



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Session is starting to heat up in Austin – the budget has been filed, committees have been appointed in the Senate, and our first hearings are scheduled. We hit the ground running this year and are prepared to accomplish as much as we can in the short time we have.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Senate committee assignments for 89th Session released

Last week, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick announced committee assignments for the 89th Legislative Session. I am honored to once again serve as the Chair of the Senate Transportation Committee. I am also on the Senate Business and Commerce, Local Government, and Finance Committees. These committees cover a variety of subjects including infrastructure, broadband development, the state's budget, local regulation, and more. In fact, next week the Senate will begin work on crafting the state's budget. Senate Bill 1, the Appropriations Bill, was filed this week by Senate Finance Committee Chair Senator Joan Huffman. We will go through each article of the budget, line by line, to ensure that we are responsible stewards of state and federal funds.

2. BOOT II awards announced by Broadband Development Office

This week, the Broadband Development Office, which is within the Comptroller's Office, announced awards totaling over \$700 million for broadband projects across Texas to connect more than 93,000 homes and businesses that lack access. The Bringing Online Opportunities to Texas (BOOT II) Program sought to support countywide infrastructure projects in counties with the greatest need. To ensure equity across the state, two counties from each of the Comptroller's 12 regions were selected based on the percentage of unserved and underserved locations in the county. The program prioritized the deployment of fiber technology to bring connectivity to these areas. In Senate District 3, three counties were selected – Liberty, Newton, and Trinity. These three projects alone will connect more than 23,000 locations.

3. Winter Storm Enzo brings snow to East and Southeast Texas

For the first time ever, Southeast Texas was under a blizzard warning that stretched from the Golden Triangle east along I-10 into Louisiana. Winter Storm Enzo brought freezing temperatures and snow across the Gulf Coast – coating normally white sand beaches in white,

powdery snow. The area saw accumulations up to five to six inches, a new record. The electric grid faired well during the freeze; only local outages due to downed distribution lines were reported. Texas had enough electricity to power the state through the storm. As always, we appreciate our first responders, linemen, and other officials who kept Texans safe and warm during the worst of the weather.

4. State employees fired after data breach, stolen funds

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) announced last week it suffered a data breach in which account information for 61,000 individuals was improperly accessed by agency employees. Information accessed included personal identifying information like full names, home addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, email addresses, Social Security numbers, health information, and more. It may have been accessed between June 2021 and December 2024. HHSC took action and terminated the employees and referred the case for investigation. Individuals should carefully review their accounts and information from health care providers, insurance providers, and financial institutions to ensure their activity is correct. If errors are found, the agency is asking individuals to report any questionable activity to the provider and contact law enforcement. Additionally, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients should check their Lone Star Card transactions for potentially fraudulent activity. If you think you are the victim of SNAP fraud, call 2-1-1 and choose option 3 to report the fraud to the OIG. You should also contact your local HHSC benefits office to have benefits replaced.

5. East Texan to be inducted into Texas Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame

Ann Thomasson-Wilson of Jasper, TX is set to be inducted into the Texas Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. She is a two-time bass fishing World Champion, fishing tackle innovator, and owner of Ann's Tackle Shop which she opened in 1986 near Lake Sam Rayburn. The shop is a destination for anglers. Additionally, she even designed some of the gear in her store, including baits and hooks. At the end of last year, she retired and handed over daily operations of the shop to her daughter, Debra Pryor, and long-time employee Laren Bush.

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