



# My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Contact: Shelby Vestal  
Tel:512-463-0103

After the flurry of bills filed on the deadline, we have the final number of bills filed and an accurate picture of the universe of topics we will work on. In total, both the House and Senate together filed 8,898 bill – almost 800 more bills than last session.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. Senate passes parental rights in education bill**

This week the Senate passed Senate Bill 12 by Senator Brandon Creighton. This bill seeks to strengthen parental rights, eliminate DEI in public schools, reform the transfer process, and increase transparency and accountability of schools. The bill dictates that parents have a clear right to direct the moral, religious, and educational upbringing of their children. It also directs TEA to develop a process for districts to notify parents of changes in their child’s mental or physical health status and encourage parent-child communication.

The bill also addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in public schools. It prohibits race- or gender-based hiring preferences, compelled diversity statements by staff, and other ideological influence. One other major change is in the process for public school students to transfer to another public school. It standardizes open-enrollment and inter-district transfers and creates a lottery process for open seats with more applications than openings. Priority would be given to returning students, dependents of district employees, military or law enforcement dependents, and siblings of current students.

## **2. Nasdaq announces opening of new headquarters in Texas**

Nasdaq is the latest company announcing expansion in Texas. The stock exchange operator said it would open a new regional headquarters in Dallas. This comes on the heels of the creation of the Texas Stock Exchange, which will launch early next year, and the announcement that the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) is moving its Chicago operation to Texas. The Lone Star State accounts for the largest number of listings on the NYSE and is home to over 200 companies listed on the Nasdaq. In recent years, many of these companies have moved operations to Texas due to our favorable tax policies, lower cost of living, and lower energy costs. Texas is open for business and will continue supporting business-friendly policies.

### **3. THC ban passes Senate**

This week, the Senate passed Senate Bill 3 by Senator Charles Perry. This bill would ban all forms of THC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis. Several sessions ago, the Legislature passed a bill allowing the sale of hemp products with less than 0.3% of THC. However, consumable products with THC levels that exceed the state's limitations are being sold in retail stores statewide. Over 7,000 retailers have opened in the six years since the state legalized consumable hemp products. Though intended to help the Texas agricultural industry, the result was the proliferation of gummies, candies, drinks, vapes and other products with more than 0.3% concentration of THC, which the state classifies as marijuana. The bill now moves to the House, which has its own proposal for imposing much stricter regulation of the products rather than an all-out ban.

### **4. Broadband Development Office awards grants, opens pre-registration**

The Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO) announced it has made \$9.8 million worth of awards to 8 applicants in 121 counties through the office's Pole Replacement Program. This is the second round of awards for the program which aims to support retail broadband services by reimbursing the cost of replacing thousands of utility poles statewide. In 2023, voters passed Proposition 8 which created the Broadband Infrastructure Fund and dedicated \$75 million to the Pole Replacement Program. Of those funds, almost \$30 million has been allocated.

The BDO also announced pre-registration opened for the Texas Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. BEAD is a federally-funded program that seeks to provide broadband access to every residential and commercial location statewide. Texas was allocated \$3.3 billion to support infrastructure deployment, mapping, and adoption. Pre-registration is not required, but participants will get early feedback on information they submit. The pre-registration period opens March 17 and closes April 4.

### **5. Senate passes bill penalizing production of obscene AI material**

Senate Bill 441 by Senator Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa passed the Senate unanimously this week. SB 441 creates civil penalties for the creation of nonconsensual intimate visual materials, often called "deepfakes." These deepfakes have gotten more perverse with the use of AI to digitally create intimate photos. This bill imposes civil penalties on individuals, websites, and payment processors involved in producing or distributing this content without consent. It also allows for an extensive statute of limitations of 10 years for victims to sue for damages.

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