



# My five cents...

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

For immediate release  
September 28, 2017  
word count: 750

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About a month ago, many parts of our state were devastated by Hurricane Harvey. Since that time, my staff and I have been working hard to ensure that those in Senate District 3 are receiving the help and services they need.

If you require assistance, please don't hesitate to contact any of my offices. You can also visit <https://www.disasterassistance.gov> or call 1-800-621-3362 to check your eligibility, register for assistance and check your application status. Our thoughts and prayers are with all who survived the disaster and those who continue to be affected.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

## 1. Interim Charges

As the Legislature only meets in odd-numbered years for 140 days, there is a limited amount of time for all issues to be addressed. Because of this, the Legislature uses interim charges as a way to study and examine the different sides of an issue, provide suggestions for solutions and begin work on potential legislation for the next session.

I recently submitted ideas to the Lt. Governor for interim charges which included reviewing the disaster response by the Texas Department of Transportation to Hurricane Harvey and how they can improve for the future. I also recommended studying the Transportation Allotment in the school finance formulas to better reflect actual costs for school districts, and make recommendations on how to cut down on driver license renewal wait times.

## 2. Texting While Driving

On September 1st, Texas became the 47th state to ban texting while driving. Drivers are now prohibited from reading, writing or sending electronic message 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.

Stricter local ordinances are not superseded, however, practices against both local and state law, such as typing a text, are subject to only a state citation.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 carries a fine of up to \$99, and up to \$200 for a second offense. If texting leads to an accident causing death or serious injury, it could be a Class A misdemeanor.

### **3. Election and Constitutional Amendments**

On November 7th, Texans will have an opportunity to head to the polls and vote on seven proposed amendments to the Texas Constitution. Through its 16 articles, including a Bill of Rights, the Constitution establishes the purposes and limits for our state government. You can find an analysis of these amendments at [http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/const\\_amends](http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/const_amends).

The deadline to register to vote in the upcoming election is **Tuesday, October 10th**. Early voting will be from October 23rd through November 3rd. If you have not registered to vote or have questions about your registration, I encourage you to go to [www.votetexas.gov](http://www.votetexas.gov) or call 1.800.252.VOTE (8683).

### **4. School Food Pantries**

During my meetings with Superintendents and teachers within Senate District 3, they have shared their concerns of what was happening to the leftover food in their cafeterias, when it could go to those in need. School districts can currently donate food that is leftover from their cafeterias to nonprofits. However, many times this food is taken someplace else, while it could be used to benefit those around the school district.

As of September 1st, school districts now have the option to keep leftover non-perishable packaged foods and produce for distribution on their own campuses, by donating the food to themselves. A school can name one of its employees as the designee of a third-party nonprofit, which allows the school district to donate and then collect the leftover food. It also allows school districts to use their campuses to distribute that food, as long as they follow health and safety codes.

### **5. Protecting Patients**

Recently concerns have been raised that patients were being surprised with larger than expected medical bills when their insurance was not within network of the freestanding emergency room they visited. These facilities, which can resemble urgent care clinics, often charge high hospital emergency room prices. During the 85th Session, the Legislature took action to ensure that consumers were being protected from these exorbitant medical bills. Now freestanding ER's will be required to post notice that they do not operate within any insurance networks, or which ones they do operate within. This will ensure that patients have the information they need before deciding where to receive treatment.

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