



My five cents...

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

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March is a busy month in the Capitol as many families, students and teachers make their way to Austin for spring break. We enjoy seeing everyone, but there is, of course, no spring break for legislators as final bills are filed and committee agendas are full of potential legislation.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Law Enforcement Day

On Monday, the Senate held its first Law Enforcement Day to recognize the officers who protect our state. It also marked the end of the 60 day constitutional prohibition on considering non-emergency legislation. To honor these brave men and women, the first bills heard were all law enforcement related. Lt. Governor Patrick said it well when he hoped they "hear loud and clear that the Texas Senate put them first when this session began, because they deserve to be first."

As law enforcement officers watched from the gallery, legislation was passed declaring July 7th as "Fallen Law Enforcement Officer Day" in Texas. This date marks the day Dallas police officers were killed during a peaceful march. Legislation was also passed to create a 'Blue Alert' System, which sends out an alert when someone who has injured a police officer. The Senate also provided a property tax exemption for the spouse of an officer killed in the line of duty and established a \$25 million grant program to buy bullet-proof vests for all Texas officers.

2. Bills Filed

Last Friday was the Legislatures bill filing deadline for all legislation and joint resolutions except for local bills, emergency appropriations and emergency items determined by the Governor. Over 5,300 bills were filed in the House and approximately 2,700 were filed in the Senate. Many of the bills filed will not receive a committee hearing or make it to the House and Senate floors. We have a lot of work ahead of us as we continue through the legislative process.

3. School Accountability System

Last session, legislation was passed creating an A-F accountability system in an effort to provide a transparent and comprehensive way of evaluating how a school district or campus is

performing. After the preliminary ratings were released, it became apparent there needed to be some changes made. Rep. Dan Huberty, Chair of the House Education Committee, has filed HB 22 which would reduce the number of categories in which each campus and school district would be graded. It would also eliminate an overall letter grade, instead giving a letter grade for each category. The implementation of this system would also be pushed to 2019 to allow for more time for development. I will continue to keep you updated as this bill moves through the legislative process.

4. Made in Texas

House Bill 1514 has been filed to require wines with a Texas label to be made 100 percent with Texas grown grapes. Current law only requires 75 percent of the grapes must be grown in the state for it to be labeled a Texas wine. Advocates for this bill believe products which are advertised as being made in the state should be fully Texas made. There is also a belief this bill would help to encourage more grape production and improve the authenticity of the state's wines.

Opponents of the bill fear it could limit options for winemakers if there are unexpected events such as a strong storm which could ruin a grape crop. There is a provision in the bill which would allow the Texas Department of Agriculture to allow exceptions to the 100 percent threshold if drought or severe weather were to damage the states grape crops.

5. Voter ID

Senate State Affairs Committee has approved a bill to overhaul Texas's current Voter ID Law in response to a recent ruling by the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals which declared the current law discriminatory against minorities who may have not access to the acceptable types of identification. Senate Bill 5, filed by Senator Joan Huffman, allows voters to present alternate forms of ID without being questioned, as well as permits voters ages 70+ to use photo IDs that are expired but otherwise allowed. While making the ballot more accessible, the bill also cracks down on those who lie about not having photo ID. Such perpetrators could be charged with a third degree felony and earn up to ten years in prison if found guilty.

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