



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Session is coming to a close and, as it does, critical deadlines have to be met for legislation to pass. Those deadlines fall throughout the next week and if bills do not pass those benchmarks, they won't become law this session. It's a sprint to the finish, but we're almost there!

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Lottery overhaul passes Senate

This week the Senate unanimously passed a bill to reform the Texas Lottery by moving governance to the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) and abolishing its current governing body, the Lottery Commission. The bill also requires the Sunset Advisory Committee to conduct a review of lottery games by August 2027 and prohibits the purchase or order of a lottery ticket by telephone, internet application, or other courier-type service. Initial concerns stemmed from the Lottery Commission's decision to alter rules to allow the sale of tickets by courier services, which essentially allowed for the sale of tickets online. The Wall Street Journal and other news outlets uncovered a scheme by an international gambling ring to take advantage of the Texas Lottery and, in coordination with a nearly-defunct courier service, purchase almost every ticket combination to effectively rig the lottery for their benefit. Reforms and additional oversight of the lottery at TDLR are necessary to ensure the integrity of the Texas Lottery.

2. Governor seeks waiver to prohibit unhealthy food purchases with SNAP

Last week, Governor Abbott sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins requesting a waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service to ban unhealthy food from being purchased using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. SNAP serves more than 3 million Texans every year and provides more than \$7 billion to reduce food insecurity, especially for low-income Texans. SNAP was created to increase access to nutritious foods, but SNAP benefits are often used to buy foods with little nutritious value. States now have the opportunity to regulate the foods that SNAP benefits are used to purchase. The Governor's letter is the first step to ensure that tax dollars are used to make healthy food more accessible to all Texans.

3. Bail reform passes House, goes to Governor

This week, the Texas House passed a package of bail reform bills that take significant steps to protect Texans from offenders accused of violent crimes. These bills passed out of the Senate in the early weeks of session. Bail reform was one of the emergency items that the Governor declared in his State of the State Address. One of the central pieces of legislation, SJR 5 by Senator Joan Huffman, is a constitutional amendment which would require judges to deny bail for offenders accused of certain violent crimes like murder, rape, and kidnapping. Upon passage by the legislature, this measure will be placed on the November ballot. This legislation has been an emergency item for three sessions and the passage of these bills will ensure the safety of our communities.

4. Legislature develops proposal for school finance

The House and Senate have been collaborating for months to develop a comprehensive plan for school finance. The most recent proposal is an \$8.5 billion dollar infusion of funds in critical areas. This includes roughly \$4 billion specifically for teacher pay raises. Additionally, \$500 million will be dedicated to other school employees' salaries and \$100 million will be dedicated for windstorm property insurance for coastal districts. The most recent changes to the plan will help districts address costs other than teacher salaries, like building repairs, the purchasing of school buses and district vehicles, and district support staff salaries.

5. Broadband Development Office announces BEAD funding opportunity

The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program, authorized by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, provides funding to help increase high-speed internet access. The Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO) has released a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for the state's allocation of the BEAD Program and the Texas Match Assistance Program (TMAP). The NOFA provides nearly \$4 billion in combined federal and state funding to expand broadband infrastructure. Local governments, internet service providers, non-profits, utility companies, institutions of higher education and other entities may apply for these funds. Interested parties will have until May 29 at 2 p.m. to submit any questions or request information regarding the funding. Responses to these inquiries are estimated to be made available by June 12th, 2025.

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