

Tear gas doesn't put woman's protest on ICE

By Joy Sewing
COLUMNIST

Plumes of tear gas rose through the air, sending protesters scattering on January 28 outside the Dilley Immigration Processing Center in Dilley, Texas.

Houston resident Frida Adame was among the 100 or so protesters who found herself caught in the plume.

Bullhorn clenched in hand, she shouted that they meant only to promote peace while at the protest.

After all, she said, they had followed all the rules. They stood behind the yellow tape federal agents had warned them not to cross. They held posters, blew bubbles and played drums and flutes. A few voices shouted profanities, but the crowd's



JOY SEWING
COLUMNIST

spirit was mostly upbeat and even hopeful.

The mood shifted as a busload of federal agents in protective gear rolled in. They formed a line in front of the protesters, then forced the crowd backward. Some of the protesters at the front resisted. Then came the canisters of tear gas.

Adame has been to more than 60 protests across the country, but she says she never experi-

enced anything like she did on that day. The gas burned her eyes and made her cough. A friend standing nearby fell to the ground, gasping for air.

It wasn't necessary, Adame said. No one was being violent.

While she knows protests don't guarantee change, Adame continues to show up, bullhorn always in hand, to fight for the many immigrants who are too afraid to speak out or who simply can't.

I've interviewed Adame several times over the years about her fight for the rights of immigrants. The 30-year-old is a recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which she earned at age 19.

There are more than 500,000 DACA recipients in the nation, and over 90,000 in Texas, according to the Migration Policy Institute. **Sewing continues on A19**



Courtesy of Frida Adame

Houston resident Frida Adame joined hundreds of protesters outside Dilley Immigration Processing Center on Jan. 28.

CAREER EXPOSURE



TOP: derian Villacorta, left, helps Anthony Sosa gear up for a firefighting drill during a fire/EMS class at HISD's Cesar E. Chavez High School on Tuesday in Houston. The high school offers a program designed for students interested in becoming firefighters, EMTs or emergency dispatchers. **ABOVE LEFT:** Anthony Sanchez prepares to set up a syringe during a class. **ABOVE RIGHT:** CTE, Health Science instructor Jessica Pineda teaches a lesson during a pharmacy tech class.

PHOTOS BY BRETT COOMER/HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Ruling to reshape migrant detention

Judge's decision may lead to more being held in state

By Julián Aguilar
STAFF WRITER

Detention centers in Texas could see a surge of migrants following an appeals court decision Friday that allows unauthorized immigrants to be held without a bond, legal analysts and attorneys said.

Late Friday, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit upheld the Trump administration's practice of holding immigrants in mandatory detention until their removal proceedings conclude. The 2-1 decision landed as Texas already leads the country in the number of immigrants detained in the country.

The ruling's scope extends beyond people already in custody in Texas or immigrants who are arrested by immigration officials in the state. It also applies to immigrants who are arrested outside of Texas and transferred to one of the state's detention facilities, said Ruby Powers, a Houston-based attorney. **Detention continues on A17**

Mix of donors giving to hopefuls

Much of the money is from within Texas, given to super PACs

By James Osborne
STAFF WRITER

From rock stars to oil billionaires, an eclectic mix of donors is pumping money into the state's U.S. Senate race.

With almost nine months to go to election day - and less than a month to the Republican and Democratic primaries - close to \$80 million has already been spent on advertising.

A lot of that money is coming from inside Texas and going to Super PACs, to which donors can give unlimited contributions and aren't supposed to directly coordinate with the campaigns they support.

Most of the state's big GOP donors are backing U.S. Sen. John Cornyn through the Super PAC Texans for a Conservative Majority, which had raised \$18.5 million as of Dec. 31. Cornyn is seeking to fend off challenges from fellow Republican Rep. Louie Gohmert. **Campaigns continues on A19**

RV park ravaged in July 4 flood to close

By Gretchen Butwid
SPECIAL TO HOUSTON CHRONICLE

KERRVILLE — A riverside RV park once meant to fund Lorena Guillen's retirement is now shuttered for good after July 4 flooding killed four people at Blue Oak RV Park and devastated the family-run business.

Guillen and her husband purchased the park — just feet from the typically tranquil Guadalupe River — as a retirement investment built on steady cash flow. That plan collapsed when a deadly flood swept through the property during the July 4 weekend.

Four people staying at Blue Oak were killed in the flooding, part of a Texas Hill Country disaster that claimed at least 135

lives overall and left entire riverside communities in ruins.

Guillen's loss reflects a broader reckoning after the floods, which exposed vulnerabilities at riverside youth camps, RV parks and campgrounds. While Texas lawmakers have since passed new safety legislation, survivors say disaster relief has been uneven — often favoring homeowners over small businesses and low-income residents.

"If there's another 40-foot flood again, knowing that there's nobody here, I'll be able to sleep," Guillen said. "And I don't think I'll survive another flood like this."

She's been trying to obtain a Small Business Administration loan. **RV park continues on A18**



Megan Weise/Texas State University

Lorena Guillen, co-owner of the Blue Oak RV Park in Ingram, said her requests for a loan have been denied three times.



IN SOUTHWEST AUSTIN

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LOCAL NEWS

After July flood killed four guests, a Hill Country RV park shutter

Four people died at Blue Oak RV Park during July 4 flooding, part of a Hill Country disaster that killed at least 135 and exposed gaps in safety. The owner says the park will not reopen.

BY GRETCHEN BUTWID

- Months after deadly Texas flood, one man is still searching for missing victims
- Austin parents of missing girl sue Camp Mystic, allege ignored flood warnings



DINING

More than 35 Black-owned restaurants to know in Austin

ENTERTAINMENT

My worst first dates in Austin — and what they taught me

First responders get housing help

Apartment association's program urges landlords to waive fees and lower rents

By Austin Sanders
STAFF WRITER

The Austin Apartment Association announced the launch of a new program Thursday that invites landlords to provide financial assistance to first responders struggling to afford housing in Austin.

The new program, dubbed the "Partner in Safety Alliance," was designed to encourage participating property owners to waive fees, reduce security deposits or discount rents for police officers, firefighters and other first responders so they can better afford living in the communities they serve, said

"If you want first responders to keep showing up ... their communities also have to continue showing up for them."

Austin EMS Association President James Monks

Apartment Association President Kimberly Faulkner told reporters at a Thursday news conference.

"This initiative is designed to support our first responders while strengthening the connection between residents and the professionals who serve and protect our community every day," Faulkner said.

To support the initiative, the Apartment Association will host on its website a listing of

properties participating in the program. The directory listed 61 properties as of Friday.

Faulkner said the Apartment Association will also help arrange community gatherings with first responders at participating properties. Building owners can also request a walk-through performed by emergency responders to identify potential safety improvements, such as where additional lighting

Housing continues on B3



Photos by Jennifer Merrill/Texas State University

A cross stands just east of Camp Mystic, where 25 girls and two counselors died during the July 4 flood, in Kerr County.

Man still searching for flood victims

Kerrville volunteer continues hunt on Guadalupe River as region recovers

SPECIAL TO THE AUSTIN
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

HUNT — Ryan Logue survived the deluge that killed at least 135 people over the July 4 weekend in the Texas Hill Country, but even after the water has receded, he keeps the memory of the lives lost during the natural disaster at the forefront.

Logue quit his job search and now has a singular purpose: finding the two remaining victims who searchers have not yet found.

"All of a sudden it was just like a switch hit," Logue said while standing between the recently manicured lawns of Camp Mystic and the bent 40-foot cypress trees east of the girls' camp along the banks of the Guadalupe River in Kerr County. **Floods continues on B4**



Ryan Logue, deputy incident coordinator for the United Cajun Navy, describes recovery efforts to locate two missing people who were swept away in Hunt on Oct. 17.

AFD captain axed in OT probe

Case has uncovered broader timekeeping issues at department

By Tony Plohetski
STAFF WRITER

Austin Fire Chief Joel Baker fired the third highest-ranking woman in the department after an investigation found she overstated overtime hours in a case that uncovered broader issues in how firefighters accounted for extra work.

The attorney for Capt. Chelsea Caloia calls her a "scapegoat" in a greater lack of timekeeping oversight by department management.

A 36-page disciplinary memo, made public Friday, said a lengthy investigation found "a culture of impropriety and unethical conduct" in the department's fire prevention division, which conducts about 25,000 building and fire hydrant inspections annually.

Employees, including Caloia, routinely logged time for inspections that look less time than they recorded, the Jan. 30 memo said.

The crux of the issue is that fire prevention inspections for new construction are billed by the city at fixed, standard rates determined by factors such as building size — not by actual time spent on site, said Doug O'Connell, Caloia's attorney.

Caloia told investigators she believed the number of overtime hours she logged on her timesheet needed to match the hours billed for the inspection, even though they may not. She also believed her practice was proper and was shared by her colleagues.

The memo does not tabulate the amount of unworked overtime hours Caloia is accused of logging on her timesheet.

"As the fire chief, I bear responsibility for this," Baker said in the memo. "Each of the leaders for fire prevention bears responsibility. Had I known about this behavior sooner, I would have acted to stop it."

He added that "our failure as fire chief continues on B4

Mix of rain, heat this week could bring record temperatures to area

By Mary Wasson
NEWSROOM METEOROLOGIST

We're coming off an unusually warm weekend across Central Texas, with high temperatures running about 10 to 20 degrees above normal. Both Saturday and Sunday saw highs climbing into the 70s and 80s.

This week will stay on the warm side, but sunshine will give way to cloudier skies and increasing rain chances.

An upper-atmospheric system of low air pressure that has been lingering near Baja California will

move east across northern Mexico and into Texas on Monday. This will lead to increasing cloudiness across Central Texas, but rain chances should hold off until midweek. While forecast models over the weekend differed about the timing of this next storm system, confidence is improving.

"Models/ensembles have shown a delaying trend in the passage of the upper-level trough, currently just west of Baja California. The consensus now shows a Tuesday night passage, though this could be pushed into early on Wednesday as some show," the

National Weather Service wrote in their forecast discussion on Sunday.

Monday

We'll wake up to a mix of sun and clouds, paired with light winds and the potential for patchy fog, especially east of Interstate 35. Morning temps will settle into the mid-50s and upper 50s.

By around lunchtime, clouds may thin a bit, allowing for a little more sunshine to peek through. Temperatures will continue to rise. **Weather continues on B4**



NOAA

An area of low atmospheric pressure over northern Mexico will continue pushing clouds into Texas on Monday, with rain chances increasing Tuesday and Wednesday. This satellite image was captured Sunday morning.

Austin docs help reduce premature births

St. David's North Austin Medical Center participated in study using blood tests to ID early labor signs

By Nicole Villalpando
STAFF WRITER

Imagine if you could predict which mothers would give birth prematurely. Then imagine there was some easy interventions to prevent that.

A new national study of more than 5,000 pregnant women in 19 locations did just that by using a blood test to identify certain biomarkers in the mother.

The Women's Center of Texas at St. David's North Austin Medical Center was one of the locations. The hospital has the largest labor and delivery department in Austin, with more than 10,000 babies born last year, and treats mothers at the highest risk for pregnancy complications, including premature birth.

The study enrolled women in 2022 and 2023 but ended early because of the definitive results achieved.

Compared with the study's control group, the women who received interventions had 56% fewer babies born before 32 weeks and 32% fewer babies born before 35 weeks. Full-term is 40 weeks.

The interventions also affected the babies. The intervention group had 20% fewer babies admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit along with 20% fewer complications for the baby. Babies in that group also spent less time in the NICU — 6.93 days compared

with 8.12 days.

"Every day less in the NICU is one that you get to spend at home," said Dr. Molly McDonald, a maternal-fetal medicine doctor who led the study locally. "That's huge."

How the study worked

During the study, women who were between 18 weeks and 21 weeks gestation had their blood drawn. A screening test looked for biomarkers, specifically the ratio of circulating maternal insulin-like growth factor-binding protein 4 to sex hormone-binding globulin.

That ratio is thought to indicate how well the placenta is functioning, McDonald said.

If the placenta is not functioning well, women could have early labor, preeclampsia or other complications that could cause premature birth. Preeclampsia happens when a mother's blood pressure rises to an unsafe level.

About 5% of participants screened positively for biomarker levels that could put them at risk. Half of those women got traditional care, and they and their doctors were not told about the positive test.

The other half who had a positive test were told and their doctors started them on a regimen of low-dose aspirin, a vaginal suppository of progesterone and weekly check-in calls



Samantha and Gary Wallin had their first son in March 2024 after she participated in a study that predicted she was at risk for preterm labor and provided interventions. Her baby was born only two weeks early.

Courtesy of Samantha Wallin

with a nurse.

The progesterone helps stabilize the tissue of the cervix to prevent early labor. The low-dose aspirin helps reduce inflammation, which lowers the risk of preeclampsia, blood clots and other problems that could cause early labor.

Unless a woman has had a preterm labor previously, preterm labor is difficult to predict, McDonald said. Even if they have had a preterm labor, every pregnancy is different because every placenta is different, she said.

Austinite Samantha Wallin was part of the

study when she was pregnant with her first son and was randomly selected for the intervention group after her positive test. The interventions weren't hard to do and the weekly calls with the nurse were reassuring, she said.

Her son Oliver was born in March 2024 at 38 weeks. Wallin recently delivered her second son, Henry, who was born at 39 weeks.

Doing the test with her first pregnancy and doing the treatments, she said was "low effort and low risk."

Not available for all

The screening test used

in the study is available for \$750 but is not covered by insurance. Because of this study, there has been a push to get the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to cover the testing. Usually once CMS covers something, insurance companies often follow.

With her second pregnancy, Wallin did not have access to the test through a study and it wasn't covered by insurance. She did take low-dose aspirin to prevent inflammation, but after assessing her cervix, she and McDonald determined the progesterone probably wasn't needed for this pregnancy.

If the test had been available through her insurance for Henry's pregnancy, Wallin would have done it. "It would be great if it was available to more people," she said.

If this biomarker test becomes the standard of care, McDonald said more babies would need less intervention, free up NICU beds and have better outcomes.

Although the study did not focus on preeclampsia, McDonald said the regimen's potential to reduce that risk could also lower maternal deaths and complications. A large national study on preeclampsia is underway.

FIRE CHIEF

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leaders does not mitigate the responsibility of each AFD member to accurately report their time."

Baker said the City Au-

ditor's Office has an ongoing investigation into the matter.

Caloia's attorney, Doug O'Connell, said in a statement: "If Captain Caloia has engaged in any impropriety, the same could be said of numerous other

firefighters and AFD leaders who have operated under the same policies and practices. Captain Caloia deserves fair treatment, transparency and accountability that addresses the broader issues rather than targeting

one dedicated public servant."

Baker wrote in the memo he likely would not have fired Caloia solely for lapses in how she recorded her work hours. However, he said the investigation found Caloia

used a city car for her personal benefit, including for personal errands and for doctors appointments unrelated to her work.

He said that since the issue arose, he directed supervisors across multiple divisions to closely

monitor overtime, telework time and flexible time.

"I am more than disappointed by all of this," he said. "This is not the custom or behavior of all Austin Fire Department members."

FLOODS

From page B1

County, about 115 miles west of Austin.

"It's either you can respond, and you can start acting, or you can be reactive, and you can sit back and watch," he said.

He searches the banks of the Guadalupe River daily for Cecilia "Cile" Steward, 8, of Austin, and Jeffrey Ramsey, 63, of Lewisville.

The flood killed 27 people at Camp Mystic — 25 campers and two counselors.

Logue, a deputy incident coordinator with the nonprofit United Cajun Navy, a volunteer-led disaster response group, joined other searchers immediately after the floods.

Before the flood, Logue was a single father looking for a job. After the disaster, he was put into an extraordinary position and

"could not stop," he said.

"It's hard to see people feel hopeless," Logue said. "Life doesn't prepare you for that, but when you're put in that situation, you stand up to it and make sure you are (hope) for those people."

With the guidance of the United Cajun Navy, Logue began running operations and helping the Hill Country community.

The United Cajun Navy "gave me instructions on what to do and kind of guided me along the way," Logue said. "I'd never done any of this before. I was just a Kerrville local that woke up to his town being flooded."

Brian Trascher, the national vice president of the United Cajun Navy, said Logue is an effective volunteer because of his empathy and his connection to the community.

"I could tell right away that he was going to be valuable in that mission,"

"You can't bring back the people who are lost. The one thing you can do (is) help save the souls and help save the hearts of those people who are also impacted."

Ryan Logue, Kerrville volunteer

Trascher said. "He's had trials and tribulations in his life, and I think that being put in a position to help other people, help his community, I think was very fulfilling for him."

The flood is personal to Logue: His 7-year-old daughter is the same age as many of the girls at Camp Mystic killed in the flood. He also grew up with Cecilia's father.

"Every day is a new battle," Logue said. "You keep that hope; you keep that prayer that you're going to find her. But you have to come to peace that one day you may not."

Logue and his team of volunteers have searched the river using sonar water drones between Hunt

and Kerrville "so many times" to find Ramsey and Cile, and he estimates it will take about 18 months to remove debris from the Guadalupe River.

He is doing this work with no compensation.

"This river was my pool," Logue said. "My daughter the other day said, 'Daddy, can we go swimming at the river?' and just stopped herself mid-sentence. But she sees what I'm doing out here, and she knows I'm going to get it back for her."

Long road to recovery

Now that the immediate response teams and many of the nonprofit organizations have left the region, those who are left are fac-

ing a new battle: long-term recovery.

Logue goes to a therapist every week and communicates with spiritual healers, but he is still on the front lines witnessing the devastation every day.

"There's that long-term response with the mental health part of it where people feel like they can't go get the services that they are supposed to be able to get after a disaster because it's not followed up on," Logue said.

"I feel like the biggest thing that we're going to see, or we need to see, is a longer lasting, impactful long-term recovery for the people so that they don't feel left behind," he said. Kerrville Mayor Joe

Herring has good and bad days.

He said he turned to counseling for personal recovery after the flood.

"I don't care how big and strong and macho you are, you need to talk to somebody," Herring said. "I feel like I've cried every day since July 4."

Logue said that as time moves on, the adrenaline people experience during a disaster runs out and cortisol, which is associated with stress, starts to replace it.

"You can't bring back the people who are lost," Logue said. "The one thing you can do (is) help save the souls and help save the hearts of those people who are also impacted."

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

WEATHER

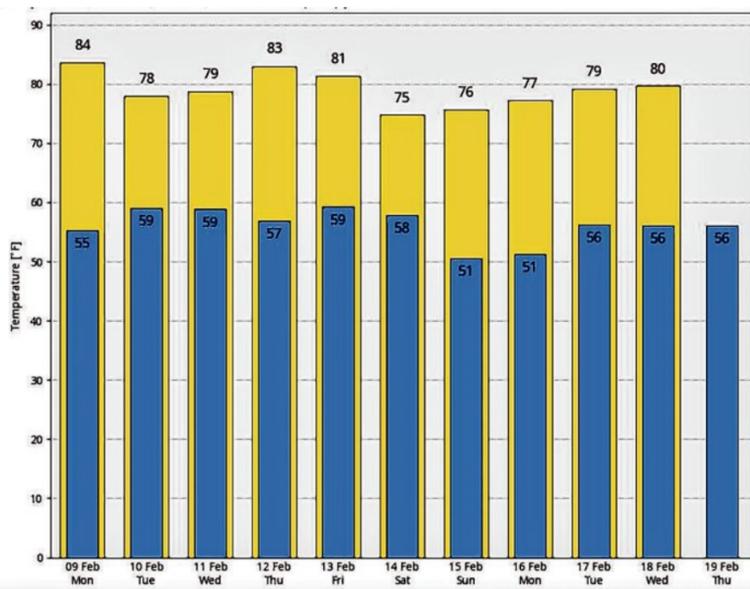
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surge, reaching high temps on either side of 80 degrees, well above the early February average of 65.

Tuesday

More clouds will stream in overnight Monday and into Tuesday with a mostly cloudy sky and even milder temperatures, with morning lows closer to what we typically see for daytime highs this time of year. Lows will range from the mid-50s in the Hill Country to the low 60s along and east of the Interstate 35.

A few light showers may begin to show up around lunchtime on Tuesday and become more widespread by the late afternoon and evening. Not everyone will see a good rain chance but



Austin temperatures this week will remain above the average February high of 65 degrees. Austin could also flirt with record highs later in the week, specifically on Thursday and Friday.

at least 30% to 40% of the region will see a tenth of an inch to a quarter-inch of rainfall.

Atmospheric instability, a key factor in generating storm clouds, will remain in check along with light winds, so we're not anticipating any thunderstorms with this disturbance.

Wednesday

Some light showers might linger into early Wednesday before heading east of Austin by mid-morning. However, if the current forecast trends continue, then chances of rain may have to be extended a little more into Wednesday afternoon with the onset of rain a little later on Tuesday.

Because this storm system came across Texas from the southwest to the northeast, it lacked any sig-

nificant cooling. In fact, we'll see a warming trend begin on Wednesday as our skies clear from west to east in the afternoon. Morning lows will be in the upper 50s to near 60 degrees while afternoon highs climb into the upper 70s and low 80s.

Rest of the week

Beyond Wednesday, high atmospheric pressure will briefly move into Texas, leading to dry and hot weather on Thursday. Austin's afternoon temperatures will once again run about 15 to 20 degrees above normal, nearing our record high of 83 degrees set in 1951.

Another storm system arrives by Friday, bringing additional rain chances and higher rainfall totals through the weekend, while temperatures remain warm.

RV park ravaged in July 4 flood to close

By Gretchen Butwid
CONTRIBUTOR

KERRVILLE — A riverside RV park once meant to fund Lorena Guillen's retirement is now shuttered for good after July 4 flooding killed four people at Blue Oak RV Park and devastated the family-run business.

Guillen and her husband purchased the park — just feet from the typically tranquil Guadalupe River — as a retirement investment built on steady cash flow. That plan collapsed when a deadly flood swept through the property during the July 4 weekend.

Four people staying at Blue Oak were killed in the flooding, part of a Texas Hill Country disaster that claimed at least 135 lives overall and left entire riverside communities in ruins.

Guillen's loss reflects a broader reckoning after the floods, which exposed vulnerabilities at riverside youth camps, RV parks and campgrounds. While Texas lawmakers have since passed new safety legislation, survivors say disaster relief has been uneven — often favoring homeowners over small businesses and low-income residents.

"If there's another 40-foot flood again, knowing that there's nobody here, I'll be able to sleep," Guillen said. "And I don't think I'll survive another flood like this."

She's been trying to obtain a Small Business Administration loan to rebuild after more than \$2 million in damage, but the federal agency has denied her three times due to lack of collateral. After the most recent denial, she suffered a heart attack and collapsed on the floor of an SBA office.

After a short hospital stay, Guillen recovered

physically, but the remaining emotional and financial strains have forced Blue Oak RV Park — and likely its adjoining restaurant — to close permanently.

"We lost our revenue. We lost our income," Guillen said. "The two businesses together, it was perfect, but the restaurant alone can't pay that big mortgage."

Guillen's restaurant, Howdy's Bar and Chill, nestled next to the RV park, is a cozy, classic Texas honky-tonk, where '80s country music plays over the speakers and the walls are covered from floor to ceiling with relics from the community. Much of the food is made from Guillen's own recipes.

On the night of the flood, residents of the RV park gathered at the restaurant to kick off the holiday with beer, music and family. During the flood, the restaurant became a refuge, where people evacuated with nothing but a beloved pet or clothes they grabbed from their RVs before they were whisked away.

"We did a headcount, and I knew exactly who we had missing," Guillen said. "At that point, a third wave came, and it went inside the restaurant."

A tragic turn

The Burgess family arrived at Blue Oak on July 3 to pick up their daughter from camp.

"The kids were so excited," Guillen said. "Their dog was so excited. It was such a beautiful day."

Hours later, John Burgess was wading through floodwater with his 1- and 3-year-old sons in his arms, with his wife following behind.

Guillen tried to get the firefighters on scene to help them, but instead her husband, Bob Canales, tied a rope around his



Megan Weise/Texas State University

Lorena Guillen, co-owner of the Blue Oak RV Park in Ingram, said her requests for a Small Business Administration loan have been denied three times.

waist to try and reach the family.

"My husband said, 'Throw me your baby,'" Guillen recalled. "He didn't do it. And a second later, the second wave came, and it took the family, and all four of them died."

Uprooted cabins, cars and RVs from the camp upriver rushed past Blue Oak, with people still inside, honking their horns and screaming for help as they crashed into trees. Guillen could feel electricity from fallen power lines humming through the water.

The firefighters were on scene but did not assist with the attempted rescue of the Burgess family or any others, she said.

"They never had the sirens on. They didn't knock on anybody's door," Guillen said. "My husband was desperately trying to get them to."

Guillen also lost one of her employees, Julian Ryan, that night. He bled to death in his driveway from injuries while trying to save his family, she said.

"I can't be here that

much because of my anxiety. My stress starts going crazy," Guillen said. "Before, I used to work 16-hour days, seven days a week, and that was my normal, and I loved it. Now, I can barely come here for a couple of days out of the week, because it's just too much."

Waiting for relief

More than \$100 million has been donated to Hill Country flood relief, with donors such as the Dallas Cowboys, Buc-ee's and George Strait, whose relief concert raised funds. Less than three weeks after the flood, the Community Foundation of the Texas Hill Country announced it had raised \$60 million through its Kerr County Flood Relief Fund.

She says the community's response has been outstanding, but the distribution of the relief funds appears to have bypassed her business, as well as some lower-income residents.

She received enough donations to rebuild her parking lot but has otherwise received little aid,

she said.

"There was so much money donated — where is it?" Guillen asked. "They're going to start helping with the homes, which is great, but a lot of these are second or third homes, vacation homes, summer homes."

"Obviously, everybody has the right to get their house fixed no matter what. But start with the low-income first," she said.

Nearly a third of the July 4 flood deaths occurred in youth camps, RV parks and campgrounds.

Texas lawmakers passed Senate Bill 1, also known as Heaven's 27 Camp Safety Act, to revamp the safety procedures for youth camps. RV parks and campsites are addressed in the bill, but most of the requirements apply to youth camps.

The bill requires sites with cabins or sleeping quarters located within a 100-year floodplain to have an evacuation plan in place, as well as escape ladders.

Andrew Parks, committee director for the

state Senate Committee on Water, Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the Texas Senate Select Committee on Disaster Preparedness and Flooding, said that the evacuation plan requirement was born from an experience at Camp La Junta, a youth camp downriver from Camp Mystic on the South Fork of the Guadalupe River.

"They had one cabin that was in the floodplain, and the water was rushing in too fast," Parks said. "They couldn't get out so, they climbed up into the rafters of the cabin and hung on while the wave came through."

The Texas Association of Campground Owners has helped RV park owners get back on their feet after the flood, including raising nearly \$30,000 through GoFundMe.

"We have a PR firm that we work with, and we decided to do a series of press releases, basically indicating that, hey, the Hill Country is open for business," said Brian Schaeffer, executive director and CEO of TACO.

"Unfortunately, the media sort of paints big swaths of Texas, like, oh, you don't go there. It's all been flooded out. There's nothing left, which isn't true," Schaeffer said.

Although Guillen will not reopen Blue Oak, she believes SBA will help in future floods.

"Anything that they can learn from this flood is important," Guillen said. "But I think it's also very important that they come and ask us, the people that went through it, because unless you've lived it, you have no idea what it is."

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

Dell Children's starts bone marrow transplant program

By Nicole Villalpando
STAFF WRITER

Last March, it quickly became clear something was wrong with 3-year-old Avry Jo Schapansky. After a weeklong cruise with her family, she had trouble walking once she was back on land in her Bastrop home.

"We thought maybe it was a virus," said her mother, Rose Schapansky.

They took Avry Jo to the emergency room at Dell Children's Medical Center. An overnight stay to monitor her turned into a second overnight stay, and by the third day, an MRI scan revealed it was not a virus.

On March 9, Avry Jo, who is now 4, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a highly aggressive cancer of the nerves that typically occurs within the first few years of life. What once had a 30% survival rate now has a 70% chance or greater because of bone marrow transplants and the protocol that also includes chemotherapy, radiation and immunotherapy.

In August, Avry Jo, became the first child at Dell Children's to undergo a bone marrow transplant. Since then, the bone marrow transplant program has done five transplants in three children, all with neuroblastoma.

Until August, children in Central Texas who needed a bone marrow transplant would have to go to Dallas, San Antonio or Houston for treatment. Their families would have to move away from home for months, sometimes splitting up if they had other children.

Dell Children's did not have a bone marrow transplant program when it was built in 2007, but that was always the plan. The hospi-

tal initially promised to launch its bone marrow transplant program in a year, but that got put on the back burner.

Dell Children's did not have the infrastructure or the physical layout to successfully start the program. A few developments had to happen:

Dell Medical School at the University of Texas had to open in 2016. Without a medical school, it would be difficult to attract the doctors and specialists to launch the program.

Dell Children's had to build an area of the hospital that would have specialized airflow to maintain a sterile environment and keep viruses and bacteria out. When the hospital built the fourth tower in 2022, it created eight rooms with the correct ventilation for bone marrow transplant patients.

Dell Children's had to recruit the team. That started in 2023 with the recruitment of Dr. Amir Mian to lead the program and later an additional two doctors. The hospital also recruited coordinators to manage the program, and trained nurses with advanced certifications, specialized pharmacists, psychologists and child life specialists in bone marrow transplant care. "It takes a team," Mian said.

Dell Children's had to go through ongoing regulatory compliance and certification steps to be able to perform the transplants. "It's quite a strenuous process," Mian said of the accreditation. "Every transplant program is very expensive and resource intensive."

During the accreditation process, hospitals begin with autologous bone marrow transplants, which use the patient's own stem



Photos by Nicole Villalpando/American-Statesman

Bone marrow transplant coordinator Anne Raines shows nurse Emily Maxwell the steps needed to take out the prepared stem cells for transplant.



Dr. Amir Mian, along with Maxwell and Raines, walk through the special doors that separate the bone marrow transplant unit from the rest of the hospital at Dell Children's Medical Center.

cells. The hospital initially has to pay for the cost of the treatments because they are not covered by insurance until the program is fully accredited, typically two years after starting the program when it can show long-term results. Once fully accredited, Dell Chil-

dren's will be able to do allogeneic transplants, which uses donor stem cells, as well as gene therapies and CAR T cell therapies.

"Once we get accreditation and can do CAR T and gene therapies, then the floodgates open up," Mian

said. "Cellular therapies are the new frontier."

Typically, 15 to 20 local patients at a time travel elsewhere for this kind of bone marrow transplant care that Dell Children's doesn't offer yet, Mian said.

Being able to stay home

and not have to leave their older child was the main reason the Schapansky's agreed to have Avry Jo be the inaugural patient. They went to Dallas for the radiation portion, but that was only for three weeks, which felt more doable. Eventually, Mian said, Dell Children's will have the ability to do the radiation portion after it builds out the rest of the program.

Avry Jo's stem cells were harvested in May. They are then put back in after rounds of chemotherapy to kill off the cancer cells. In neuroblastoma, the protocol is two rounds of bone marrow transplants with chemotherapy, radiation, immunotherapy and surgery to remove any dead cancer cells.

The treatment cycle takes 18 months to two years. Avry Jo has made it through chemotherapy, two transplants, radiation and is now doing regular immunotherapy.

"It's rigorous. It's hard. You feel like screaming because it is terrible," Rose Schapansky said. "I don't wish this on my worst enemies. The horrors of it all are unexplainable."

Still, she has learned to celebrate the little things and to cherish every moment: friendships with nurses, reading bedtime stories to her daughter, campfires and memories of that family cruise.

"I feel so honored to be her mom," Schapansky said, "but this is the hardest thing I've ever done."

Mian said the team continues to learn with every transplant as it builds the program. He expects Dell Children's will achieve accreditation and start offering other cell therapies in 2027, about the time Avry Jo is expected to be done with her treatment.

Ingram man seeks to aid other flood victims

Paradise River Bend owner tells of rescues and destruction

By Abrielle Kate Maddison

SPECIAL TO THE AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

INGRAM — Where couples once exchanged vows beneath towering cypress trees along the Guadalupe River, only a bare concrete slab remains. What had been Dan Schoen's outdoor wedding venue and family retreat — a peaceful riverside escape just yards from the water — was erased in minutes by a flood so powerful it bent 40-foot trees and scoured nearly a mile-wide path of destruction.

Schoen, owner of the Paradise River Bend wedding venue and vacation rental property, often visits what was once a pristine retreat across the road from his cabins, surrounded by trees and nestled along the usually tranquil Guadalupe River.

But all that is left now is the concrete slab that once served as the floor of his popular wedding venue, and the once-regal nearby 40-foot cypress trees are now bent over after raging floodwaters destroyed everything in their path.

"The roof's gone, the beam's broken in half, gigantic boulders — they're all sitting over there now — they used to be up there," Schoen said, pointing to the top of his wedding pavilion.

A record flood tore through Kerr County and impacted surrounding cities, including Kerrville, Hunt and Ingram, killing more than 130 people across the Hill Country.

Schoen bought the Ingram property in 2002, and it quickly became a favorite location for weddings and vacation rentals on Airbnb and VRBO. His cabins were full during the July 4 weekend, as guests, including his family, were in town to enjoy popular Independence Day festivities.

He looked out his window about 4 a.m. to find



Dan Schoen, owner of the Paradise River Bend wedding venue, which was destroyed in the July 4 flood near the Guadalupe River in Ingram, holds a rope tethered to a support post from the remains of the pavilion.

the water had risen past the wedding pavilion, which is elevated about 30 feet above the Guadalupe River, on his riverside property. The pavilion sits across the street from the guest cabins and Schoen's personal residence.

"At 4 in the morning, I'm thinking, OK, it's going to be OK," Schoen said. "This is a lot of rain, but it's handling it. We're going to be all right."

Schoen's land had been through floods before, and water reaching past the pavilion was nothing new to him.

Schoen quickly resigned himself to losing kayaks and other river equipment and mentally prepared for a debris cleanup first thing in the morning.

However, not even 15 minutes later, Schoen was awakened by his 93-year-old mother, who alerted him to the rapidly rising water outside.

"Dan, there's water outside," Schoen quoted her as saying. "I said, 'What?' She says, 'People's in water.'"

"He talks about the victims because there were quite a few victims near and on the property. So, he's just very selfless about it. He knows that life is imperfect and that things are going to happen. And we don't always know why."

Grace Hyatt, Dan Schoen's daughter

The Paradise River Bend property features a steady increase in elevation. It starts at the river with the wedding venue, then extends across the road and up to the rental cabins and Schoen's personal cabin about a mile away.

Every cabin was built above the 500-year flood plain, but on July 4, the water didn't stop rising until it reached just below Schoen's front porch.

"And so you have to understand, within 15 minutes, the water had risen 20 feet," Schoen said.

Friends and family said Schoen jumped into action immediately, spending the following weeks searching for missing people and helping anywhere he possibly could.

"He made sure first and foremost everybody was

taken care of," said Grace Hyatt, Schoen's daughter. "He checked his Airbnbs and everybody was safe."

There was a woman in a camper on his property who had difficulty walking.

Schoen described watching her being pulled by the water like a wet towel as he held on tightly.

He was able to get her out of the water and safely transfer her to his cabin.

"I am probably more stable than maybe some who did it," Schoen said, referencing his unique background. "I've certainly seen death and all that type of stuff."

When Schoen was 4 years old, his missionary parents took their family to the South American country of Suriname,

where they spent the next 15 years of their lives living with Indigenous people in the jungle region.

The family learned the local language and created a written version of it, and Schoen's father, Ivan, translated the Bible so the Surinamese people could have it in their own tongue.

"That aspect of him (Schoen) that could continue to trust and have faith when things get difficult, knowing those experiences where God delivered their family over and over, kept him safe all those years and provided for them," said Hart Simpson, a longtime friend and business partner of Schoen. "I think that's kind of a bedrock for him."

The constant rapids were a reminder of

Schoen's Suriname home. He has returned many times, often bringing friends with him.

"Living on the Guadalupe was him getting a little piece of home," said Greg Powell, a longtime close friend of Schoen. "Many times when I go out there, we sit in the hammocks, you know, in the pavilion by the river and we talk, light a bonfire, and we listen to the river and sometimes we kayak on it."

Schoen's children — and now their children — have been able to enjoy the river since his purchase of the land.

The property has known picnics, parties, long conversations and baptisms.

"Seeing it the way that it is (— destroyed —) was really hard, especially since my dad just takes care of everybody else," Hyatt said. "So, it was really hard to see that for him."

Schoen's son, Christian Shoen, had planned to be married on the land, and those plans have not changed.

"Even though it's wrecked, it's still sentimental," Christian Schoen said.

The spot has long been a respite from the daily grind, and Schoen finds peace there, but Paradise River Bend has suffered greatly in the wake of the flood.

Despite nearly losing his business, Schoen's main goal that day — and ever since — has been helping and consoling other victims, his daughter said.

"Ever since the flood, he doesn't talk about his own losses when it comes to finances or property," Hyatt said.

"He talks about the victims because there were quite a few victims near and on the property. So, he's just very selfless about it. He knows that life is imperfect and that things are going to happen. And we don't always know why."

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

New Hays County trail could join S.A., Austin link

By Richard Webner

STAFF WRITER

The Great Springs Project, a planned 100-mile network of walking trails linking San Antonio and Austin, continues to move forward, as project organizers say they are working with officials in Buda to build a 3½-mile trail along Onion Creek.

The proposed Buda trail would connect to a 1½-mile trail the city finished last year north of the city's downtown. The new trail would begin near Buda Amphitheater & City Park, run past Buda Elementary School, cross from Hays County into Travis County and end at yet-to-be-built Manchaca Springs County Park, according to a map attached to the Jan. 20 agenda of the Hays County Commissioners Court.

The Great Springs Project, the nonprofit leading the trail effort, and the city of Buda plan to submit a grant proposal seeking funds to conduct a feasibility study for the new trail, according to the agenda. The grant application would be submitted to the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, or CAMPO, an agency that plays a key role in determining which transportation projects in the Austin region receive federal funding.

The commissioners

court also voted to enter into an agreement with the nonprofit to submit a separate application to CAMPO seeking \$425,000 to study what kinds of structures the trail should use at its crossings with Purgatory Creek, Garlic Creek and other places.

The map submitted to the commissioners court shows the Onion Creek trail running along the creek for part of its length, as well as along Buda's Main Street. It would go across a railroad owned by Union Pacific that sees heavy freight traffic.

Mikey Goralnik, senior planner for the Great Springs Project, said the proposed path in that map is subject to change.

"There might be multiple alignments in that area, based on the types of agreements, or permissions — whatever people want to see," he said.

The Great Springs Project's stated goal is to complete the 100-mile trail network by 2036, and the nonprofit is on track to meet that deadline, Goralnik said. The trail network will link various natural springs in the region between San Antonio and Austin, including San Antonio Springs, Comal Springs, San Marcos Springs and Barton Springs.

Last year, Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill, HB 4230, establishing the trail and



Barton Springs pool in Austin's Zilker Park is slated to be one of the major stops on the Great Springs Project trail, also known as the Texas Bicentennial Trail.

directing the Texas General Land Office to work with municipalities, nonprofits, the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to help bring it to completion. As a result of that bill, the trail will also be known as the Texas Bicentennial Trail.

The bill did not provide any funding to the trail, which has been paid for to

this point with a patchwork of sources, including federal grants distributed by CAMPO and its San Antonio-based counterpart, the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, or AAMPO. An overall budget for the project is not available, Goralnik said.

For part of its length, in Caldwell County and Hays County, the trail is expected to cling to Hunter Road,

a state roadway. CAMPO and AAMPO are funding separate studies for portions of that stretch, he said.

"It's not just going to be this one thing that goes from the Alamo to the Capitol," he said of the trail. "The character and quality of the trail will change depending on the location, its context and setting."

In another recent mile-

stone, one portion of the trail network, known by itself as the "Limestone Link," was recently completed, running between the River Recharge Natural Area and the Ringtail Ridge Natural area on the west side of San Marcos. The Great Springs Project partnered with the San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance on that portion.

The nonprofit now has a pretty good idea of where the trail will go along its full length, he said. The current plan can be viewed on its website.

"At the big picture, that is the trail. We have it pretty figured out," he said. "In some places, there may be some technical issues, or cost issues, or other considerations that make what you see in the trail plan... likely change over time. But we feel pretty confident that the alignment that we are depicting at that level in the trail is the route."

Asked whether it was a challenge to have to partner with so many nonprofits, agencies and municipalities to build the trail, Goralnik said, "it's not difficult; it's awesome."

"It's a privilege and an honor to be in partnership and hopefully an asset, a resource," he said. "It's really fulfilling and interesting to learn about and be responsive to the nuances between all the different communities."

Artist turns flood tragedy into story of hope

By Hope Monte
SPECIAL TO AMERICAN
STATESMAN

KERRVILLE – As deadly floods tore through her Hill Country hometown July 4, Jeanelle McCall sat helpless in her East Texas home, watching heart-breaking photos fill Facebook.

Unable to be there in person, she turned to the only thing she could control — her art.

“I needed to do it,” McCall said. “I don’t know what else to say. I have to do the art, I have to. It’s like breathing.”

Watercolor after watercolor filled her studio wall. Soon, she realized the paintings could become more than personal therapy — they could help her community rebuild.

With the help of her cousin in Kerrville, McCall transformed one haunting image — a stuffed bunny caked in mud — into a children’s book about hope after Hill Country flooding left more than 130 people dead.

The book, titled “Stuffie and the Great Flood,” grew from that single image into a story of hope and optimism amid the devastation.

News broadcasts showed

damage throughout the area, “and I couldn’t be there. I was just bleeding for it,” McCall said.

“I even posted (the paintings) on Facebook as each day went by, and the reactions I got were very dear and heartwarming,” she said. “It wasn’t until I saw this photograph of this little bunny in the mud that I did that painting.”

Through the power of Facebook, Martha Barrow, the owner of the painted stuffed bunny, reached out to McCall and shared her own story of her connection to the Guadalupe River in nearby Hunt, just a few miles from Kerrville.

Barrow’s memories of the river go back to many summers visiting her family’s cabin in Hunt, where her stuffed bunny along with many belongings, including those of her late father, washed away with the floodwaters.

“It felt like losing another piece of him, but finding this, and just seeing this beautiful story come out of it, it’s given me hope. It’s just been a bright light amid all of the terrible things that happened to everyone,” Barrow said.

McCall finished illustrat-



Dino Chiechi/Texas State University

Phyllis Sample, business manager of PJ Creative Enterprise, holds a copy of “Stuffie and the Great Flood,” written by her cousin, Jeanelle McCall.

ing and writing the children’s book in late August. She quickly got ready to take on the next step: selling books and putting donations into the hands of those who need them. She pledged to donate all proceeds from the first 100 copies — \$26.65 per book — to nonprofit flood-recovery organizations, and 50% of proceeds from every copy sold after that.

McCall managed the printing of the books but needed help with the business and distribution side of publication. Her cousin, Phyllis Sample, stepped up to the challenge despite having no experience running a business.

Sample made a trip to the bank to set up their new business, PJ Creative Enterprise, while McCall sent all the materials to Kerrville.

As order requests quickly came in through McCall’s website, Sample got to work as fast as possible, processing, packaging and shipping one book at a time.

“I made so many mistakes (at the start), it was unreal,” Sample said. “And we laughed, and it was kind of the blind leading the blind, but we’ve got it down now, we know what we’re doing.”

Through word of mouth, Facebook posts and Sample’s makeshift home workspace, they managed to sell the first batch of 100 books

within one month.

“My initial thought was, we need to get this into the hands of every single person in Hunt, they need it,” Sample said.

After seeing how fast the first copies sold, along with the continued positive feedback, they expect to surpass at least 300 copies sold, Sample said.

Among the purchasers of the book is Allyson Langston, whose two daughters have a personal connection to Camp Mystic, where 25 girls and two counselors were killed. Langston’s youngest daughter attended camp for the eighth time last summer, while her oldest went for the fifth time, most recently as a counselor.

Langston and her family spent six hours praying for the safety of their daughter, who was working at the camp at the time the floods inundated Camp Mystic.

Her daughter, Lilly Grace Langston, who was 20 years old at the time, was fortunate to return safely to her family that day, and McCall’s book is a representation of the resilience that characterizes the Texas Hill Country in a time of devastation, Langston said.

Langston’s daughter

“was the song leader on the (camp) bus because it’s instilled in her from her time spent in the Hill Country that we have to have hope and we have to stand through the hard times,” she said.

“I think the book, for us, it was just like everything’s going to be OK. God has a hand in all this.”

McCall and Sample continue to sell the book to reach as many people as possible, preserve the fond memories of the Guadalupe River, spread a positive message and raise donations to help their community in whatever way possible.

Books are still available through an online order form.

“Even if you don’t have a connection to the Hill Country, that story alone of the sweet little baby bunny that gets lost and gets reunited with her owner, I mean, it’s just precious,” Langston said. “It’s such a special, special little book, I think in so many ways.”

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

Alamo Visitor Center and Museum’s opening delayed

By Madison Iszler
STAFF WRITER

The debut of the Alamo Visitor Center and Museum — the centerpiece of a major public-private makeover of the iconic site — has been pushed back to spring 2028 from late 2027.

The Alamo Trust, a nonprofit that oversees daily operations at the Alamo, confirmed the delay but did not explain what prompted it.

“We anticipate opening the world-class museum in Spring 2028, as it will take time to prepare the galleries and exhibits that will tell the Alamo’s full 300-year story,” said a spokesperson in a statement.

Construction is expected to be complete by late 2027.

It’s at least the second major timeline adjustment for the complex project. A smaller version of the facility was initially slated to open in 2026.

As of early Tuesday afternoon, the trust’s website still indicated a 2027 time frame.

Refashioning the site is complicated, requiring crews working within a tight footprint to carefully preserve and renovate historic buildings, install exhibits and beautify pathways — amid the millions of visitors who flock to the Alamo every year. The Alamo Trust has also had to conduct archaeological investigations of the site.

Another possible challenge could be construction, labor and insurance costs, which have surged in recent years. Higher costs have forced developers to delay private-sector projects across San Antonio.

The Alamo Trust began building the 160,000-square-foot center in 2024. It is transforming the historic Crockett, Palace and Woolworth buildings into a modern space for visitors that will chronicle the history of the mission and battle site, with galleries, thousands of artifacts, a 4D theater and a partial replica of the Woolworth lunch counter that civil rights activists peacefully integrated in 1960.

The state-of-the-art facility is expected to boost foot traffic at the Alamo from 1.6 million to 2.5 million visitors annually. A Civil Rights exhibit, a display with a representation of the original Alamo Mission and Fort’s western wall and a cafe will be free to patrons, while other displays and theater showings will be ticketed. The center will also charge rental fees for event space to help make it financially self-sustaining.

The project has hit roadblocks.

Early plans for the site’s overhaul called for moving the 1930s-era Cenotaph monument, a memorial to the 200 or so Anglo and Tejano soldiers and volunteers who died at the Alamo in the 1836 battle for



Michel Fortier/San Antonio Express-News file photo

The Woolworth and Crockett Buildings are seen under reconstruction in 2025 for the Alamo Plaza project. The visitor center and museum is now set to open in 2028.

Texas independence. But fierce opposition to the proposal culminated in the Texas Historical Commission in 2020 denying the city of San Antonio’s request to move it.

The city transferred ownership of the monument to the state in 2024. Crews spent about two years repairing it — replacing brick in the Cenotaph’s interior frame, fixing a drainage system, putting marble exterior stones that had shifted back in place and cleaning stones and carvings.

The city, the trust and the Texas General Land Office also became embroiled in a dispute with the owner of Moses Rose’s Hideout, the downtown bar named after an Alamo



Alamo Trust

A 4D theater will be located inside the Alamo Visitor Center and Museum.

escapee. The partners attempted to buy the property to make way for the museum and then threatened eminent domain proceedings. The bar owner agreed to sell it for \$6.75 million in state funds in 2023, and it was subse-

quently demolished.

As construction on the museum continues, other components of the makeover are underway.

Scheduled to open this spring, the Texas Cavaliers Alamo Education Center will feature a lec-

ture hall, a garden, classrooms and labs for students to learn about the Alamo. The trust is also preparing to replace the concrete roof of the Alamo’s mission church and to renovate the Paseo del Alamo leading to the River Walk.

The trust has added outdoor exhibits representing the main gate of the mission-fort and renovated the Plaza de Valero next to the Menger Hotel. The state bought the Menger and Crockett hotels last year.

The refashioning of the site, along with the purchase of the hotels, is expected to cost more than \$700 million. The state is contributing \$550 million, and another \$63 million is coming from the city and Bexar County. The trust and its affiliate, the Remember the Alamo Foundation, have raised more than \$90 million from private donors toward a goal of \$150 million.

The Legislature allocated \$400 million for the project in 2023. Lawmakers reserved another \$150 million last year for “continued construction costs at the Alamo, support for new Alamo exhibit and collection costs, and property enhancements to protect the Alamo Complex from encroaching urban surroundings,” including acquiring the Menger and Crockett hotels. The trust doesn’t consider that funding part of its Alamo makeover price tag.

Early voting gets underway next week in Texas primaries

By Marley Malenfant
STAFF WRITER

The Texas primary election is coming up, and early voting beginning next week.

Voters will help decide which candidates advance to the November general election in congressional, statewide and local races. Here’s what to know about key dates, registration requirements and how to cast your ballot. If you want to see what will be on your ballot, check out our voter guide online, which allows you to search by your address to see the races on your ballot.

Here’s what you need to know about early voting deadlines and how to check voter registration status.

When is the deadline to register to vote in Texas?

Feb. 2 was the last day to register to vote or submit an address change for the primary election.

When is early voting in Texas?

Early voting for the primary election begins Tuesday, Feb. 17.

When does early voting end?

Friday, Feb. 27 is the last day to vote early.

Where can I vote early in Texas?

Registered voters can vote early at any polling place in their county.

According to VoteTexas.gov, early voting locations can be found on its website in the “My Voter Portal” section. Once there, you can enter your name, county, date of birth and ZIP code to find your registration information and the nearest



Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

The 2026 primary elections will be held on March 3. Early voting begins Tuesday and ends on Feb. 27.

polling location. You can also contact the early voting clerk for state and county elections for early voting locations near you.

When is primary election day in Texas?

The 2026 primary elections will be held Tuesday, March 3.

What is a runoff election?

If no candidate receives a majority of the vote in the primary, a runoff election between the top two vote-getters will be held May 26.

Texas has open primaries, meaning voters can choose which party’s primary to participate in every

two years.

How to check voter registration in Texas

Voter rolls are updated regularly, and some voters may be removed if their status changes, they have not voted in two general elections, or they have not responded to address verification notices.

Several organizations, including Rock the Vote, offer tools to check registration status.

You can verify your voter registration status on the Texas Secretary of State’s website, where you can view your status, address, county, voter ID number and party affiliation. A status of “active” means you are eligible to vote.

Am I eligible to vote by mail in Texas?

You may qualify to vote by mail if you:

Will be absent from your county of residence on Election Day and during early voting

Are sick or have a disability that prevents voting in person without assistance

Are 65 or older

Are confined in jail serving a misdemeanor sentence or confined without bail pending trial

Are expecting to give birth within three weeks before or after Election Day

Are civilly committed under Chapter 841 of the Texas Health and Safety Code

What if I moved after the voter registration deadline?

According to VoteTexas.gov, voters who move must submit updated address information in writing to their voter registrar or complete the change online.

Primary races that matter most in '26

Senate, AG, congressional, Travis County contests among this year's biggest clashes

By Dante Motley
STAFF WRITER

If you're trying to figure out where power in Texas may actually shift in the 2026 primaries, start here.

The Republican U.S. Senate showdown between John Cornyn and Ken Paxton — with Wesley Hunt in the mix — is the defining Republican battle of the cycle, pitting establishment

experience against hard-line, base-first politics in a race that could reshape the GOP's direction.

Democrats have their own high-profile U.S. Senate matchup between U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett and state Rep. James Talarico, a contest that will test the party's strategy for winning statewide heading into November.

Below that, the open Texas at-

INSIDE

How to vote early in the Austin region. **B2**

torney general race is flashing signs of a possible runoff. Two other Republican-held U.S. House seats — Districts 10 and 21 — are also being decided. And in Travis County, Democratic commissioner primaries will help determine control over transportation, criminal justice policy and county spending.

These are the contests that will decide who governs — and

how — in Texas after 2026.

Republican Senate primary: John Cornyn vs. Ken Paxton vs. Wesley Hunt

The biggest race on the ballot is the Republican primary for U.S. Senate.

Cornyn, first elected in 2002, is a longtime incumbent and former Texas attorney general who also served as Senate Republican whip.

He's being challenged by Paxton, Texas attorney general since 2015 and one of the most

polarizing figures in state politics. Paxton survived a 2023 impeachment trial in the Texas Senate and continues to face scrutiny tied to past legal and ethics issues.

Hunt, a Houston-area congressman and military veteran, entered the race later, complicating the anti-Paxton lane and reshaping the dynamics.

Cornyn allies argue he's the safer general election bet. Paxton's backers counter that a more combative nominee would energize the Republican base.

Primaries continues on B4



Dino Chiecchi/Texas State University

Dondi Persyn, founder of the "Found on the Guadalupe River" Facebook group, reviews some of the many items recovered after the July 4 floods, including photographs, in Ingram.

Flood survivors reunited with their belongings

Facebook group helping families recover photos, clothing and keepsakes

By Sidney Orman
SPECIAL TO AMERICAN STATESMAN

INGRAM — Dan Persyn starts his morning at the local car wash with baskets full of clothes belonging to people he doesn't know and will likely never meet.

He gingerly washes them, folds them when he's done and returns them to a small warehouse that houses them and other items. These clothes belong to the victims of the deadly July Fourth floods that devastated the Texas Hill Country.

What began as neighbors

picking up debris quickly became a mission to return pieces of people's lives.

Early on July Fourth, Kerr County residents awoke to one of the most destructive floods in a decade — a catastrophic weather event that killed at least 135 people across the Hill Country, including 25 girls and two counselors at Camp Mystic in the small, rural community of Hunt.

These residents not only lost family members but also countless belongings.

Dondi Persyn and her husband, Dan Persyn, have made it

their goal to help reunite surviving residents with personal items that were swept away in the floodwaters.

The items — photos, letters, clothes and other personal effects — are housed at a small warehouse on Old Ingram Loop.

"We went out on July 6 to look for people, because there were still people missing," said Dondi Persyn, who founded a Facebook group to reunite people with their lost belongings.

"And I just told the people standing around, let's pick up trash and let's pick up personal

belongings and put the personal belongings in the clear bags and that's how it started," she said.

Through the Facebook group, "Found on the Guadalupe River," Dondi Persyn has found a way to bring joy and hope back to the community.

More than 10,000 members joined the group within the first week, and it received more than 1 million views by the second month.

One resident in particular is grateful for the Facebook group.

Belongings continues on B3

Paxton expands probe of student walkouts

Manor ISD among school districts also under investigation

By Keri Heath
STAFF WRITER

Two weeks after demanding information about recent student protests from the Austin Independent School District, Attorney General Ken Paxton announced Monday that he was opening investigations into Manor ISD and two other Texas school districts over accusations they facilitated a recent wave of student-led walkouts over federal immigration policy.

Paxton, who is also investigating Dallas ISD and Northeast ISD in San Antonio, said the districts had "taken little to no action to ensure the safety of students."

"Let this serve as a warning to any public school official or employee who unlawfully facilitates student participation in protests targeting our heroic law enforcement officers: my office will use every legal tool available to hold you accountable," Paxton said in a state-

Walkouts continues on B4

Abortion opposition group back in court

By Paul Flahive
STAFF WRITER

Nearly four years after it was filed, a federal lawsuit between the state of Texas and a group that says it was targeted by liberals in state government for its anti-abortion stance is back in court.

The Heidi Group, once a force in Texas' anti-abortion politics, was given millions in state funding to provide health care to low-income women through its network of clinics and crisis pregnancy centers. But the Round Rock nonprofit was dropped in 2018 for what the state said were disappointing results.

It had been awarded more than \$7 million to serve an estimated 70,000 women but lost funding after the state said it served only 3,300 in its first year. Heidi Group founder Carol Everett said the state's numbers ignored results at 16 of her clinics. But the Texas Health and Humans Services Commission, which administered the funding, said its numbers were correct.

Critical media coverage also dogged the group, notably from The Texas Observer. It noted that money had been clawed back

Heidi continues on B3

Why are more adults under 50 dying of colorectal cancer?

By Nicole Villalpando
STAFF WRITER

The death of "Dawson's Creek" actor James Van Der Beek at age 48 from colorectal cancer was just one more reminder that this cancer is happening to younger people more often.

Colorectal cancer is the No. 1 cause of cancer deaths for people younger than 50 in the United States. In 1990, it was only the No. 5 cause of cancer deaths for that age group.

While other cancer death rates are falling, colorectal cancer deaths have been increasing 1.1% each year since 2005, a study released in January in the Journal of the American Medical Association found.

What are the risk factors of colorectal cancer?

Having a poor diet
Not getting enough exercise

Smoking
Alcohol use
Tobacco use
Obesity
Diabetes
An inflammatory condition

Family history
Age

Why are colorectal cancer deaths increasing in younger adults?

Austin gastroenterologist Dr. Parastoo Jangouk said the increase in colorectal cancer risk is closely tied to lifestyle factors,

Cancer continues on B4



Richard Shotwell/Invision

James Van Der Beek attends the FOX Winter Press Day in Los Angeles in 2024. Van Der Beek died of colon cancer, the top cause of cancer deaths for younger people, last week.



Jennifer Merrill/Texas State University

Dan Persyn washes clothing recovered from Heart O' Hills, an all-girls summer camp, with a garden hose in Ingram.



Dino Chiecchi/Texas State University

Dan Persyn of the "Found on the Guadalupe River" Facebook group washes clothing recovered after the July 4 Hill Country floods on Oct. 4, 2025, in Ingram.

BELONGINGS

From page B1

The day of the flooding, Hilaria Sigala nearly lost everything, including her husband, Alvaro Sigala.

"I called the Kerrville police. I called everybody," she said. "Everybody that was giving me information. I called them. Nobody knew nothing."

Her husband's body was found later that week at the Travis County medical examiner's office and returned on July 16, followed by the funeral the next day.

Shortly after Alvaro Sigala's funeral, Hilaria Sigala was scrolling through Facebook when she came across the "Found on the Guadalupe River" page.

Two days later, scrolling through the page, she stopped cold. She found her husband's pants.

"I commented on her page, and (Dondi Persyn) answered me and asked if she could call me," Hilaria Sigala said. "She called me that Friday afternoon while I was picking up my grandson, and she was telling me how she's the one that found his body."

After finding Alvaro Sigala's body, Persyn knew she wanted to help in some way.

"And that's what even made her start this page, to help people," Hilaria Sigala said. "I told her, 'I'm so glad, you're like an angel sent from God,' because she gave me something of his that I didn't have."

The Sigalas' story has made it possible for other residents to be reunited with loved ones' belongings.

Dan Persyn and volunteer Teri Hauger help alongside Dondi Persyn on a day-to-day basis.

Dealing with the cleaning and heavy work, Hauger and the Persyns quickly learned about the emotional severity of the situation.

"There's just been so



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much tragedy, but so many miracles, too, at the same time," Hauger said.

During an interaction with a male resident, Persyn witnessed firsthand the trauma those floodwaters left that day.

"Dondi greeted him and asked him, 'Did you lose something?' And he says, 'Well yes, I've lost everything,'" Hauger said. "I've lost my daughters, I've lost my wife, I've lost my own."

Each recovered item represents a piece of someone's life that has been restored, along with a reminder that the Texas Hill Country is still healing from this devastating tragedy.

"You think about your home and where our family photos are stored, and what it'd be like for them to be washed away," Dan Persyn said. "We take for granted that they're there when we want to go and grab them and reminisce about the past."

Months later, "Found on the Guadalupe River" has provided a safe space for victims to find clarity and peace amid the chaos.

"I think as humans, we move energy around when you're uncomfortable or comfortable with grief, so let's do something," Dondi Persyn said. "We all just found our way to serve and walk through grief and hold the space for grief."

"The work continues. And I guess that's the main thing I want to say. It's been a lot of great work that's been done, and there's still more to do, too," Dan Persyn said.

In a warehouse stacked with mud-stained photos, letters and clothing, the Persyns and their volunteers offer something rare after disaster — the chance to hold onto what remains.

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

HEIDI

From page B1

from the nonprofit in 2017 and that the entire grant program showed poor performance.

The Campaign for Accountability, a left-leaning government watchdog group, accused the group of mismanaging funds, questioned whether it had broken the law and called for investigations by various state, local and federal agencies.

A 2019 state audit implied the group defrauded the state of more than \$1.5 million. The amount of alleged fraud eventually was significantly reduced and a subsequent audit found no fraud.

In 2022, four years after its funding was terminated, the Heidi Group sued, saying it had been targeted by bureaucrats in the Republican-controlled state government. It said the "swamp" of liberal Texas bureaucrats, still smarting



Austin American-Statesman file photo

Carol Everett, CEO of the Heidi Group, speaks in support of a proposal for burial or cremation of fetal remains at the Department of State Health Services in Austin in 2016.

over the state's 2017 defunding of Planned Parenthood, saw how they could derail Everett, a prominent anti-abortion advocate, as revenge for her support of the defunding.

"This case is about HEIDI's treatment at the hands of the swamp creatures, and its fight to obtain jus-

tice and to vindicate and restore its constitutional and statutory rights and entitlements," it says in its amended complaint.

Now the case is headed back to federal court for the first time in nearly seven months. An attorney representing one defendant has requested to leave the

case.

No court action has been taken since last July. At that time, the state issued a response to the amended complaint, issuing denials of Heidi Group's many allegations.

It alleges recalcitrance on the part of Health and Human Services Commis-

"This case is about HEIDI's treatment at the hands of the swamp creatures, and its fight to obtain justice ..."

Heidi Group, in its amended complaint

sion workers when Heidi sought clarification and a long overdue contract signing it says delayed its work for six months. Unanswered phone calls and questions left the provider without clear guidance.

It claimed religious discrimination, violations of its Fourth Amendment rights and cyber crimes.

The U.S. District Court initially rejected the state's efforts to have the claims thrown out and the case was sent to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

In its complaints, the Heidi Group weaves an intricate story of deception and skullduggery on the part of known and unknown persons within the state government, the commission's office of inspec-

tor general and a former Heidi Group employee. It said the state used the disgruntled former employee, who still had access to the organization's documents online, to take its financial data in violation of Fourth Amendment protections.

The state said it had qualified immunity and that the former employee was not acting as an agent of the government. The Fifth Circuit disagreed last May and barred at least one senior office of inspector general investigator from qualified immunity, potentially opening him to personal liability.

The case continues in district court, and will be seen Tuesday by Magistrate Judge Mark Lane to determine one defendant's representation.

Shelter: Some pets dumped as flood victims

By **Lesdy Hernandez**
CONTRIBUTOR

KERRVILLE — In the chaotic days and weeks after deadly July floods tore through the Texas Hill Country, Kerr County's animal shelter was so overwhelmed with displaced pets that officials say some people tried to pass off their own animals as flood victims.

As staff scrambled to reunite families with lost dogs and cats, residents from outside the flood zone began attempting to surrender pets under false claims, straining already limited space and threatening efforts to keep displaced animals alive long enough for owners to find them.

Nichole Golden, shelter manager for Kerr County Animal Services, said people taking advantage of the limited resources available negatively af-

ected rehoming and reunification efforts during the first week of recovery.

"That hurt because we're struggling so hard to keep enough space for these animals to be here long enough for their families to come looking for them, or even next of kin, and these people just didn't care," Golden said.

With the department only allowing strays to be held for up to 72 hours for owners to reclaim them, animal nonprofit Kerrville Pets Alive and Kerr County Animal Services began reaching out to other animal service organizations for help.

The shelter's available space quickly dropped after it housed up to 100 animals in the first week, and intake numbers continued to grow.

To preserve limited housing capacity, the false flood-related surrenders were turned down, allow-

ing the shelter to continue its work.

"We were concerned about what (pet owners) were going to do with the animals, because if you're going to bring them down here for three hours and get turned away, are you really going to take them back on another three-hour ride?" Golden asked.

In the first days after the floods, Kerrville Pets Alive prioritized gathering supplies and distributing them to different disaster shelter areas, said Karen Guerriero, the organization's executive director.

"Our job is the pets, so we all met at our safe campus, we made a plan, we got kennels, food, and we decided to go out to the shelters here," Guerriero said.

"In a disaster, (shelters) are spread all the way from Hunt all the way to the Comfort area, all

along the river, so we knew the volunteer fire departments, the churches, the ones that were going to be people shelters," she said.

Guerriero said Austin Pets Alive, another animal services nonprofit, assisted the Kerrville organization with rehoming and fostering efforts by transferring animals to other facilities with more capacity and creating a database of lost pets for owners to search.

Austin Pets Alive "went in and they took all the animals from the animal shelter out, because that's what we're so worried about, 'Oh my gosh, what are we going to do?' because this shelter doesn't have enough space, and when you don't have enough space, they euthanize for space," Guerriero said.

As more of Kerrville's four-legged community

members were rescued, Kerrville Pets Alive began working alongside search-and-rescue teams to help retrieve animals who had died during the floods.

Dr. Debra Zoran, director of the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team, and 18 other emergency team veterinarians, technicians and veterinary students provided aid to the search-and-rescue dogs on site.

Over the course of 25 days, the VET teams treated and evaluated 187 search-and-rescue dogs during more than 750 visits.

"People wanted to bring donations and all of this sort of stuff for the animals that were being rescued and so they would see us at Kerrville High School, and so they would bring stuff," Zoran said.

They informed Kerrville Pets Alive of any

dead or injured animals found by the search-and-rescue teams so the organization could provide appropriate services, Zoran said.

While rebuilding efforts continue throughout the Hill Country, Reagan Givens, director of Kerr County Animal Services, said plans for a bigger facility are underway to expand capacity and better serve the community.

Officials said they hope expanded space will be online early this year.

"We'll be hopefully moving in there at the end of (January) and a lot more space for animals, better space for staff, office space, storage space — just a better all-around facility," Givens said.

This report was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

Former Manor ISD officer cleared in use-of-force case

By **Austin Sanders**
STAFF WRITER

A Travis County grand jury declined to bring charges against a former

Manor school district police officer for a 2024 use-of-force incident involving a juvenile, according to a Tuesday news release from the Travis County District

Attorney's Office.

Former officer Kristopher House was accused of using excessive force during an encounter with an unidentified juvenile Feb.

20, 2024. According to the release, the juvenile sustained injuries during the encounter.

But a special grand jury declined to indict House on

Thursday, clearing the former officer in the case.

"In this case, an independent group of members of the Travis County community heard the evidence

and law and decided that Officer House's conduct was not unlawful," Travis County District Attorney José Garza said in a written statement.

HEART

From page B1

hard-headed and stubborn."

He didn't want to call an ambulance, but he finally agreed to go. First, he insisted on going to Home Depot to return the digger so he wouldn't lose his deposit.

Once unloaded, they headed to St. David's Round Rock Medical Center, where Darrin Lutz works in IT, but the pain was increasing. "I couldn't take it. I needed help immediately," he said.

He asked her to take him to St. David's Georgetown Hospital, which was closer.

Lutz was having one of the deadliest kinds of heart attack, often called the widemaker. It occurs when the left anterior descending artery becomes blocked. This artery supplies the blood to half the heart, and this artery can go from 10% blocked to 100% blocked in a matter of seconds, said Dr. Bruce Chen, an interventional cardiologist at Austin Heart and St. David's Round Rock. People can be out walking their dogs and feeling fine one minute and then pass out and experience a sudden cardiac death, Chen said.

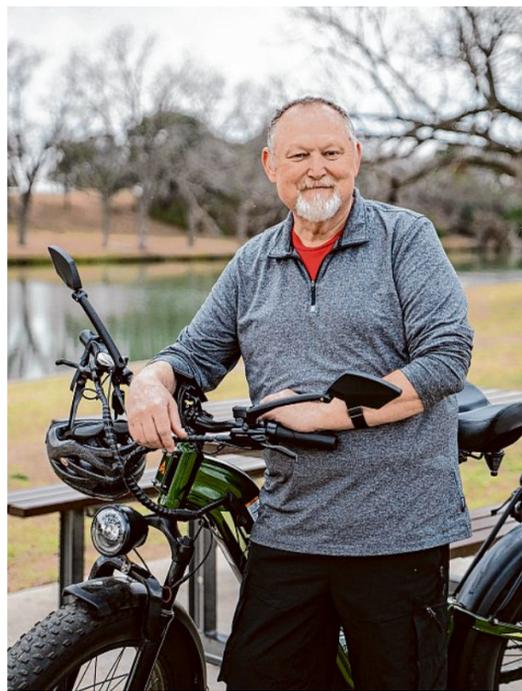
When Lutz arrived at St. David's Georgetown, his electrocardiogram showed the classic widemaker pattern. It looks like tombstones, Chen said. Elevated sections followed by flat lines indicate the heart muscle is not getting enough blood flow and may be dying.

Lutz was immediately taken by ambulance to St. David's Round Rock, which has specialized heart care.

There, Chen performed an angioplasty with a balloon to open up the artery and suck out the blood clot. He also placed two stents into that artery to keep it open.

Not made in a day

A new study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed the risk of developing cardiovascular disease increases for men beginning at age 35, 10 years before it increases for women. And the risk of coronary heart disease increases seven years before it increases for women.



Photos by Mikala Compton/Austin American-Statesman

Darrin Lutz now enjoys riding his bicycle for exercise at San Gabriel Park in Georgetown. Lutz suffered a heart attack in July 2024.

Heart attacks and other cardiovascular disease events, "don't come out of nowhere," said Dr. Rohan Bhandari, a cardiologist with Austin Heart and St. David's Medical Center. "In many ways, your heart is the engine of the body. It's similar to your own car. You don't wait until the engine fails to change the oil."

Lutz had warning signs. He was diagnosed with high cholesterol around his 50th birthday, but didn't like how the medication made him feel. He stopped taking it and went years without going to the doctor. He had also had a previous incident of chest pain.

"Personal pride held me back," Lutz said.

Jo Ann Lutz said "his health wasn't his priority. He's old-fashioned. His priority was taking care of us."

His heart attack, though, almost left her a widow and their nine children without a father. "I would have taken them to the doctor in a heartbeat, but I wouldn't go myself," Lutz said.

Warning signs

Symptoms include:
Chest pain
Shortness of breath
Excessive sweating or clamminess
Nausea or vomiting
Abdominal pain
Pain radiating down the left arm or weakness
Jaw pain
Headache
Dizziness
Fatigue

Not everyone will have these symptoms. Women and people with diabetes tend to have more abdominal symptoms than chest or arm pain.

Even if a symptom is not on this list, seek medical help immediately if it's severe and not improving.

"Time is heart muscle," he said.

Because Lutz didn't go immediately to the hospital, he did sustain some heart muscle damage, Chen said. Lutz's heart doesn't pump as well as a

heart that hasn't had a heart attack.

Screen for an attack

Everyone should have annual physicals that look at cholesterol levels, blood sugar levels and blood pressure.

Cardiologists recommend getting a CT scan to get your calcium risk score beginning at age 40 and then every five years. This scan, which insurance doesn't cover, usually is about \$100 and looks at the amount of calcium in the arteries around your heart.

If you have a family history or are having mild heart symptoms such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath or chest discomfort, you should see a cardiologist.

Reducing risk

The main risk factor is family history. If you have a first-degree male relative who had a heart attack at age 55 or younger or a female relative with a heart attack age 65 or younger, you have an elevated risk. There are newer cholesterol blood tests that can better assess your risks, Bhandari said.

You also should:

Stabilize your blood pressure, cholesterol and your blood sugar levels

Get at least 150 min-

utes of moderately intense exercise a week

Eat a Mediterranean-style diet with less red meat but more fruits and vegetables, fatty fish like salmon, and healthy fats like olive oil

Maintain a healthy weight

Avoid tobacco use
Limit alcohol
Reduce stress

Life after an attack

Lutz has completely changed his life. After doing cardiac rehabilitation, he's become active and changed his diet by lessening his red meat intake, drinking less caffeine, and eating less sugar and carbohydrates. Instead, he's eating more chicken and turkey and a lot of vegetables and salads.

"I feel like a rabbit sometimes," he jokes.

He loves riding his bike, going for walks and he and his wife do strength-training exercise videos at least three times a week. He has lost 60 pounds.

"It's been great to see him exercising," Jo Ann Lutz said. "He used to say 'round is a shape.'"

They have enjoyed being outside on their bikes and riding through Georgetown. His goal is to ride 15 miles each way to work.

"It's just fun," he said.



Darrin Lutz rides his bicycle for exercise on Feb. 10 at San Gabriel Park in Georgetown. Lutz ignored warning signs in July 2024, before finally agreeing to go to the hospital. He found out he was having a heart attack.

RV PARK

From page A13

loan to rebuild after more than \$2 million in damage, but the federal agency has denied her three times due to lack of collateral. After the most recent denial, she suffered a heart attack and collapsed on the floor of an SBA office.

After a short hospital stay, Guillen recovered physically, but the remaining emotional and financial strains have forced Blue Oak RV Park — and likely its adjoining restaurant — to close permanently.

“We lost our revenue. We lost our income,” Guillen said. “The two businesses together, it was perfect, but the restaurant alone can’t pay that big mortgage.”

Guillen’s restaurant, Howdy’s Bar and Chill, nestled next to the RV park, is a cozy, classic Texas honky-tonk, where ’80s country music plays over the speakers and the walls are covered from floor to ceiling with relics from the community. Much of the food is made from Guillen’s own recipes.

On the night of the flood, residents of the RV park gathered at the restaurant to kick off the holiday with beer, music and family. During the flood, the restaurant became a refuge, where people evacuated with nothing but a beloved pet or clothes they grabbed from their RVs before they were whisked away.

“We did a headcount, and I knew exactly who we had missing,” Guillen said. “At that point, a third wave came, and it went inside the restaurant.”

‘Such a beautiful day’

The Burgess family arrived at Blue Oak on July 3 to pick up their daughter from camp.

“The kids were so excited,” Guillen said. “Their dog was so excited. It was such a beautiful day.”

Hours later, John Burgess was wading through floodwater with his 1- and 3-year-old sons in his arms, with his wife following behind.

Guillen tried to get the firefighters on scene to help them, but instead her husband, Bob Canales, tied a rope around his waist to try and reach the family.

“My husband said, ‘Throw me your baby,’” Guillen recalled. “He didn’t do it. And a second later, the second wave came, and it took the family, and all four of them died.”

Uprooted cabins, cars and RVs from the camp upriver rushed past Blue Oak, with people still inside, honking their horns and screaming for help as they crashed into trees. Guillen could feel electricity from fallen power lines humming through the water.

The firefighters were on scene but did not assist with the attempted rescue of the Burgess family or any others, she said.

“They never had the sirens on. They didn’t knock on anybody’s door,” Guillen said. “My husband was desperately trying to get them to.”

Guillen also lost one of her employees, Julian Ryan, that night. He bled to death in his driveway from injuries while trying to save his family, she said.

“I can’t be here that much because of my anxiety. My stress starts going crazy,” Guillen said. “Before, I used to work 16-hour



The parking spaces for recreational vehicles can be seen at what remains of the Blue Oak RV Park near the banks of the Guadalupe River in Kerrville on July 8, 2025.

Christopher Lee/Staff Photographer

days, seven days a week, and that was my normal, and I loved it. Now, I can barely come here for a couple of days out of the week, because it’s just too much.”

Waiting for relief

More than \$100 million has been donated to Hill Country flood relief, with donors such as the Dallas Cowboys, Buc-ee’s and George Strait, whose relief concert raised funds. Less than three weeks after the flood, the Community Foundation of the Texas Hill Country announced it had raised \$60 million through its Kerr County Flood Relief Fund.

She says the community’s response has been outstanding, but the distribution of the relief funds appears to have bypassed her business, as well as some lower-income residents.

She received enough donations to rebuild her parking lot but has otherwise received little aid, she said.

“There was so much money donated — where is it?” Guillen asked. “They’re going to start helping with the homes, which is great, but a lot of these are second or third homes, vacation homes, summer homes.”

“Obviously, everybody has the right to get their house fixed no matter what. But start with the low-income first,” she said.

Nearly a third of the July 4 flood deaths occurred in youth camps, RV parks and campgrounds.

Texas lawmakers passed Senate Bill 1, also known as Heaven’s 27 Camp Safety Act, to re-vamp the safety procedures for youth camps. RV parks and campsites are addressed in the bill, but most of the requirements apply to youth camps.

The bill requires sites with cabins or sleeping quarters located within a 100-year floodplain to have an evacuation plan in place, as well as escape ladders.

Andrew Parks, committee director for the state Senate Committee on Water, Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the Texas Senate Select Committee on Disaster Preparedness and Flooding, said that the evacuation plan requirement was born from an experience at Camp La Junta, a youth camp downriver from Camp Mystic on the

South Fork of the Guadalupe River.

“They had one cabin that was in the floodplain, and the water was rushing in too fast,” Parks said. “They couldn’t get out so they climbed up into the

rafters of the cabin and hung on while the wave came through.”

The Texas Association

of Campground Owners has helped RV park owners get back on their feet after the flood, including raising nearly \$30,000 through GoFundMe.

“We have a PR firm that we work with, and we decided to do a series of press releases, basically indicating that, hey, the Hill Country is open for business,” said Brian Schaeffer, executive director and CEO of TACO.

“Unfortunately, the media sort of paints big swaths of Texas, like, oh, you don’t go there. It’s all been flooded out. There’s nothing left, which isn’t true,” Schaeffer said.

Although Guillen will not reopen Blue Oak, she believes SB1 will help in future floods.

“Anything that they can learn from this flood is important,” Guillen said. “But I think it’s also very important that they come and ask us, the people that went through it, because unless you’ve lived it, you have no idea what it is.”

This story was produced in partnership with the American-Statesman and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University.

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Michel Fortier/San Antonio Express-News

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