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THE EAGLE LAKE HEADLIGHT

(USPS 163-760)
P.O. Box 67 — 220 East Main
(409) 234-5521
CITY OF EAGLE LAKE,
TEXAS 77434-0067
Published Weekly
Every Thursday

Produced By:
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Jeannine Fearing
Shirley Lueddecke • Betty Drymalla

ADVERTISING AND NEWS DEADLINE: 5 P.M. MONDAY

Subscription Rates

Colorado County (including Lissie and Egypt)\$12.00
Fayette, Lavaca, Wharton, Austin counties\$13.50
Other Texas Residents\$15.00
Outside of Texas\$16.50

Single Copy Price: 35-Cents
Second class postage paid
at Eagle Lake, Texas

Address Corrections
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To The Editor & You

TACC learns about homestead exemption

On May 27, the Taxpayer's Association of Colorado County (TACC) held its regular meeting. After several months with planned programs and

guest speakers, it was decided to give the citizens a chance to discuss local issues and topics that are of current concern.

The first topic of discussion was the status of the "old jail". The general opinion seemed to agree with the recent statement in The Citizen. "It's not over until the wrecking ball swings." Copies of a letter from the State Historical Commission to the County Judge were passed out, which stated, "As guardian of your community's history, we feel it is imperative that you explore all alternatives to demolition of the old county jail."

A group of TACC members had visited with the Judge recently, after learning about this letter, but he is still unwilling to delay demolition and give citizens the opportunity to vote on this issue. The process and cost for getting a restraining order and/or injunction were discussed. Not that TACC wants to force the restoration of the old jail on the community, but it is believed all citizens should have a voice on this issue.

Also the group seemed to believe it would be good business to go out for bids to see if there are private parties that would pay for this facility, rather than the taxpayers having to pay for it to be demolished. Several citizens commented on the many times they have heard regrets expressed within the community that "we should have stopped the demolition of the old high school." Now is the time to act, or we will add the old jail to a list of regrets.

There is a general election in November. If an injunction can be obtained, at that time the citizens could have the option to vote for: (1) demolition of the old jail; (2) restoration of the old jail; (3) seeking bids for the sale of the old jail.

The second major discussion was the new rules by Commissioner's Court concerning "Citizens Comments". Copies of an Attorney General's

Opinion on this topic were shared. It stated that the court had much discretion in making policy, but that the court could not set policy that discriminates.

Everyone agreed that not allowing some citizens to speak, while allowing "invited" citizens to speak seemed very discriminatory! No single plan was adopted, but it seemed to be general opinion that such a policy should be challenged to preserve the right of "free speech" and citizens' right of redress to "those vested with the power of government" as guaranteed by our Texas Bill of Rights.

Perhaps the discussion that generated the most surprise among the group, was when a citizen reported just how close CISD taxpayers came to losing their homestead exemption.

This exemption must be voted on every year by May 1 or it is automatically voided.

The school administration failed to place this item on the agenda. When it was brought to the Board President's attention, he had to call a special meeting at 6 p.m. on April 28.

Even then there was an effort to persuade the board to discontinue the homestead exemption, because if the proposed tax bill passed, our district may be penalized financially for giving the homestead exemption.

Fortunately the board voted unanimously to continue the homestead exemption. They said that they would deal with the new legislation when, and if, it actually passed. Consequently the tax bill failed and the homestead exemption was protected - just barely!

New concerns about SPARC's ability to get liability insurance for the water park, since there are no engineering plans or specifications were voiced. This is a situation that will continue to need to be closely monitored.

Finally there was much discussion on how to get more citizens involved. It is imperative that more citizens attend meetings such as Commissioner's Court, school board, CAD, etc. In order to hold our elected officials accountable, we must know first hand what is going on. Vigilance is the (See TACC, Page 4)

Property tax relief in Texas dead, for now

On Saturday, May 24, the prospect of property tax reform died after Gov. George W. Bush rejected a last-minute Senate compromise that featured a mix of accounting maneuvers, budget cuts and tax increases.

A couple of weeks ago, two versions of property tax reform passed into the hand of a squabbling, uncompromising House-Senate tax conference committee, yet many Texans clung to hopes that tax relief would come.

The House plan would have raised about \$3.8 billion in new and expanded taxes, while the modest Senate plan would have raised about \$1 billion. Critics pointed out that neither plan addressed property tax appraisal reform, which would create a more dynamic effect than simply scaling back taxes.

Bush favored the House plan, because it provided a more substantial reduction in property taxes through budget cuts and revenue increases - including a business franchise tax that would have included partnerships. Senators gagged at the idea of a tax on partnerships.

Bush said the Legislature's failure to produce a tax plan shows that Texans are not desperate enough about high property taxes to force a change. He predicted that tax reform will come when taxpaying homeowners and business people march on the state Capitol and demand action from their state representatives and senators.

The death of tax reform opened the chute for other legislation, and a flurry of lower-profile issues came up for consideration before the June 2 end of the session.

Homestead Exemption Ok'd

Despite the failure of major tax reform, the same House-Senate conference committee informally approved an increase in the homestead tax exemption that would amount to a \$1 billion tax cut statewide.

The exemption - if it gains final approval - will give the average homeowner a \$140 tax cut by increasing the present \$5,000 homestead exemption to a new state minimum of \$15,000.

"We are at least granting relief of \$1 billion without tax increases," said conference committee member Sen.

State Capitol Highlights

By Lyndell Williams
and Ed Sterling
Texas Press Association

Ken Armbrister, D-Victoria.

Technicality Kills Many Bills

A bill that would have required parental notification before abortions are performed on minors failed on a technicality last week.

The measure was defeated after abortion rights activist Rep. Debra Danburg, D-Houston, challenged the bill on a point of order because records of a committee hearing on the bill did not list the groups represented by witnesses.

Rep. Arlene Wohlgenuth, R-Burleson, angered at the defeat of the bill, raised a point of order that killed 52 bills waiting floor debate. Wohlgenuth, who supports parental notification, pointed out that House Calendars Committee Chairman Mark Stiles, D-Beaumont, had failed to announce the location of a meeting where House agendas were set.

Wohlgenuth's action prompted other lawmakers to resubmit bills that failed to reach Calendars.

Bush Signs Literacy Bill

Gov. Bush signed the "Read to Succeed" initiative - legislation that earmarks \$32 million to pay for evaluating the reading skills of children, promote literacy and provide training for reading teachers.

Under the initiative, school districts will compete for state grants totaling \$7 million in 1998 and \$25 million in 1999 that will help schools evaluate the reading level of children in kindergarten through second grade and determine what help they need.

Bush had campaigned for a \$70 million literacy program but finally agreed on a scaled-down version costing about half that amount.

The initiative was attached to a bill sponsored by Rep. Helen Giddings, D-Dallas, that allows the Texas Department of Transportation to issue "Read to Succeed" license plates. A logo for the license plate will be designed in a student competition.

Other Capital Highlights

Gov. Bush toured the ruins of the tornado-ravaged community of Jarrell, 40 miles north of Austin, where he met with victims at a shelter. Bush called the destruction caused by the May 27 tornado "mind-boggling" and signed a proclamation declaring a disaster.

The Legislature approved a measure that will allow motorcyclists 21 years old or older to choose whether or not to wear a protective helmet - provided they have \$10,000 coverage in health insurance or take a DPS safety course. The bill repeals the eight-year-old mandatory helmet law. The bill awaits Gov. Bush's signature.

The Senate approved a bill that would require telemarketing firms to register with the state and disclose the amount of compensation they receive to donors if they keep more than 10% of the contributions. The bill is aimed at stopping fraudulent telephone solicitations by telemarketers that raise money for charities. This bill awaits the governor's signature.

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