

GOVERNMENT: Abbott pushes Texas' first sales tax hike in 30 years » A3

G A L V E S T O N  C O U N T Y

The Daily News.

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TOURISM | TECHNOLOGY

‘Catastrophic’ failure takes Moody Gardens offline

Hotel, attraction bookings expected back up Thursday

By KERI HEATH
The Daily News

» **GALVESTON**

A computer system failure at tourist destination Moody Gardens, and the organiza-

tion's hotel, has prevented customers from making digital payments and bookings for about a month, a spokeswoman said.

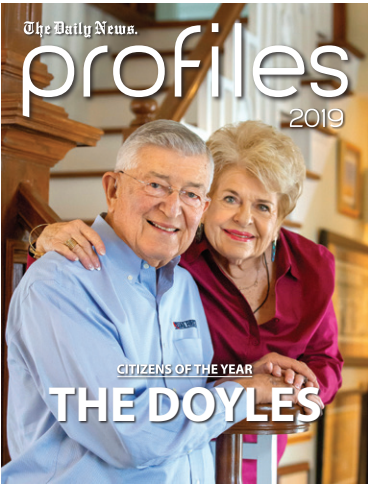
Staff members in the technical department at the Moody Gardens Hotel Spa & Convention Center, 7 Hope Blvd., ex-

pect online booking for hotel rooms to be restored Thursday, spokeswoman Jerri Hamachek said.

But restoring online payment for ticketing could take longer, since that service is run through a third party, she said.

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COMING SATURDAY



The Daily News celebrates the people and businesses who give back to the community in its annual special issue called Profiles.

GOVERNMENT | CONTRACT

Galveston company gets \$789 million for border wall

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON
The Daily News

The federal government has awarded a Galveston company more than \$789 million to rebuild parts of the U.S.-Mexico border wall.

The contract, awarded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, means SLSCO Ltd., stands to earn more than \$1 billion total from work related to building fences and walls along the border.

The company, owned by Galveston natives Todd, John and Billy Sullivan, declined to comment, citing government restrictions.

“Due to the nature of the project, we direct all media to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol,” company spokeswoman Liz Rogers Alvarado said.

The contract was one of two totaling nearly \$1 billion to replace short barriers meant to block vehicles with tall fences, federal officials said late Tuesday.

Barnard Construction Co., based in Montana, won the second contract for \$187 million, officials said.

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EDUCATION | SCIENCE



JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

Ball High School juniors Bryce Rosales, from left, Leyha Williams, Jessica Saucedo and Braden Hebert are learning to use the equipment in the school's new Biotechnology Lab on Tuesday. They'll soon be learning to grow cell cultures under controlled conditions in the new classroom lab.

High school invests in a rare biotechnology lab

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON
The Daily News

» **GALVESTON**

When you're working with cells, you have to take every precaution to not contaminate your sample.

You'll put the cells in a carbon dioxide-chilled refrigerator, and let them grow in a negative pressure hood, which keeps you from accidentally spitting into your petri dish.

You'll suspend the cells in purified water and look at them using

a special microscope.

And if you're a student at Ball High School, you'll do this very carefully and under the watchful eyes of teachers, who are excited students can use all this new equipment.

Carefully, very carefully. Ball High School is putting the final touches on a new state-of-the-art science lab that officials say would be used by 500 students a year come next fall.

“It's really exciting, I'm really excited for it to just be done,” said Michelle Puig, Ball High School's



JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

Ball High School students Braden Hebert, from left, Jessica Saucedo and Leyha Williams look through the glass of a biological safety cabinet at some of the new lab equipment.

microbiology teacher, who has helped plan and develop the lab.

The new lab is filled with state-of-the-art equipment, which is usually reserved for college

campuses, said Julia Ramirez, the director of biomedical and science program at Ball High

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BUSINESS | ENERGY

Commissioner tours gas plant in rural county

By KATHRYN EASTBURN
The Daily News

» **SANTA FE**

County Commissioner Joe Giusti thinks a natural gas treatment plant that sprang up recently in a neighborhood just south of Santa Fe is safe, but he wouldn't want to live near it, he said.

The latter assessment is one shared by

See PLANT » A7



KELSEY WALLING/The Daily News

A new Kinder Morgan plant, a natural gas processing plant, operates in Santa Fe on Wednesday. Commissioner Joe Giusti toured the plant with engineers and representatives of Kinder Morgan Treating, to get answers to his questions about the project, he said.

WEATHER | FEMA

City debates accepting new flood maps now or later

By KERI HEATH
The Daily News

» **GALVESTON**

Galveston officials are considering adopting new federal flood maps in advance of the August implementation date, a decision that could alter some building standards this summer.

The new Federal Emergency

Management Agency maps, which have been in the works since 2012, are expected to assign higher base flood elevations in some parts of the island, but might lower the elevations in other parts, officials have said.

Base flood is the computed elevation to which floodwater is

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FROM THE FRONT



JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

Michelle Puig, a teacher at Ball High School in Galveston, talks about the school’s new Biotechnology Lab on Tuesday.

LAB

Continued » A1

School. It’s so rare, that the school believes it might be a one-of-kind thing in Texas. “It’s because of the cost of equipment,” Ramirez said of why there aren’t more labs like this one. The equipment at Ball High School cost more than \$15,000, she said. The lab is being paid for by grants given to the high school by the Moody Permanent Endowment Fund and the Galveston Education Foundation, officials said. It’s part of the same grant that helped the school purchase a synthetic cadaver for its anatomy lab earlier this year. The high school has been planning the new lab for two years, said Dr. Bruce Leipzig, the president of Ball High School’s parent group for its science, technology, engineering and mathematics program. Ball High School divides many of its programs

If You Go

WHAT: Ball High School science open house
WHERE: Ball High School, 4115 Ave. O, Galveston
WHEN: 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. April 24

into different communities, with their own parent advisory groups. The new biotechnology lab will allow students to grow and observe cells taken from plants and animals, officials said. It also will teach them about working in a clean and sterile lab environment. Some students already have gotten a good look at the lab, and said they’re excited about what kind of things they’ll get to try doing in it. “There are a lot of schools that don’t have this, we have an opportunity that schools don’t have and use this later on in college life,” Ball High

School junior Leyha Williams said. “They use this stuff in college classes, and we have it here, in our high school.” Because the program and equipment are so novel, Puig reached out to universities near and far to determine whether high schoolers would be capable of doing the kind of the work envisioned in the lab. She struck gold after finding a teacher in California who has pioneered teaching microbiology to high school students. The key, she learned, is to not worry about students failing to grow cells. That’s part of the process. “It’s more about the journey, than the destination,” Puig said. “If the kids kill the cells, if the cells get infected, that’s OK.” The new lab also solves something of an access problem at the high school. Students from the school have long been able to partner with researchers at the

University of Texas Medical Branch to learn about biotechnology and to use the college’s resources. But the space and funding to do that fluctuates, officials said. The new lab will allow the high school to pass on some of those lessons to students who don’t, or can’t participate in the medical branch program. “We thought, instead of waiting for a handful of kids to go over there, why don’t we bring it to them,” Ramirez said. There’s still work to be done in the lab before it’s ready to do everything teachers envision, and it won’t be in full use until next semester. Before students get to work in the lab, the school district will hold an open house for Galveston residents to check out the new science lab on April 24. **John Wayne Ferguson:** 409-683-5226; john.ferguson@galvnews.com or on Twitter @johnwferguson.

MAPS

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anticipated to rise during a 100-year flood, or a flood with a 1 percent chance of occurrence in any given year. Base flood elevations vary from about 11 feet to more than 15 feet on the island. The city Wednesday did not immediately provide information about specific changes to Galveston flood maps. Cities have until Aug. 15 to accept the maps, which must be implemented if municipalities want their citizens to remain eligible for the National Flood Insurance Program, said Lauren Fulton, floodplain management and insurance specialist with the federal agency.

This program provides lower cost flood insurance and is required for people with federally backed mortgages if a building is in a special flood hazard area, she said. Communities are encouraged not to put off adoption of the new maps, Fulton said. “This has the same risk as putting off any critical item,” Fulton said. If a natural disaster occurs between now and August, the city could lose its participating status in the national insurance program, she said. The new flood maps will come with updates to the building standards in Galveston, Mayor Jim Yarbrough said. This will require working with property owners in the middle of construction projects to make sure they’re

meeting the right standards, Yarbrough said. Many of these building codes are already in place, but will need to be rearranged to comply with the new maps, he said. “It’s not redesigning the codes or rewriting the codes,” Yarbrough said. The city should adopt the maps sooner than later, but ultimately the changes are coming and the insurance rate changes won’t take effect until Aug. 15, he said. “It’s probably minimal difference for the city either way,” Yarbrough said. For Douglas Ender, owner of DE Custom Beach Homes, the new flood maps can’t be implemented soon enough, he said. “The current flood maps don’t make sense,” Ender said. This new map has been a

long time coming and he’d rather start building to the new specifications sooner, he said. Adopting the maps now could potentially help the city in the event of an emergency, but could also help cities plan for new construction, federal agency spokeswoman Robin Smith said. “Communities that adopt the map early may use it for floodplain management, which is helpful in areas of growth where permitting is likely occurring now,” Smith said. The Galveston City Council is expected to decide upon when to adopt the new maps within the next few months. **Keri Heath:** 409-683-5241; keri.heath@galvnews.com or on Twitter @HeathKeri.

WALL

Continued » A1

The companies also will install lights and improved roads along a 46-mile section near Santa Teresa, New Mexico. The contracts are being paid for with money diverted from military projects when President Donald Trump on Feb. 15 declared a national emergency at the border. It was unclear which projects lost funding to the border fence, but in March, the U.S. Department of Defense identified \$13 billion in proj-

ects from which it could divert money. Among them was an \$8.4 million project to renovate the Marine Corps reserve building in Galveston. SLSCO Ltd. has won at least three other border wall contracts totaling \$459 million for projects in California, New Mexico and Texas, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. With the new contract, the company stands to earn at least \$1.24 billion through border-related government projects. As with the project announced Tuesday, the company is replacing existing

barriers, rather than erecting new ones. Part of the work, however, entails replacing waist-high vehicle barriers with fences as much as 30 feet tall, according to government statements. Work to replace vehicle barriers in New Mexico with taller bollard-style barriers, described as steel slat fencing, has been underway for more than a year, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection statements. SLSCO’s New Mexico section of the wall is supposed to be completed by October 2020, according to the defense department. The Sullivans have stead-

fastly declined to comment about their involvement in the border project, citing orders from the federal government. In December, a small group of people picketed outside the company’s office on Broadway in Galveston. Protesters included members of the Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribal Nation, who said they worried wall construction would disturb burial sites and harm animal species. **John Wayne Ferguson:** 409-683-5226; john.ferguson@galvnews.com or on Twitter @johnwferguson.

BUSINESS | SPACE TRAVEL

SpaceX delays mega rocket launch due to high wind shear

Associated Press

» CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla.

SpaceX has delayed the launch of its newest mega rocket because of dangerously high wind. The Falcon Heavy was poised to blast off from NASA’s Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Wednesday night with a communica-

tion satellite. But SpaceX chief Elon Musk said upper-level wind shear was extremely high. SpaceX will try again Thursday evening. It will be just the second time a Falcon Heavy soars. Last year’s test flight put a sports car — Musk’s own Tesla convertible — into space. It’s almost certainly still in orbit around the sun with a mannequin at the wheel.

FROM THE FRONT

OFFLINE

Continued » A1

“We had a catastrophic system failure,” Hamachek said. The hotel could take reservations by phone within seven days, but the staff couldn’t access the system to check bookings beyond that period of time, she said. The technology department noticed suspicious activity in the system on March 14, which prompted staff to shut down the entire system, she said. Moody Gardens, which includes Rainforest, Aquarium and Discovery pyramids, among other attractions, has no evidence that any personal information was leaked, Hamachek said. “That was definitely our primary concern,” Hamachek said. While she’s sure the

company lost some business because of the system failure, it’s hard to quantify that amount, she said. “I would speculate that online convenience is a priority for folks, so it is unfortunate,” Hamachek said. “It’s hard to know what the scope of that would be.” Moody Gardens took its time to bring the system back online to ensure there were no threats and that customers’ personal security was safe, Hamachek said. “We definitely want to make sure that we’re mindful of security,” Hamachek said. The staff isn’t sure how long it will take for online ticketing to be restored, because Moody Gardens will have to work with its third party payment site, she said.

Keri Heath: 409-683-5241; keri.heath@galvnews.com or on Twitter @HeathKeri.

PLANT

Continued » A1

some people living in the quiet, rural neighborhoods closely abutting the plant site from every direction. Although the plant was fully permitted, few people knew what was going up on the 11 acres and some neighbors were surprised and dismayed when the plant’s industrial profile rose above what had been a pasture. Giusti, who represents Precinct 2, which includes that unincorporated part of the county, toured the plant Tuesday in response to constituent complaints and concerns. Kinder Morgan’s spokesperson told him the plant was very safe and that the company has never had any kind of incident in one of its treatment plants similar to this one, Giusti said. The facility is a cleaning station for natural gas being piped through from areas west to Texas City, according to Kinder Morgan. “There are two towers, one with amine and one with glycol,” Giusti said. The amine attracts and traps any carbon dioxide in the gas, pulls it out and burns it off, releasing it into the air, Giusti said. The glycol, a dehydrating agent, removes any water vapor that the gas might have collected from the pipeline, Giusti said. Neighbor Sharon Tipton, who lives less than a quarter mile up the road, said that although that sounds good, it doesn’t offer her much comfort. “A little research tells me I have learned nothing,” Tipton said. “Both

amines and glycol come in different types, some more dangerous than others, and without knowing which amine and which glycol, I can’t evaluate the danger level.” Giusti visited the plant along with a county road administrator, County Engineer Michael Shannon and the Santa Fe fire marshal. Local first responders, most of them volunteer firefighters, will be on call for any incidents that should occur at the plant, officials said. The plant will largely be monitored remotely and if anything goes wrong, someone has been hired who lives nearby and will be able to get to the plant quickly to turn off any valves that need shutting off, Giusti said. The system can also automatically shut down if instruments indicate any kind of irregularity that could result in a dangerous situation, the Kinder Morgan representative told Giusti. “Do I think it’s safe? Yes,” Giusti said. “Would I want it in my back yard where my grandkids are playing? No. Just because of the nature of what’s running through there.” Giusti was referring to a natural gas pipeline that feeds the plant, then sends cleaned gas to petrochemical plants in Texas City. That part of the county is criss-crossed underground by pipelines of all sorts, some of them abandoned and some of them active, Giusti said. Kinder Morgan is one of the largest energy infrastructure companies in North America. **Kathryn Eastburn:** 409-683-5257; kathryn.eastburn@galvnews.com.