



# My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This week session began! It will be an exciting and fast-paced 140 days. We will do our best to keep East Texans informed about the goings on in Austin.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. 89<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session begins**

On January 14, 2025, the 89<sup>th</sup> Regular Session of the Texas Legislature began at noon. On the Senate side, members who successfully won in the general election were sworn in. There are three brand new members of the Senate: Senators Molly Cook, Adam Hinojosa, and Brent Hagenbuch. I look forward to getting to know my new colleagues and working with them on their priorities this session. In the House, all 150 members were sworn in on Tuesday, including 31 freshman members. Then, House members had to vote for the Speaker of the House. Representative Dustin Burrows won the Speaker election on the second ballot. Congratulations to Speaker Burrows, I look forward to working with him and all of our partners in the House this session.

Here are some important dates to know as we move through the session:

- Friday, March 14, 2025 – 60<sup>th</sup> day; deadline for the unrestricted filing of bills and joint resolutions, other than local bills, emergency appropriations, and emergency matters submitted by the governor.
- Monday, June 2, 2025 – 140<sup>th</sup> day; last day of the 89<sup>th</sup> Regular Session, also known as Sine Die (Latin for “without days”).

## **2. Comptroller releases Biennial Revenue Estimate**

Comptroller Glenn Hegar released the Biennial Revenue Estimate (BRE) which he does before every regular legislative session. It projects the revenue that lawmakers have available to spend through the upcoming biennium. Because the Legislature meets every other year, lawmakers create budgets on a two year, or biennial, basis. The 89<sup>th</sup> Legislature will have a surplus from the 2024-2025 biennium of \$23.76 billion. For the upcoming 2026-2027 biennium, the Comptroller estimates the Legislature will have \$194.6 billion in total revenue available for general purpose

spending. However, several years ago a constitutional amendment passed to limit the state's spending to ensure fiscal responsibility. The Legislative Budget Board determines the constitutional tax spending limits before each session. That formula is a combination of the rate of growth of the Texas economy, the growth in population, and the level of appropriations from the previous biennium. This year, the LBB announced the amount of appropriation that can be made without a special concurrent resolution is just under \$147 billion.

### **3. New laws in effect on January 1**

Though most bills passed in the 88<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session went into effect in September 2023, a few had effective dates on January 1, 2025. Here are a few that went into effect this month:

- House Bill 3297 – Authored by Representative Cody Harris, this bill eliminates the requirement for annual vehicle inspections for personal vehicles. However, some counties have adopted vehicle emissions standards and will require vehicles registered in those counties to undergo an emissions inspection.
- House Bill 4 – This bill enhancing Texas consumer data protections and allow online users to have control over opting out of certain advertisements, business profiling, and digital sales.
- Senate Bill 2 – A section of this bill goes into effect this month. The section makes property tax compression and homestead exemption benefits permanent for elderly and disabled homeowners.

### **4. Changes to Social Security may allow expanded pool to receive benefits**

This month, President Biden signed the Social Security Fairness Act into law. The bill eliminates the reduction of Social Security benefits for certain populations, including some Teacher Retirement System (TRS) retirees. Two provisions were repealed: the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) reduced benefits for individuals who also received a pension or disability benefit from an employer that did not withhold Social Security taxes (like many Texas school districts) and the Government Pension Offset (GPO) which reduced benefits for spouses, widows, and widowers who also received government pensions of their own. This will benefit TRS retirees who were subject to these reductions. Monthly benefits will increase on average by \$360 per month and impact 2.8 million recipients nationwide.

### **5. New leadership at Texas Department of Public Safety**

Toward the end of the last year, a new director of the Texas Department of Public Safety was sworn in by Gov. Abbott. Director Freeman Martin began at DPS as a highway patrolman in 1990 and has held various law enforcement positions since then, including becoming a Texas Ranger and serving as a deputy director of DPS since 2018. He takes over for Director Steve McCraw, who led the agency for 15 years and announced his retirement in August.

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