



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under 50,000

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

The issue discussed is the amount of loopholes in the Texas Open Record and Open Meetings laws that allow police to hide virtually everything they do behind the refrain: "It's under investigation." The commentaries call on the public to support legislative efforts to bolster the state's Sunshine Laws while telling them how the loopholes have personally affected their own community newspaper.

We've received a lot of feedback that people here didn't know there was a problem. They had just assumed their news sources had gotten lazy or didn't bother to report all the details. They've become accustomed to using gossip on social media as facts when retelling a story. As a result, complaints about police-related stories that lack more detail than departments offer have fallen to almost zero.

OUR OPINION | HOMELESSNESS

Consider
joining
PIT Count

Just because someone has a roof over their head doesn't mean they're not homeless. As it turns out, defining homelessness is a difficult task.

"Someone who is experiencing homelessness does not have a primary residence," states the Homeless Connections website. "He or she may be staying in a shelter, living on the streets, occupying a motel room, 'doubled up' with friends and family, sleeping in a vehicle, or living in any other unstable or nonpermanent situation."

Imagine then how Herculean the task must be to try to count a city's homeless residents. Making sure volunteers who conduct the counting are trained well must be a top priority. And so it is for the Lamar County Homeless Coalition as the 2019 Point In Time Count approaches.

The PIT Count, scheduled for Jan. 24, is an annual counting of the nation's homeless. It's conducted at the local level by volunteers, and the Lamar County Homeless Coalition is preparing to train volunteers to get the job done.

The training is set for 10 a.m. Monday at the United Way Center, 2340 Lamar Ave., in Paris. To register, call United Way Executive Director and coalition member Jenny Wilson at 903-784-6642.

Please consider volunteering your time for this important survey. The PIT Count helps the coalition know which areas to target their services and whether local programs are helping to lift people out of or prevent them from falling into homelessness. The information gathered also could help local nonprofits seek or maintain funding for programs.

Coalition President Shelly Braziel said police will accompany volunteers not only for safety, but to help direct them to Lamar County's homeless.

Braziel also said several services and organizations will come together for a social service fair to take place in conjunction with the PIT Count from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Jan. 24 at The Salvation Army gymnasium, 350 W. Kaufman St., in Paris.

Homelessness is hard to define and hard to count, but lending the Lamar County Homeless Coalition a hand is easy. Call and volunteer.

» Klark Byrd

ONLINE POLL | VOTE



DANIEL OCHOA DE OLZA/AP File Photo

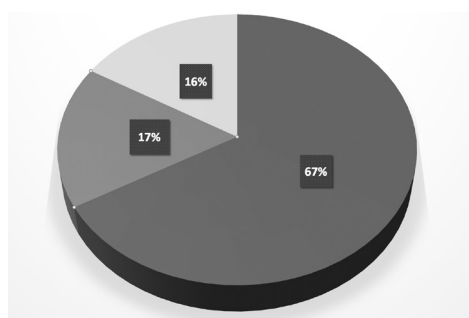
What should be done
to end gov't shutdown?

President Donald Trump and the U.S. Congress reached an impasse over a plan to fund the government that does not include \$5 billion for a southern border wall. Saturday marked two weeks the federal government has been partially shut down.

What do you think should be done to end the shutdown?



SCAN THIS CODE
WITH YOUR
SMARTPHONE
TO VOTE

Thoughts on Paris rescinding
the hospital's tax abatement

67 PERCENT: It was the right thing to do. The hospital promised to not close the south campus in the original agreement. They voided the agreement when it closed.

17 PERCENT: The city should have reworked the agreement with the hospital before voiding the old agreement.

16 PERCENT: The hospital is one of the biggest employers in Lamar County. The city should give Paris Regional Medical Center more leeway.

COMMENTARY | PUBLIC INFORMATION

Texans deserve access to info

In the early morning hours of Feb. 2, 2018, a Clayton (Georgia) Police Department officer's pursuit of a driver who sped off after the officer signaled him to stop ended when the driver crashed into some trees. As the officer approached, the driver came out from the car's back window and leapt at the officer with knife in hand. He missed, but quickly got up and began chasing the officer while wildly swinging the knife.

"Stop or I'll shoot you!" the officer yelled.

"I don't give a ..." the man shouted as he swung the knife twice more before the officer fired three rounds that brought the man down.

Twelve hours. That's how long it took for the Clayton Police Department to release the officer's dash camera footage pursuant to an open records request. Additionally, the officer's name was released along with a statement from the police chief.

Seventy-seven days. That's how long it's been since a Paris police officer fatally shot Edward Paul Zumski in the parking lot of Kings Inn. Here, the police chief also released a statement that named Zumski as the deceased and provided some detail as to why an officer shot him to death. But here the officer has not been identified and the public should expect to never see any related video footage of the shooting.

According to the Paris Police Department statement, officers responded to a reported stabbing at Kings Inn and found a

person bleeding in the parking lot. Their investigation led them to suspect Zumski in the stabbing, and when officers confronted him, he pointed a firearm at them, we're told. That act prompted the use of deadly force, police said.

We also were told the officer who fatally wounded Zumski was placed on administrative leave while the Texas Rangers investigated. In the 77 days since, the only other information released to the public was that the officer on administrative leave returned to duty. When? The department didn't say. We only know it was after a period of administrative leave.

We sought more information, but were told none was available because of the ongoing investigation. Do you want to hear something laughable? That was the same response one of our reporters received a few days ago when he asked an officer at the scene of a vehicle crash how many vehicles were involved.

Let's be clear: I'm not accusing the Paris Police Department of doing something it shouldn't. In both the Clayton and Paris officer-involved shootings, the police departments released as much information as they are required to by law. It just so happens Georgia's Open Records Laws protect the pub-



KLARK
BYRD
Managing
Editor

lic's right to access government information better than Texas'. In fact, in just about every ranking from 2002 to current I could find online, Texas Open Records Laws were ranked among the worst in the nation — No. 49 of 50 in one ranking and grades of D and F in others.

The last time I visited this subject, I said there were about 43 exceptions local and state governmental agencies could use to keep certain records off limits. But the latest "Guide to Texas Open Records and Open Meetings Law" from the Texas Bar Foundation and the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas says "certain records are off limits under about 50 exceptions." Investigative details are one of those exceptions.

Some are understandable, such as to protect Social Security numbers, health records and names of sexual assault victims. But the number of cars involved in a crash? Seriously?

Information not available to newspapers is information not available to you. You cannot fully participate in our democracy without public access to government information and the government cannot be held accountable by a public kept in the dark.

Join me in writing our state representatives to create and support laws that restore Texans' right to government information.

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COMMENTARY | TEXAS ANALYSIS

School finance reform will take new money

Two of the most expensive ways to make Texas voters happy just happen to be the top priorities of the state leaders and legislators assembling this week in Austin.

The state's school finance system is out of balance when it comes to raising money for education, and out of date when it comes to distributing the money it raises. It's expensive to re-balance — even when overall spending remains the same — because it pits one set of taxpayers who'll be paying more against others who'll be paying less.

And lowering property taxes — a closely related but different financial puzzle — is both expensive and elusive. Most modern attempts to cut property taxes have cost the state a lot of money and left most property owners wondering why the advertised savings never appeared.

Texas' school finance solution might not be about spending more money, though that was one of the recommendations in a new report from the Texas Commission on Public School Finance, formed to recommend a top-to-bottom rewrite of the state system for funding public education. If there's already enough money in the system, then the solution may be redistributing it more equitably.

That redistribution, however, is expensive. The state has to raise money on its own if it wants to replace what is currently being raised from cranky property taxpayers. And the state has to figure out who will be the winners and the losers if spending formulas are adjusted, as those "adjustments" mean spending more money on one set of students and less on others.

Even so, the plans advanced so far for public school finance in Texas, as ambitious as some of them are, remain cautiously vague when it comes to sources of new money.

In its final report, that commission said it wanted to: balance local and state funding for public schools; to rework "outdated or otherwise inef-



ROSS
RAMSEY
Texas
Tribune



BOB DAEMMICH/The Texas Tribune

State Sen. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, left, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, and Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Houston, right, chairman of the House Public Education committee, talk with Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, facing, and Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio on May 27, 2017.

efficient allotments, weights and programs;" to increase equity in schools "with significantly greater investment in low-income and other historically underperforming student groups;" to reduce the growth of property taxes and reliance on the so-called "Robin Hood" system that moves money from wealthier districts to poorer ones; to encourage adoption of "data-informed best practices" and to immediately spend more money to do it; and to increase per-pupil funding in the future based on the results of those practices.

Even if not one more dime is spent on public education in Texas, leveling the fundraising load would force the state to raise more money. The last rebalancing, in 2006, put the state and local shares of public school spending at about 45 percent each, with the other 10 percent coming from the federal government. Now, the numbers are 55.5 percent local and 35 percent state, with the rest coming from the feds. Roughly speaking, it would cost more than \$11 billion to balance that, an amount that would require the state to find that much money somewhere — kind of an early Halloween for some set of taxpayers — in order to lower school taxes for property owners.

It is a financial problem, but it's also a political one. That local money is raised from property taxes. Texas has the sixth-highest property taxes in the country, according to the Tax Foundation, a

Washington, D.C.-based think tank that tracks state and federal tax issues. Property owners vote. Voters are screaming at the state's politicians to ease the load. One reason state leaders want to cut property taxes is to make those people happy. But it's a lot to ask: Those same elected servants fear how their masters — you — might react if they increase other taxes to offset cuts in property taxes.

The formula changes are problematic in another way. It costs more to educate some students than others, and state funding for school districts is adjusted to take those differences into account. Changing those outdated adjustment formulas without new money inevitably means spending more on some students and less on others. That will ripple through each school district in a different way — and those ripples will be noted in advance by lawmakers trying to figure out what the changes will do to their schools at home.

It's as tricky as the property tax part: expensive to tinker with, and fraught with political risks for politicians who are trying — whether you believe it or not — to produce a great public school education for Texans for as little money as possible.

Ross Ramsey is executive editor and co-founder of The Texas Tribune, where he writes regular columns on politics, government and public policy. He can be reached at rramsey@texastribune.org or 512-716-8611.



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Editorials on topics relevant to the community are published every Wednesday and Sunday.

OUR OPINION | LEADERSHIP

Bush leaves legacy of service

Few would say George Herbert Walker Bush was a captivating leader. Rather than rile supporters into a frothing mob, the 41st president spoke with calm demeanor and asked for Americans to give in to their duty to serve one another.

Bush's old-school upbringing influenced every aspect of his life. So polite was he even his political adversaries acknowledged his manners.

Bush, who died Friday at the age of 94, was many things during his long life. He was a World War II hero who came home to become a Texas oilman before returning to public service as a congressman, a U.S. ambassador, director of the CIA, vice president and president.

In the White House, Bush called for a "kinder, gentler" nation, and he pressed his fellow Americans to find good causes to support, then volunteer their time to them.

Although not a native son, Bush called Texas home for 70 years after moving from the Northeast to work in the oil fields. His political life began in Houston in 1964, and though he lost that year, his career in politics ascended from his 1966 election to the House.

By his side was wife Barbara Bush, who passed away April 17. With a marriage spanning more than seven decades, the Bushes go down in U.S. history as the longest-married presidential couple. Together, they showed the nation a way forward with service to others. Bush's work in the White House — which includes improving the Clean Air Act and the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act — is a testament to that ethic.

The nation grieves the loss of George H.W. Bush with the Bush family. From a man who truly loved his country comes this advice: "There is no higher honor than to serve free men and women, no greater privilege than to labor in government beneath the Great Seal of the United States and the American flag." Rest in peace, President Bush.

» Klark Byrd

HISTORY | FROM OUR FILES

25 YEARS AGO

Judge reprimands probation department

Publicity about a reprimand of the Sixth Judicial District Adult Probation Department "does no one any good," chief Dan Bono said. In October, employees cited examples they say contribute to a hostile work environment.

COMMENTARY | SUNSHINE LAWS

Time to fight for your rights

Texas Sunshine Laws are bumming me out. Sunshine Laws protect the public's right to access information generated by the government and the right to witness proceedings of government agencies, boards and committees. There's usually two parts, a public information act and an open meetings act.

Texas, like every other state in which I've practiced journalism, has both acts. Unfortunately, Texas' Sunshine Laws do little to no good.

Sources in my research tell me that wasn't always the case. In fact, I've learned Texas' protection of the public's right to know was once the envy of the nation. Over time, though, state lawmakers whittled away at those protections and now, with no less than 43 exemptions allowing the government to refuse disclosure of information, Texas is the darkest state I've ever called home.

This isn't just a problem for journalists. It's not like we have any special privileges simply because of our occupation. Journalists have no more rights than the general public, although we are sometimes granted additional access, say at the scene of a car collision or fire, by on-site officials who would rather deal with one person than rubberneckers by the carload. Every exemption to Sunshine Laws chips away at the public's ability to govern itself.

Paul Watler, past president

of the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas, in a Nov. 20 blog post gave the following examples:

More than two years after five officers were fatally gunned down during a peaceful march in downtown Dallas, the police department continues to refuse media requests for release of video and audio from its investigation.

After a 17-year-old boy took the lives of nine students and a teacher at a high school near Houston this year, local school district officials declined a public information request for a safety audit conducted before the incident, even though there is no apparent prospect of any prosecution related to the safety audit.

Christopher Collins of the Texas Observer on Wednesday recalled how three years ago Enrique Iglesias left the Rio Grande Valley "holding a proverbial sack full of taxpayer cash." In a decision supported by Attorney General Ken Paxton, McAllen officials still refuse to tell residents how much Iglesias was paid.

"The Iglesias debacle was preceded by a 2015 Texas Supreme Court ruling — Boeing Co. v. Paxton — finding that records could be kept secret if their release would

put the government or businesses at a competitive disadvantage," Collins wrote. "The decision blew a gaping hole in the Texas Public Information Act... It's since been cited more than 1,850 times to withhold all kinds of records: power plant deals, school cafeteria contracts, even the identities of Austin city manager candidates."

The state Legislature is soon to convene and some lawmakers want to restore the public's access to government information. State Rep. Terry Canales, whose district includes McAllen, has submitted House Bill 81 to protect the public's right to review payment information for taxpayer-funded entertainment events. Any bolstering of the state's Sunshine Laws is welcome by me.

James Madison, the nation's fourth president, once wrote "a popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

It's high time Texans' access to information was restored. Lend a hand in that effort by telling state lawmakers to back bills that will get the job done.

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ROB ROGERS/Andrews McMeel Syndication

PARTY VIEWS | MASS SHOOTINGS

Regulations will help ensure a safer, still armed nation

It was Aug. 1, 1966, and I had left the UT campus maybe 30 minutes before Charles Whitman unleashed the era of mass shootings in America. Whitman used a hunting rifle. Just imagine how much more damage he could have done with an assault rifle with a bump stock, both of which are now legal.



GARY O'CONNOR
Democrat Party Chairman

America has the highest rate of gun ownership and the highest rate of mass shootings in the world.

Much of Texas and America is rural where guns are necessary and common. Contrary to GOP propaganda, the Democratic Party isn't coming for your guns. What we do want are common sense regulations to protect us from abuse of Second Amendment rights, including the following:

- Require all gun purchasers to pass a thorough background check that includes all criminal, civil and psychological databases with enough of a waiting period to both complete the check and to allow a "cooling off" period for distraught buyers.

- Curtail availability of rapid-fire, magazine-fed, military-style assault weapons with high-capacity clips.

- Prohibit the manufacture, sale or possession of bump stocks, binary trigger systems and trigger cranks that increase the rate of fire.

- Outlaw the personal possession and use of body armor and armor-piercing bullets.

- Repeal legislation granting civil liability immunity to manufacturers and sellers of firearms.

- Enforce criminal penalties for individuals who negligently fail to control access to firearms by minors.

- Enact legislation empowering law enforcement to confiscate weapons from domestic abusers, sex predators and terrorists.

These are among steps we can take to increase our security and reduce gun deaths while still allowing responsible gun ownership. Other countries have successfully implemented regulations that have reduced mass shootings, and we must follow suit for the safety and security of all our citizens, including the more than two-thirds who don't own guns.

Gary O'Connor is chairman of the Lamar County Democratic Party. He can be reached at goconnor1983@yahoo.com.

Society must readjust itself to quell mass shootings

Fifty-two years ago, in 1966, a sniper in the clock tower at Texas University randomly killed 17 people and ushered in the modern era of senseless mass murder shootings.

Since that time, 1,135 people have been killed in similar acts. These tragic events motivate many to call for more gun control laws or even banning or confiscating guns.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported 321,838 deaths due to drunk driving in just 26 years. Annually that's more than 500 times the number of deaths due to mass shootings.

It also reported 3,450 traffic deaths due to texting drivers in 2016 alone. These deaths received far less media attention than mass shooting, perhaps because the perpetrators didn't intentionally kill their victims, or they just occurred far too often.

No one is calling for banning automobiles, cellphones or alcohol because everyone understands it's not these objects, but

the actions of individuals that caused the deaths.

More gun laws are not the answer to quelling mass shootings.

The root cause of mass shootings must be identified and addressed if this problem is ever to be eliminated.

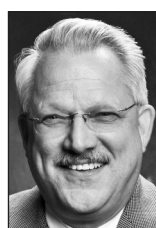
Soft targets like schools, churches and entertainment venues must be hardened through better controlled access and on site trained security protection.

Since the '60s there has been a steady decline in recognizing the importance of traditional family units as the cornerstone of society. Respect for human life is waning as evidenced by the acceptance of abortion and increasing disregard for the homeless and mentally ill.

Many no longer attend church. Society seems to have turned away from God's will and toward the will of individual self satisfaction.

The root cause of mass shootings might be the moral decay of society. The solution might then be calibration of the moral compass, by turning back to God.

Chris Dux is chairman of the Lamar County Republican Party. He can be emailed at chris@usdux.com.



CHRIS DUX
Republican Party Chairman



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