



My five cents...

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

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This week, the Lieutenant Governor began referring bills to committee and we will soon begin to hear them in committee. The legislative process kills more bills than it passes, which I consider a good thing. Only the best legislation which has had significant public input and survived the hearing process should become law.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Senate Finance Begins

The Senate Finance Committee, on which I serve, have begun their hearings. Over the next few weeks we will hear the legislative appropriations request from every state agency and higher education institutions, as well as public testimony. These requests are a starting point to determine their budget needs for the next two years.

The hearings have focused on public education and higher education institutions. As this is a tough budget year for the state, we will be studying each of these programs to determine the appropriated funding is being used appropriately to benefit students and help provide the education they deserve.

2. School Finance Workgroup

In addition to the regular work of the Senate Finance committee, The Senate Finance Committee Chair Jane Nelson has appointed a workgroup to study school finance. The workgroup members will work with stakeholders to propose a new simplified school funding structure.

Many of our funding items have not been updated in 30 to 40 years. This is an opportune time to ensure we are providing an equitable system for all school districts across the state, which also meets the needs of the students in those schools. Education has and should continue to be one of the top priorities of the Legislature, and I look forward to working with the members of Senate Finance to ensure we are able to accomplish this task.

3. Tuition Set-Asides

In 2003, the Legislature required universities to set aside a percentage of an undergraduate, graduate and professional degree students tuition, to be used to provide assistance to students with a financial need. While the set-aside was not meant to be an extra charge to the students, universities have to raise their tuition to cover this set-aside.

I believe this has created a tax on student's tuition. Even if a student has taken out loans to pay for their education, they will have to take out much more than is needed for their own education to pay for someone else's tuition. Senator Kel Seliger has filed Senate Bill 18, I am also a co-author, which would repeal this set-aside program. I look forward to working with Senator Seliger and supporting him in doing away with this program.

4. Ethics Reform

Transparency and strong ethics laws are critical to good government, which is why I've co-authored Senate Bill 14 with Senator Van Taylor to provide ethics reform in the State. This bill would keep elected officials who are convicted of felonies from staying in office and receiving a state pension. It would also require more disclosure of money and gifts that lobbyists provide to elected officials, as well as prevent elected officials from immediately turning into lobbyists after leaving the Legislature. Finally, it requires elected officials to provide more information about their incomes, including government contracts and legal referral fees. Texans deserve to know whether elected officials may be swayed by special interest groups, and taxpayers should not be paying for these pensions of elected officials who commit felonies.

5. Timeline of Session

Although we have now been in session two weeks the Legislature is not allowed to fully pass any legislation in the first 60 days of the 140-day session unless the Governor designates an item as emergency legislation. This and other provisions help to place even more value on our time and ensure only the most pressing issues are addressed. The framers of the Texas Constitution envisioned a citizen legislature which only meets every other year for a limited amount of days, and is therefore unable to infringe too much on citizens' lives. Many years later, their vision is still being fulfilled.

Below are some important dates to keep in mind for this session:

- March 10th - This is the last date bills in the Senate and House can be filed.
- May 29th - This is the final day of the 85th regular session, which happens to fall on Memorial Day.
- June 18th - This is the last day the Governor can sign or veto bills passed during the regular legislative session.

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