



My five cents...

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

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Here in Austin, the Legislature has ended our second week of session. We are off the starting block and continue to pick up the pace for the long race ahead. During this time, as more bills are filed and the members have a chance to meet with each other, many of the issues which will define the course of the coming months begin to appear.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Committee Assignments

On Wednesday, Lieutenant Governor Patrick announced the committee assignments for the 85th Legislative Session. I am pleased to continue to serve as the Chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, as well as serving on the Senate Finance, Business and Commerce and Administration Committees. Over the next weeks, committees will begin to meet and vote on bills to be sent to the Senate floor.

2. Helping High School Students

During the 84th Legislative Session, Senate Bill 149 was passed and established 'individual graduation committees' to help students graduate if they have failed to pass the required state exams. These students must meet the requirements laid out for them by the individual graduation committee, which is made up of teachers, principals and counselors. The students attendance records, past credits, performance in classes and other tests as well as class projects are all looked at to determine if a student should be allowed to graduate through a committee.

This legislation had a clause in it, stating that it must expire in September 2017. I have co-authored, with Senator Kel Seliger, Senate Bill 463 which will remove that clause and make the individual graduation committees permanent. After meeting with all of the Superintendents in Senate District 3 last fall and hearing the success of these committees, I look forward to working with my colleagues to pass this bill and ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed.

3. Protecting Our Police

In the last few years, we have seen many of our police force injured and sadly killed due to violence. While some law enforcement agencies across the state have funding to purchase protective gear for their officers, not all do. Senate Bill 12 has been filed, which I have co-authored, and if passed would help local, county and state law enforcement agencies to buy high-quality protective vests for field officers. The grant program will be housed under the Governor's Criminal Justice Division. These vests, which are capable of stopping a high powered rifle, will go a long way in ensuring those who protect our state, our protected themselves.

4. Filing Budgets

The primary purpose, and only constitutionally required task, of the legislative session is to prepare a balanced conservative state budget for the following two fiscal years. The House and Senate have filed their version of the base budget, which will serve as the basis for budget negotiations.

The Senate's budget which contains \$103.6 billion in state general revenue is less than what Comptroller Glenn Hegar announced was available last week. It contains an additional \$2.65 billion to cover public school enrollment growth, maintains the \$800 million for border security, adds an increase of \$260 million for Child Protective Services and additional funding for prekindergarten.

Over the next few months the Senate and House will not only reconcile the differences between the two budgets, but will also continue to make new changes and alterations. My priorities this session will include, reducing property and business taxes, increasing funding for education as well finding solutions for transportation funding.

5. Reimbursement For Border Security

Recently, a group of Texas Republican lawmakers shared a \$2.8 billion 'invoice' which is being sent to the federal government to ask for reimbursement for the states cost related to securing the border. The cost includes money spent by the Texas Department of Public Safety to monitor the border, money spent by state and county jails to house unauthorized immigrants and healthcare provided for unauthorized immigrants at medical facilities in the state.

The amount of money the state spends on border security has surged in the past few years. I believe it is necessary to use the states funding to ensure our border is secure, however, it is ultimately the responsibility of the Federal government, not the taxpayers of Texas. I support this request for reimbursement.