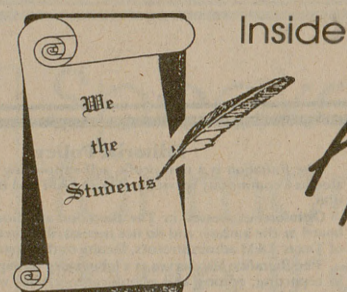


Texas A&M The Battalion

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Inside

At Ease

Speaking out at A&M



Photo by Doug La Rue

Follow The Bouncing Ball

Several students play flag rugby in the grassy area between Clements Hall and the Albritton Bell Tower. The game is similar to flag foot-

ball, and the ball carrier is "tackled" by removing a flag that hangs from her waist.

Insurance premiums to increase for A&M faculty, staff members

By Amy Couvillon
Staff Writer

Insurance premium increases and a different method of setting premiums for Texas A&M faculty and staff for 1987-1988 were tentatively approved at a meeting of the System Employee Benefits Advisory Committee Wednesday.

The meeting was a planning session for SEBAC to get input from faculty and staff before they meet April 24 to agree on official premium rates for 1987-1988.

Premium rate increases are needed, SEBAC Chairman Larry Wilson said, because medical claims in the last year (\$19,386,651) exceeded premiums paid (\$16,215,543) by 20 percent.

"We are in the hole," Wilson said.

He mentioned other factors, such as medical inflation and increased usage of the plans, that also must be considered.

Wilson said he was impressed with the turnout of faculty and staff. The committee's meetings usually get about a dozen people, but about 75 faculty and staff members showed up Wednesday to express opinions and give suggestions to the committee before the new premium rates are officially set. A microphone was set up in the front of the room so spectators could voice their opinions.

"We are extremely glad that you are here," Wilson told the crowd. "We see this as evidence that our process is working."

If the committee's plans are made policy, pre-

mium rates will go up about 28 percent for A&M employees and staff. The yearly premium for an employee with no other dependents on his or her insurance plan would go from \$66.01 to \$84.97. Premiums for those employees who include dependents would increase proportionately.

Retired employees, whose rates would increase only 4.4 percent, would not be affected as much because the committee tentatively approved a major restructuring of the process in which premium rates are set. The process would "return retired employees to the employee group for premium rating purposes," Wilson said.

Mary J. Hurley, a member of the committee and A&M associate director of insurance and retirement programs, explained what this means. Beginning in the early 1980s, she said, retired employees were considered to be in a lower-cost group because many of them had Medicare, which could pay for much of the expenses that the A&M plan would have had to pick up.

"In the first couple of years that the plan was in place," Hurley said, "we were able to give retirees with Medicare a premium rate that was something less than what employees were paying, for the same level of coverage — in recognition of the fact that Medicare was going to pay for a lot of their expenses."

However, as it turns out, retired employees — even those with Medicare — generally use their A&M benefits more than regular employees. They are using more medical services, and more

expensive services, which has caused their rates to go up. Retired employees are now paying about a third more in premiums than regular employees.

"Retirees on their fixed incomes . . . are going to have continued accelerated premium increases that may be, in general, harder for them to bear than for the normal population," Hurley said. "So maybe now is the time to bring that group of 2,100 back into the group (of A&M faculty and staff members using the benefit plan) and spread that risk over all 14,000 people participating."

A&M's medical plan is contracted out to a private insurance firm, Lincoln National. There was some talk at the meeting that A&M should change carriers and give other insurance companies a chance to put in a bid to run A&M's plan.

Wilson said A&M's insurance plan has not been re-bid in five years. If the medical plan was re-bid, the committee would write a letter to all eligible insurance companies in Texas — about 600 — and give them an opportunity to put in a bid. But the committee did not decide at Wednesday's meeting to do this as of yet.

Kenneth Livingston, personnel officer for the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, came to the microphone and supported opening A&M's plan to bids, saying it could be beneficial in terms of costs.

"I would encourage you to consider re-bidding as a strategy to validate or confirm what's been suggested," he said.

Classes after noon cancelled for Friday

By Amy Couvillon
Staff Writer

Classes are cancelled at Texas A&M after noon on Good Friday in accordance with a resolution passed in the Texas Legislature, according to a Tuesday memorandum from President Frank E. Vandiver.

"Gov. (Bill) Clements has signed legislation today that authorizes state agencies to operate with reduced staff, but remain open, on Friday afternoon of this week," Vandiver wrote.

The memo continued as follows:

- Unit administrators can release individuals under their supervision at noon, but must keep the offices open until 5 p.m.
- Staff who remain until 5 p.m. are to be awarded compensatory time.
- Staff paid monthly shall be treated as usual for working during holidays or on weekends.
- Optional or compulsory activities may be scheduled on Friday afternoon, but absentees may not be penalized.

"I am keenly sensitive to the problems and confusion this late announcement may create," Vandiver wrote. "Also . . . given the

uncertainty already created by various rumors and the lack of time for usual consultation, announcing these policies immediately is really the only alternative left to me."

The resolution awarding the half-day off was passed in the House last week. It passed in the Senate Monday and was signed by Clements Tuesday.

Kathy Lewis, personnel director for The Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System, said this state holiday is determined on a year-by-year basis.

"Usually they'll do this every other year," she said. "It has been done every time the Legislature is in session."

A representative from the office of the author of the resolution, Rep. Bob Richardson, R-Austin, said that "all state agencies" includes state universities, but that it's up to the head of the agency whether to observe the holiday.

Lewis said state universities don't normally follow usual state holiday schedules because of spring and semester breaks, so the decision whether to observe the holiday is usually up to the individual university.

Texas A&M's wind tunnel being used in space shuttle escape experiments

By Debbie Monroe
Reporter

The space shuttle Discovery develops a problem within minutes of launch, and the mission director at the Johnson Space Center in Houston orders the crew to evacuate the orbiter. Astronauts hurriedly blow the hatch off the side of the shuttle and, using rockets clipped to a harness, launch themselves one-by-one out of the craft. Within seconds, parachutes open and the crew floats safely away from the damaged spacecraft.

This kind of crew escape system exists only in the minds of NASA engineers, but testing being done at the Texas A&M wind tunnel is helping to make it a reality.

Because of the Challenger accident, getting crews quickly out of a shuttle has become a top priority at NASA, Paul Romere of NASA's Johnson Space Center said. Romere's project is one of many escape systems being developed for use aboard the shuttle.

Romere leads a group of engineers who are working to answer basic questions about the system — how will the rocket react when ejected from the orbiter, and what will the astronauts go through as they leave the ship?

"We're worried about where this

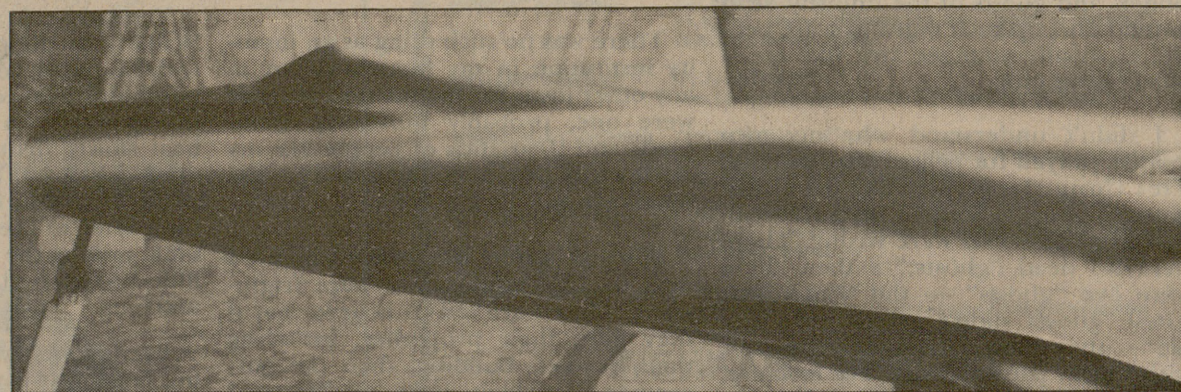


Photo courtesy of Texas A&M wind tunnel

A model of the space shuttle is tested at the Texas A&M wind tunnel near Easterwood Airport. White smoke from a smoke wand is used to gauge airflow over the shuttle's wings.

rocket will go when it's jettisoned," Romere said. "If the rocket's not pointed in the right direction, you could effectively drag the guy over the doorsill."

Using a scale model of the space shuttle and delicate wind tunnel instrumentation, the NASA group will graph wind-flow patterns around the orbiter, he said, information that will give the escape system designers a map to work from.

"(The database we'll create) will be fed into the trajectory programs that

we'll be using to see if it's even feasible to do this type of escape," Romere said.

But there are a number of problems they could face, he said. Since the 300-pound hatch is not made to open during flight, it would have to be blown from the shuttle, and could possibly fly back and hit a wing. To simulate wing damage, Romere's group will remove sections of the leading edge of the left wing, and then, in the wind tunnel, test the craft's maneuverability. For the crew

to escape, it is essential for the orbiter to be capable of controlled flight.

"If you're going to do this ejection, you have to be in a controlled, gliding flight," Romere said. "If you've sustained damage to the leading edge, you still want controlled gliding flight or you're not going to get out."

Because of the variety of problems that could arise during orbiter

AUSTIN (AP) — The Texas Senate passed a \$39.97 billion state budget Wednesday, with backers admitting it would require a larger tax increase than Gov. Bill Clements has agreed to approve.

Clements immediately dubbed senators "budget busters" and called their spending plan "a giant step in the wrong direction."

Passage came on a 28-3 vote, after a debate marked by sharp Democratic attacks on the Republican governor's smaller budget.

The Senate plan calls for spending about \$2 billion more in 1988-89, an increase of 5.4 percent over current state spending levels.

It is \$3 billion higher than the \$36.9 billion, two-year budget Clements proposed, a plan that already would require a \$2.9 billion tax increase to fund.

Clements has vowed to veto any spending bill that exceeds his "bottom line," and on Wednesday the governor said the Senate bill would require a \$6 billion tax hike that voters don't want.

"The average working men and women of our state are saying no to that tax increase," Clements said. "The budget busters prevailed today in the Senate. But I am confident the people of Texas ultimately will prevail."

"We will keep spending under control, adequately fund essential services and turn our efforts to what the people of Texas really want — jobs, jobs and more jobs."

Sen. Grant Jones, D-Temple, the bill's sponsor, began the debate by acknowledging that the plan exceeds the governor's limit. But Jones argued, "The proposals the governor is making for spending will not adequately meet the needs of Texas."

Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby, the Democratic leader of the Senate, said that despite exceeding the governor's spending limit, the Senate-passed budget still had shortcomings. But he said it is about all that can be expected given the state's current economic problems.

"What's bad about it is it doesn't adequately address human services or education," Hobby said. "It's the best that can be done under adverse economic conditions."

Some lawmakers suggested that passage of the bill put the Senate on a collision course with the House and the governor.

House Speaker Gib Lewis, D-Fort Worth, said the Senate's budget probably was too high to win approval in his chamber.

"I just think it's in excess of what

we need," Lewis said. "And I think it's a great deal higher than will be passed here in the House."

House Appropriations Committee members said they hoped to complete work on their spending plan before the weekend, and Lewis said he has discussed the budget fight with the governor.

"He (Clements) said again, 'I will veto any tax bill beyond the \$2.9 billion.' I believe him," Lewis reported.

Bob Davis, Clements' budget director, said the governor's plan still is the only one that will balance.

Oliver North 'overloaded' shredder with papers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Before Lt. Col. Oliver North was fired last November, he and his secretary destroyed so many documents their White House shredding machine broke down under the load, government investigators have been told.

The shredder got backed up and jammed as North and his secretary Fawn Hall shoved memos and other documents into it, a source familiar with the Iran-Contra investigation said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, sources said that investigators for both independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh and congressional committees have obtained a wealth of material from North's office, including a record of his telephone calls, meetings and other contacts, and original versions of four documents altered by his secretary.

These sources said the alterations appeared to be an attempt to conceal North's program for raising money and supplying arms to the rebels opposing Nicaragua's government.

The sources, who were familiar with the investigations, spoke only on condition of anonymity.

In a fresh disclosure, sources said Hall had turned over to North documents she removed from his White House office on Nov. 25, the day he was fired by President Reagan.

Investigators also have copies of those documents, sources said.

With congressional hearings on

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