



- State Representative Lance Gooden (seen above during his swearing-in during the 82nd Legislature in 2011) will return to work in Austin when the 83rd Legislature convenes on Tuesday. State Senator Robert Nichols, who represents the county in that chamber, is also ready to roll up his sleeves. File photo



- Nichols



Discussion

January 4, 2013

Education, water issues on minds of legislators

Rich Flowers [Athens Daily Review](#)

Athens — Henderson County’s representatives in the Texas Legislature are focused on issues such as water, education and transportation as the 83rd Texas Legislature gets set to convene on Tuesday.

State Senator Robert Nichols and State Representative Lance Gooden anticipate tough decisions for both chambers over the next five months.

Nichols said former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn tagged water education and transportation as the “big three” more than half-a-century ago. The 83rd meeting of state lawmakers will be dominated by debate concerning planning and funding in those areas.

“We’ve got a lot to do in education,” Nichols said. “We cut their funding quite a bit and there are a lot of things the local districts would like to see changed.”

Nichols represents more than 100 school districts in District 3. Before each legislative session, he visits every school superintendent to find out what they think needs to be fixed. The Standardized Testing and Reporting System used by the state is high on the list.

“One of the main things all of the school superintendents told me is about the testing and how disruptive it is,” Nichols said. “They only have 170 days of education for the school year, and of that somewhere between 42 and 46 days are disrupted due to the new testing. We have to have accountability in education, but we do not have to spend that much time testing.”

Gooden is not shy about giving his assessment of the test.

“We have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the STAR tests which have been a total failure and lined the pockets of special interests,” Gooden said. “I’m really disgusted with the program we have in place.”

Water concerns grow as the state population increases, especially in urban areas.

“Since we had our last session, we had a major drought,” Nichols said. “I think people realize how important water planning is, especially in those urban areas. In East Texas, we have the water and everyone else wants it.”

Gooden and Nichols are both backing legislation to help protect consumers in rural areas from being hit with unreasonable water rate increases.

“They’ve been price-gouging for the last several years and have no intention to stop, so it’s

going to be up to the legislature to provide some relief,” Gooden said. **“With the support of County Judge Richard Sanders and the Commissioners Court, we’re working on legislation that will allow the commissioners court to represent rate payers across Henderson County and fight those water companies on their behalf.”**

Transportation is of special interest to Nichols, who was recently named by Lt. Governor David Dewhurst as chairman of the Transportation Committee.

“How to fund it is going to be the main issue,” Nichols said. “I’ll be filing a bill on that that will take the existing sales tax that you pay on your automobile and constitutionally dedicate it to the infrastructure — the roads and bridges.

The constitutional change would require an amendment to be placed before the voters. Nichols said the change would be phased in over about a 10-year period so it doesn’t bust the budget when implemented.

Gooden is pleased to have a spot on the House Appropriations Committee. He’s looking forward to serving with committee chairman Jim Pitts, whose 10th district now includes the western edge of Henderson County.

“This will be another lean session and there will be talk about potentially restoring some of the cuts,” Gooden said. “I would like more funding to be restored to public education, but would also like to continue on the trail of cutting waste in our government. We cut overall state spending for the first time in 50 years in the last session, but I think there’s still fat in the budget.

Gooden said he intends to be available to the people of Henderson County during the upcoming session.

“I want the people to feel free to contact me at any time throughout the session at my Austin office and my Athens office,” Gooden said. “I’d like everyone to feel welcome and active in the legislative session.”

Anyone who would like an electronic copy of Gooden’s newsletter can send an e-mail to lance.gooden@house.state.tx.us. He also keeps constituents up to date via his Facebook page.