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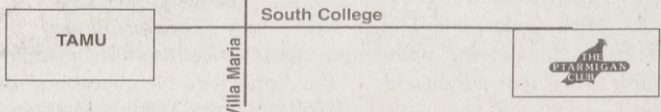
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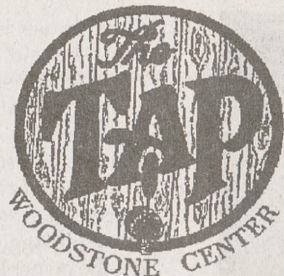
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Beverly Mireles, Editor in Chief

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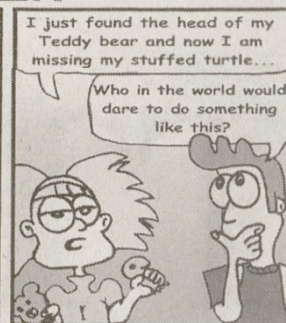
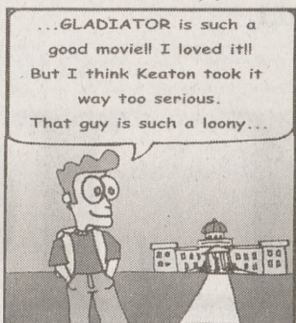
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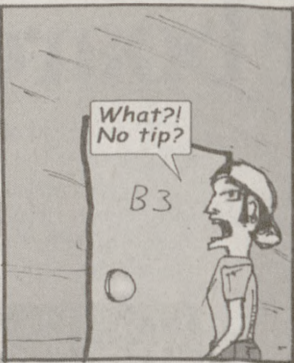
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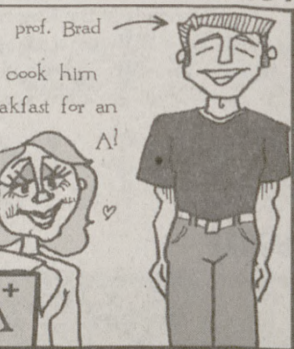
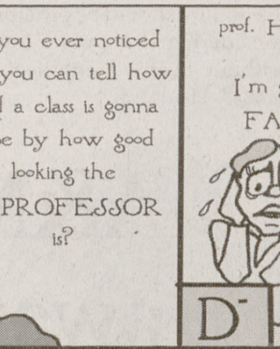
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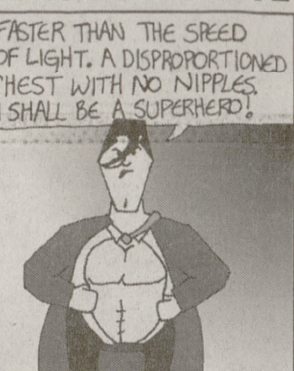
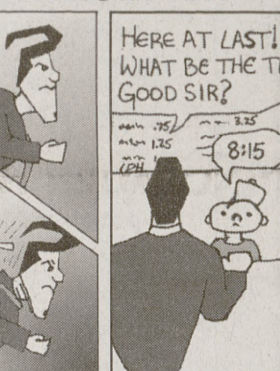
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TNRCC commissioners adopt federal auto emission standards

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas environmental regulators unanimously agreed Wednesday to adopt federal auto-emission standards favored by the industry instead of tougher standards favored by Gov. George W. Bush and environmentalists.

But members of the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) said the deal they have struck with automakers could become a national model.

Auto manufacturers have agreed in writing to voluntarily equip new passenger vehicles with the same pollution-fighting parts required in California, the commission said.

The automakers also promised to make alternative vehicles such as electric cars available.

"We set the national standard to not only have cleaner air for Texas but for the entire country," said Jeff Saitas, the commission's executive director.

Texas is the nation's second-largest new auto-buying market, estimated at upward of \$30 billion a year.

California leads the nation in new sales. Under the federal Clean Air Act, states can choose from the two standards. Each is slightly different but both phase in cleaner vehicles.

"There is a big victory that happened here today because of the commission having stood up and saying we want to adopt the same evaporative standards as California," said Tom Smith, executive director of Texas Public Citizen, a government watchdog group.

"They may have forced a national change in the cars sold across the nation, and they should be complimented on their courage," he said.

But Smith was disappointed with the overall decision, saying adopting the entire California plan would have gone further to solve long-term pollution problems in Texas, where Houston surpassed Los Angeles last year as the nation's smoggiest city.

By adopting the federal standard, "They're only solving the short-term pollution problem and not

the long-term problem of global warming gases and the small particles that are choking our lungs," Smith said.

The commissioners said the agreement, approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), would bring cleaner cars, pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles to Texas beginning in 2004.

New equipment would cut emissions from sport-utility vehicles by 95 percent, and on new

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— Tom Smith
executive director of Texas Public Citizen

cars and light trucks by 77 percent.

The cost to consumers is projected at about \$200 per vehicle.

TNRCC's three commissioners are appointees of Bush, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

In December, he asked them to consider the California plan, which requires the sale of some "zero-emission vehicles," such as cars powered by electricity.

Bush was satisfied with the plan approved Wednesday, said spokesperson Mike Jones.

"Gov. Bush asked TNRCC to be bold and inno-

vative in finding the best solution for Texas they've come up with a solution that has parts of both the national and the California Jones said. "In the next few years, we will cleaner fuel and better cars on the streets of Texas."

Saitas last month recommended the federal standards to the commissioners, saying extensive analysis showed those requirements are better for state's immediate needs, including reducing air causing nitrogen oxide by a 2007 federal deadline.

The commissioners on Wednesday also recommended that Bush designate Austin, San Antonio, Longview, Tyler and Marshall as nonclassifying zones for measuring ozone levels, meaning they cannot be properly monitored and are not subject to federal penalties.

Environmentalists had been pushing for attainment designations in those areas, meaning they regularly violate the federal government's 8-hour standard for ozone.

Such a designation would require those areas to work harder to cut air pollution or face penalties ranging from a loss of federal highway funding to rewriting their pollution-control plans.

The commissioners cited a pending federal court challenge over the law for its decision to allow as current, aggressive ozone-reducing measures in those areas.

The cities will be required to develop air quality improvement plans before federal deadlines in Houston, Galveston, Dallas, Fort Worth, El Paso and Port Arthur areas were again designated as nonattainment cities.

"The last thing they want to do is declare nonattainment counties nonattainment when Gov. Bush is running for president," Smith said.

"We shouldn't be playing politics with people's lives," agreed Ramon Alvarez of Environmental Defense.

Bush has 30 days to accept or reject the commission's decision, then seek EPA approval.

News in Brief

Six-year-old boy electrocuted

HENDERSON (AP) — A 6-year-old boy was electrocuted Tuesday when he climbed out of a porch his grandparents' home in Rusk County and while still touching a trailer home connected to a house by an extension cord.

Rusk County Sheriff James Stroud said Brandon Bynum, 6, was thrown backward and his grandparents thought he had been struck by an insect, but soon he lost consciousness.

Bynum was taken to Henderson Memorial Hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Brownsville man killed in accident

TYLER (AP) — A Brownsville man died Wednesday at an East Texas hospital after falling feet inside an empty water tower in Crockett.

Russell Krug, 46, was part of a two-man crew sandblasting inside of the water tower when he fell from a scaffolding Tuesday, said Darrell Decker, chief of the Crockett Volunteer Fire Department.

Krug, an employee with Cormick Painting Co. of Rock, Ark., was unconscious at the bottom of the 145-foot tower when rescue workers arrived, Decker said.

Krug was taken to East Texas Medical Center in Crockett where he was stabilized and transported by helicopter to ETMC-Tyler, Decker said. He died Wednesday afternoon.

Convicted 'gum' sentenced to prison

HOUSTON (AP) — A man claims to be a Hindu priest and probation for the 1998 sexual assault of an Arkansas woman has pleaded no contest to being another victim.

Bhogeshwernand Sharma was sentenced Tuesday to 10 years in prison.

Sharma, 37, was accused of sexually assaulting a 20-year-old Hindu woman on Jan. 6, 1998, before he was charged with the April 3, 1998, rape of a 21-year-old Arkansas woman.

Sharma, now free on bond, will turn himself in Monday because of the deal, Sharma's attorney said.

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