

Fire chief's resignation controversy continues

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire chose not to release the contents of a resignation letter from Fire Chief Robert Swartout because the letter was self-serving, according to mayoral aides.

Swartout unexpectedly quit 10 days ago — giving five minutes notice — and then disappeared.

But city council members, who had to approve Swartout's hiring from a similar job in Seattle, said it was a mistake for the mayor to withhold the letter from the public.

Swartout, who surfaced over the weekend at his Seattle home, blamed interference from mayoral aides and unnamed city officials and other frustrations for quitting the Houston department after just four months on the job.

Those frustrations were outlined in the two-page, single-space typewritten letter, which Swartout released to The Houston Post. The mayor's office subsequently also released a copy of the letter on Sunday.

Clarence West, Whitmire's agenda director, said the mayor wanted to speak with Swartout before the letter was released.

"What you have is someone you think would be a responsible individual, the fire chief of the fourth largest

city in America, and he literally walks off the job leaving a note on the doorstep of the person who hired him," West said.

Whitmire, who is in Europe, could not be reached for comment and did not return telephone calls to her hotel.

Councilman Larry McKaskle, said it showed the mayor was "not capable of running this city, in that she cannot accept defeat in any respect."

Analyst Richard Murray, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said he didn't think the flap would have any great impact on the mayor's likely re-election bid because the November election is still a long way off.

"Houstonians are not up in arms about fire protection, which is rated pretty high," Murray said. "Even though everybody knows there's a lot of squabbling in the fire department, people don't think it's so screwed up they can't fight fires."

Whitmire has nominated Robert Clayton, who has risen through the department ranks, as successor to Swartout.

Clayton said he hopes to work with the people Swartout criticized — primarily city finance people.

Tornadoes give Texans more trouble

Associated Press

At least 12 tornadoes blackened Central and East Texas skies Monday, demolishing mobile homes and spawning baseball-sized hail and heavy rains that flooded streets in several cities, authorities said. A tornado ripped through downtown Dallas late Monday night inflicting extensive damage to the area.

Monday was the third straight day that violent springtime thunderstorms erupted across the state. On Sunday, a tornado killed three people in Northwest Texas.

Six funnels were sighted in Smith County near Tyler and one touched down in Lindale Monday night, but none caused any injuries or major damages, Sheriff's Deputy Charlie Baker said.

At least four other tornadoes, some accompanied by baseball-sized hail that caused an undetermined amount of damage, dipped down in the Waco area but caused no damage or injuries, authorities said.

Only one of the tornadoes touched down on land and another dissipated after sucking up tons of Lake Waco water, said Lt. Lewis Barber of the McLennan County Sheriff's Department.

"Our luck is holding so far," Barber said Monday night. "And the cell seems to be breaking up now, so we ought to be OK."

The only funnel to hit land was southwest of Lake Waco in Speegleville, but it immediately — and harmlessly — ricocheted into the clouds, Barber said.

Another tornado that moved out over Lake Waco shortly after 4 p.m., turned into a waterspout and then dissipating within minutes.

At least two other tornadoes were reported over Crawford and McGregor southwest of Waco, but caused no damage or injuries, Barber said.

"This is the worst I've ever seen," Sgt. Joe Hall of the Young County sheriff's department said.

Trees were split apart, power lines ripped down and barns destroyed as several tornadoes bounced around the area, officials said. Several other homes in the area had flooded yards.

The fatal twister that claimed three lives at about 6:20 p.m. Sunday was one of "at least seven" tornadoes that were reported to have touched down in Throckmorton and Young counties late Sunday afternoon, civil defense officials in Throckmorton said.

Stabbings increase prison violence toll

Associated Press

HUNTSVILLE — A Texas Department of Corrections inmate was fatally stabbed Monday by another prisoner, bringing to 11 the number of homicides in the state prison system this year, a prison spokesman said.

Another inmate stabbed in an unrelated incident was listed in fair condition, authorities said.

Lynn Bernard Haskins, 24, an inmate at the Coffield Unit near Tennessee Colony, was stabbed by a fellow prisoner about 1 p.m. Monday while waiting in line to return to work at the meat packing plant, prison spokesman Charles Brown said.

After he was stabbed, Haskins ran outside the building and was attacked again, Brown said. The victim suffered about a dozen wounds in the chest, back, stomach, neck and legs with a 10-inch boning knife, Brown said.

Haskins was serving a life sentence for aggravated rape, the spokesman said.

He was treated at the unit infirmary, but died about 1:30 p.m. en route to Anderson County Memorial Hospital in Palestine, Brown said.

Authorities were questioning a 26-year-old inmate, who is serving a 24-year term for murder, in the inci-

dent, the spokesman said. Initial investigations show the incident may have dealt with a grievance outside the prison unit, Brown said.

In an unrelated incident, another inmate was in fair condition Monday after he was stabbed by two fellow prisoners, Brazoria County sheriff's officials said.

The attack took place Sunday night after one of the inmates overpowered prison guard Danny Fazio, 21, took the guard's keys and freed himself and a fellow inmate. The two prisoners then went to the cell of Joe Leonard Price, who was stabbed.

Sheriff's Capt. Gene Smith said Fazio was in the main hall of the prison's solitary confinement unit when an inmate reached through the bars of his cell, grabbed Fazio by the shirt, pulled him against the bars and held a knife at the guard's throat.

After Price was stabbed, Fazio was released and the inmates returned to their cells, Smith said.

Price is serving a six-year sentence for burglary of a building in Dallas County.

Eleven inmates have died in Texas prisons this year and more than 80 others were stabbed.

Lawmaker supports amendment barring school consolidation

Associated Press

AUSTIN — Rep. Bill Haley, D-Center, won House approval Monday for a proposed constitutional amendment that would bar lawmakers from forcing school districts to consolidate.

Haley pulled 91 votes in a preliminary vote last Wednesday. It takes 100 votes to approve a constitutional amendment, and he got them Monday, winning 108-31 approval.

The measure now goes to the Senate, where approval would put it on the general election ballot in November.

State law now bans the Legislature from forcing school districts to consolidate without the approval of local officials and voters. But Haley said that might not be enough protection against lawmakers who see consolidations as a way to save state money.

Some urban lawmakers and school officials have complained that school districts in sparsely pop-

ulated, rural areas are money-wasters that should be consolidated.

Legislators could change the current law to allow them force consolidations. But if the provision is put in the Constitution, it would take a popular vote to change it.

"This says that we may not capriciously consolidate school districts without the approval of voters in the districts," said Haley, chairman of the House Public Education Committee.

Two lawmakers who spoke against the proposal said they like the idea, but not the method.

"The statutory provisions are fine and sufficient as they are," said Rep. Bill Hammond, R-Dallas, adding that the oft-amended Texas Constitution already is too long. "Things of this nature simply do not belong in the Constitution."

Rep. Gary Thompson, D-Abilene, said the Constitution now carries 269 amendments.

Surveillance cameras aid agents in nabbing aliens along border

Associated Press

EL PASO — Surveillance cameras along the United States-Mexico border near El Paso have been such an aid in nabbing illegal aliens that the Border Patrol is considering their use elsewhere, officials say.

Since beginning the use of the cameras a year ago, the apprehension of illegal aliens in the El Paso sector has increased by as much as 60 percent, said Gustavo De La Vina, sector deputy chief patrol agent.

"They're definitely a big aid to us," De La Vina said in a recent interview. "They've been fantastic."

Eleven of the cameras, similar to those used for security in banks and office buildings, are located atop telephone poles or buildings in strategic spots along a nine-mile area of the border, De La Vina said.

"We've got them at the most frequently crossed places, at the low-

level water crossings that are used by aliens a lot," he said.

Designed to help agents catch illegal aliens who otherwise would evade detection by conventional security methods, the cameras have been a big aid in nabbing people who were trying to reach the interior United States, De La Vina said.

The cameras rotate nearly 360 degrees while scanning an area up to a mile away and are equipped with zoom lenses. They project images on small television screens in a computer room at the Paso del Norte bridge in downtown El Paso.

An agent controlling the equipment can switch one of the pictures to a larger screen for added detail. Though colors cannot be seen, light- or dark-colored clothing and sex can be determined to help pinpoint the person being sought.

Once aliens are spotted, the control agent dispatches officers to the

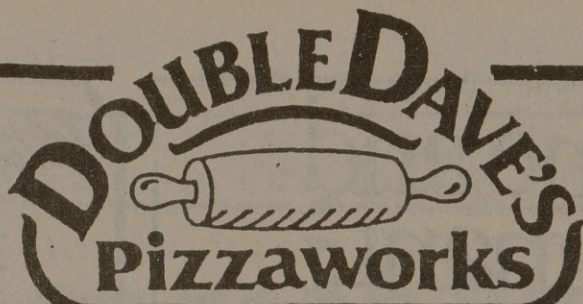
area for apprehension.

"They've really helped us to pin down aliens," De La Vina said. "They allow an agent at the control headquarters to keep an eye on the aliens while other agents are en route to pick them up. We really can monitor their (aliens) movement."

El Paso was chosen as a test site for the monitoring project early last year because of its unique location, De La Vina said.

Just across the Rio Grande from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the area is "special because it's two cities back to back," he said.

"With the El Paso area, the distance between the river and downtown is so short you only have just a few minutes, if that long, to effect an apprehension," he said. "Unless you're right there, the aliens are going to mingle into the crowd quickly."



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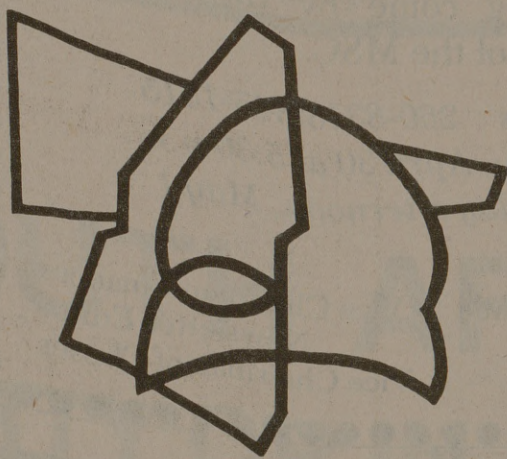
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