In a League of Her Own
Senator Judith Zaffirini (D) is the Energizer Bunny of Texas legislators—she just keeps voting and voting. Zaffirini, first elected to the Senate in 1987, cast her 60,000th consecutive vote in the chamber in August. But she does more than just show up for votes. She has sponsored and passed more bills (1,024) and substantive resolutions (53) than any legislator in Texas history. This year alone, she passed 108 bills—a sign of her bipartisan effectiveness in the Republican-dominated Legislature.

The Michi-green Capitol
Michigan officials are enlisting Mother Nature’s help to keep the temperature inside their 138-year-old Capitol just right for making laws. A new geothermal heating and cooling system will be the country’s largest, as state government buildings go. The Detroit News reports. The system sends fluid through loops of piping reaching 500 feet below ground. The fluid is naturally cooled or heated in the ground, then used to heat or cool the building. The system, which cost about $4 million, will save the state $300,000 annually in heating and cooling costs and will pay for itself in about 10 years.

Managing Medicaid
Like many states, Oregon saw a big increase in Medicaid enrollment under the Affordable Care Act. And, like many states, it fell behind in verifying that enrollees were qualified. After eligibility checks on 115,000 recipients, officials reported in late August that they’d canceled benefits for almost half of them because they no longer qualified or did not respond to information requests. Oregon will soon create a new office to handle the eligibility checks. According to Pew's Stateline, Republican lawmakers in many states are proposing tougher and more frequent checks. Some states, such as Illinois, are hiring private contractors to conduct the checks.

Wolf and Dog 'Sign' Law
When Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf (D) signed Libre’s Law toughening the state’s penalties for animal cruelty, the law’s namesake added his “signature” as well. Libre, a now-healthy rescue dog, put his pawprint on a copy of the bipartisan bill, which increases penalties for animal abuse and shields vets, humane society officers and vet technicians from frivolous lawsuits when reporting animal cruelty, among other protections. The law “brings us in line with the rest of the country,” Wolf said. More than three-quarters of states have put real teeth in their animal protection laws in the last five years, the Animal Legal Defense Fund reports.

Alaska’s Sesquicentennial
Russia ceded the territory of Alaska to the United States in the Treaty of Cession, signed in March 1867. The actual transfer of the territory took place seven months later, in Sitka on Oct. 18, a date Alaskans celebrate as a state holiday, Alaska Day. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the transfer, and the weeklong Alaska Day Festival will include events held across the state, with most taking place in Sitka. No doubt part of the celebration has to do with the purchase price of all that territory: about 2 cents per acre.

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Remote Sales-Tax Update

South Dakota officials hope to snatch a U.S. Supreme Court victory from the jaws of a state high court defeat. The state filed a lawsuit against several remote retailers in 2016 based on a law passed that year requiring certain out-of-state sellers to collect sales taxes, The Associated Press reports. A state judge sided with the defendants in March. Officials hope a speedy defeat before the high court will allow them to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court—where they seek their ultimate goal: a reversal of the court’s 1992 ruling preventing states from collecting taxes from remote sellers. Alabama, Indiana, Maine and Wyoming have laws similar to South Dakota’s.

Test Costs = Enrollment Hurdle

It won’t make tuition more affordable, but paying for low-income students’ college-entrance exams makes it more likely they will enroll in a four-year school, Education Week reports. About half the states require high-schoolers to take the ACT or SAT. A study of Michigan high school records found that for every 100 needy students who took the ACT in that state, nearly 50 other such students who didn’t take it would have scored at a college-ready level. The ACT typically costs $46 per student, though ACT Inc. offers some discounts. When testing costs were covered, college-enrollment rates went up by 6 percent for students at schools with higher poverty rates.

Tax Highs and Lows

At 10.2 percent, Louisiana has the nation’s highest average sales tax. The nonpartisan Tax Foundation ranks states based on their combined state and local sales tax rates. After Louisiana, at the high end of the ranking, are Tennessee (9.45 percent), Arkansas (9.34 percent), Washington (9.20 percent) and Alabama (9.03 percent). The bottom five, with the lowest combined rates, are Alaska (1.76 percent), Hawaii (4.35 percent), Wyoming (5.26 percent), Wisconsin (5.42 percent) and Maine (5.5 percent). Five states get by without statewide sales taxes: Alaska, Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire and Oregon.

Making a Good Drug Easy to Get

This summer, Delaware joined at least 40 other states that make naloxone available to the public, The (Delaware) News Journal reports. Also known by the brand name Narcan, naloxone is a nasal spray that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Drug-related overdoses in Delaware killed 308 people last year and at least 121 people so far this year. The new law requires those buying naloxone at a pharmacy to undergo a short training before they can leave with the overdose antidote. The law also protects pharmacists from legal liability if they sell naloxone to a person and it doesn’t work.

Driven to Distraction

Washington state officials have a message for drivers: ‘If you’re on the road, you’re off the phone,’ the director of the Traffic Safety Commission said. Texting or holding a phone to your ear while driving is already illegal in the state, but a new law prohibits drivers from holding any electronic device—phones, tablets, other gadgets—while behind the wheel, The Associated Press reports. At least 14 states now have bans on handheld phones. Five others—Hawaii, Illinois, New Hampshire, Vermont and West Virginia—ban their use even when the vehicle is stopped in traffic or at a light, as Washington’s new law does.