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County to ponder jail overcrowding

Solutions include building new facility or buying existing facility

By Catherine Dominguez
STAFF WRITER

Officials with the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office are weighing options to address jail overcrowding, including building a \$400 million facility. On Tuesday, commissioners gave the sheriff's office the green

light to proceed with an assessment for the jail and develop a plan for moving forward. The study will address the needs of the jail, evaluate options to design a jail that is expandable, secure funding and develop a project timeline. "Overcrowding isn't just a statistic, it's a safety issue," Deputy Chief Jonathan Zitzmann said. "It limits our ability to properly classify inmates; it stretches our staff thin and places them at greater risk."

During a presentation to the court, Zitzmann said the jail is at 97.9% of its 1,317-bed capacity. As of Tuesday, the jail, built in 1987, had 1,289 inmates. In February, the state granted a variance to allow Sheriff Wesley Doolittle to add 64 beds to address the long-term overcrowding. County Judge Mark Keough said that despite the infrastructure challenges, the staff has done well in keeping the facility compliant with state requirements.

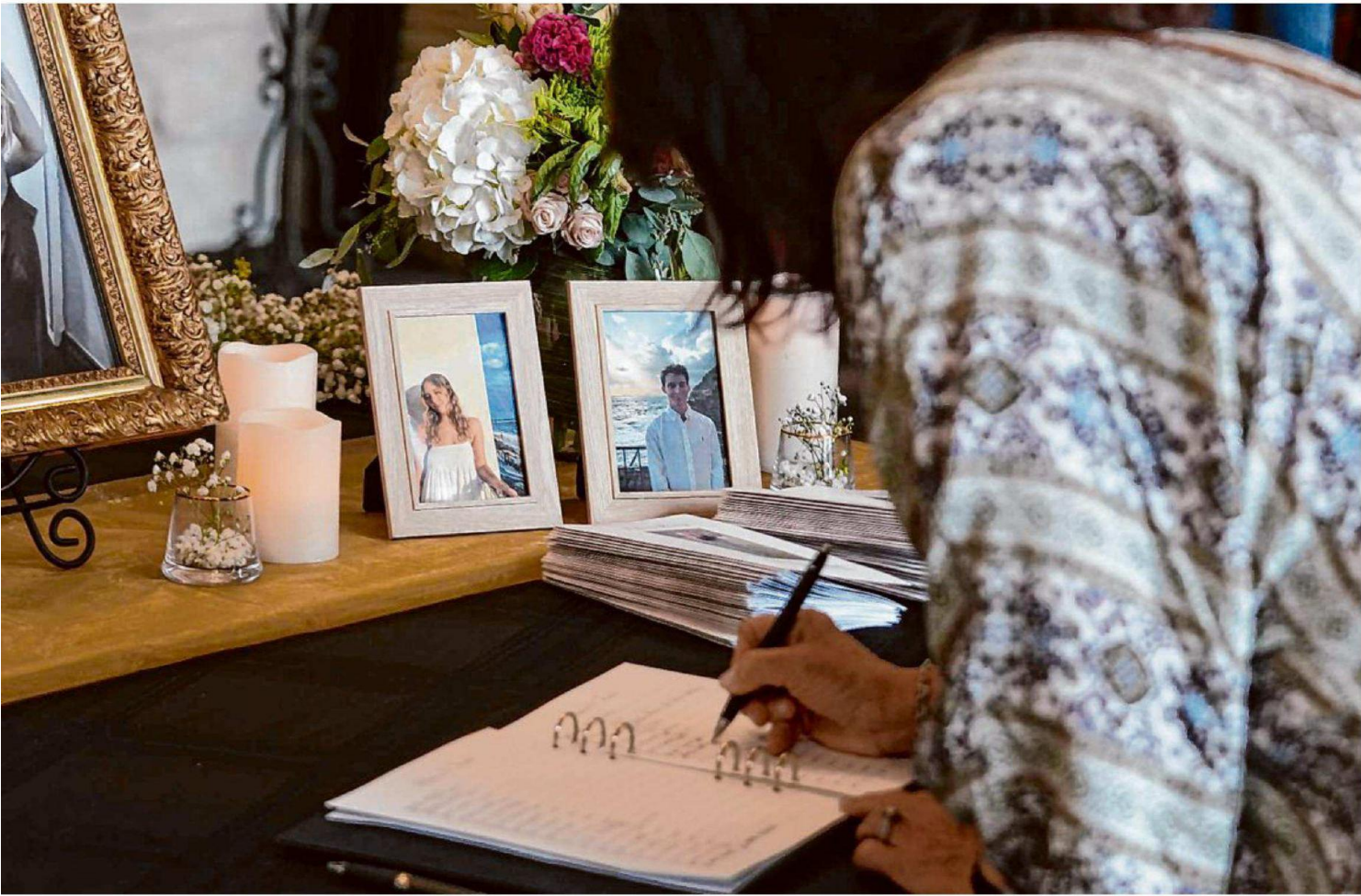
"The way y'all have turned it around this year is awesome," Keough said of the jail passing two surprise inspections by the state.

Chronic overcrowding Since the early 2000s, the jail has faced continued overcrowding issues. The county built the 1,293-bed Joe Corley Detention Center in 2008 to address future needs. However, after the county failed to meet the requirements with inmate numbers, the county sold the facility in May

2013 to The GEO Group for \$65 million. The facility now serves as an immigration detention center in Conroe. In 2015, as the jail continued to face overcrowding, the county commissioned a needs assessment study with Austin-based Broadus Planning and Miami-based CGL Company. The study presented two scenarios: expanding the existing facility for \$197 million or building a new jail for \$202 million. *Jail continues on A3*

DISASTERS IN TEXAS

Service in Conroe honors Hill Country flood victim



A memorial service is held on Friday in Conroe for Reese Manchaca, who once was crowned Ms. Caney Creek High School and was staying with three friends in a cabin in Hunt when the Fourth of July flood struck. None of them survived.

Photos by Ashleigh Lucas/Houston Chronicle

College student who was Caney Creek High School graduate remembered by family as bright, compassionate

By Caroline Wilburn
STAFF WRITER

Friends, family and other mourners on Friday gathered among flickering candles and a display of flowers to honor Texas flood victim Reese Manchaca in a Conroe memorial service led by Montgomery County Judge Mark Keough. Manchaca, 21, was staying

INSIDE Weather warnings ahead of floods weren't frantic — until suddenly they were. **A7**

with three friends in a cabin in Hunt for the Fourth of July weekend. None of them survived the devastating floods that hit Central Texas in the early hours of July 4, and Manchaca's

body was found on July 7, her family said. A 300-mile procession led by Montgomery County law enforcement officers escorted her body home to Conroe. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and state Rep. Morgan Luttrell of Magnolia were among those in attendance at the Lone Star Convention Center in Conroe. U.S. Rep. Dan Crenshaw of Houston presented Manchaca's family with

a folded flag that had been flown over the U.S. Capitol in her honor. A 2022 graduate of Caney Creek High School, Manchaca was a senior and dean's list student studying architecture at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She was crowned Ms. Caney Creek High School and was named best dressed by her *Manchaca continues on A7*

Spirit and 'shared love' of Mystic

How camp became Texas tradition for generations of girls

By R.A. Schuetz
STAFF WRITER

In 1939, Ag Stacy and her husband purchased Camp Mystic: 600 acres along the Guadalupe River, a place where little girls as young as 7 would learn to paddle a canoe and carry themselves with good posture, a place many of those girls, as adults, would come to recall as a heaven on earth. Stacy was a Dallas debutante who was teed up for finishing school when she instead decided she would attend the University of Texas, then Wellesley, a private New England women's college. The year she bought the camp, she was national secretary of the camping division at the American Physical Education Society and a tennis and archery instructor at UT; her beauty and "perfectly chiseled nose" also made headlines. In other words, she was a certain kind of celebrated Texan: strong but gracious; classy but able to take life by the horns. And that's the type of woman her camp, which suffered devastating tragedy when the river flooded on the eve of its centennial, set out to nurture. "It has shaped everything about me," said former camper and counselor Hayden Rome Koone. "It's taught me how to love others." **'Did you go to camp?'** For generations, each summer, Camp Mystic welcomed hundreds of girls, most from Texas' largest cities, to the *Camp continues on A6*

Nonprofits, churches to donate Ten Commandments posters to schools

By Catherine Dominguez and Sondra Hernandez
STAFF WRITERS

Montgomery County school districts are making plans to comply with a new state law requiring the Ten Commandments to be on display in each Texas classroom. Gov. Greg Abbott in June

signed off on Senate Bill 10, which states "a public elementary or secondary school shall display in a conspicuous place in each classroom of the school a durable poster or framed copy of the Ten Commandments." The measure will go into effect for the 2025-26 school year and specifies that the poster be at least 16 inches wide, 20 inches

tall and the text may only cover the language for the Ten Commandments laid out in the bill, as reported by the Texas Tribune. Schools "must accept any offer of privately donated" displays or may use district funds to purchase a Ten Commandments display, for the 2025-26 school year, according to the text

of the bill. "If our students don't know the Ten Commandments, they will never understand the foundation for much of American history and law," said the bill's sponsor, Sen. Phil King, R-Weatherford, on his website upon introducing the bill in February. "In fact, few documents have had a greater impact on the

whole of Western Civilization than the Ten Commandments." The new law has sparked backlash. Leaders from both Christian and Nation of Islam faiths filed a lawsuit June 23 against the Texas Education Agency, its commissioner, Mike Morath, and three North Texas school districts. The lawsuit *Posters continues on A3*

Donor with mystery trust gave Abbott \$1M

By Benjamin Wermund
AUSTIN BUREAU

Joe Gebbia, an Austin billionaire, Airbnb co-founder and close friend of Elon Musk, is behind a mysterious \$1 million donation to Gov. Greg Abbott, the Texas Republican's campaign confirmed Wednesday.

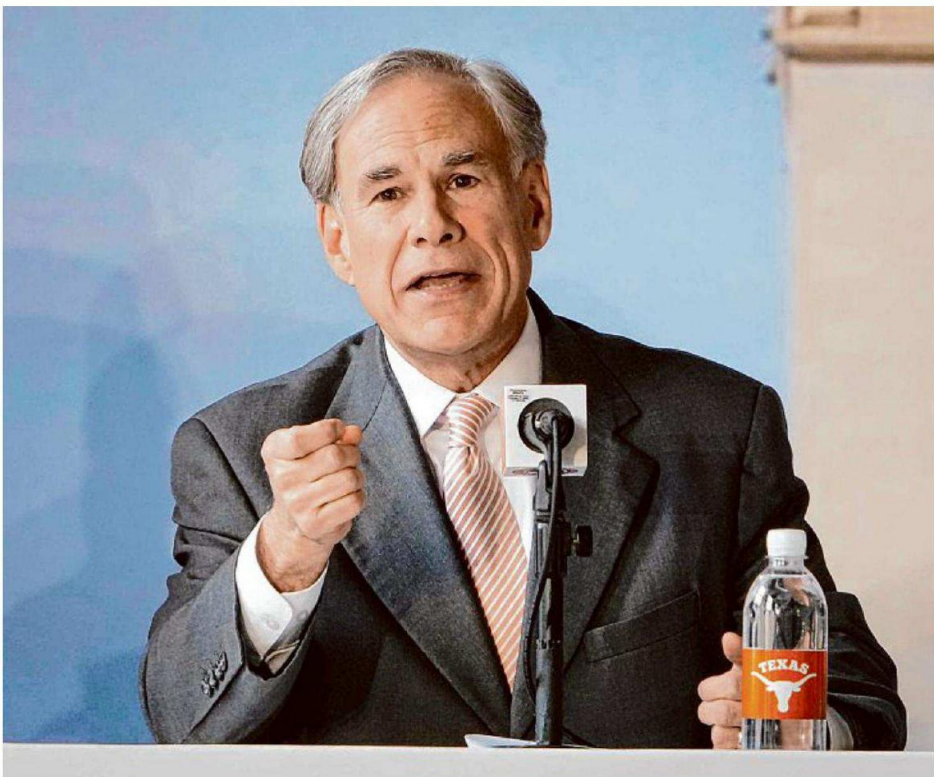
The governor's campaign reported the gift from Peachtree Trust, one of four million-dollar donations Abbott received in June in a new filing.

But the campaign did not include any information on who is involved in the trust — which experts said could be a violation of campaign finance rules.

The trust did not appear to be publicly registered in Texas, and the governor's campaign finance report only said it was based in West Lake Hills.

The donation appears to be the trust's first-ever to a Texas official.

In response to questions from Hearst Newspapers, the campaign said the gift was from Gebbia and that it was filing an updated campaign finance report to disclose his identity.



Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

Gov. Greg Abbott received a \$1M donation from a trust that does not appear to be publicly registered in Texas run by Joe Gebbia, an Austin billionaire.

It is unclear why Gebbia donated under the trust. Gebbia has given to Abbott under his own name before, including \$1 million to the governor last year.

Gebbia sits on Tesla's board of directors. He is also involved in the Department of Government Efficiency, the cost-cutting effort Musk launched for the Trump administration before his public falling out with President Donald Trump in June.

Musk lives in Austin and is close to Abbott. Attempts to reach Gebbia through Airbnb and Tesla went unanswered.

The donation was part of a more than \$20 million haul the governor reported raising in just an eight-day period in June following a legislative session that saw the Texas Republican sign long-sought private school vouchers into law and veto a ban on hemp-derived THC products.

Abbott also signed into law a slate of fresh corporate protections, including provisions making it harder for shareholders to file lawsuits against publicly traded companies, like the one in Delaware that blocked a massive pay package for Musk at Tesla, spurring him to move his companies to Texas.

It is not unusual for political donations to be made under trusts, but they typically carry the name of the donor. Musk, for instance, gives political donations in Texas under the Elon Musk Revocable Trust.

The Texas Ethics Commission issued an opinion last year that said campaign finance restrictions and reporting rules apply to the people comprising the trust.

That means it has to be treated as a political action committee if multiple people are involved, and is required to report where it gets its money and how it spends it. If it's a single person, they should be identified.

Like the previous study, Zitzmann presented two possible solutions: building a new facility for \$350 million to \$400 million or purchasing an existing facility for \$60 million to \$150 million.

While building a new jail would address many concerns, Zitzmann said it would be the costliest option and would take up to five years to address overcrowding.

JAIL

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The \$202 million did not include the cost of purchasing land.

Temporary solutions

The building, Zitzmann said, was not designed to handle the current capacity and is now plagued by plumbing, air conditioning, heating, electrical, and structural issues. Maintenance costs are expected to increase to about \$1 million for the year, Zitzmann said.

"We have done everything we can to mitigate this crisis internally," Zitzmann said of efforts to reduce jail time for some inmates, process inmates faster, increasing efficiency with the courts, and using all "free" space, like closets and hallways, as office space.

Almost 70% of the inmates in jail are pretrial defendants who have not been convicted and are presumed innocent, according to information from the county.

Zitzmann said 90% of jail inmates will eventually return to the community.

While Montgomery County is currently housing 30 inmates in Waller County, which will cost about \$1.1 million annually, it hasn't made a significant impact on the continued overcrowding.

Zitzmann said the county will need more than 2,300 jail beds by 2040 because of population growth.

"If it's just one person dumping money into it, then you're supposed to report it as the person," said Andrew Cates, an expert in Texas campaign finance and ethics laws.

"It's either you report it as the person, not the trust, or you report it as a PAC — and in that case, they have to file as a PAC and go on the grid."

"There would have to be somebody's name somewhere. And if not, then there should be a PAC formed."

Gebbia was a longtime Democratic donor, giving thousands to both Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden's presidential campaigns. But in January, he wrote on the social media site X that he voted for Trump.

"I did my own research," Gebbia wrote. "And I found something that shocked me. He is not a fascist determined to destroy democracy."

"He deeply cares about our nation."

Gebbia is also an investor in the San Antonio Spurs. He accompanied Abbott to watch the Austin Spurs, a Spurs-owned team that plays in the NBA's developmental league, in March.



Photos provided by Love Heals Youth

Montgomery County groups including Love Heals Youth, Liberty Library Project, Lake Conroe Area Republican Women and Liberty Belles Republican Women presented Ten Commandment posters to Willis ISD.

POSTERS

From page A1

came two days after Abbott signed the bill and three days after a court blocked a similar law in Louisiana.

"Posting the Ten Commandments in public schools is un-American and un-Baptist," plaintiff Griff Martin, senior pastor with The First Baptist Church of Austin said in a news release by the American Civil Liberties Union.

"S.B. 10 undermines the separation of church and state as a bedrock principle of my family's Baptist heritage."

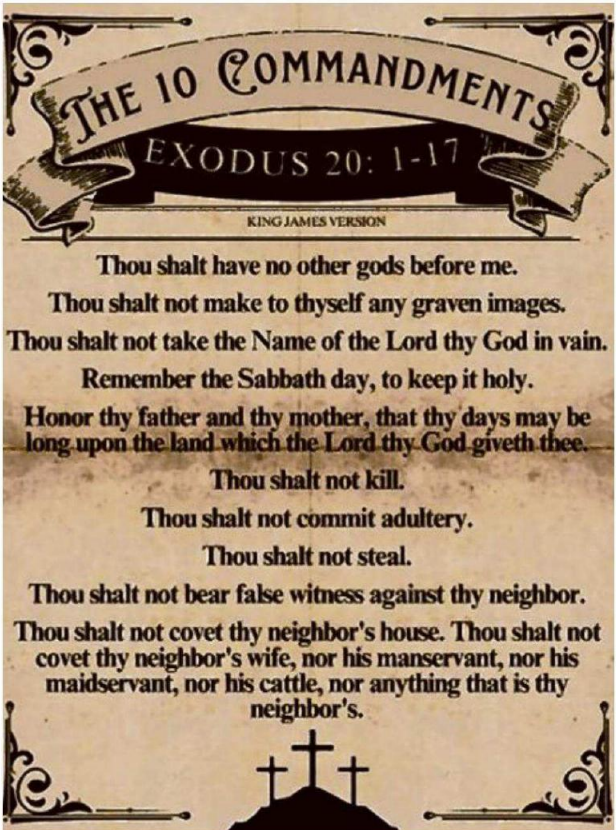
Baptists have long held that the government has no role in religion — so that our faith may remain free and authentic. My children's faith should be shaped by family and our religious community, not by a Christian nationalist movement that confuses God with power."

Local push

In Montgomery County, a group of nonprofits, Republican women's groups and local churches have joined together in a grassroots effort to donate Ten Commandments posters to Montgomery County school districts.

The Love Heals Youth nonprofit founded by Rebecca Smith is focused on counseling services for youth in the foster system.

Smith said she was watching the debate on the Texas Senate floor in May when she thought it was a great opportunity for her group to participate in the effort of spreading basic morals and making them available to students. Other



A photo of the Ten Commandments poster for junior high and high school students that Love Heals Youth and other Montgomery County groups plan to donate to the county's six school districts.

participating groups include the Liberty Library Project, Lake Conroe Area Republican Women, Liberty Belles Republican Women, The Woodlands Methodist Church campuses and Grace Church in South Montgomery County.

"This is really going to be a community-wide effort. Our goal is to hit all six districts in Montgomery County," Smith said. "What better way to show unity than all taking this on, knowing that there is no money allocated to help with this bill so why not help the school districts out."

Community donations and a donation from State Rep. Steve Toth, R-The

Woodlands, kicked off the project, allowing the group to donate 20 posters — 10 elementary posters and 10 junior high and high-school posters — to each school district in Montgomery County.

The posters for the elementary schools and junior high and high schools differ to present a tailored message to each age group.

Headed to classrooms

The first presentation to Willis ISD took place July 9. Another donation was made to Magnolia ISD this week. Donations to New Caney ISD are expected to be made this month, with donations to Conroe ISD and Mont-

gomery ISD to follow in August. The group has not yet been in contact with Splendora ISD.

Russ Reneau, communications specialist with Conroe ISD, said Love Heals Youth has not yet contacted the district. However, he said the district is working on a plan to get the posters into schools before the first day.

The group is seeking donations to fund the project with a \$10 donation covering one poster. Donations can be made on the Love Heals Youth website.

Additional funds not used for Ten Commandment posters will be used to donate Bibles to school libraries.



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