate. TWIA is inviting the public to comment on the potential rate increases either virtually or in-person during the meeting or ahead of the meeting via email. The public is welcome to attend the meeting at the Tremont House Hotel in Galveston. Submit written comments via email to PublicComment@TWIA.org. If you wish to make verbal public comment via Zoom, find more information on how to register at <https://www.twia.org/>.

5. SpaceX, Twitter moving headquarters to Texas

Elon Musk announced he is moving the headquarters of two of his companies to Texas. SpaceX and X, formerly known as Twitter, will both be relocating from California to Texas after California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a law preventing schools from requiring employees to notify parents if a student requests to use different pronouns. SpaceX will move from Hawthorne, CA to Starbase, a complex and launch site near Brownsville, TX. X will move its headquarters from San Francisco to Austin.

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