



My five cents...

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

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This weekend, our country will observe Memorial Day and remember the sacrifices of the military men and women who gave their lives serving our nation. I hope we all take time to give thanks for those who sacrificed everything for our nation so we might live free.

Here are five things happening at your Capitol this week:

1. Session almost over

Wednesday of this week marked the last day the Senate was able to vote on House bills, and the last day the House was able to vote on Senate bills. Both chambers worked late into the night, attempting to get through as many as possible. Thursday began the few day period at the very end of session in which 10-person conference committees are formed between members of the House and Senate and they attempt to work out slight differences between bills which have passed both sides of the legislature. The next time you hear from me the 84th Legislative Session will have adjourned for Sine Die, meaning we have adjourned without setting a date for the next time we will meet, on May 29th.

2. Payments for Relative Caregivers

The Texas Senate has approved House Bill 4 which would increase the payments for relatives who are caregivers to abused children. This is being done in recognition that children often thrive more in the care of family members than in foster care. However, many times these relatives may not be able to afford to take the children in, such as grandparents who are on a fixed income. To qualify they would have to make less than three times the federal poverty level. For a family of four this is no more than \$73,800. Currently kinship foster parents only receive a one-time \$1,000 and \$500 per year. Under House Bill 4, they could receive up to \$4,200 a year. I believe this is a great step toward ensuring these children have a home.

3. Hogs, Coyotes and Hot Air Balloons

In recent years, Texas has been plagued with an increase of feral hogs and coyotes in the state. There have been many proposals as to how to deal with this problem as they cause millions of dollars of damages every year. One of these proposed solutions would take hunters into the air. House Bill 3535 has been passed by the Senate and House chambers and would allow qualified

landowners to hunt feral hogs and coyotes from a hot air balloon with a permit. If signed into law, Texans could start hunting from hot air balloons as soon as September 1, 2017.

4. Protecting Pastors

Governor Abbott has signed Senate Bill 24, of which I am a co-author, into law. This bill makes it impossible for a government entity to force religious leaders to hand over their sermons. A governmental entity includes the state and any of its agencies, as well as any political subdivision of the state such as a city, county or school district. A religious leader will be protected in that they will not be able to be compelled to disclose a written, audio or video version of a sermon delivered during religious worship of a religious organization, and they may also not be compelled to testify regarding the sermon.

My grandfather was Methodist minister who traveled and visited different communities in East Texas. I learned from him the important role ministers play in our lives and because of this I believe it is important to ensure we are protecting the religious freedoms of the citizens of Texas.

5. Texting and Driving

A bill to ban texting and driving statewide has finally passed the Legislature. House Bill 62 would create a ban on reading, writing or sending electronic messages from a phone in a moving vehicle. Texting would still be allowed in an emergency, and drivers can use their phone to access their GPS and music apps.

This bill does not supersede stricter local ordinances, however, practices that are against both local and state law, such as typing a text, would be subject to only a state citation. A police officer would have to witness a violation or other evidence, such as the person admitting to texting or weaving in traffic, for a citation to be issued. For a first offense it would carry a fine of up to \$99, and \$100 to \$200 for a second offense. If texting leads to an accident causing death or serious injury, it would be a Class A misdemeanor.

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