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## Investigators reexamine Columbia explosion

By Marcia Dunn  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPACE CENTER, Houston — In the days after Columbia's destruction, NASA officials made their case: The foam couldn't have caused that kind of damage. It wasn't ice or metal that flew off the fuel tank. The left wing was not breached.

All that — and more — is back on the table and under the microscope, now that an investigation board is calling the shots.

In the 2 1/2 weeks since Columbia shattered 38 miles above Texas, both NASA managers and board members have cautioned that the investigation is in continual flux, with new information turning up all the time. On Wednesday, NASA said the shuttle's nose landing gear was found in the east Texas piney woods.

But it is the board that has emphasized that everything is under consideration, no matter how seemingly irrelevant or obscure or unimaginable.

The fact that the accident investigation board has put

NASA's discarded theories back on the table is "a combination of being thorough and being independent," said NASA's Steve Nesbitt, who is temporarily serving as the board spokesman.

The 10-member board — soon to gain a new member or two — is being scrutinized for signs of independence because it was chosen by NASA.

"The board wants to make sure every base is covered," Nesbitt said Wednesday. "They're not going to take NASA's word that everything is OK in a particular area."

After first considering damage to Columbia's heat-protecting tiles by the foam insulation

falling off the fuel tank during launch, shuttle program manager Ron Dittemore soon ruled it out; "It just does not make sense to us that a piece of debris would be the root cause for the loss of Columbia and its crew," said Dittemore.

"There's got to be another reason," He later softened that. But now with the board members in control, the foam appears to be a central focus.

**"They're not going to take NASA's word that everything is OK."**

— Steve Nesbitt  
Investigative Board  
spokesman

### NEWS IN BRIEF

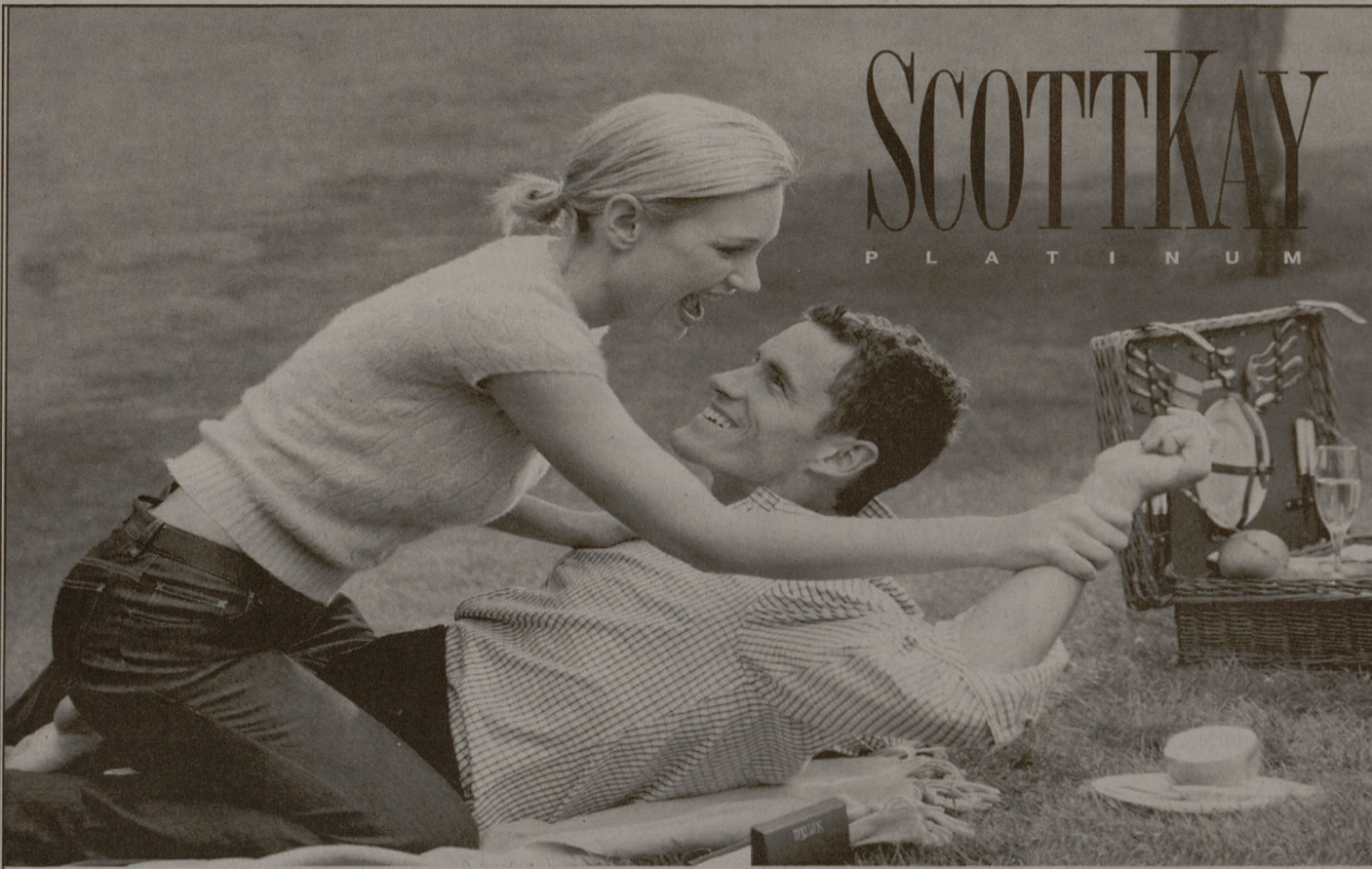
#### Governor's reprieves may be expanded

AUSTIN (AP) — Sen. Rodney Ellis of Houston filed legislation on Wednesday that would allow the governor to issue more than one 30-day reprieve of executions.

If approved, voters would have to give approval to the idea because the constitution only allows the governor to issue one reprieve in death penalty cases.

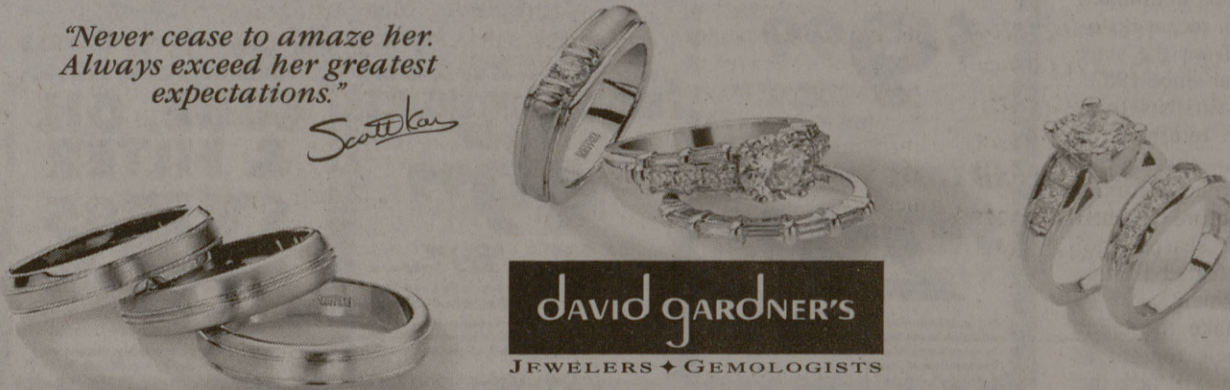
"The governor of the state of Texas ought to at least have the power to prevent a person from being executed when he or she believes it is prudent," Ellis said. "We must be sure that when Texas executes someone it is because that person is guilty and eligible to be executed."

Ellis said the legislation would provide fundamental reform necessary to restore confidence in the Texas criminal justice system.



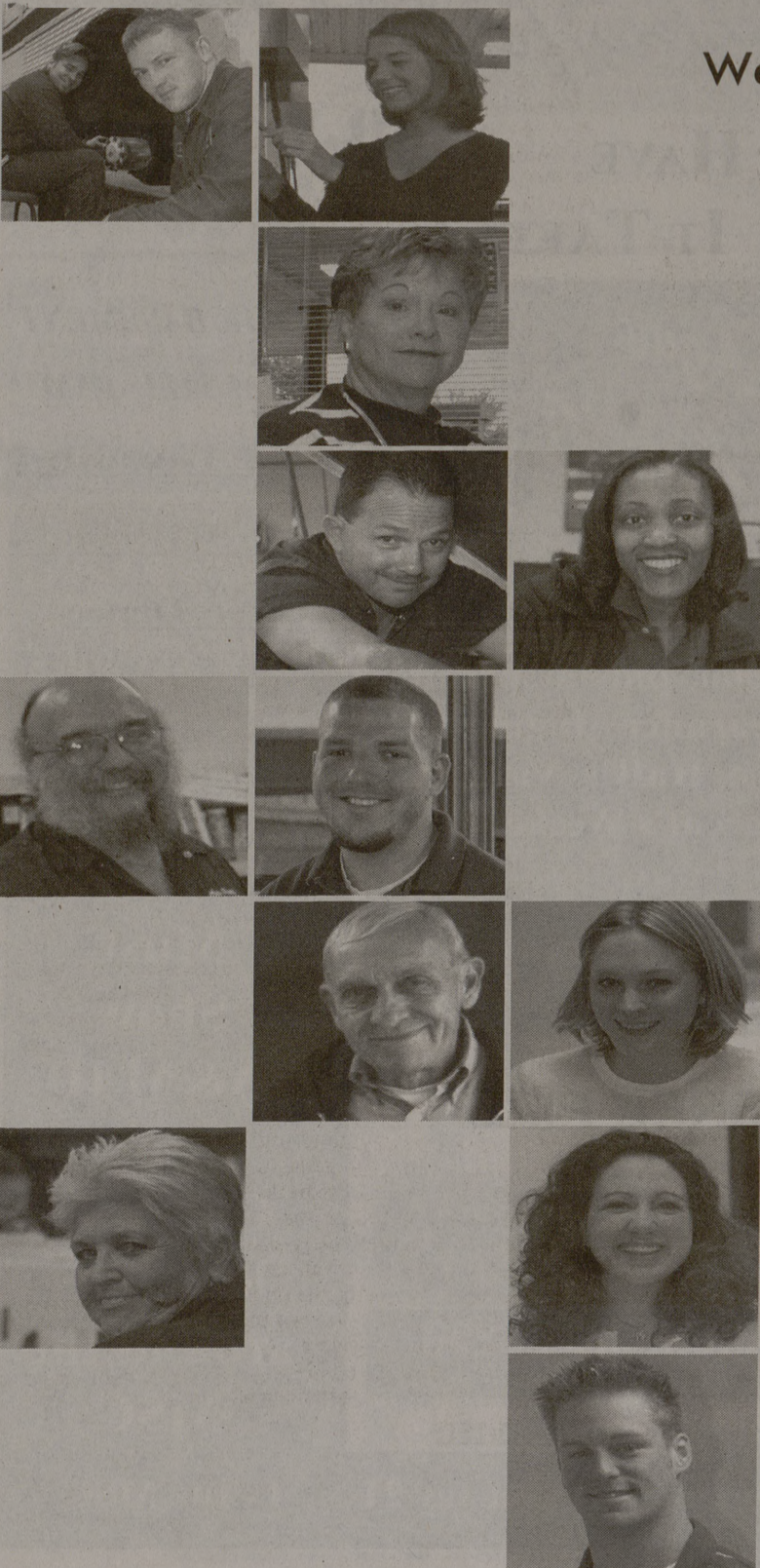
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*Scott Kay*



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