



My five cents...

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

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Since 2003, every "First Tuesday" of the month, doctors and medical students from around the state come to the Capitol to lobby on behalf of their profession and patients. These individuals provide an invaluable service to our state and I look forward to working with them for many years to come.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. School Choice

The Texas Senate passed Senate Bill 3, which provides public funds to parents who want to put their children in private schools or public charter schools. This bill establishes education savings accounts and tax credit scholarships, which parents can use for tuition at a private school, or stay in public school and get funding for transportation to go to another public school.

I believe education is and always will be the most important issue the Legislature considers. As a state we have a responsibility to ensure our future generations are receiving a quality education. My office received hundreds of calls and emails from Senate District 3, asking me to not support this bill. When I became Senator, I made a promise to not vote for any school choice legislation until we had addressed and created an equitable school finance system. I chose to vote against Senate Bill 3, as I have pledged to represent Senate District 3 to the best of my ability.

2. Red Light Cameras

Recently, Senate Bill 88 was passed by the Senate, which prohibits local governments or entities from utilizing red light cameras. These cameras, which have been controversial since their implementation over a decade ago, take a picture and issue a citation if a vehicle runs through a red traffic light. This bill has a grandfather clause, which would allow cities who are currently under contract with a company providing the traffic cameras to continue their contract until it expires. It also exempts photo enforcement which is used on toll roads. I have always believed these cameras violate due process because a person is not able to face their accuser.

3. TxDOT 100th Anniversary

This week, I had the opportunity to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) by recognizing them on the Senate floor. First created as the Texas Highway Department in 1917, they were given the charge of registering vehicles and drawing the first official map to show the 8,865 miles of improved roadways that would help to bring Texas together. TxDOT has grown and transformed, now maintaining 80,000 miles of Texas roadways.

Having served as a former TxDOT Commissioner, I understand the challenges this agency faces in ensuring Texans are able to get where they need to be. You can visit the centennial website at <http://www.dot.state.tx.us/txdot100/> to learn more about TxDOT's history.

4. Tuition Set-Asides

In 2003, the Legislature required universities to set aside 15% of undergraduate, graduate and professional degree students tuition, to be used to provide assistance to students with a financial need. This set-aside 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. I believe if the Legislature wants to ensure there is aid for students who need it, we should appropriate the funding to cover this need.

This week, Senate Bill 18, of which I am a co-author, was passed by the Texas Senate to repeal tuition-set asides. The bill would also appropriate \$30 million for a new financial aid program to be distributed to Universities, which cut their tuition by 5%, to help in providing financial assistance.

5. Chuck Norris - Honorary Texan

There are probably very few of us who do not know the famous Chuck Norris, who was born in Oklahoma, but has long lived in Texas. He is known for his martial arts movies and superhuman strength, in addition to one of his most popular roles as "Walker, Texas Ranger". He and his wife have also created a nonprofit organization called Kickstart Kids, with the mission of helping struggling kids. The Texas Senate recognized Mr. Norris on the Senate floor this week, and named him an honorary Texan, to recognize all that he has done for the State and his work to help those who are in need.

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