



My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols

by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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One hundred and eighty-five years ago this month, the Republic of Texas passed a piece of legislation that set the framework for education funding to this day. On January 26, 1839, a bill passed that set aside land for public schools in Texas and two public universities. It fulfilled the vision President Mirabeau Lamar had for a public education system endowed by public lands in the state. Though not immediately successful, the program had lasting impacts and earned Lamar the nickname “Father of Texas Education.”

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Senator Zaffirini becomes first female Dean of the Senate

Sen. Judith Zaffirini officially became the Dean of the Senate with the retirement of Sen. John Whitmire last month. The Dean of the Senate is the position bestowed on the longest serving senator. The dean oversees much of the timing, procedure, and function of the Senate. Sen. Zaffirini was first elected in 1986, making her the first Mexican American woman to serve in the upper chamber. Over her decades in service, she has been a well-respected and consistent member of the Senate. In fact, she has a record 72,132 consecutive votes. It has been an honor and privilege to serve alongside such a distinguished member. Congratulations on this well-earned honor, Sen. Zaffirini!

2. Southeast Texas ports receive \$66 million from state to improve safety, infrastructure

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) recently announced \$240 million in grant funding for Texas ports. Approximately \$66 million of those funds will go to four Southeast Texas ports to split between six projects. The Port of Port Arthur, Port of Beaumont, Port of Orange, and Port of Sabine Pass will all benefit from the funding. The six projects include building a flyover project in Port of Port Arthur, increasing cargo capacity, and adding stop lights in Port of Beaumont, building a trans motor yard and truck queuing area in Port of Orange, and repairing sheet piling in Port of Sabine Pass. Authorities anticipate these projects increasing safety at the ports and promoting economic development in the region.

3. Rural law enforcement grant applications now available

The Comptrollers Office announced that rural law enforcement grants became available for departments to submit applications starting January 1. These grants stem from Senate Bill 22, passed during the 88th regular session by Senator Drew Springer. The bill established a grant program within the Comptroller's Office to provide financial assistance to sheriff's departments, constable's offices, and district and county attorney's offices in eligible counties. The funding is intended to supplement salaries for various positions in rural areas. Eligibility requirements mandate an office or department must serve counties with overall populations of 300,000 or less and certain conditions related to specific salary levels are met. If a county already pays the minimum salary levels for the sheriff, deputies, and jailers, the county may still apply for funds for additional personnel or equipment. To apply or find more information, visit <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/development/grants/rural/>.

4. General Land Office approves increase to Veteran Home Loan amounts

This month, the General Land Office announced an increase to the Veterans Home Loan amount from \$726,200 to \$766,550. All qualified veterans will continue to receive competitive interest rates. Veterans with a qualified service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or greater qualify for a discounted interest rate. Veterans utilizing this benefit may be eligible for home loans with no down0payment and no private mortgage insurance. Veterans can also use the program more than once. For more information, visit the Veterans Land Board's website at <https://s3.glo.texas.gov/vlb/loans/home-loans/>.

5. Freezing weather delays crawfish season

According to local boil shops, the weather conditions we have recently experienced are causing a delay in the crawfish supply. Due to a drought in Louisiana last year and the freezing temperatures in January, crawfish are not expected to reach harvest size until March. That is causing many boil shops to delay their opening for at least two months as many were set to open in January.

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