



My five cents...

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

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The end of summer has come with students back in school and as we celebrate Labor Day on September 1st. I hope you have a safe and enjoyable weekend with your friends and family as we look forward to the hopefully cooler weather of the Fall.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. Special Session Has Come To An End

After 29 days (out of 30) the 85th First Called Special Session came to an end on August 15th. The Legislature successfully extended the sunset dates for important agencies such as the Medical Board and Psychological Board. They also passed measures to help prevent voter fraud, provide protections for residents who may be annexed, and ensured property rights during the removal of a tree on private land.

2. Funding For Public Schools

During the Special Session, the House and Senate came together to provide necessary funding and relief for public education. The fund Additional State Aide for Tax Reduction (ASATR) was created in 2005 to ensure school districts would not be harmed from school property tax cuts that year. Because ASATR will expire on September 1st, House Bill 21 provides a hardship grant to those schools whose budgets will be most affected by the loss of funds.

Currently, schools districts with 1,600 students or less, covering under 300 square miles, receive fewer state funds than districts with an equal number of students, spanning more than 300 square miles. This arbitrary size designation puts hundreds of school districts at a financial disadvantage. House Bill 21 begins a phase out of the punitive small schools formula and provides more funding to these schools. Funding for TRS-Care to help lower the deductibles by half for retired teachers under 65 years of age, and reduce the premiums for retirees 65 years and older was also included in House Bill 21.

3. Bills Going Into Effect On September 1st

While many bills passed during the 85th Legislative Session and Special Session went into effect the day they were signed by the Governor, most did not. Many are delayed until September 1st of the legislative year, or until the next year to give state agencies and the public time to become aware of new laws or changes to current law. It also marks the beginning of the fiscal year and the new budget cycle, which is important to note as some bills require funding to be put into action.

There are 673 bills which go into effect on September 1, 2017. Some of these you might recognize, such as House Bill 62 which puts into place a statewide texting while driving prohibition, House Bill 50 allows for a lottery winner to remain anonymous, and Senate Bill 7 which sets guidelines for dealing with improper relationships between students and teachers.

4. Mental Health Funding

In August, I spoke to the Health and Human Services Commission leaders to advocate for new construction funding for Rusk State Hospital. During the 85th Legislative Session, almost \$300 million was allocated to replace or repair mental health facilities in the state, such as Rusk State Hospital in Senate District 3. This hospital, and many like it, have been forced to provide care with outdated and inadequate buildings, which do not meet the needs of its residents or the employees who work there. .

There is a unique relationship between Rusk State Hospital and its local communities as they provide vital services to not only surrounding areas, but to many rural areas across East Texas. Through residency program partnerships with local universities and junior colleges, as well as partnerships with charitable foundations, they have created something that cannot be found anywhere else in Texas. I will continue to keep you updated, as we learn more about the amount of funding Rusk State Hospital will receive.

5. Don't Forget To Register To Vote

On November 7th, Texans have an opportunity to take part in one of the most important parts of our political system by heading to the polls to vote on seven proposed amendments to the Texas Constitution. The deadline to register to vote in the upcoming election is **Monday, October 10th**. Early voting will be from October 23rd to November 3rd. If you have not registered to vote or have questions about your registration, I encourage you to go to www.votetexas.gov or call 1.800.252.VOTE (8683) before the October 10th deadline. You can also see what constitutional amendments will be on the ballot by visiting http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/const_amends.htm.

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