

City employees protest Houston's pay policy

HOUSTON (AP) — Hundreds of police and firefighters surrounded City Hall Wednesday to protest salary cuts and rising insurance premiums amid rumors members of the 200-force may form symptoms of blue flu.

Top city officials have been bracing for the possibility of a wildcat job action Thursday in which large numbers of officers would call in sick against the apparent advice of the city's two police organizations.

The rally on the steps of City Hall Wednesday morning included a standoff with Mayor Kathy Whitmire, who was loudly booed and denied the chance to address the officers and firefighters.

The employees blame Whitmire for the 3 percent pay cut imposed two years ago, and for funding other programs before restoring their salaries. Employee insurance premiums also have risen, and demonstrators said they've been told to expect more increases.

"I think it's time that Mayor Whitmire and this administration begin to make their employees feel that they're a part of the solution instead

of part of the problem," Tommy Britt, president of the Houston Police Patrolman's Union, said.

"Police officers are just like anybody else — you can push them only so far before they break, and I think they're very close right now," Britt, one of the more than 1,000 people at Wednesday's rally, said.

"We made a three percent loan to the city of Houston back in 1986," he said. "Today, we're calling that note."

The rally was part of a week of increased tensions between rank-and-file officers and firefighters and the city administration, particularly Whitmire.

Many in the crowd shouted "liar" and "dump Whitmire" when the mayor arrived unexpectedly at the rally. And Britt refused to yield his bullhorn to address the group after its angry response to her request.

"When additional revenue does come in, the very first priority endorsed by all council members will be the return of the three percent pay cut," Whitmire said later.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity to return it," she said.

"Unfortunately with the continued drop in revenues, we're having to ask taxpayers to pay a large tax increase just to maintain our current service levels without any pay increases."

Britt and other organizers said more would have protested Wednesday had it not been for what officers call "Gestapo tactics" by Police Chief Lee P. Brown to refuse personal time to attend the rally.

Brown also restricted officers from wearing their uniforms and dispatched assistant chiefs and area captains to monitor the rally, a move demonstrators said was meant to intimidate them.

But Brown's efforts centered on planning for a possible "sickout" rumored to be possible Thursday.

He issued orders restricting normal sick leave procedures in a contingency plan that includes close monitoring of morning roll calls.

"I will personally be aware of what goes on (in roll calls) and make some determination," Brown said, assuring that the city will not be without protection.

Commissioners will discuss gas lawsuit

AMARILLO (AP) — City commissioners next week will discuss whether to drop Mesa Limited Partnership from a gas supply lawsuit that also names Energas Co. of Dallas.

The move came after Mesa and Energas said Monday they were easing efforts to settle with the city.

The city has sued the two companies, which supply gas to consumers, claiming that gas dedicated to the city is being sold elsewhere and that its quality and quantity has been diminished by Mesa over-extracting natural gas liquids from the supply.

Commissioner Don Chrysler said Tuesday that the city has been chasing the wrong horse in the suit because Energas, not Mesa, is the utility selling gas to the consumers. The gas sold to Amarillo consumers by Energas is supplied to it by Mesa.

The suit has sharply divided the city and prompted criticism of city leadership from Mesa general partner T. Boone Pickens. Mesa is one of Amarillo's leading corporate citizens, employing more than 400 people, and business leaders have said the suit damages the city's reputation for having a favorable business climate.

Energas general counsel Don E. Ames said he had not heard of the proposal and declined comment, as did Lin Patterson, Mesa's general counsel.

Mesa and Energas have made several settlement offers since the suit was filed in March. The city last week made a counteroffer to the latter offer of a \$6 million reduction in gas prices, but Mesa and Energas rejected that Monday.

Chrysler said that while dropping Mesa from the suit would not resolve the issues addressed in the legal action, it might enable the city to get back on track with Mesa and get them back helping us rebuild the city.

Mesa has maintained a high profile in the city since the suit was filed.

Bastrop Hospital closes, can't treat shooting victim

BASTROP (AP) — A shooting victim, unaware that Bastrop Hospital had been closed only an hour before, was treated in the hospital parking lot and then taken to an Austin hospital by private vehicle because the town's only ambulance was on a call.

"It's the first of many dilemmas," Karen Kramer, director of nurses, said at the hospital before it shut down Tuesday.

Kathleen Brineman, 44, who suffered an accidental, self-inflicted gunshot wound to the hand during a domestic disturbance, had to be driven by her daughter to Brackenridge Hospital. She was treated in the parking lot by emergency medical technicians and a doctor present after the hospital closed.

Later, a sheriff's deputy took Kenneth Wayne Wright, 35, to Brackenridge Hospital in Austin for treatment of gunshot wounds after his arrest about an hour after the disturbance.

Bastrop medical personnel said the shooting illustrates the problem the city faces in emergency care in the wake of the hospital closing.

The Bastrop ambulance was called on a cardiac patient emergency 20 minutes after the hospital shut its doors. Because there was no functioning local emergency room, the cardiac patient was taken to Austin, about 25 miles away.

The ambulance was still in Austin when the shooting call came in about 4 p.m. The Smithville ambulance, based 12 miles away, was unavailable.

"Police called me, and I said we don't have an ambulance," Billy Walters, co-owner of the Bastrop ambulance service, said. "It's going to get worse."

Bastrop Hospital stopped treating patients at 3 p.m. Tuesday, after transferring its last patient.

The hospital authority closed the

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— Jack Griesenbeck, Bastrop Hospital Authority chairman

hospital after losing about \$120,000 in the past three months. An adjacent clinic is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"This is a very unhappy day for all of us," Bastrop Hospital Authority board chairman Jack Griesenbeck said stressing that hospital operations were being suspended but that efforts continue to get the hospital reopened.

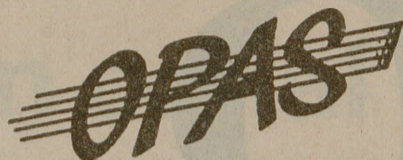
"It breaks all of our hearts to say the hospital is closed," he told employees.

Griesenbeck was a member of the board when the hospital opened in 1967. The 25-bed facility was averaging only four overnight patients per day, while seven were needed to break even, Griesenbeck has said.

The hospital employed about 60 full- and part-time employees including four doctors.

About two dozen people, some carrying signs advocating a hospital district with taxing authority, showed up at closing time Tuesday to lend support for a local hospital.

"They saved my life here," said James Duran, 59, a recent cardiac patient who was stabilized at Bastrop Hospital before transfer to Austin. "I don't think I'd be here today if it hadn't been for them," he said. "We take this place for granted when we drive by."



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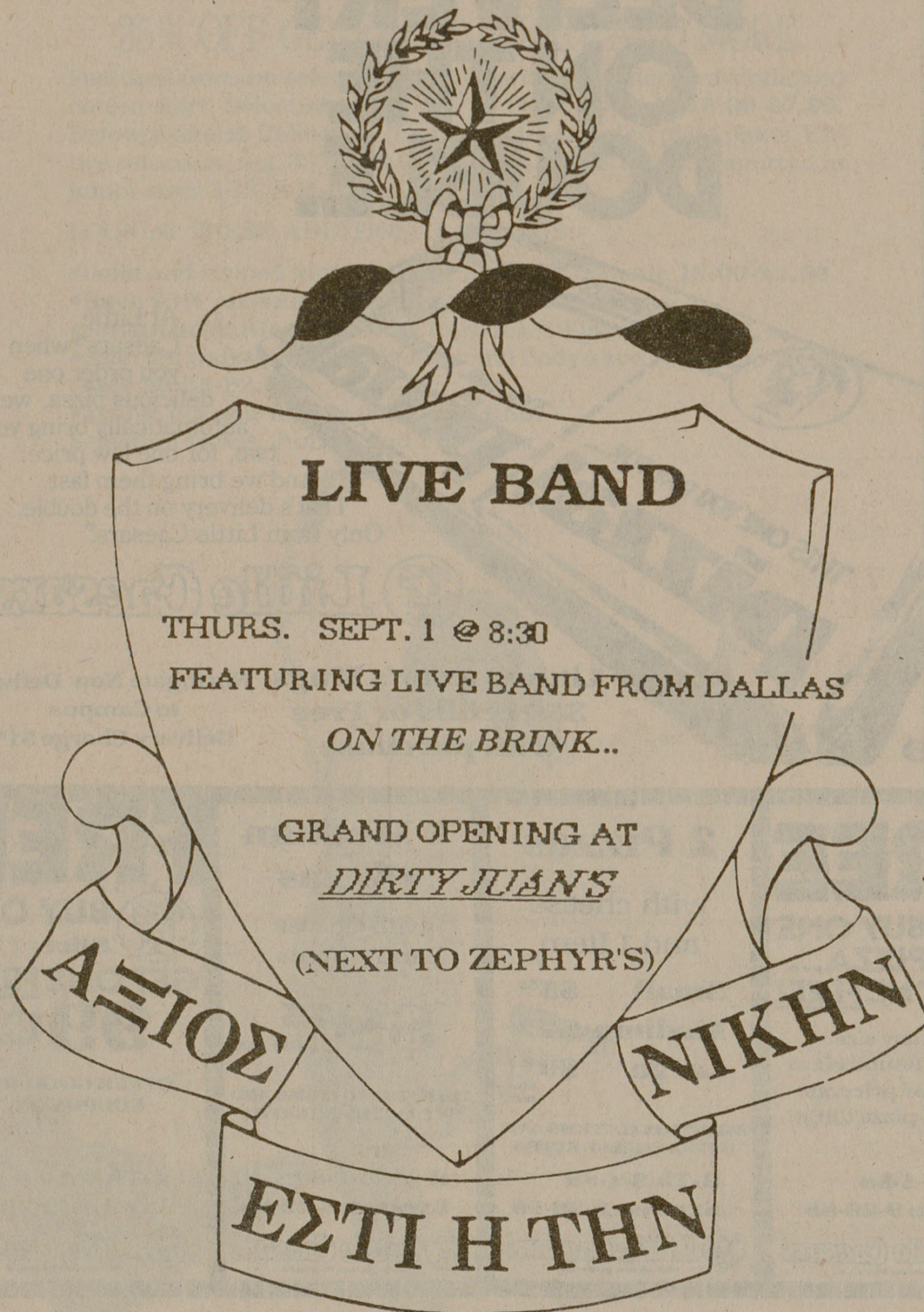
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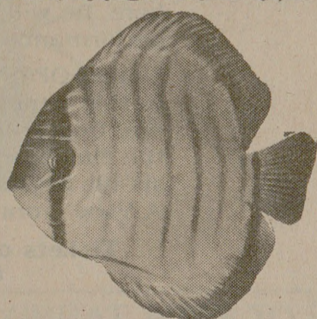
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