



My five cents...

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

For immediate release
April 13, 2017
word count: 748

Contact: Sydni Mitchell
Tel: 512-463-0103

The members of the Legislature are heading home to spend the Easter weekend with their families. When we come back we will be on the home stretch to the end of Session.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. State Supported Living Centers

Senate Bill 602 was recently heard in the Health and Human Services Committee, which would create an eight member commission to recommend which of the 13 state supported living centers (SSLC) in the state should be consolidated, downsized, or closed. No more than five centers could be recommended for closure. The argument for closure of the SSLC's stems from a belief that there are better ways residents could be supported, such as through community living.

I represent the Lufkin SSLC and believe they provide a valuable service for not only the residents, but also their families. When this same legislation came up in previous sessions, I opposed the closure of any of the SSLC's. I will continue to work to ensure these important facilities remain available for those that need them.

2. Sam Johnson

The Senate often has the opportunity to honor brave men and women for their service to our country. This week, we had the privilege of recognizing Congressman Sam Johnson for his time as a Texas State Representative and U.S. Congressman, as well as the sacrifices he made while serving as a fighter pilot during the Korean War. Mr. Johnson became a member of the elite Air Force Thunderbirds and the director of the Air Force Fighter Weapons School. In 1996, while flying his 25th combat mission during the Vietnam War, his plane was shot down and he was taken hostage, where he endured nearly seven years in captivity before being returned to the U.S. in 1973.

After a 29-year career in the U.S. Air Force, he retired at the rank of colonel with numerous military commendations including two Silver Stars, the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star with Valor.

3. Protections for County Clerks

The Texas Senate has passed Senate Bill 522, which would allow county clerks to opt out of issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples, if it conflicts with their religious beliefs. This would only be allowed if an assistant clerk or judge is willing to provide the service. If neither are available, county leaders would be required to appoint an employee, or hire a contract worker, to provide the marriage licenses. There would also be the option to form an agreement with nearby counties to provide the service electronically. Judges would also be allowed to decline to perform a marriage ceremony if it violates their religious beliefs.

4. Teacher Work Days

During the 84th Legislative Session, HB 2610 was passed which converted the 180 student instructional days to minutes. This provided school districts with more flexibility in their school calendars, by providing an option to have longer school days and fewer total instructional days. However, a concurrent change was not made to require fewer teacher contract days. This has caused problems for school districts as the instructional days and teacher contract days do not align. Teachers may now be working longer days than before, but still working the same amount of days before the change.

Senate Bill 1634 allows school districts, which anticipate providing less than 180 days of student instruction, to reduce the required days of service for teachers as well. A reduction in days of service does not reduce an educators salary. I have heard a lot of support from Superintendents within Senate District on this bill, and was happy to vote for this bill.

5. David's Law

Last week, the Senate Committee on State Affairs heard a bill by Senator Menendez to combat and prevent student harassment. Senator Menendez has worked closely with the family of David Molak, a 16 year old high school student who took his life last year as a result of repeated bullying by his peers. SB 179, also referred to as "David's Law" seeks to honor his life and ensure tragic cases like this do not become common.

The bill would classify cyberbullying as a misdemeanor, allow courts to issue subpoenas in order to unmask anonymous online bullies, and require public schools to intervene in any suspected cyberbullying cases. Each school district's board of trustees will be required to create a mental health plan, which addresses suicide prevention and bullying. The goal of this is to teach kids their actions have consequences.

###