

Businesses feeling pinch

Town's sinkhole still there

United Press International
BOLING — It has been more than two months since a sinkhole cut through the main road of this unincorporated town of 1,200, and some townspeople say their livelihood is threatened because the road has not been repaired.

On Aug. 11, the bottom dropped out of a 250-foot section of Texas 442 east of Boling.

Officials say it may have been caused by a geological fault or 60 years of sulfur drilling in the area, but they don't know for sure.

The road was a popular shortcut between Bay City, 20 miles to the south, and Houston, 60 miles to the northeast. Now people must travel five miles of

unreliable dirt road to get around the sinkhole.

For out-of-town motorists, signs now direct traffic — which the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation put at 2,000 cars a day before the sinkhole showed up — on to paved roads that bypass Boling altogether.

Although business at the Boling Cafe on the edge of town is about the same, the Bulldog Country Store and other local establishments which depended on traffic between Houston, Bay City and the Gulf Coast have been hurt.

Supervisor Donna Meek at the Bulldog, which is a gas station and grocery, said the early novelty of the 22-foot-deep, water-filled hole boosted business from sightseers, but now she estimates her drop-off at 20 to 30 percent.

Chamber of Commerce President Raymond Brown — also president of Community State Bank, which is the only bank in town — talks in dire terms.

"I think that road is such a major artery that if that thing is not spanned, our little town may not survive," Brown said.

Bank Chairman J.M. "Sonny" Ashmore said the town already was hurting because of lay offs at Texas Gulf Sulfur's big plant on the edge of town.

"With that matter on top of the normal slow-down of the

economy, I can see how it could put them in some distress," said Wharton County Judge Ed Wutrich.

Though sympathetic, Wutrich, who has received a petition from Boling residents urging some action, said the sinkhole is a state problem. He said eventually the county will do something if the state does not.

Clyde Schulz, area engineer for the state highway department, said it could be two years before the state solves the problem, although he is hoping for help in a few months.

"It was pretty important to Boling," Schulz said. "I know they're anxious."

Schulz said it takes time — and money — to fix any sort of road problem and something as mysterious as a sinkhole is not a usual problem. And the state is hurting for road funds already, he said.

"If it was a hurricane, we'd know what to do, or if a bridge washed out, we'd know what to do, but a sinkhole, we just don't have any experience with it," Schulz said. "We don't want to do the wrong thing."

Pending geological study, it is not clear who, if anybody, is at fault. One theory is that an exploration well drilled in 1927 in the middle of what now is the sinkhole is the cause since it was not capped properly.

But geologist Ralph Cantrell of Houston, who has worked the area since the 1940s, said the cause could be natural collapse of caprock over a salt dome.

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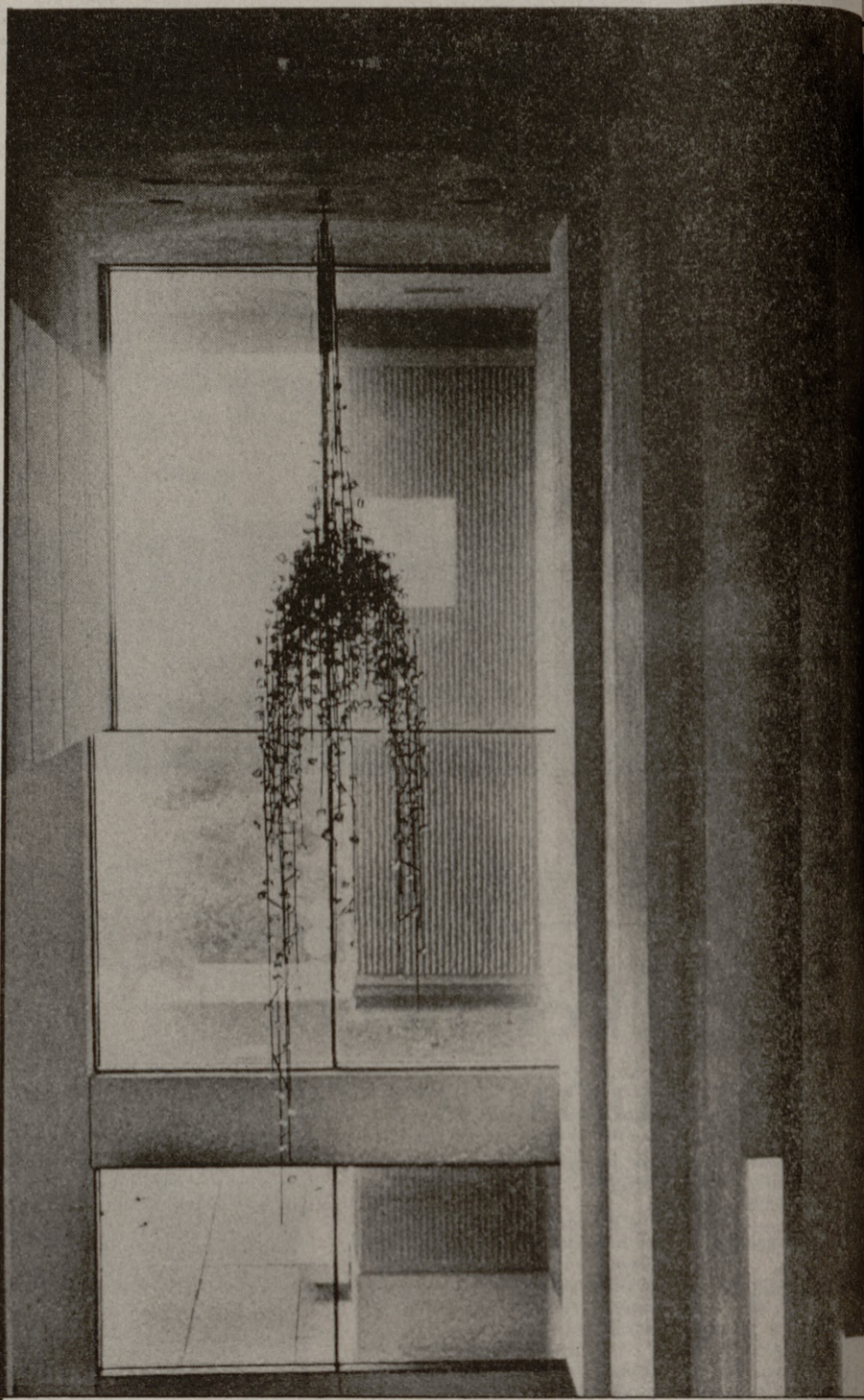
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