



# My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

For immediate release  
April 24th, 2025  
word count: 760

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This year, we commemorate the 189<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of San Jacinto. On April 21, 1836, General Sam Houston led the Texan Army against General Santa Anna and the Mexican army in a fight that lasted just 18 minutes. The Texans' victory paved the way for Texas independence from Mexico and the birth of the Republic of Texas.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## **1. Senate passes additional property tax relief for seniors**

This week, the Senate passed Senate Bill 23 and Senate Joint Resolution 85 by Senator Paul Bettencourt. The bill and its accompanying joint resolution would increase homestead exemptions for Texans over 65 and disabled Texans to \$200,000. Together the package offers additional meaningful property tax relief for Texas seniors, many of whom live on a fixed income. It offers, on average, almost \$500 in annual savings if passed by the Legislature and approved by voters. Over the past ten years, the Legislature has continued to increase homestead exemptions for all homeowners, but most significantly for seniors. In 2015, the senior exemption was at \$25,000. The passage of this bill would be the fourth exemption increase over the past decade. Property tax relief for Texas seniors is one of our most important priorities this session.

## **2. House passes massive school funding bill**

Last week the Texas House passed House Bill 2, a public school finance bill that would invest almost \$8 billion in local schools. While the bill has a number of provisions, some major highlights include a \$340 increase per student to the basic allotment and tying the basic allotment growth to property values, which would provide over \$3 billion in increased per-student spending. The bill also increases a variety of other allotments, including the small and mid-sized district allotment, which would provide almost \$1 billion for rural schools. Special education also would receive a funding increase by about \$1.5 billion. While this bill provides a needed investment for public schools, it still must make its way through the Senate. I have been, and will always be, a strong supporter of public schools and look forward to seeing this bill move through the process.

## **3. Bill regulating autonomous vehicles passes Senate**

Several years ago, the Legislature passed legislation giving primary regulatory control over autonomous vehicles to the state. The bill was designed to preempt superfluous local regulation that stymied the autonomous vehicle industry from developing in Texas. Now those vehicles are driving on the streets and a more robust regulatory framework is required. That's why I filed Senate Bill 2425, which creates more structure around the commercial autonomous vehicle industry. This bill only effects vehicles that carry passengers or goods without a driver. It would require the Department of Motor Vehicles to license operators in the state and suspend or revoke the operator as necessary. It also requires operators to submit information to the Texas Department of Public Safety for enforcement measures. This bill passed this Senate last week and now heads to the House for consideration.

#### **4. Texas leads nation in job creation over past year**

Texas is well known as a business-friendly state and this year has been no different. Over the past 12 months, Texas led the nation in total job creation and hit new highs for the number of Texans working and the size of our labor force. In March alone, Texas added 26,500 positions. That outpaces national growth trends. With a plethora of job openings in Texas, our economy continues to grow and unemployment remains low. I will continue to support pro-business policies to ensure that Texas is the best place to start or grow a business.

#### **5. Bill to rein in squatters passes Senate**

This week, the Senate passed Senate Bill 38 by Sen. Paul Bettencourt. This bill seeks to curtail squatting in Texas. As a member of the Local Government Committee, we heard harrowing tales from Texans detailing how bad actors illegitimately moved into homes they owned without the owners consent and refused to leave. In some cases, the squatters caused excessive amounts of damage to the home and in many cases stole property belonging to the owner. Owners were required to use the eviction process for these illegitimate squatters. The civil eviction process can take months to resolve. This bill expedites timelines for removal of squatters if there is no genuine dispute over the owner's right to possession.

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