



My five cents...

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

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We have officially moved into the Fall season and with that comes the expectation of cooler weather, the changing of the leaves, time with family and one of my favorite fall traditions...hunting season. Whether you are into archery, rifles, ducks or deer, there are thankfully plenty of opportunities to hunt in East Texas.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

1. School Finance Reform Commission

During the 85th Special Legislative Session, the 13-member Texas Commission on Public School Finance was created. Before the next legislative session, the Commission will help to develop and make recommendations on how the State can improve our current public school finance system, as well as look at completely new methods of funding public schools.

The Lt. Governor has appointed Senators Larry Taylor, Paul Bettencourt and Royce West to serve on this Commission, as well as Dr. Dough Killian, Superintendent of Pflugerville ISD to serve as the public member. Senate District 3 will be represented on the Commission by State Board of Education member Keven Ellis from Lufkin.

2. The State's First Flood Plan

Funding was allocated to the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) during the 85th Legislative Session to create Texas' first ever statewide flood plan. By working with city and county governments, planning authorities and local citizens, TWDB will be able to put together a comprehensive document with plans to hopefully reduce flooding damage in the future.

They will evaluate statewide flood risks and infrastructure projects local governments believe would be beneficial to help avoid future catastrophes. The plan will also encourage regions to work together in the hopes that they will be able to better prevent flooding. TWDB is expected to present their plan to the Texas Legislature before the next legislative session in 2019. The Legislature will use the plan as guidance for implementing and funding future flood prevention projects.

3. Helping Schools Affected by Harvey

After Hurricane Harvey, many school districts experienced lower attendance due to students being displaced by the storm, or the school district having fewer instructional days due to damage to facilities or other factors. As a large part of a school districts funding is based upon the number of students who attend school each day, many of them are experiencing a reduction in school funding. While they may not have as many students, their overhead costs are still high. It is estimated that Harvey-affected school districts could have almost \$250 million less in funding this year.

To address this need, the Texas Education Agency is offering a one-time adjustment in state funding for this school year to as many 157 school districts, 26 of which are within Senate District 3, who have experienced low attendance. A school district has to have had damage to at least one campus resulting in a loss of two or more weeks of class days, or instructional facilities had to be shut down for nine to 10 days after the storm. Only school districts located within Governor Abbott's 60-county state disaster declaration are eligible to apply.

4. Addressing Students Mental Health Needs

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Higher Education Coordination Board, and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission have formed the Hurricane Harvey Task Force on School Mental Health. They will work with Harvey-affected schools, universities, and their local communities to connect them with funding opportunities, training, as well as counselors to help students work through the after-effects from the storm.

The task force will develop a comprehensive list of statewide and regional mental health resources and to utilize regional Education Service Center in affected areas to coordinate services between schools and those providing assistance. TEA has put together a mental health recovery page that contains resources for schools, students and families looking for assistance. You can visit the page at https://tea.texas.gov/Harvey_recovery_mh/.

5. Governor Abbott Visits East Texas.

This month, I had the opportunity to accompany Governor Greg Abbott as he visited a number of cities in East Texas. The goal of this visit was to meet with mayors, county judges and other elected officials to share the damage they had experienced in their communities and to discuss ways the state can assist in their recovery efforts. Commission to Rebuild Texas Commissioner John Sharp, also attended the meetings. I am grateful to Governor Abbott for taking the time to come to meet with our local leaders in East Texas, and see first-hand the impact Hurricane Harvey had on our communities.

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