

Opinion

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THE BATTALION

Page 11

Speeding toward a bad policy

City of Houston should not lower speed limit to 55

To improve the quality of air and meet Environmental Protection Agency standards, Houston recently committed to an ambitious, five-year plan that includes lower speed limits, cuts in industrial pollutants and stricter vehicle-exhaust testing.

This plan, hailed by the Environmental Protection Agency as "the most innovative and technically advanced air plan ever devised," has arrived 31 years after the federal Clean Air Act was enacted. A 15-mile-per-hour speed limit reduction, the most disturbing aspect of this plan, and the introduction of stricter, more expensive annual tailpipe emissions tests will be the first implemented in May 2002.

Although the existence of such a plan is greatly needed in the Houston area, the reduction of the speed limit from 70 to 55 miles per hour is an intrusive policy that will create more problems than it will solve.

The theory behind speed limit reductions is that cars get the most efficient gas mileage at 55 miles per hour; less gas equates to less pollutants emitted into the air.

According to the Houston Chronicle, the five-year plan is "expected to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by 75 percent and volatile organic compounds by 40 percent by the year 2007." However, state environmental activists doubt the plan will even come near achieving national air quality standards, and at least 13 lawsuits have been filed challenging various aspects of the plan.

According to Dr. Kenneth Green and Dr. Lisa Skumatz, this policy "is based on a limited understanding of the nature of emissions to be reduced and the probability of successful reduction."

This uncertainty leads to unreliable environmental policy, diverts limited resources and risks negative, unintended consequences.

Green and Skumatz claim that

"mandatory behavioral controls such as mandatory reductions in the speed limit have historically been met with failure and resource wastefulness, and should be avoided."

In addition to lower speed limits, stricter emissions testing and cuts in industrial pollutants, other provisions include requiring cleaner diesel fuel for both on- and off-road vehicles on and east of Interstate 35, a ban on excessive idling by large commercial trucks, a ban on the com-

mercial use of gasoline-powered lawn equipment between 6 a.m. and noon from April 1 to Oct. 31 starting in 2005, and a cap on nitrogen oxide emissions in the region and allowing banking and trading of such emissions below the cap.

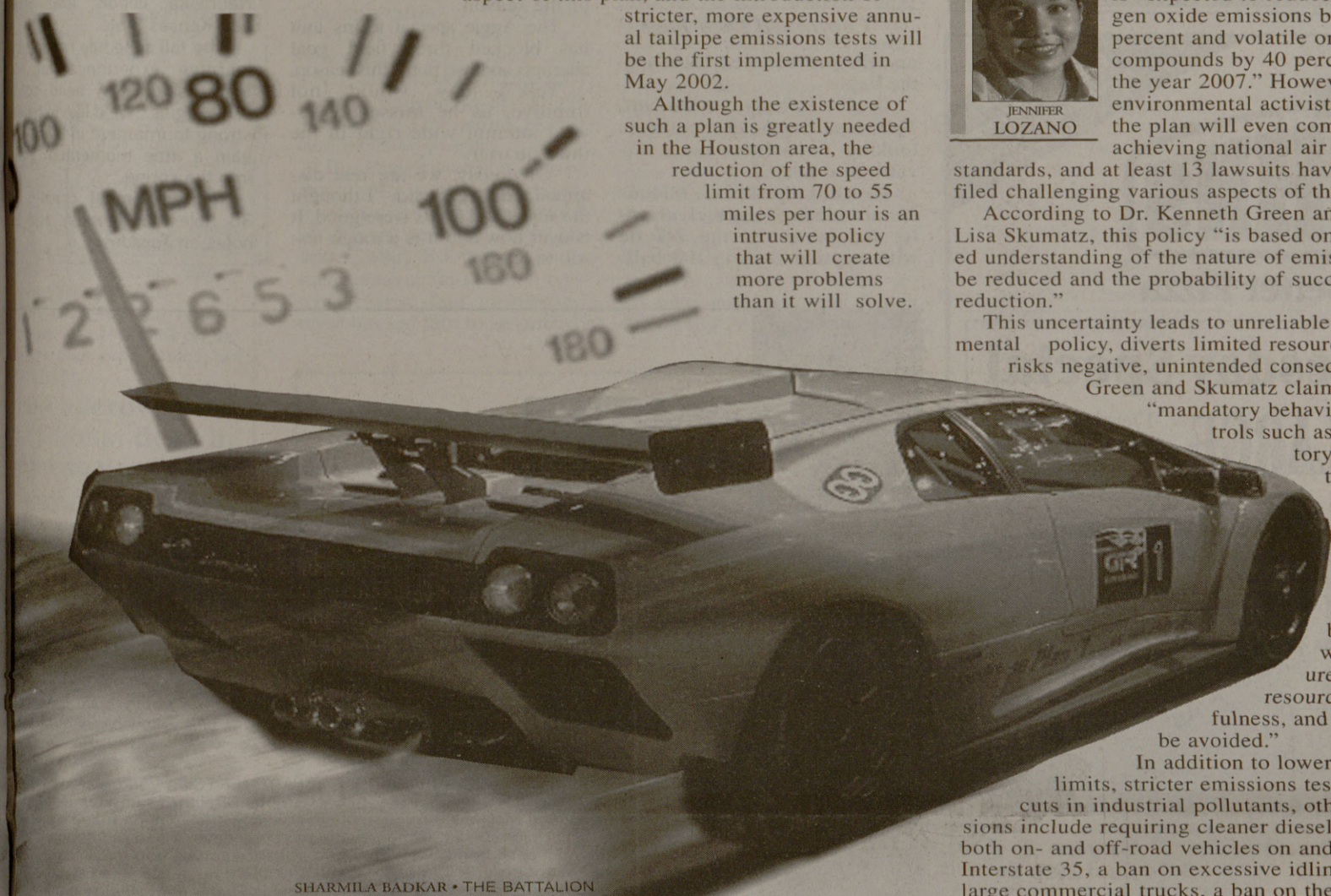
The problem with many of these policies is the intrusion into Americans' everyday lives. The pinnacle of this intrusion is demonstrated in the speed limit reduction. Houston's large commuter population will feel this intrusion and will not welcome the reduced speed limit with open arms. As a result, the law will be a difficult to enforce will not be effective.

Instead of implementing Draconian regulatory controls which tend to be more disruptive and expensive, more market-based innovative approaches such as shuttle-van transit and vehicle emission pricing (basing vehicle registration fees on the level of emissions from the vehicle and annual distances driven) should be considered.

Something must be done to bring the Houston and Galveston area into compliance with national ozone standards. However, the structure of modern cities does not allow for a successful implementation of a speed-limit reduction in major metropolitan areas. Today, people have little option but to live in distant suburbs, which leaves them dependent on automobiles and high-speed freeways. Americans spend approximately 50 percent of their disposable income on housing and transportation. Yet the extra costs of suburban housing and transportation do not increase our well being.

Instead, they bring significant new environmental and social problems such as air pollution, the depletion of fossil fuels, automobile accidents and congestion. Sensible people realize this and would be more receptive to an environmental plan that did not interfere with such an essential aspect of their existence. Now is also time for Houston leaders to finally realize this.

Jennifer Lozano is a junior English major.



SHARMILA BADKAR • THE BATTALION

MAIL CALL

Stranger shows Aggie spirit

Upon returning to my car in Zachry lot from the civil engineering event with my wife and son, I came to realize that I had somehow lost my car keys. After a good deal of rummaging through our belongings, we began to panic and tried to retrace our steps. Of course, no keys were found. Luckily for us, one of my wife's professors was kind enough to help us.

Dr. Lowery let us into his office to use the phone to call our apartment complex. He then gave us a ride back to our apartment so we could get our spare set of keys and actually gave my wife a ride back to the car so she could drive it home. The entire process took about 45 minutes out of his night, but he never complained and was completely sympathetic to our plight.

When my wife had returned to the car and had begun her drive home, she noticed a piece of paper tucked into the windshield wiper. It read as follows, "Your keys are behind the front left wheel." It seems that in the hustle and bustle of getting my family to the dinner, I had accidentally left my keys in the trunk's keyhole. One conscientious Aggie took the keys and placed them where the note stated. If I had not panicked I would have actually seen the note and we would not have had to bother Dr. Lowery.

Despite the shortfalls of the night, my faith in Aggies has been restored. Little things like this are what make me proud to call myself an Aggie. This school is not perfect, no place ever really is, but I do think that A&M has a step or two on most other places in the world when it comes to politeness, morality, compassion, and all around "good bull."

Jay Childers
Class of 2001

Do not be un-fair to the Uncartoonist

If you bring up Microsoft Office 2000 and look for synonyms for the word "idiot" you will find none. The same is true with numerous other words like "dimwit" and "moron." While they are not nice words, they do have a place in writing, and their removal from the reference marks a loss of utility to end users of the program. They were removed so as not to offend any users.

Microsoft's action above is an example of how hypersensitivity, or at least the perception of it, can needlessly harm an otherwise fine thing. Recently there have been a rash complaints from people who find themselves offended over comics appearing in *The Battalion*.

This whole semester has shown an unusually high amount of people being offended by things that they simply should not have been offended by. Do people not understand the concept of a joke anymore?

We're Aggies, we tell each other Aggie jokes! These jokes are just as insulting as any cartoon the paper has every run, usually more. And yet no one gets offended because everyone knows it's all in good fun. Why can't readers out there look upon the Uncartoonist comics the same way? They should.

I fully support the drawings of the Uncartoonist. While I don't agree with half of what he draws and don't find two thirds of it funny, I think that *The Battalion* would be much less of a publication without him. Please don't censor him or, worse, stop publishing his drawings.

Chris Carlin
Class of 2003

Aggie Bonfire unlikely to burn again

With Texas A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen's statement last week-end regarding the projected \$1.5-million price tag for Bonfire in 2002, Bonfire's final days will end with the 12 who perished in the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse.

Some students are under the impression that it will burn next year, but circumstances dictate otherwise, and Aggies should realize that administrators never promised another Bonfire. Bonfire is not likely on the horizon for the near future.

For the last two years, the A&M administration has been telling students that Bonfire would burn in 2002 under three conditions. First, the student body must support a restructured Bonfire constructed under professional safety and construction plans. Second, the University would have to approve of Bonfire safety, risk management, design and construction plans proposed by professional firms. Lastly, the administration put forth a certification requirement for all students, faculty and staff participating in Bonfire planning, construction and management roles.

Unfortunately, they left out an important factor: money. Bonfire, which has already cost between \$300,000 and \$500,000 for blueprints, is projected to cost \$1.5 million if the University carries out the tradition in

2002. In all likelihood, however, they will not. Since the beginning stages of planning, Bowen has made it clear that Bonfire will only occur if the proper safety precautions are in place. He also required students and administrators approve the project.

The safety requirements alone make Bonfire 2002 an unlikely event. A&M administration seeks "the non-negotiable standard for all future Bonfires will be forever safe through fail-safe design and fail-safe construction." A fail-safe design, while necessary for Bonfire to become anything but an embarrassment to the University, is quite a difficult goal to maintain. There is a saying among engineers that goes, "Show me a fool-proof design and I'll show you that fool." Engineers who agree with this saying would argue that the fail-safe design is an impossible goal. If University administrators come to the same conclusion after seeing the safety plans, Bonfire will be canceled.

Of course, before a safety plan can be considered, the University needs to construct these safety plans and procedures. Unfortunately, after Marak Safety Services backed out of contract negotiations Oct. 1,

Bonfire planners are finding this first step a challenge. While University officials have said that they are already in negotiations with another safety firm, delays such as this could kill Bonfire 2002 before administrators or students do.

Another impediment to Bonfire lighting in 2002 is A&M's \$6.2-million budget shortfall. With Bowen's recent announcement that A&M is looking into new sources of funds to combat financial difficulties, it could be very difficult for university relations to explain the annual expenses of Bonfire. While alumni will offer financial assistance to help save a tradition many Aggies hold dear, they are likely not as eager to open their pocketbooks with the future of Bonfire in doubt.

The obstacles stacked against Bonfire 2002 are high. The University needs to find a safety firm that needs to draft a fail-safe design. The administration and the student body then need to approve the plan, and students and faculty must be trained under the new safety regulations before Fall 2002.

The University must find a way to pay for Bonfire's expenses. And if any one of these steps fails — which will almost inevitably occur — Bonfire will not burn.

Richard Bray is a junior journalism major.

CARTOON OF THE DAY



THE UNCARTOONIST ©

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 300 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number.

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