



**Carmage Walls**  
**Commentary Prize**

**2018 Entry Form**

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**What is the subject/title of the entry?**

Gun Violence

**Date(s) of publication?**

Nov. 8, 2017 – "We can't let gun violence remain the new normal"

Nov. 19, 2017 – "Yes, we can do something to stop the gun massacres"

Feb. 18, 2018 – "Thoughts and prayers won't stop this cycle of madness"

Feb. 25, 2018 – "Listen to our children about guns"

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**Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)**

In these columns and one editorial, I sought to reflect the growing outrage and frustration many Americans are feeling over the mass shootings -- including one not far from Austin -- that sadly have become common in our country. I wanted to tap into what I believe is a growing sense of anger and frustration over our seeming inability or unwillingness to do something about gun violence.

While national in scope, I believe the gun violence debate is at its core a local issue, one that deeply affects our community and communities across the country.

The shootings in Parkland, Fla., stirred personal outrage -- I'm the father of a beautiful young woman in middle school. I want her to have a future that allows her to live up to her potential. Like millions of Americans, I don't want to have to worry that she will be the victim of a mass shooting.

My intent has been to generate reader discussion that was respectful and embraced the spirit of seeking answers and finding middle ground on such a polarizing issue. I knew I would hear from angry readers, too, and I did. The response from people who oppose any type of gun control was strong and sometimes unpleasant

But I also heard from people who agreed with the running thread and spirit of these articles – that we are not powerless to do something and that we can work to achieve change to prevent more mass shootings. Some have contacted me to tell me they've gotten involved in grassroots efforts to address gun violence. Others submitted guest commentaries and letters to the editor. I believe the results overall have been positive in communicating a message that it is within our reach and power to find solutions that could conceivably be acceptable to most Americans.

Respectfully,  
Juan Castillo



# VIEWPOINTS

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## We can't let gun violence remain the new normal



**Juan Castillo**  
Commentary

Texas weeps today.

In a small house of worship in a bucolic small town — one of those where everyone knows everyone else's business, and that's just fine — a gunman with a military-style rifle methodically opened fire Sunday morning. When he was done, 26 people lay lifeless inside a Baptist church. The dead ranged from 18 months to 77 years of age and included as many as 14 children and a pregnant woman, investigators said.

Lest we become numb to this kind of carnage, let that sink in for a moment. The victims had come to the sanctuary to pray and worship. The gunman had come intent on slaughtering them.

The carnage left even hardened law enforcement officers reeling. Wilson County Sheriff Joe Tackitt said investigators found blood everywhere.

"Wherever you walked in the church, there was death," Tackitt said. "It's hard enough to see an adult. But when you see babies — I'm talking, you know, 3, 4, 5 and 6 years old, 10 years old — it's just hard."

Another horrific mass shooting in a string of massacres in America, this one hit closer to home, in Sutherland Springs, southeast of San Antonio. The deadliest in Texas history, it came just 35 days after another massacre with a different dubious distinction: the deadliest mass shooting in American history. That one in Las Vegas left 58 people dead and hundreds wounded.

Law enforcement officials believe the gunman, Devin Patrick Kelley, may have been motivated by "a domestic situation" and that his in-laws and estranged wife attended the church. In the coming days, investigators will seek to unravel answers to a motive and many other questions, like how the shooter was able to get a gun.

"By all the facts that we seem to know, he was not supposed to have access to a gun," Gov. Greg Abbott said. "So how did

### It is long past time to have a national conversation about how to prevent more massacres.

this happen?"

Kelley's 2012 conviction for assaulting his wife and child should have barred him from buying the rifle used in the massacre. The Air Force failed to enter Kelley's domestic violence court-martial into a national database that would have prevented him from buying weapons.

Texans, like all Americans, grieve for the victims and their families, and extend their condolences. All of us are trying to come to terms with such unspeakable horror. How could it happen in our own backyard?

"In God's backyard," a reader said on The New York Times' website.

The website features a clock that is counting the number of hours, minutes and seconds since Sunday's shooting. The Times' editorial board is calling for Congress to act on gun control.

But it is "mental health," not guns, that is behind the Texas mass shooting, President Trump said Sunday in Tokyo, calling the shooter "deranged."

"I think mental health is the problem here. This isn't a guns situation," Trump said. Bear in mind that Trump signed a bill earlier this year that gutted an Obama-era regulation making it harder for people with mental illnesses to buy guns.

In proclaiming that a massacre carried out with an assault weapon capable of unleashing lethal damage in seconds is not about guns, Trump seemed to wish to silence any talk about gun control. His words had an element of misdirection, too — the gunman may have had mental issues, but that does not alter the fact that he used a military-style weapon to kill innocent people.

The president's reaction is something we've become used to seeing after each new

mass shooting. Gun advocates, including many of our elected officials, are quick to admonish that it's not the time to talk about gun control.

"We don't need politics right now," U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said Monday in Sutherland Springs when questioned about gun control.

But when then?

Offering sympathies and prayers to the victims of these massacres, however well-intentioned, is not nearly enough. Not anymore. Not when deadly mass shootings occur with frightening regularity.

A church should always be a safe space, but the tragedy is that these massacres do indeed happen in our own backyards. This was not the first in a house of worship. They occur in movie theaters, at outdoor music concerts and at elementary schools.

Since a mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub in 2016 left 49 dead and many wounded, at least 639 people have been killed and more than 2,600 have been injured in mass shootings, according to The New York Times.

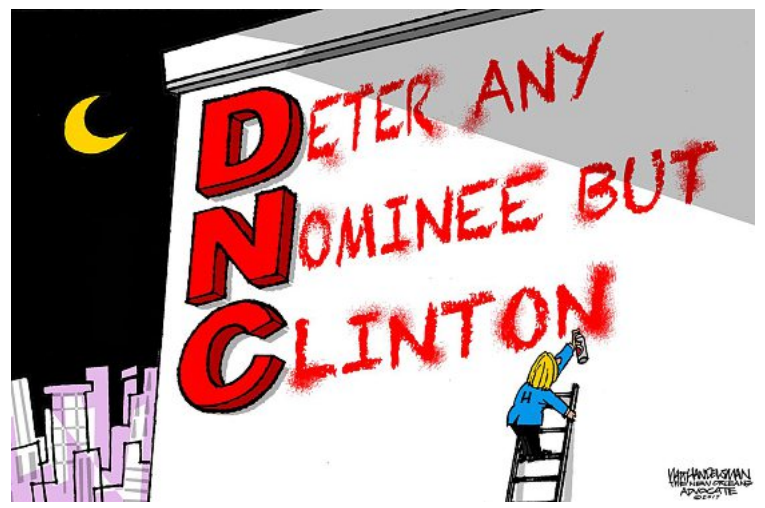
Regardless where you may stand on gun control, it is long past time to have a national conversation about how to prevent more massacres. And it is time for our elected officials to have the courage to lead.

The dead in Sutherland included mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. They included wide-eyed young children who will never again kiss their parents goodnight. Among the lasting images described by investigators is of piles of bodies inside the church — parents covering their children's bodies. In their final moments, they had tried vainly to shield the children from lethal bullets.

Texas is heartbroken today, but we can turn our anguish into action if we demand our elected leaders address gun violence. If we do nothing, we risk more senseless and heinous slaughter.

Castillo is the American-Statesman's editorial page editor. Contact him at [jcastillo@statesman.com](mailto:jcastillo@statesman.com) or 512-445-3667.

### WALT HANDELSMAN NEWSDAY



### YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Leaders, forget prayers; how about gun control?

I was saddened and appalled to learn that while I sat in my house of worship on Sunday, dozens of people were being slaughtered in a church less than 100 miles away.

I am greatly angered by the mockery made by our governor and other elected officials by their request for prayers for the victims and their families. Their prayers ring hollow when they alone have the power to stop the bloodshed by passing sensible gun control laws. This is not the time to talk about people who are evil or mentally ill or immigrants; it is time to take away weapons that can cause this kind of slaughter.

Yes, I most certainly will pray for the victims and their families, but I will pray even harder that our elected officials will summon the courage to take action before the next violent act occurs.

SUSAN MILAM, CEDAR CREEK

#### No solution to growing mass shooting problem

Gov. Abbott and President Trump spent much time empathizing, demonizing, sympathizing, proselytizing and sermonizing about Sunday's massacre. Nowhere in all of their "izing" did either address a solution to this repetitive and increasing crime.

What are our alleged leaders going to do about it? The only person addressing a solution was a peace officer who said, "this has happened before." In other words, get used to it.

A few well-thought-out laws limiting access to semi-automatic guns would mitigate, if not eventually eliminate, this kind of mass murder.

ANTHONY TODESCO, BUDA

#### Cutting mental health money a contradiction

When questioned about what could be done about these horrible mass shootings, our governor stated that evil goes back to biblical times and that we should pray.

Our chief law enforcement officer says that people in churches need to have guns. All this while the ruling party is cutting funding for mental health. But the president says

that this is a mental health, not guns, issue. Something appears to be terribly wrong.

AL GILES, AUSTIN

#### Heroes like McCloskey are a blessing to us

Re: Nov. 5 article, "Family of hero killed at party looks to preserve legacy in West Texas."

Mark Wilson's story about Ted McCloskey's act of heroism — and his father and brother's love and compassion for him — were greatly appreciated.

Heroes are born — not made — and act unselfishly in times of need. We are blessed to have them in our daily lives.

H. FRANK SEVERN III, CEDAR PARK

#### Patrick's endorsements are not a surprise

Re: Nov. 5 article, "Former Rockwall councilman to challenge Lt. Gov. Patrick in primary."

I don't know which bothered Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick's political consultant Allen Blakemore more: Scott Milder's announcement that he's running for lieutenant governor, or his less than stellar evaluation of Patrick's abilities.

In response, Blakemore cites endorsements for his boss "from Gov. Abbott, Sen. Cornyn, Sen. Cruz."

If Larry were running for office, he'd get endorsed by Moe and Curly, right?

ROBERT ELLIOTT, KYLE

#### Why are barbecue joints whining about scales?

Re: Nov. 3 commentary, "Herman: Weighing in on barbecue scales."

I wonder if the barbecue restaurants that are whining about the prohibitive \$35 cost of certifying their scales get their wholesale meat from certified scales?

I can't imagine County Line's profit is so razor thin that the owner can't afford to certify all 40 of his scales. That's less than two rib plates per restaurant at their prices. Maybe they can start a Go Fund Me campaign. Think about it. The thousands of meals served monthly would certainly add up if they were shorting customers only a few ounces.

MIKE WAGNER, ROUND ROCK

### OTHERS SAY KRISTINE HOPKINS

Special Contributor

## After order, many women could lose access to free contraception

The Obamacare contraceptive mandate was put into place because providing free contraception provides health benefits to women, families and society. It protected the right of American women to access contraception even if their employers had objections.

Now that President Donald Trump has signed the executive order expanding who can opt out of providing no-cost contraceptives to their employees, the balance has tipped dramatically in favor of the beliefs of employers at the expense of their staff.

Many women now stand to lose access to free contraception in their health plans. Employers of any size and any type can decline to cover their female employees' contraception without cost sharing; they must only state that they have a religious or moral objection to doing so.

In research we did at the University of Texas on the impact of religion on women's contraceptive choices, we found that Texas women negotiate religion and contraception in very personal ways. A Catholic woman who got her tubes tied after giving birth said, "The church is against all that, but I am too old to have (more) children. I had a high-risk pregnancy, and, with the permission of God, we decided to do the surgery." Another woman who used condoms for contraception recounted, "We are not really allowed to be on birth control. As much as I love my religion and follow up with it, I think that it is up to me to decide my birth control."

Indeed, religious considerations have very little influence over women's decisions about whether to use contraception

### The conflict between access to contraception and Catholic teachings can go to absurd lengths.

or about which method of birth control to use. In the study, conducted with over 1,000 low-income Hispanic women in Texas, 87 percent were Catholic or of another Christian faith. Among these women, only 6 percent reported that religion influenced their contraceptive choices. And within this small group of women who reported any impact of faith at all, the majority reported that other considerations, including their health or the health of their children, took precedence over their religion's view of contraception.

Sometimes, women's religious convictions even compel them to use contraception. A Catholic woman using the pill describes using contraception as a way to help her follow her religious beliefs to avoid unplanned pregnancies and abortion: "If I become pregnant, I can't get an abortion. It would be a big sin. But, I can try to avoid pregnancy."

The balance favoring the views of institutions over those of the women they serve is nothing new. Women's views on contraception — even those of religious women — are often ignored in the U.S. health care system at great cost to women and taxpayers more generally. For example, Catholic ethical and religious directives prohibit elective female sterilizations to

be performed at Catholic-run hospitals.

This conflict between access to contraception and Catholic teachings can go to absurd lengths. In Austin, Catholic-owned Seton hospital system took over Brackenridge, the county-owned safety net hospital, when it was in financial trouble in the mid-1990s. Eventually, in order to provide sterilizations and other reproductive health care not allowed by Catholic teachings, the county built a "hospital within a hospital." Taxpayers were stuck with nearly \$7 million of the \$9 million remodeling bill. But the hospital-within-a-hospital approach couldn't survive financially. Women who want a sterilization in the hospital after delivery now must deliver in a nearby for-profit hospital with a doctor on call whom they have never met.

Taxpayers foot large bills to support Catholic hospitals. Every year, these institutions receive millions in federal and state funds through Medicaid and Medicare payments.

As taxpayers and Americans who want better health care and want everyone's religious choices to be respected, we should demand that the Trump administration not cater to the narrow religious views of a few powerful business owners and religious institutions. Instead, our government should protect women's rights to their own religious beliefs about contraception — and with that, women's access to critical reproductive health care.

Hopkins is a research assistant professor at the University of Texas and an investigator with the Texas Policy Evaluation Project.



People participate in a candlelight vigil in Sutherland Springs for the victims of the mass shooting at the First Baptist Church on Sunday. Twenty-six people were killed. JAY JANNER / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

### BE A PART OF THE DISCUSSION

The Austin American-Statesman encourages feedback from readers. Please include a full name, address and daytime and evening phone numbers. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, style and clarity. Edited letters address a single idea and do not exceed 150 words. Anonymous letters will not be published. Letters become property of the Austin American-Statesman.

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# VIEWPOINTS

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WESAY DAM SAFETY

## Why Texas dams need scrutiny

Texas has made progress in addressing dam safety – there is no doubt. But more needs to be done to keep Texans who live near dams safe.

Twenty years after the Austin American-Statesman reported on widespread shortcomings in dam safety, another Statesman investigation by Ralph K.M. Haurwitz published last week found hundreds of dams in Texas remain at risk of failure. It also found that, as more communities develop near dams, substandard dams increasingly put the lives of people at risk.

Meaningful change at the state and local level, however, can ensure Texas has safer dams and that it protects more lives near dams.

Changes should start at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which regulates and inspects dams. The commission should reconsider its hazard risk, or dam safety designation system. State legislators should also revisit a 2013 law that exempts rural dams from safety regulations. Texas should also create a loan program that allows private dam owners – private dams account for almost half of all Texas dams – to address dam

safety issues. Local elected officials can help by pursuing regulation for proposed development near dams; none currently exists.

Those changes need to come sooner than later. There are 7,229 dams in Texas – 27 percent of those are upstream of populated areas where lives would be at risk if the dams were breached. Disaster is just one huge storm away.

The worst-case flood is a dam's biggest threat. That scenario calls for the most severe wet-weather conditions reasonably possible, according to TCEQ. Texas knows too well what that looks like: Band after band of heavy rain over one particular area, like Houston experienced during Hurricane Harvey. A similar storm over a dam near a populated area anywhere in Texas could be catastrophic.

In 1997, the Statesman reported on the alarming state of neglect and inadequate oversight of dams in Texas. At that time, nearly two-thirds of dams that sat above populated areas lacked inspection. Back then, the Commission on Environmental Quality dam safety team had just six employees.

Today, the environmental

commission's dam safety team has grown to 30 employees and has a \$2.3 million annual budget. More dams whose failure would put people at risk are regularly inspected – and most dams under the commission's oversight have submitted emergency plans.

Still, current state and local policies give experts reason to call dam safety in Texas an increasingly urgent matter.

We agree.

One problem is the environmental commission's safety designation system.

In Texas, a dam receives a "high-hazard potential" classification if the lives of seven or more people are in danger in a worst-case flood. A mid-level rating of "significant-hazard potential" is designated if the loss of up to six lives is expected in the event of dam failure.

High-hazard dams are required to meet the environmental commission's strictest standards. The commission should require those high standards of any dam that threatens even a single life in a worst-case flood. That's how the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers and most states clas-

sify a dam high-hazard. Texas should, too.

During the last legislative session, state lawmakers gave the Texas Water Development Board \$600,000 to create the state's first flood plan. The plan will evaluate statewide flood risks and propose solutions for local governments to decrease those risks. State leaders must ensure the plan includes how to address dam failure risks.

Legislators should also revisit a state law that exempts dams from safety regulations.

That law, championed by then-Gov. Rick Perry, permanently exempts 3,232 dams in Texas – or 45 percent – from inspections and other safety requirements because of their relatively small size and rural locations. Although more than 90 percent of these dams would not be expected to cause loss of life if they failed, 231 of them are in the up-to-six-deaths-are-possible category, Haurwitz found.

The law puts convenience for private dam owners – who argued before legislators that safety-related studies and costs for improvements are too expensive – over the safety of people who live below the dams.

A state loan program would help dam owners with safety expenses. Legislators should consider creating such a fund.

The threats dams pose have also increased because more people have been allowed to settle below dams in what engineers call the potential inundation zone, which includes areas well outside the 100-year flood plain, which has a 1 percent chance of flooding during any given year. Development near dams, as the Statesman reports, is mostly unregulated by local, state and federal authorities. As a result, construction of housing, businesses and roads puts structures and people's lives at potential risk from dams.

That needs to change.

Local elected officials across the state, including in Austin, need to limit development near dams, where a worst-case flood would threaten loss of life.

Experts say that the probability that a catastrophic storm causes dam failure is low. But, if Texas weather has taught us anything, it is to expect the unexpected. As such, state and local officials must make it a priority to keep communities near dams as safe as possible.

YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Many died despite 'good guy with gun'

Nov. 15 commentary, "What if Sutherland Springs had no 'good guy with a gun'?"

"The fact that a bystander armed with his own rifle chased and shot the perpetrator in Sutherland Springs crucially transforms the terrain of the political interpretation of the shootings."

Twenty-six people died. Children died. Families were destroyed. A small town will never be the same. What kind of distorted logic leads anyone to see this as anything less than a complete tragedy? Because the shooter could have killed 50? 100?

The shooter had an assault rifle. Should we fight fire with fire and have people armed with AR-15s at schools, churches and workplaces? In addition to seeing guns everywhere, should we turn half the populace into law enforcement officers? The "good guy with a gun" narrative over improved gun control adds up to a deranged society – exactly what the extremist NRA wants.

DAVID WEINBERG, AUSTIN

### Focus on gun control, not more guns

Re: Nov. 12 commentary, "Heroes and vigilantes and gun laws."

Ken Herman's column falsely seeks to cast blame on mental health issues and violent movies for recent mass shootings.

If violent movies were to blame, then why do other industrialized nations of the world have lower levels of gun violence than us, despite having the same violent content available to their citizens?

Mental health issues are to blame? We have a gun homicide rate 30 times greater than the British, so do we have 30 times as many mentally ill people per capita as them? I don't think so.

What we do have a lot more of in this country than the British are guns. Congress needs to look toward passing gun laws like the U.K. and Japan have. Both countries have among the toughest gun control laws in the world – and gun violence is virtually nonexistent in these countries.

NEAL JOHN, AUSTIN

### Renaming schools reveals ignorance

Re: Nov. 14 article, "AISD moves to rename remaining schools with Confederate ties by August."

So, the school board president says, "We don't need schools named for Confederate soldiers and sympathizers."

What a shallow, simplistic view of people living in a different time, facing the complex issues of slavery and state's rights that our country had struggled with from its founding. How sad that a whole generation of Americans are painted with such a broad stroke – never mind their accomplishments or contributions. It all comes down to Confederates bad, Federals good.

Consider this: In 1836, Santa Anna swept in to Texas to put down a rebellion and free the slaves. Based on the school board's criteria, sounds like a school should be named after him.

WILLIAM L. CAMPBELL, CEDAR PARK

### Leave Southern history alone

Re: Nov. 14 article, "AISD moves to rename remaining schools with Confederate ties by August."

I read again about five schools changing their names because they were named after Confederate soldiers and statesmen. I'm tired of all this racism.

I am being discriminated against just because I am from the South – and more specifically, from Texas. These Confederate figures were part of our Southern history. Even if you don't agree with them today, they were doing what they thought was right at their time in life.

Leave our history alone. You can't change the past; it is what it is.

ANITA BRADLEY, LEANDER

### Remember where the money comes from

Re: Nov. 15 letter to the editor, "If contraception is key, find job that provides it."

The letter writer forgets that these institutions receive federal, state and local money for the services they provide, directly

or indirectly.

We are also a secular country, subject to federal, state and local laws and regulations. If these institutions do not want to abide by these laws and regulations and are given a way out – like drop all federal, state and local subsidies or remove themselves from the business completely – they can do that. Someone else will pick up the slack. Then, they will not need to comply and their conscience will be clear.

GILBERTO MENDOZA, AUSTIN

### Memory problems? Go home, Sessions

I am outraged, offended and frustrated that Attorney General Jeff Sessions thinks we should believe him when he answers – under oath – that he cannot recall.

If he cannot recall, then he is clearly unfit to be the attorney general of the United States – or senator from Alabama, or any other job with a modicum of responsibility.

He needs to resign immediately and go quietly back home to be cared for by his doctor and his family. Of course, if he is lying, he needs to resign immediately and hope that he can go back home and remain out of the public view forever instead of going to jail.

NANCY LABASTIDA, AUSTIN

### Military unit solution a 'really bad' idea

Re: Nov. 15 letter to the editor, "Time to get 'political' about mass murders."

Ideas to prevent further mass shootings abound, as all of us would like to prevent further bloodshed. Most are simply impractical, but occasionally one is floated that is really bad, like the suggestion in Wednesday's letter that a person must be part of a military unit to purchase certain poorly defined types of guns.

The writer should watch "Full Metal Jacket," or at least the scene where the drill instructor lectures trainees at the gun range, pointing out that Charles Whitman and Lee Harvey Oswald learned their marksmanship in the Marine Corps.

LAURENCE RAGAN, AUSTIN

## Yes, we can do something to stop the gun massacres



Juan Castillo  
Commentary

It seems outrageous now, but cruising New Mexico streets while tossing back a beer used to be as common as Hatch chiles in August. It was the culture, pure and simple, says Doug Fritzsche, who used to live there.

Not surprisingly, until the 1990s, New Mexico led the nation in alcohol-related deaths, the New York Times reported back in 2005. Carnage on the highways stirred outrage, which triggered new laws that reduced the number of deaths.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving was out front trying to change the culture by latching on to a singular, strategic focus:

"They said this behavior is killing people," Fritzsche told me.

Change would also come to Texas, among more than two dozen states where it was still legal to drink and drive in the mid-1980s.

Why is MADD's strategy back then still noteworthy now?

Fritzsche thinks focusing on behavior that presents a public-safety issue could work to change the culture once more as America wrestles with a different problem that's killing people with disturbing regularity: gun violence.

It could be successful, he said, if it focuses specifically on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, like the ones used in the nation's string of mass shootings. Highly militarized weaponry just doesn't make any sense, "and it's created a great deal of damage, so why don't we do something about it," Fritzsche said.

If you read these pages regularly, you might recognize Fritzsche's name. A Presbyterian Church pastor now living in Austin and working in New Braunfels, he recently penned a powerful op-ed for us. Fritzsche wrote about how Gov. Greg Abbott put the Sutherland Springs church massacre in the context of historical evil.

Fritzsche took issue with the idea that evil is simply a fact of life and the message that sends: that we are powerless to do anything about it.

By the way, Fritzsche is no "anti-gun nut," as he put it. In the Army, he learned how to use an assault weapon and he's owned guns. He's somewhat torn about the gun debate; guns have a function in society, he said, but not highly militarized weapons.

I also wrote about the Sutherland Springs massacre last week. I said it is long past time we do something about the mass shootings that have become the new norm in America.

Many of you wrote back. Some said you feel the same way – and you're fed up that our lawmakers aren't doing anything about it. I've heard from gun owners who can't fathom how assault weapons have legitimate use outside the military.

Others said I'm another typical "knee-jerk liberal" intent on making this a political issue and on taking your guns away. Keep the guns. I understand the Second Amendment. I get why hunters and those who would protect their homes need their weapons.

I shared the latter reaction with Gina Hinojosa, the Austin Democrat who represents the 49th District in the Texas House.

"It's a knee jerk-reaction. You don't even say (gun control) and people put you in this camp," she said.

Like Fritzsche, she couldn't just sit idly after Sutherland Springs.

So, three days after the massacre, Hinojosa, a member of the state Homeland Security and Public Safety committee, joined a few fellow legislators at a Capitol news conference to urge state lawmakers to declare gun violence a public health issue.

"Let's not confuse this debate into one about the Second Amendment or going after anyone's guns," Hinojosa said. "This is what com-

mon-sense people of good conscience who are law-abiding want."

I'm appalled when I hear some people say that the massacres that snuff out innocent lives at churches, concerts, movie theaters and elementary schools are just the price we pay for our freedom.

But I find it reassuring that people like Fritzsche and Hinojosa are standing for the courage of their convictions and are looking for solutions and places where all can come to reasonable agreement. I'm heartened to hear that a bipartisan group of senators led by Texas Republican John Cornyn unveiled legislation last week to strengthen background checks for gun sales. A Quinnipiac University poll released the same day found support among Americans for universal background checks at an all-time high.

Americans aren't powerless. We know that the man who massacred churchgoers at Sutherland Springs had a domestic violence conviction in military court that should have barred him from buying a gun. Yet, he bought a gun each year since 2014. We don't have to let that stand.

The subject of gun violence is sadly ensnared in a culture war. But I believe that common sense and good conscience can transcend ideology. A few of you wrote to say that's naive.

Sure, the gun issue divides Americans – that's plain to see. But in the end, we all share a common and decent humanity and a unifying respect for the common good.

Objectives aimed at preventing more mass shootings are ones all Americans can rally around. Doing nothing after each mass shooting is tantamount to throwing up our hands and saying, "Oh, well, life goes on." Yes, but at what price?

Castillo is the American-Statesman's editorial page editor. You can contact him at jcastillo@statesman.com

## Be a part of the discussion

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WESAY AUSTIN POLICE CONTRACT

## How Austin should take on police contract talks

We welcome the Austin Police Association's decision to restart negotiations on an employment contract after the Austin City Council in December uncharacteristically rejected an agreement hammered out over months between city staff and the police union.

In past years, when both parties reached agreement, the council routinely approved the deal. This time, however, it was the City Council voting unanimously to nix the contract in a stunning setback to the police union and city negotiators.

The vote came after a marathon public hearing in which dozens of residents testified on the proposed five-year agreement, with most opposing the contract in a public show of their displeasure with the current meet-and-confer bargaining system. The cost to taxpayers for the contract would have been about \$80 million over five years, according to a city official.

Two key issues will drive negotiations that resume this month: greater accountability and transparency for police officers, and the amount of money the city is willing to spend on their pay raises and benefits.

Underlying those issues will be another question: whether the city should continue the meet-and-confer system with trade-offs that permit flexibility in hiring and promotions – or revert to civil service that relies heavily on written exams for hiring and promotions.

There also is a third lesser-known option that the city of Dallas employs in which terms for police salaries, hiring, promotions and discipline are done via city ordinance. That option also spells out accountability and transparency measures.

In our view, the city and council should work with the



Austin police Cpl. Troy Wismar checks his computer before heading out on patrol in January. As the city and police union resume negotiations on a contract, the city must continue to aim for diversity, excellence and accountability in the department.

RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

police union to craft an agreement that maintains the public's expectations regarding safety, transparency and accountability. It's also important for Austin's police department to hire men and women who reflect the city's racial, cultural and gender diversity.

Of the two systems, the meet-and-confer system is the best way to achieve that goal. Under that system, the city can bargain with the police union over salary, pay raises, benefits and the methods used to hire, promote and discipline officers. Typically, the city uses financial incentives and benefits to win concessions from the police union in hiring and promoting officers.

It was through such contract negotiations that the city created the Police Monitor's Office and established public oversight through the Citizens Review Panel. While the monitor's office has survived as a standing city office, the citizens panel was eliminated after

the police contract expired because it lost its authority to investigate confidential internal affairs cases regarding police misconduct.

Under meet-and-confer bargaining, the city has been able to create a police department that better reflects the community it serves. It's worth noting that about 8 percent of Austin Police Department officers are African-American, and 20 percent are Latino. Whites make up just over 69 percent of officers, while Asians and/or Pacific Islanders make up the rest, according to APD figures.

Interim Police Chief Brian Manley says the department still has ground to make up regarding diversity, but notes it would not have made as much progress as it has without the meet-and-confer system.

City officials also note that officers are more educated than before the meet-and-confer bargaining was established and are better trained. There are more women on the force,

and the police chief has greater authority in setting up disciplinary procedures.

A return to civil service likely would save money as salary increases and other benefits would be determined by the city alone. But even if it curbs the amount the city pays Austin officers – who on average are the highest-paid in Texas – a civil-service system would erode the diversity of the department and limit the police chief's ability to pick a leadership team. All those key decisions would be based on a written exam.

"Promotions under civil service would be limited to a written test," Manley said. "So, we would end up promoting people who are good test-takers, but might not have the skills to be good leaders."

As the city and police union again bargain for a contract, we encourage both parties to focus on the following:

■ Beef up the Citizens Review Panel with tools that

give it more teeth and greater transparency, such as subpoena power and authority to release confidential records to the public. Austin needs a citizen oversight panel that not only can do its work but show it to the public.

■ Maintain a flexible hiring and promotions system that supports Austin values regarding diversity and does not undermine the police chief's authority to build a skilled leadership team.

■ Offer salaries and benefits that maintain the police department's competitive advantage but do not break the bank. That might mean a reduction in salary increases of 1.9 percent proposed in the contract that failed. That is doable without a cut to officers' pay because of the generous bonuses – called "step pay" – that the city awards officers for years of service.

■ Steer whatever savings a new contract generates to social programs that address the root causes of crime.

The city might also consider negotiating a three-year contract instead of five years. During that period, new City Manager Spencer Cronk, who will oversee negotiations, could examine the Dallas system and a separate proposal by the Austin Justice Coalition to replace the Citizens Review Panel with a city-financed non-profit that would operate independent of meet-and-confer bargaining.

Cronk was hired in part for his skill in bringing parties together. That will be tested during this new phase of bargaining.

We urge all parties to come to the table in good faith and keep focused on the goal of improving public safety. Austin residents expect no less.

### YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Let CDC study data on gun violence

The United States is dealing with a public health epidemic. This disease is killing children, police officers, and young men and women. In the past, our nation has addressed serious epidemics such as polio, AIDS and lung cancer. First, we gathered valid information. We then studied the origins of these diseases. Ultimately, smoking cessation in the case of lung cancer, or vaccines and public health measures in viral illnesses, were implemented.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, our national research arm, is not allowed by Congress to collect information on gun violence and its causes. Since 1996, the CDC has no comprehensive data that would help us determine a rational approach to this public health problem.

By recognizing this epidemic as a public health issue, we can view gun violence as a disease that has a solution and begin to look for it in an organized fashion.

**RICHARD PEARCE,**  
GEORGETOWN

#### Who has courage to pass gun legislation?

I am so sick and tired of this never-ending cycle of mass shootings and Congress' "thoughts and prayers" and "now's not the time to talk about gun reform" and then, in a few days or weeks, the same thing over again.

When will our representatives stand up to the National Rifle Association? How many children's lives must be lost before they do the right thing? Just how much more important is keeping their seats than the lives of our children?

The NRA is holding them hostage. It's time for our representatives to

be courageous and take a stand! It's time to ban assault weapons. It's time to ban bump stocks. It's time to enhance background checks. It's time to pass sensible gun reform!

**MARY SCHWINDT,**  
CEDAR PARK

#### Team USA's diversity a wonderful thing

Team USA represents the best argument for an open and welcoming immigration policy.

Team USA, 244 strong, come from a diverse variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The one thing they have in common is sharing their honor and pride in representing us at this Winter Olympics.

Chloe Kim, a first-generation Korean-American, took gold in the women's half pipe competition. Mirai Nagasu, whose parents are Japanese immigrants, was only the third woman to land a triple axel at the Olympics.

While we marvel at their feats every day, do not forget that they are the children of immigrants who came here in search of the American Dream.

Do not let the narrow vision of a Donald Trump deprive us of their achievements, simply because they come from the wrong religion, race or culture!

**FARIDA KHAN,** AUSTIN

#### You'll never find a Trump Democrat

Re: Feb. 14 letter to the editor, "Now Herman must cite Democrats for Trump."

Recently, a subscriber wrote a letter suggesting that Ken Herman, in the interest of fairness, interview a Democrat who voted for Trump.

If the reader can find one, by all means, he should let Herman know.

However, I'm wondering where he's going to find a Democrat who was

willing to vote for a candidate with the values, character and ignorance of Donald J. Trump.

**MARY PRICE,**  
AUSTIN

#### Trump will not let up on sexist attitude

"All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks."

Sarah Grimké wrote these words in 1837 on the topic of equality of the sexes. Today, the year is 2018 and we have a president who, when shown cold hard facts (something he has trouble with) of domestic abuse, calls it a "mere allegation" and continued to praise a wife beater (who denied all allegations) with no security clearance.

With that alone, I felt the allegorical foot of the president of the United States push down harder on not only the necks of the women who had suffered at the hands of Trump's most trusted aide, but for women all over the world (including myself). His actions show he has no intentions of ever letting up.

**VERONICA WILLIAMS,**  
HOUSTON

#### Don't ignore intel chiefs on Russia

At the Senate Intelligence Committee's annual hearing the heads of the CIA, NSA, FBI and other intelligence units once again warned that Russia intends to meddle in our midterm elections.

Why is the Trump administration delaying sanctions on Russia? Congress voted for these sanctions in bipartisan fashion. Why is Trump ignoring evidence that Russia has meddled in elections with the aim of weakening our democracy? This is a nefarious attack by an outside foreign power.

**WALTER MAGAÑA,**  
AUSTIN

## Thoughts and prayers won't stop this cycle of madness



**Juan Castillo**  
Commentary

Hunkered down on a classroom floor with his classmates, as a shooter roamed the halls opening fire on teachers and students, a terrified 14-year-old Florida high schooler tweeted these chilling words Wednesday:

"I am in a school shooting right now ..."

Once, these words would have seemed unfathomable, even in the city where lethal bullets rained down from a University of Texas tower 51 years ago.

Now – incredibly, sadly – mass shootings are almost commonplace.

The latest gun massacre in America left at least 17 people dead. Slaughtered. Words fail us at times like these, incapable of capturing the depth of our grief, our disgust and, yes, our rage.

"This keeps happening again and again and again ..." said a headline on CNN's website Thursday over a graphic listing 21 shootings at U.S. schools from 2000 to 2017. Not a complete list, those massacres killed 64 people, including 26 children at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. They do not include at least eight school shootings in 2018, nor the mass shootings in Las Vegas (2017) and Orlando (2016) and down the road just three months ago, at a country church in Sutherland Springs, where a gunman killed 26.

Each mass shooting brings a familiar and cruel cycle: Politicians offer impotent and hollow thoughts and prayers; partisan politics fuel intransigent Facebook debates; politicians shamelessly

beg off debating gun policy, saying now is not the time; and Congress sits on its hands. And then the next shooting comes along and pierces a gaping hole in our collective soul once more.

With virtually every mass shooting, we learn once again that semiautomatic guns with large magazines of ammunition that can more easily inflict mass casualties are accessible to people intent on slaughtering. In the case of Wednesday's mass shooting in Parkland, Fla., authorities said the AR-15 rifle used by the gunman was purchased legally. In Florida, an AR-15 is easier to buy than a handgun, The New York Times reported.

Military-style weapons like the AR-15 have been used in many if not most of the nation's recent mass shootings. Despite the increasing occurrence of these massacres, there's been no federal legislation to tighten gun laws since Newtown. Though Congress passed a national assault weapons ban in 1994, it expired a decade later.

Still, with every mass shooting the argument persists that weapons are not the issue. President Donald Trump, who pointedly avoided mentioning gun control Thursday, said he would make school safety a top priority and tackle the "difficult issue of mental health." The Florida shooter was mentally disturbed, Trump said.

It's not the first time the president has sought to spin a mass shooting as a mental health issue. We can't forget, however, that it was Trump who undid an Obama-era regulation that would have blocked some mentally ill people from buying guns.

That effort to strengthen national background checks was a response to the massacre at Newtown.

In his tweets Thursday, Trump offered prayers and condolences to the families of the victims. A survivor of the mass shooting lashed back: "Prayers won't fix this. But gun control will prevent it from happening again."

Another Trump tweet seemed to lay some responsibility on neighbors and classmates who he said knew the shooter was a "big problem." Perhaps the president could also look inward and see his hypocrisy on mental health and mass shootings.

On Wednesday, as that terror-filled, 14-year-old high school student live-tweeted on the mass shooting, one of his followers responded, "Stay safe and stay hidden, Aidan! We're all pulling for you, kiddo."

All Americans should pull for the safety of our children by demanding that Congress pass gun laws to help protect them from mass shootings. No parent should have to fear that sending off their child to school in the morning might be the last time they see them alive.

We strive to be a civilized society but we fail our aspirations – and our children – when we do not act and when we allow our lawmakers to not act. Grief and rage cannot bring us to our knees. Words cannot fail us; they must inspire us to act. We are only powerless if we choose to be.

How many more times will we allow ourselves to read these haunting words again: "I am in a school shooting"?

Contact Juan Castillo at 512-445-3667.



# VIEWPOINTS

Austin American-Statesman

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WE SAY GUN VIOLENCE

## Listen to our children about guns

The national gun debate has a new, youthful face. This time children are the grown-ups driving the discussion, and they have something to say. We should all listen.

Even as they mourned the deaths of 17 of their schoolmates and faculty, the survivors of the Feb. 14 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., channeled their grief and rage into activism as leaders of the newly christened NeverAgain movement.

This you know already, because the newest, youngest activists are succeeding where others have failed after previous mass shootings — keeping the Florida massacre in the headlines. It is a sobering commentary on how numb we have become to the frequency of mass shootings in America that wall-to-wall news coverage of them is short-lived. Until the next one comes along.

But not this time. Calling for stricter gun laws and a ban on assault weapons, the Florida survivors are inspiring young people across the country to call out the adults for not doing more to prevent mass school shootings. They're all over television and social media, and organizing marches and school walkouts nationwide, including here in Austin. National days of protest are planned for March and April.

These young people deserve our attention, and we applaud them for their courage. The gun violence debate is fraught with personal attacks and diatribes, stereotypes, conspiracy theories and misinformation.

A national poll taken after the Florida shootings found that our country's polarization on guns is as severe as ever. Fifty percent of Americans support a nationwide ban on assault weapons, and 46 percent oppose one, according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll released Tuesday.

Who knows whether we will one day look on the students' activism as a tipping point for seismic change? For now, there's no denying their movement is extraordinary and is reverberating across the country.

"They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS," said Emma Gonzalez, a senior at the Florida school who has become one of the determined faces of the student uprising.

Their resolve and passion are admirable, but these young leaders face monumental challenges. Barely days ago some of them were running down their school's halls fleeing a killer who stalked them, wielding an AR-15 that fired dozens of rounds in a matter of minutes. Now they have come under attack again, mocked on social media by people who clearly have no sense of decency or humanity.

Conspiracy theorists said the students were paid actors, claims that were easily debunked though they spread far and wide. A Florida legislator's aide was quickly fired for perpetuating that falsehood, a sign that this movement was gaining legitimacy.

There were more potent signs of growing momentum.



About 100 students from Clint Small Middle School in Southwest Austin staged a walkout Wednesday to protest school gun violence in support of shooting victims in Florida. RALPH BARRERA / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump met with grieving family members and survivors of mass shootings, including the one in Parkland. And at a town hall that night, shooting survivors confronted Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and state lawmakers and demanded a ban on assault-style weapons.

Earlier in the week, the president ordered the Justice Department to ban so-called rapid-fire bump stocks, which increase weapons' firepower. Bump stocks were used in last year's massacre of concertgoers in Las Vegas.

Trump also offered support for a proposal by Sen. John Cornyn of Texas for legislation to improve national gun background checks.

"We must move past clichés and tired debates and focus on evidence-based solutions and security measures that actually work," Trump said.

We hope the president is sincere, but we should note that his principal achievement on guns has been to undo an Obama-era regulation designed to keep firearms away from some people with mental illness. And the tone-deaf remedy he offered after his White House meeting with survivors was to arm specially trained teachers — in other words, to fight guns with more guns.

While the National Rifle Association supports additional regulations on bump stocks, it opposes an outright ban on assault-style weapons, which are typically the firearms of choice in mass shootings, putting them in the center target of the gun debate.

Advocates of a ban say the guns, when paired with high-capacity magazines, are essentially weapons of war intended to inflict widespread lethal damage in moments.

Opponents say banning guns based on the actions of a perpetrator who is mentally ill will not prevent attacks and punishes law-abiding gun users.

It's the shooter, not the gun, goes the common refrain. We agree with the president: We must move past those tired clichés and debates. The gun debate is strewn with them, and they perpetuate a status quo of inaction that gave us Columbine, Newtown, Orlando, Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs and now Parkland.

"How many children have to get shot?" the anguished father of one of the Florida victims asked Trump.

Yes, Americans have a constitutional right to carry arms. But Americans are fed up too. They want change. Another survey released after the Florida massacre found that Americans back stricter gun laws by a margin of 66 to 31 percent — the highest level of support ever measured by the Quinnipiac University poll.

Still, there is the history of inaction and Congress' inability or unwillingness to address gun violence.

One of the NeverAgain activists, Jedediah Grady, a high school student from Silver Spring, Md., seemed to perfectly grasp the enormity of the challenge student activists face.

"I understand marching isn't automatically going to change legislation ... but it's not just about change. Next year I'll be able to vote."

By all means, young man. And make it count. In the meantime, keep speaking out. America is listening.

### YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Student: Evidence on guns overwhelming

Re: Feb. 21 article, "15-year-old student shot 5 times protecting classmates from gunfire."

Evidence over feelings. Shouldn't the American people rally behind this mantra with pride? Isn't this a hill worth dying on for the safety of our children?

I am a junior in high school — and the reality of my life is that I live in a country with more school shootings than the rest of the planet combined. This is terrifying. But more than this, it's infuriating. In America's tireless defense of constitutional rights, gun reform takes a backseat while children continue to be slaughtered.

Evidence does not lie. And the evidence is screaming. Every other country does not encounter these problems. Are Americans just more homicidal? I don't believe that. Are countries this large bound to have mass shootings? Look at China, Russia and countries in Europe.

The children of America live under the threat of murder in our own classrooms. What are you going to do about it?

NICKOLI BENKERT,  
CEDAR PARK

#### We need to reach out to anyone suffering

In the wake of the Florida shooting, many people are calling for the government to solve the problem. While there certainly are different gun laws and mandates that need reworking to better protect our communities, the solution doesn't rest entirely upon Washington.

We as a society — and especially in our own communities — need to ban together and seek out those in suffering, whether physical or emotional, and try to help them. This doesn't mean we should all become

the next Mother Teresa, but it does mean that we should look to help those who are struggling.

As a junior in high school, I especially see how easy it is for someone to become ostracized from the community. While some people might say it's not their responsibility or problem, when someone like Nikolas Cruz strikes out, it becomes everyone's problem.

RALEIGH DEWAN, AUSTIN

#### Explain scary news to kids, don't hide it

Re: Feb. 21 article, "Instant access to news may scar some children."

This is our world. Keeping children in the dark about these unfortunate events is not an option. It is imperative that we educate adolescents about the unfortunate realities of American life.

As a student at a private school, I've spent most of my life being shielded from the "real world" — and I've worked very hard to make up for my 11 years of political blindness. News exists in many forms, including social media. Real-time first-person updates regarding school shootings are the reason that my peers and I are so passionate about today's political scene.

It's incredibly dangerous to hide the truth for fear of emotional damage. It's supposed to be upset. That's the point. That's the reason that we are going to be the generation that actually does something about it.

DEAN JORDAN,  
CEDAR PARK

#### Pickens has right idea on settlement

Re: Feb. 21 commentary, "Three thoughts for Texas on spending emissions settlement."

T. Boone Pickens makes a lot of sense. Texas' portion of the fine that Volkswagen will pay for cheating on emissions tests should go

to medium- and heavy-duty natural gas vehicles for all the reasons Pickens stated: getting the most value out of the award, demonstrating the feasibility of cleaner alternative fuel trucks in rural areas and boosting the Texas economy.

Especially if natural gas producers capture emissions at the well head, natural-gas vehicles are the right choice now. Heavy-duty natural-gas vehicles can help bridge the coming era of market-based solutions to reduce carbon emissions. With carbon fee programs — hopefully with fair dividends to all citizens like the proposal of Citizen's Climate Lobby and other groups — natural-gas vehicles will be cheaper and cleaner to operate when all costs are considered.

CYNTHIA LESKY, AUSTIN

#### Proposition 6 has ulterior motives

As a Republican, I am concerned with the latest tactics of our lieutenant governor. As I dutifully went to early voting on the Republican ballot, there was Proposition 6: Texas should protect the privacy and safety of women and children in spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms and showers in all Texas schools and government buildings.

Who would vote "no" to such a proposition unless you know the ulterior motive is to attempt to pass the bathroom bill that failed in the Legislature last year. The reason it failed was:

■ There is and never has been a safety issue in public bathrooms due to gay or transgender people using their bathroom of choice. Not one incident.

■ We have been advised by major corporations and various national sporting events they would not come to Texas if the bill becomes law.

HENRY FELDMAN,  
CEO MARTIN FELDMAN  
HOSPITALITY, SAN ANTONIO

### OTHERS SAY RUSSELL WITHERS

Special Contributor

## Austin's sick leave policy invites legislative cleanup

Once again, the Austin City Council has decided to run the city's private businesses instead of the city of Austin. If it isn't careful, it's going to run those private businesses right out of town, like it did to Uber. Thankfully, the Texas Legislature stepped in on the ride-hailing issue. And while mandatory paid sick leave for private employers may not result in companies leaving the city — they're not all as mobile as Uber — it's one more mandate and compliance burden for those businesses — and one more distraction for a city that already thinks traffic congestion can be solved with more bike lanes.

Austin's new ordinance requires private employers with 15 or fewer employees to provide six full eight-hour work days — 48 hours — worth of paid sick leave. The rest must provide up to eight days — 64 hours. The city determined that employees will accrue paid sick leave at a rate of one hour per 30 hours worked.

Paid sick leave is a good policy for businesses to have. Not only does it help keep employees healthy by encouraging their co-workers to stay home when they are sick, but it's a nice benefit to have generally. It makes an employer more attractive to prospective employees.

The fact that paid sick leave is good policy is why most employers already offer it. The private sector provides paid sick leave to 68 percent of workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Given that 76 percent receive paid vacation and 77 percent receive paid holidays, it is clear most private businesses place a high level

### Rep. Paul Workman has already called the ordinance an 'overreach,' and pledged to file legislation to preempt the city's actions.

of value on these benefits without a government mandate in most cases. But the fact that many people agree on paid sick leave as a good policy does not change the fact that the government should not impose it on all private businesses in the City.

Rather than interfering in the affairs of small businesses, the City Council should focus on getting its own house in order. Austin is a great place to live, but it ranks as having the 18th most-congested traffic in the nation. Analytics company Inrix identifies 1,727 traffic "hotspots" in Austin and estimates that traffic congestion will cost \$8.4 billion by 2026, calculated by wasted time, lost fuel, and carbon emissions. The downtown homelessness problem increased by 50 percent between 2015 and 2017, according to data from the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition. Austin's plastic bag ban from a few years ago is not a clear success, as the reusable plastic bags — which are more difficult to recycle and have a larger carbon footprint than the banned bags — have replaced the banned bags, according to a study conducted by Austin Resource Recovery.

And, of course, there's the embarrassing episode of running Uber out of the city with unnecessarily burdensome business requirements. In 2017, the Texas Legislature stepped in and nullified the Austin ordi-

nance with much more reasonable state-level requirements. It looks as though legislators will act again with respect to the paid sick leave ordinance. Rep. Paul Workman has already called the ordinance an "overreach," and pledged to file legislation to preempt the city's actions. Likewise, Sen. Donna Campbell is "fully prepared to pass statewide legislation to stop Austin's intrusion into the private sector."

Austin increased its population by 37.7 percent in the decade ending in 2015. It ranked first among the 50 largest U.S. cities based on net migration as a percentage of total population. This growth shows no signs of slowing down. The business community is keeping up, doing its part to provide new opportunities — yet the city is more focused on creating new mandates for those businesses than it is on addressing the issues that it is actually responsible for solving. Paid sick leave may be good policy. There are a lot of policies that are good for business, employers and workers. That is none of the city of Austin's business. This ordinance is one more mandate — one more straw to make the burden a little bit heavier. It's a shame that the Legislature is going to have to lighten the load again.

Withers is a policy analyst at the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute in Austin.

### Be a part of the discussion

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