

NEWS BRIEFS

Memorial Day honors veterans of U.S. wars

Today is Memorial Day, a federal holiday commemorating veterans of United States wars.

The holiday previously celebrated on May 30 is now observed on the last Monday of May.

Memorial Day was first established in 1868 by Gen. John A. Logan and was called Decoration Day on which the graves of Civil War veterans were decorated.

Health course may be added to core curriculum

The Faculty Senate approved a change in the core curriculum that will require students to take a one-hour health and fitness course for part of their four-hour kinesiology requirement.

The course will focus on issues such as stress, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and cardiovascular fitness and be offered by the Department of Health and Kinesiology.

The Faculty Senate's proposal will take effect if approved by other units of the University administration.

Recycling center for used motor oil opens

The Public Used Motor Oil and Filter Recycling Center opened in College Station earlier this month to educate people on protecting water resources and recycling motor oil and filters.

The new recycling center provides a safe and healthy way to dispose of motor oil and filters since dumping this waste on the ground or down drains is illegal.

The center is located next to the fuel station at the Public Services Center, 2613 Texas Ave. S.

House OKs governing board for Aquifer

AUSTIN (AP) — An elected governing board would be established to oversee the Edwards Aquifer, a huge underground river in Central Texas, under a bill that got final House approval Sunday.

The Senate still needed to consider the measure.

The legislation would establish an Edwards Aquifer Authority board. The panel would include 15 members elected from single-member districts in the eight-county area.

Seven would come from Bexar County, four from the western side of the region and four from the eastern side. The panel would include two more non-voting members, one from the west and one from downstream.

Man shot at high school graduation party

LA MARQUE (AP) — A man was shot and killed while trying to break up an argument at a high school graduation party, police said.

Broderick Keith Crowder, 20, was found shot in the back of the head about 1:45 a.m. Saturday in the driver's seat of his car, which had skidded into the front yard of a residence.

Crowder was airlifted to John Sealy Hospital in Galveston, where he died at 10:40 a.m. Saturday, a hospital spokeswoman said.

Bush vetoes liquor sales bill

□ The bill would have set up exclusive sales territories for wholesale liquor and wine distributor companies.

AUSTIN (AP) — Legislation that would have established exclusive sales territories for seven distributors of wine and liquor has been killed by Gov. George W. Bush's first veto.

Bush's spokeswoman, Karen Hughes, said the governor vetoed the measure — which dealt with alcoholic beverage permits and regulation — because of an amendment added by Sen. Ken Armbrister, D-Victoria.

That amendment would have set up exclusive sales territories for seven wholesale liquor and wine distribution companies.

"He feels it's bad for the consumer and it runs counter to his belief in marketplace competition," Ms. Hughes said after Saturday's veto.

Under the bill, six distribution companies owned by five Texas families and one jointly owned by a Chicago family and Texans would have become the exclusive distributors in their

respective territories of liquor and wine brands whose contracts they had held on May 1.

The bill was sponsored by Rep. Kim Brimer, R-Fort Worth, and Rep. Chris Harris, R-Arlington. Brimer chairs the House Business and Industry Committee and Harris heads the Senate Administration Committee.

Armbrister said beer distributors operate with exclusive sales territories. He said he believed the territories were necessary because distillers haphazardly switch distributors, leaving retailers and the distributors without a supply.

But opponents said the measure would have created virtual monopolies for the Texas families and hurt retailers and smaller distributors.

Passage of the bill had caught the major distillers off guard, leaving them with little legislative relief except to lobby the governor.

Fred A. Meister, president of the Distilled Spirits Council of America, had said the bill "would remove competition, foster costly distribution inefficiencies and ultimately harm small Texas retailers and consumers. ... This bill is anti-free enterprise."

House OKs property rights measure

□ The bill allows landowners to sue for relief from government regulations.

AUSTIN (AP) — The Senate was embroiled in a last-minute debate Sunday over a House-passed bill that would give Texans the power to sue state and local governments over action that devalues their property.

The bill by Rep. Susan Combs, R-Austin, was passed on an unrecorded House vote Saturday night, despite objections from several lawmakers.

Senate approval still was needed before Monday's end of the 1995 Legislature if the measure were to reach Gov. George W. Bush's desk.

But when the bill came up in the Senate, Sen. Carlos Truan, D-Corpus Christi, talked for more than two hours against it and no vote was immediately taken.

The bill would create legal grounds for lawsuits against state or local government for actions that restrict a person's

use of private property and reduce the market value of the property by at least 25 percent.

It would require state agencies and local governments to assess whether potential action would reduce property values.

The bill has come under fire from environmentalists and some law-

makers, who said the increase in the number of new lawsuits would cost the state and cities millions of dollars.

Combs, however, said that concern was addressed when House and Senate negotiators amended the bill to disallow lawsuits for

monetary awards. "Any possibility of a sum of money was removed," Combs said.

Negotiators also included provision that would require property owners to pay the legal costs of all the parties they sue and lose.

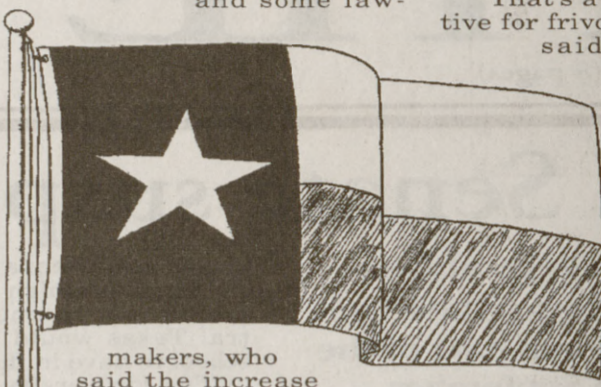
"That's a real good disincentive for frivolous suits," Combs said.

"I don't think you'll find a body that these things on."

Under the bill, landowners would be allowed to sue for relief from government regulations.

A leading environmental group has expressed doubts with the bill.

"This bill passed in part because Susan Combs misled the people of the House of Representatives about what it does and does not do," said Kramer, director of the Sierra Club chapter of the Sierra Club



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Electronic debit card brings efficiency to food stamps

□ The Lone Star Card can only be used at grocery stores. It has cut down on fraud and reduced administrative costs.

HOUSTON (AP) — A funny thing is happening in Texas as food stamps go the way of the horse and buggy.

The cost of the food stamp program is down because the paper coupons used for decades are being replaced by the Lone Star Card — the nation's most ambitious use of a reusable electronic debit card.

Those savings were expected. But what was not anticipated was the amount of federal money actually spent on food is rising, even though the number of people using food stamps has remained fairly constant.

"I didn't expect the dramatic rise in grocery sales," says John Sharp, the Texas comptroller who first proposed the card in 1991. "It's paying dividends I didn't know."

Unveiled late last year in a test program involving 16,000 families in Houston and in rural Chambers County just east of Houston, the Lone Star Card expanded Feb. 1 to include all of Houston's 220,000 food stamp families.

February grocery sales using the card were \$29 million. March sales jumped to more

than \$33 million. Some stores reported grocery sales using the card increased as much as 12 percent compared with earlier food stamp sales.

Flushed with success, the program moves to Dallas and north Texas in June and then gradually to the rest of the state.

"By the time this year's over with, we will eliminate food stamps in Texas and a heck of a lot of fraud and black market attached to them, bunches of overhead, and food stamps will begin to be used again for what they were supposed to — and that's buying food," Sharp says.

"I'm pretty proud of it."

With 1.3 million households getting food stamps in Texas, the state accounts for about 10 percent of all food stamp coupon recipients nationally.

The coupons alone cost \$4.7 million annually to print, another \$460,000 to ship and \$2.4 million for final processing. They're used once and then shredded. Sharp figures that's money Texas will save the federal government.

The plastic card looks like a regular bank card and works in almost the same way. Each holder's account is replenished during the first four days of each

month with that family's allotment for food stamps. Purchases then are debited electronically at the grocery store checkout.

If the card is lost or stolen, it's useless without the holder's PIN — a personal identification number. Even if the PIN is discovered, the card holder can get the electronics of the card disabled by calling a toll-free number to report the loss.

"You can't use the food stamp portion of the card on street corners to buy crack cocaine," Sharp says. "You have to use it to buy food, whether you like it or not."

"I knew we were going to take a good bite out of fraud. People were using food stamps on street corners and trading in a black market, and common sense would say that if you can only use this thing at a compatible machine and the only place compatible machines are in grocery stores, people are going to get caught."

Even with a compatible machine, nine people at a Houston meat market got caught in March when electronic tracking of benefits showed questionable transactions. The arrests broke a ring estimated to have bilked the food stamp program out of \$1 million over the years.

"You'll never totally eliminate fraud, but it's going to take a big bite out of it," Sharp said.

Grocers love the card for its simplicity. Cashiers merely run it through an electronic scanner like a credit card transaction. And there's no pile of paper

coupons at the end of the day.

"It's worked tremendously," Gil Russell, director of information systems for Houston-based Fiesta Mart, a supermarket chain that draws the largest number of food stamp users in the state.

"It has reduced our administrative costs. We don't have to count paper food stamps and reconcile them at the end of each day. And we found our sales were up for food stamp purchases, just because we think it has reduced fraud."

Users also report satisfaction with the simplicity, convenience and security.

"Before if I lost the checks or if something happened to them, they were just gone," said one Houston mother of two, who asked that she be identified only by her first name, Becky. "With the card, if I lose it, it is re-

placed. It's a lot less hassle. It's a lot more security."

The woman, who has been on food stamps for about two years, says it's also helped with her self-esteem, removing the stigma of standing in a long checkout line and handing over a pile of food stamp coupons.

"I've had lots of looks and lots of comments in the past," she said. "The Lone Star Card is like a bank card. 'Nobody notices the difference. They don't notice that much attention.'"

Big losers in the deal are out-of-state firms that produce federal food stamp coupons. Sharp said they waged successful lobbying to thwart his plan to move into the electronic age.

The program, which caught the attention of 30 other states, is evolving the addition of Aid for Dependent Children benefits to an electronic card.

That has drawn the private check-cashing firms to handle welfare checks for welfare recipients who have personal bank accounts. They sometimes end up paying exorbitant fees to the cashing companies.

"People moaning making a ton of cashing AFDC checks not on groceries," sympathetic Sharp said. "That's fixing to the window."

"It's really a part of government," he said. "What's wrong with government is not necessarily the amount of people will say we feed poor kids."

"But they're sick and seeing where their money either to some guy in New or some crack dealer in town Dallas."



Gov. Bush



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