

THE BATTALION

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

JUDGMENT DAY IN AGGIELAND

NO BONFIRE IN 2002

Bowen cites cost, safety and liability factors in decision

By Rolando Garcia
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Aggie Bonfire will not burn next fall, A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen announced Monday, revealing that preparations for Bonfire 2002, 18 months in the making, came unraveled in the past week.

Turner Construction, the New York-based firm that was serving as the safety consultant for Bonfire, withdrew from the project Wednesday because it was unable to obtain insurance to cover the firm's liability for its work on Bonfire.

"Without an acceptable safety plan, the limited role that has been preserved for students still carries a danger above what we can tolerate," Bowen said.

Even with a safety consultant, revised estimates of the cost of Bonfire make it unlikely the 90-year-old tradition could continue, Bowen said. The projected price tag for Bonfire 2002 was \$2.5 million, about \$1 million more than previous

"My heart does not like what my brain is doing today. It would be irresponsible of me to listen to my heart when we are dealing with the safety of our students."

— Dr. Ray M. Bowen
A&M president

estimates. Also, future Bonfires, which Bonfire 2002 Steering Committee Coordinator Dr. Bryan Cole estimated could be built for between \$500,000 and \$750,000, would actually cost \$1.3 million.

"We simply cannot spend this much money to construct a Bonfire," Bowen said.

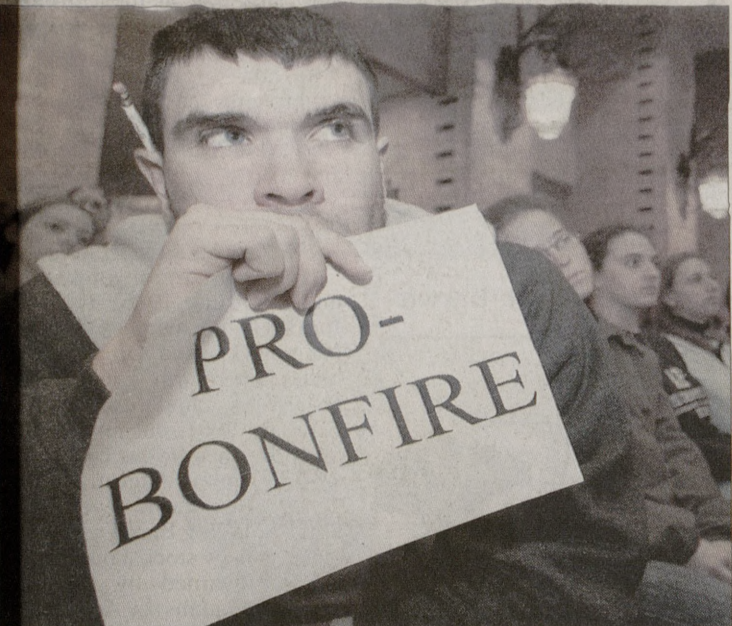
The other factor behind his decision, Bowen said, was the legal liability the University would incur if it continues to sponsor a high-risk activity like Bonfire. Twelve Aggies were killed and 27 were injured when the Bonfire stack collapsed in 1999, and many of the victims' families have sued A&M and top administrators, including Bowen, alleging the University's negligence caused the accident. Liability insurance for students and staff who work on Bonfire would cost \$450,000, Bowen said.

In addition to liability insurance, other expense estimates that accounted for the hefty price tag of Bonfire included engineering and safety consultant services (\$1.1 million), insurance for the consulting firms (\$300,000) and University Bonfire staff (\$250,000).

The Bonfire Steering Committee already has spent \$260,000 on the project and selected a 45-foot-high wedding cake design, in which all logs would touch the ground but be cut to different lengths for a multi-level appearance. The design met the strict safety parameters Bowen established in June 2000, including the elimination of cut, the use of professionally cut logs, a revamped leadership selection process and the use of design and safety plans drafted by licensed professionals.

Despite previously upbeat assurances that the proposed

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TOP AND ABOVE PHOTOS BY JOHN LIVAS • THE BATTALION

Top: Senior political science major Chad Olsen and sophomore industrial distribution major Jonathon Kleckley react to Bowen's decision to cancel Bonfire 2002. **Above left:** Sophomore construction science major David Arabie listens as the fate of Bonfire 2002 is announced on Monday. **Arabie** and hundreds of other students gathered in the MSC Flagroom to watch Bowen's announcement on closed-circuit TV. **Above right:** A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen speaks to the media after announcing the cancellation of Bonfire 2002.

Students, families react to decision

By Sommer Bunce & Brandie Liffick
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The halls of the Memorial Student Center (MSC) were empty moments after A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen told students there would not be an Aggie Bonfire in 2002.

In the upstairs room where he spoke to students and reporters, broadcast to Rudder Theater and the MSC Flagroom and KAMU on-campus channels, students gasped as Bowen named reasons for discontinuing the 90-year tradition he had placed on a moratorium until this year. Then, in one collective movement, students in the press conference room, the Flagroom and Rudder Theater rose, gathered their bags and left, refusing to hear the rest of Bowen's announcement.

On Nov. 18, 1999, 12 Aggies died and 27 were injured when the Bonfire stack swayed and fell at 2:42 a.m.

Student Body President Schuyler Houser, a senior industrial engineering major and member of the steering com-

mittee that worked for 18 months on the Bonfire 2002 project, told students Bowen's decision was "the collapse of a great tradition."

"Bonfire is an amazing memory for those of us who knew it," Houser said at the news conference. "For me, that's what it's going to remain."

The grief the campus felt in the wake of the collapse will be renewed this week, Houser said, as students face the reality that Bonfire will not be held this year and may not be seen on the tradition-filled campus again.

"A university needs to keep its students safe," Houser said. "I felt at first as if after two years, all of our work has been for nothing, but it wasn't for nothing. It was a process we had to go through, and we learned so much about our University ... about the really valuable things about our culture. We also learned of the weak spots."

John Andrew Comstock was trapped for seven hours beneath the fallen stack Nov. 18. Comstock returned to campus

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Aggies rally on Bowen's lawn

By Sommer Bunce
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More than 1,000 students gathered on A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen's lawn Monday night to show their unity in the face of his decision to discontinue Bonfire.

A procession of students walked arm-in-arm from the Northside dorm areas, picking up students as they went along.

Bowen and Vice President for Student Affairs Dr. J. Malon Southerland met the group as they held a yell practice, led by Senior Yell leaders Sam Seidel and Boo Boo Davies. By the end of the spirit yells, Bowen and Southerland joined in, singing "The Spirit of Aggieland," and "humpin' it" for the rest of the yell.

The students' voices echoed from Bowen's residence to Kyle Field.

"We're here to show Dr. Bowen that no matter what decision he made, we stick together as a University," Seidel said.

Bowen thanked students for affirming that the Bonfire decision was important to them. He said that though they may not like what he decided Monday, he said over time students and the administration should come together.



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Students sing the "The Spirit of Aggieland" outside A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen's home Monday night.

"I don't want to be remembered as a guy who ruined Bonfire," Bowen said. "I wear the same ring ya'll do...we share the character all Aggies have."

After the yells, shouts of "Go home, Ags!" filled the air, and the assembled students did just that, dispersing within minutes, as quickly as they had gathered.

The yell leaders said they did not

organize the rally, but joined the gathering students to portray the positive spirit of the University.

Seidel said he wanted to show that students were united in the wake of Bowen's decision.

"For those out there who are wondering how this school would react, this is how," Seidel said.

True Brown and Brandie Liffick contributed to this report.