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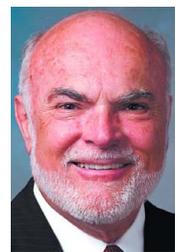
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NICHOLS: Ensuring Teacher Retirement System

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Robert Nichols

Posted: Monday, May 2, 2016 12:30 am

By ROBERT NICHOLS/Contributing writer

On Memorial Day, our country will remember the military men and women who gave their lives serving our nation. I hope we all take time to give thanks for those who sacrificed everything for our nation, so we might live free.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

Teacher Retirement System. This month saw multiple hearings regarding the state's Teacher Retirement System and the programs they oversee. Many of the discussions included how investment decisions for TRS were being made and whether the Legislature should have more oversight of those investments. There also was discussion on how the growing cost of active employee health insurance has put a burden on many teachers.

The Legislature has made it a priority to address how these programs are funded and ensuring health care benefits are competitive to help schools recruit eligible teachers.

TRS, which was first created to help smaller school districts offer health insurance coverage, is used by a majority of the state's more than 1,000 school districts, though many larger schools are self-insured.

Higher Education Committee. The Senate Higher Education Committee held a hearing this past month to discuss tuition increases at universities and colleges across the state. The discussion included how Texas compares to peer states in the cost of tuition and how accountability measures could be



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The day before the hearing, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Sen. Kel Seliger, chairman of the Higher Education Committee, held a press conference to discuss the hearing as well as share ideas on how to cut tuitions costs. These included eliminating a requirement that state universities set aside 20 percent of the tuition they collect to be used for scholarship, work-study programs and other forms of financial aid. This could be considered an unnecessary tax on students tuition. Patrick also mentioned requiring universities and colleges to prove they deserve to increase their tuition.

Energy Star sales tax holiday. Many Texans are familiar with the tax free holiday in August, but did you know there is a tax-free holiday for energy-efficient purchases? This Memorial Day weekend, Texans can get a break from state and local sales taxes when they purchase an energy-efficient item for their home. With the hot temperatures of summer approaching, it's the perfect time to take advantage of this sales tax holiday.

Qualifying products include air conditioners priced at \$6,000 or less, refrigerators priced at \$2,000 or less, ceiling fans, incandescent and fluorescent light bulbs, clothes washers, dishwashers and dehumidifiers.

Earthquake activity. Researchers at the University of Texas have released a study stating that it is "plausible" wastewater disposal wells triggered earthquakes experienced in East Texas over the past few years. There has been an increasing number of research studies confirming the tie between these wells and earthquakes. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, Texas is the third-most-at-risk state for man-made earthquakes.

Gov. Greg Abbott recently appointed members to the Technical Advisory Committee to the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas to help oversee a comprehensive study of earthquake cause and activity across the state and implement the TexNet Seismic Monitoring Program, which was funded during the 84th legislative session.

Armed Forces Scholarship. My office is now accepting applications for the Texas Armed Forces Scholarship Program, which encourages students to participate in Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs at universities in Texas.

To be eligible, must meet two of the following requirements: Be on track to graduate high school in a Distinguished Achievement Program or International Baccalaureate program; 3.0 or higher GPA; rank in the top third of graduating class and SAT score of 1590 or ACT score of 23.

To receive the scholarship: Submit an essay explaining why you believe military service is important and how you would fulfill the requirements of the scholarship; enroll in an eligible Texas institution and an eligible ROTC program; and commit in writing to remain in ROTC for four years, graduate within six years, and enter Guard service or accept a commission with the armed services within six months of graduation from college.

If you live in Senate District 3 and are interested in this scholarship, please send the required material to robert.nichols@senate.texas.gov. Applications must be received no later than June 30, 2016. For questions please call my Jacksonville office at (903) 589-3003. For more information and details on the application please visit hloans.com.

Robert Nichols is the state senator for Senate District 3. First elected in 2006, Nichols represents 19 counties including much of East Texas and part Montgomery County. He lives in Jacksonville.

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