



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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While we see hundreds of visitors every week at the Texas Capitol, this week the Sweetwater Jaycees featured a little more unusual guest, the rattlesnake, in the open rotunda of the Capitol. They come to raise awareness of their annual rattlesnake round up, which started as a way to help local ranchers prevent problems for themselves and their livestock. While I did not visit these snakes, I believe some of my staff got up close and personal with them.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. First Bills Heard on the Floor

This week the Senate heard and voted on the first bills of the 85th Session. The rules of the Legislature state that neither chamber may vote on legislation for the first 60 days of a legislative session, unless it is one of the Governor's emergency items or a local bill. The bills voted out this week had been declared emergency items by the Governor during his State of the State address last week.

2. Ethics Bill Passes Senate

The Senate has passed Senate Bill 14, of which I was a co-author, to provide ethics reform to the State of Texas. The bill, which is now being sent to the House for consideration, would keep elected officials who are convicted of felonies from staying in office and receiving a state pension. It requires more disclosure of money and gifts that lobbyists provide to elected officials, as well as requiring elected officials, upon leaving the Legislature, to wait one full legislative session before becoming lobbyists. Elected officials will also be required to provide more information about their incomes, including government contracts and legal referral fees. It is important to ensure our government is transparent in its dealing with special interest group and to ensure there are strong ethics laws to help guide the Legislatures actions.

3. Sanctuary Cities Ban Passes Senate

In last week's column, I shared with you the details of Senate Bill 4 which would ban sanctuary cities in Texas. The bill was heard in the State Affairs Committee late last week and after many hours of testimony was sent to the Senate floor, where it was finally passed. Local and state

government entities and college campuses could face denial of state grant funds if they refuse to comply to enforce immigration laws and cooperate with federal immigration officials. The department head of the agency who violates the provisions of the bill could also be subject to a criminal prosecution in the form of a class A misdemeanor. It is important to ensure state and federal laws are followed by every law enforcement agency in our state in the same way.

4. Sermon Safeguard

Senator Joan Huffman has filed Senate Bill 24, of which I am a co-author, which makes it impossible for a government entity to force religious leaders to hand over their sermons. A governmental entity includes the state and any of its agencies, as well as any political subdivision of the state such as a city, county or school district. A religious leader will be protected in that they will not be able to be compelled to disclose a written, audio or video version of a sermon delivered during religious worship of a religious organization, and they may also not be compelled to testify regarding the sermon.

My grandfather was Methodist minister who traveled and visited different communities in East Texas. I learned from him the important role ministers play in our lives and because of this I believe it is important to ensure we are protecting the religious freedoms of the citizens of Texas.

5. 4-H Day at the Capitol

This week it was great to see so many 4-H members for their day at the Capitol this year. The Texas 4-H Youth Development Program is a component of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. The 4-H program, which is available to students in all 254 counties within the state, serves youth from Kindergarten to 12th grade by helping them prepare for service to our state, country and world. Students are able to learn life-skill experiences in agriculture, engineering, leadership, healthy living and creative arts. It is always an honor to meet with this and other organizations who are training tomorrow's Texas leaders.

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