

Texas Senate considers bill increasing penalty for assault of pregnant woman

AUSTIN (AP) — Tougher penalties would be established for assaults against pregnant women, particularly if they suffer a miscarriage or stillbirth, under a bill that received preliminary approval Tuesday from the Texas Senate.

The bill, which also would establish grounds for civil lawsuits by the would-be mother or father

when a miscarriage occurs, was opposed by groups that support abortion rights.

The Texas Family Planning Association called it "a first step toward policing pregnancies."

The bill's author, Sen. Steve Ogden, said he opposes abortions but that he gave his word to his colleagues "that I wasn't trying to use

this as a vehicle to address the larger abortion agenda."

"I'm trying to protect women who have decided that they want their babies," said Ogden, R-College Station. The bill requires a final Senate vote before it goes to the House for consideration.

Ogden said the measure would:

- Make it a third-degree felony,

punishable by two to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000, to assault a pregnant woman.

- If the woman miscarried, raise that to a second-degree felony, punishable by two to 20 years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine.
- Make it a second-degree felony if a drunken driver crashes into a woman and she has a mis-

carriage.

- Create grounds for the mother or father of the fetus to file a lawsuit for damages if someone's wrongful or negligent act or omission causes a pregnant woman to suffer bodily injury that results in a miscarriage or stillbirth.

The mother could not be sued under an amendment to the bill. Og-

den said the provision would allow a woman to sue her husband.

"I find it odd that we're punishing already existing assault," said Sen. Gonzales, D-Austin.

Ogden said assaulting a pregnant woman under current law generally is a Class A misdemeanor, while aggravated assault is a felony.

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Abilene police search area for suspects in shootings

ABILENE (AP) — Police and state troopers were combing the area for two suspects Tuesday, while relatives searched for answers as to why four young women were fatally shot in the head inside a small apartment. Another man was critically wounded.

Police had no immediate motive for Monday's killings at the complex of duplex apartments in a high-crime area of this West Texas city, which had six homicides in all 1998 and is home to three Christian universities and an Air Force base.

Authorities reportedly were looking for a 19-year-old man and his 16-year-old brother, who have Tarrant County addresses, to ask them about the latest attack.

Police responding to reports of gunfire around 5 p.m. Monday found handyman Larry Hammond in the common area of the complex suffering from a gunshot wound to the abdomen. The other victims — including one who was pregnant — were inside one of the apartments, and it appeared some may have been trying to escape, said detective Jay Hatcher.

Valdez laid roses on the outside of the apartment where the shootings occurred. She said her daughter, who was six months pregnant, had grown up with and Martinez.

"They were like sisters. They were so close," she said. "They all loved each other so much. I can't believe it happened."

The shooting struck a tight-knit neighborhood, which is considered to be a high crime area but later experienced such bloodshed. However, some relatives and friends speculated that the area was the result of gangs or drug activity because of a sordid relationship between one of the young women and her boyfriend.

Horton Sparks, 85, a neighbor who lived across the street from where the shooting occurred, said there had been a lot of motion in the building all day long. "There was some sort of preparation going on in there for several days," he said. "Someone would be there, bring a little boy out, and then go down and then go back up and raise more ruckus. There were at least a couple of men in there for several hours."

Witt's car, a light blue four-door, was initially located by Abilene police the day morning.

Officers were investigating whether the deaths were related to the Sunday night shooting of year-old Jimmy Estrada at home. However, Valdez said her daughter was not related to the teen.

Sunday's shooting was the first police he did not know the shooter. Two other juveniles were injured told police they did not know the gunman.

"It's a very, very sad fact to have happened to four people at such a young age," Hatcher said.

The victims were identified as Sandra Witt, 20; Erica Arispe, 21; Naomi Martinez, 23; and Penny Estrada, 21.

Estrada's mother, Juanita Valdez, was one of dozens of relatives and friends who visited the complex Tuesday to pray, leave flowers or poetry and light candles in memory of the victims. One 3-year-old boy carried a cap gun.

"I don't have the slightest idea who could have done this," said Valdez, who leaned on her husband for support. "But whoever it is, I hope they are brought to justice."

President Clinton to be present at opening of Austin airport

AUSTIN (AP) — The opening of the capital city's new airport is to be a presidential affair, according to a newspaper report.

President Clinton will come to Austin April 21 to help celebrate the opening of the new Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, city and White House sources told the Austin American Statesman for a story published Tuesday.

Mayor Kirk Watson has been working to persuade Clinton to join the city's celebrations for the facility, which is the last major U.S. airport scheduled to open

this century, the newspaper said.

The airport is scheduled to officially open May 2.

Garry Mauro, former state commissioner, Democratic gubernatorial candidate for governor and friend of Clinton, is planning to coincide with Clinton's visit to the newspaper said.

Texas Republican Gov. W. Bush had formed a special exploratory committee to ponder whether to seek re-election for the White House in 2000.

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