

Hegar's defunding claim may take toll

Comptroller's accusations could hurt police budget

By **St. John BARNED-SMITH** and **JEN RICE**
STAFF WRITERS

Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar's accusation that Harris County defunded law enforcement brought the county's multibillion-dollar budget process

to a halt Tuesday and could cost the sheriff, constables and district attorney's office an additional \$100 million in funding, county officials said.

On Tuesday, Commissioners Court was planning to begin the annual budget negotiating process, considering some \$2.2 billion to be spent in the fiscal year set to start on Oct. 1.

Budget officials have proposed to boost funding to county law enforcement by more than \$100 million dedicated to

raises, hiring more violent crime investigators, body cameras and other equipment. The proposed spending plan also would give the district attorney's office an additional \$9 million to hire prosecutors and expand its intake division to help work down case backlogs.

Then they received a letter Monday from Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar accusing the county of defunding law enforcement in violation of Senate Bill 23, which bars counties with

a population of more than 1 million from cutting law enforcement spending without the approval of voters.

The accusation was sparked by two Republican Harris County constables — Precinct 4 Constable Mark Herman and Precinct 5 Constable Ted Heap — who had complained to Gov. Greg Abbott after the county changed its budget policy to do away "rollover," which had allowed departments to save unspent funds and use them in fu-

ture budget cycles.

In his letter, Hegar said doing away with the rollover funds resulted in a loss of \$3 million previously dedicated to the constables office in fiscal 2021.

County officials said Hegar had not contacted them about any concerns until Monday, when it would have been too late to put a voter initiative on the November ballot.

They also said the elimination of the rollover policy occurred in **Hegar continues on A8**

MASSACRE IN UVALDE



Jerry Lara/Staff photographer

A delegation from Montgomery County and Conroe prays by a memorial for shooting victims at Robb Elementary School.

Houston approves homeless housing

By **Sam González Kelly**
STAFF WRITER

Houston City Council voted Wednesday to award two nonprofits more than \$18 million in funding for a homeless housing development in Midtown despite concerns about one organization's history with a run-down apartment complex in Fifth Ward.

Mayor Sylvester Turner, a strong supporter of the project, said he understood the council members' objections, but that a tight deadline imposed by the Texas General Land Office made this a take-it-or-leave-it kind of project.

"The marriage between the city and the state is a horrible one ... but we have the responsibility of coming forth with the best solution for the people in our city," Turner said.

Critics, however, said one de- **Housing continues on A7**

Conroe nonprofit brings counseling support, meals

Nearby Utopia ISD also gets help in shooting aftermath

By **Sondra Hernandez**
STAFF WRITER

At Utopia ISD, school counselor Ashleigh Kay has seen the impact the massacre at nearby Uvalde has had on her students.

And while security concerns have been addressed, she said, mental health needs have not.

"We've had zero counseling assistance," Kay said. "I feel like the mental health needs are

just as important as the security aspect."

That's where the Conroe-based nonprofit Love Heals Youth has stepped in to help.

A group of 16 Montgomery County residents, led by group founder Rebecca Smith-Nash, traveled to the Uvalde area Monday and delivered therapy kits and items for the therapy room at Utopia ISD.

Kay explained that the two communities are closely inter-

twined with staff and students from Utopia having ties to Uvalde and vice versa.

One big difference is the 1A UIL classified Utopia ISD has not received the outpouring of resources that Uvalde has since the shooting.

"These are materials I can't afford to purchase on my budget," said Kay. "These items are considered a luxury but they're not really a luxury because these are all really important

tools used to counsel kids."

Nash brought them tactile items, art pieces, soothing lamps, music and noise makers, essential oils and diffusers.

"These are therapeutic items for children to help them express feelings and develop a vocabulary for their emotions that they experience," said Nash, whose group provides therapeutic services to foster youths in group homes. **Counseling continues on A5**

Council OKs Bush concession contract

By **Dylan McGuinness**
STAFF WRITER

Common Bond, The Annie Café and The Kitchen are among the new local restaurants and businesses heading to Bush Intercontinental Airport, under new concessions contracts passed this month.

City Council voted unanimously and without discussion Wednesday to pass a 10-year retail contract led by Paradies Lagardère, the Atlanta-based concessionaire. It will partner with local businesses to operate 10 storefronts in the airport's new **Bush continues on A8**

HUD urged to enforce ruling on GLO's Harvey discrimination case

By **Dylan McGuinness**
STAFF WRITER

Mayor Sylvester Turner urged the federal government Wednesday to defend its finding that the Texas General Land Office discriminated against communities of color when it left Houston and Harris County out of its plans to distribute flood mitigation funding after Hurricane Harvey.

Turner's comments came as the land office faces a Friday deadline to correct the issues outlined in the March finding by the U.S. Department of Housing

and Urban Development. The land office rebuffed talks to settle the matter earlier this summer. The agency has yet to modify its plans for the funds to include Houston, and local advocacy groups are urging them to do so.

"I don't know if anybody is at HUD these days, I don't know that they're open for business," Turner said, garnering a few laughs in the City Council chambers. "HUD has to defend its own process and its own dollars and its allocation. So, if anyone is at home, at HUD, then answer the phone and defend yourself, because it is the integrity of HUD

that is on the line."

Congress sent Texas about \$4.3 billion in flood mitigation funding, a new kind of relief money, after Harvey struck Texas in 2017, inundating thousands of homes and businesses with water. The land office was tasked with administering that money, and both Houston and Harris County — which endured about half of all damage in Texas from the storm — had anticipated receiving about \$1 billion each from the funds.

In an initial competition for about \$2 billion, the land office's **Harvey continues on A7**



Staff file photo

Doris Brown filed a complaint that found that the Texas General Land Office discriminated with Harvey flood mitigation funds.

CORONAVIRUS AT A GLANCE

598,381,565
Confirmed cases worldwide

93,903,844
Confirmed cases in U.S.

7,672,518
Confirmed cases in Texas

6,461,362
Deaths worldwide

1,042,398
Deaths in U.S.

88,413
Deaths in Texas

2,714
Confirmed patients in Texas hospitals

62.39%
Texans 6 months+ fully vaccinated

Source: WHO, CDC, Texas DSHS, Johns Hopkins University

Katy residents trapped by just 3 inches of rain

By **R.A. Schuetz**
STAFF WRITER

Roughly 3 inches of rain fell over Katy last Friday, according to the Harris County Flood Warning System.

But on Clay Road — a stretch of street lined with torn-up land where prairie is being readied to make way for single-family home developments — the pavement disappeared beneath nearly a foot and a half of cloudy orange water. The waters trapped residents of an adjoining community, threw a wrench into school bus drop offs and forced those driving down Clay Road to stop and turn around.

One person living in LakeHouse — the community cars could not enter or exit following the deluge — waded into the floodwaters with a tape measure to see whether his truck could make it through.

Bryan Gillis' wife was 39 weeks pregnant, and he worried what would happen if she went into labor. When he found that there was 16 inches of water — too much for him to pass through — he started thinking through his options. It was too deep for an ambulance or fire-truck, he believed, and there was a chance, if the next storm was accompanied by a tornado watch, that an air evacuation would be stymied.

"Of course, we could call 911, we could call her OB-GYN, and they could, over the phone, walk me through delivering the baby," he said. "But if something goes wrong ..."

Even after Friday's waters subsided, he worried about the coming rains.

But a spokesperson for Land Tejas, which is developing a master-planned community west of LakeHouse and is in the process of widening Clay Road in order to accommodate the anticipated traffic, said Wednesday that the problem was related to outfall pipes and had already been fixed.

"Waller and Harris counties

are aware of this and the solution has been put in place," said Tim Johnson. "It should be resolved."

Waller County Commissioner Kendric Jones was more cautious with his assessment.

"They have dug the ditches to be deeper," he said. "But we don't know if that's the end all be all." He said a plan had been put in place to ensure, among other things, that emergency vehicles can access the community during the rain forecast over the next two weeks. Over the long term, plans for the road will be reviewed.

Gillis said he was hopeful to hear officials were focused on a solution.

"It's not like we're complaining that we can't be reached in a hurricane," he said. "It's 3 inches of rain that's stranding us."

The incident outside LakeHouse — a gated community being developed by the California-based Tri Pointe Group with plans for 350 houses upon completion — comes as some worry whether flood mitigation efforts taken by developers go far enough. Developers can submit applications to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, arguing that floodplain designations should be changed because of physical changes they've made to the landscape. One such revision covered both LakeHouse and the swath of land immediately to its west, which is having lots prepared for a community called Sunterra.

Sunterra is being developed by Land Tejas, a Houston company famous for its master-planned communities including one in Humble surrounding a crystal lagoon called Balmoral; the company was recently acquired by Florida-based Starwood Land.

To prepare for the increased traffic that its new community will attract, Land Tejas partnered with Waller County to redo the stretch of Clay Road that floods. What was once a two-

lane road with deep ditches on either side will eventually become a four-lane boulevard with curbs and gutters, Jones explained. "So that alters the drainage system."

A board member for the community said he had received hundreds of emails after the road filled with water, and dozens of residents showed up to a meeting on Tuesday with Jones to hear what steps were being taken. One asked who had approved the plan for a new road that floods; another asked why the new lane of the road was visibly lower than the old one.

It was unclear whether the lowered road was tied to any changes in flood mapping. The Waller County Engineer did not respond to a request for comment.

The contingency plans for the upcoming rains include blocking off the eastern entrance of the LakeHouse community, which is more likely to flood, and redirecting residents out of the western entrance. Stakes will be installed along the sides of the road so that those driving emergency vehicles know where the edges of the street are if they are passing through floodwaters. Jones, the county commissioner, said he would confirm whether Katy ISD could drop students off at the intersection of Bartlett and Clay roads in case of heavy rainfall, so they don't risk heading down Clay Road only to have to turn around.

But to address flooding beyond this storm, Jones said he and county engineers wanted to go back and look at the design and drainage metrics of the new Clay Road to see if any changes could be made to decrease the likelihood of flooding.

With his wife's delivery imminent, Gillis is hoping the steps being taken will work so he and others in the community will not be stranded again.

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Jerry Lara/Staff photographer

Utopia ISD counselor Ashleigh Kay, left, hugs Love Heals Youth Founder and CEO Rebecca Smith-Nash.

COUNSELING

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will better help them process and talk about events that they go through and start learning how to cope with their anxiety or depression."

Janeen McSwain was among those who took the trip. The group first went to Robb Elementary School, where 19 students and two teachers were killed on May 24. The school is boarded up.

"It just breaks my heart," said McSwain, the executive director of the Montgomery County Veteran's Memorial Commission.

Nash organized a fundraiser in June in Montgomery County to support the Uvalde community, collecting nearly \$35,000.

She worked with friend and Texas Ranger Wesley Doolittle, who has been close to the tragedy in Uvalde.

While there was support coming in from across the country and \$11 million had been raised for the community, Doolittle wanted to do something for Uvalde on a more personal level and chose to address the mental health services, Nash said.

The group left Nash's house in Montgomery before dawn Monday and arrived at Oasis Outback BBQ & Grill in Uvalde around 11 a.m. to pick up 650 meals to deliver to the Uvalde fire department, police department, city employees and Uvalde Memorial Hospital with Love Heals Youth footing the bill.

"Everyone we visited was so

grateful, not just for us bringing food, but that we would take the time away and drive five hours to be with them," Nash said. "Knowing that people are willing to pause their day to come out and support them is what will help them recover and get through this incredibly horrible time."

Monday was filled with many emotions, she said.

"You felt inspired and connected but at the same time heavy and sad," she said as they visited with the people of Uvalde.

Nash said she'd like to set up a network of virtual therapy for the people of Uvalde. But in the meantime, she is focusing her efforts on putting together therapy kits for the schools around Uvalde.

Kay said Love Heals Youth's impact will be far reaching in the Utopia and Uvalde communities. Utopia ISD started school Aug. 18. Uvalde students will return to school Sept. 6.

"Not only will I use these materials, I also plan to share with the special education department as well. The head of the department came in last night and said 'Oh you have a weighted blanket. I've always wanted one of these for one of my students. I've had to use one from home,'" she said. "This has blessed so many kids in so many ways."

Visit lovehealsyouth.com, counselingcentermc.com for more about Love Heals Youth or the Counseling Center of Montgomery County.

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