



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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An unspeakable tragedy unfolded in our nation's capital this week after a mid-air collision between an Army Blackhawk helicopter and American Airlines flight 5342 in what may be one of the worst air disasters in decades. Our hearts and prayers are with the victims, their loved ones, our fearless first responders, and all those affected by this tragedy.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Senate Finance hearings begin

This week the Senate Finance Committee, led by Senator Joan Huffman, began our hearings on the state budget. The budget has 11 articles that cover different agencies within the state government. The head of each agency comes before the committee and testifies on their budget requests for the next biennium. It is important to hear from the agency leadership to ask for status updates on current and past work and hear about goals for the future of the agency. Our funding choices reflect our priorities as a state. As such, I take these proceedings very seriously, especially since we must be responsible stewards of tax-payer funds. This week we heard from agencies related to the judiciary, public safety, and general government. Next week, we will hear from health-related and education-related entities.

2. Abbott surges state resources to border to help federal enforcement

Governor Greg Abbott issued five border-related Executive Orders this week directing state agencies to coordinate and support the federal government with border and homeland security operations. They include directing state agencies to assist federal immigration officers to investigate, arrest, detain, and deport illegal immigrants in the state, directing the Texas Military Department to assist the US Northern Command; deploying additional border barriers; sharing information and intelligence on foreign terrorist organizations with federal law enforcement; and providing Texas land and facilities available for federal partners to lease and use for these efforts. Securing our southern border is vital to the safety of all Texans. The Governor also directed the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to deploy tactical strike teams to help with immigration enforcement.

3. Laken Riley Act signed into law

President Trump signed his first bill into law this week. The Laken Riley Act directs immigration enforcement officials to detain and deport people in the US illegally who have committed a crime, including theft, assault, and murder. It passed both chambers with bipartisan support before heading to the president's desk. The bill was named in memory of a Georgia nursing student who last year went for a run and was murdered by a Venezuelan immigrant in the US illegally. The man had previously been charged with shoplifting in New York. Proponents of the bill argue that had this law been in place, it would have triggered his deportation earlier and prevented the tragedy. This bill is an important step forward in strengthen our border, improving our immigration system, and ensuring that we're doing everything possible to keep our citizens safe.

4. Entergy starts \$137 million project to strengthen grid

The Texas Public Utility Commission (PUC) gave Entergy permission to move forward with a \$137 million grid resiliency project. The project will be implemented over the next three years and includes rebuilding neighborhood-level power lines to storm-resilient standards, replacing long-distance transmission line and poles that are more resilient, and burying overhead power lines in some areas. These projects stem from work done last session. House Bill 2555 from the 88th Regular Session allows transmission and distribution utilities – those in charge of the poles and wires – to file forward-looking resiliency plans to help mitigate the impact of severe weather.

5. TPWD awards \$30.9 million in local park grants

This week the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) announced \$30.9 million in local park grants. This award amount surpasses previous records and will help create and enhance outdoor recreational opportunities. The grants are awarded to local government entities as part of a 50/50 match. Once funded, the sites must remain parkland forever, be properly maintained, and open to the public. For more information about the program and how to apply, visit <https://tpwd.texas.gov/business/grants/recreation-grants/about-local-parks-grants>. In Senate District 3, two awards were made:

- The City of Center received a \$250,000 grant for American Legion Park and will support a lighted plaza, pickleball courts, yard games, trails, native landscaping, shade installation, site amenities, and program and interpretive signage.
- The City of Pineland in Sabine County received a \$50,000 grant for sustainable and accessible improvements at Pineland Park and playground equipment, surfacing, lighting, and interpretive signage.

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