



Big wheel makes rodeo debut **PAGE D1**

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Chance of storms: High 79, Low 64

Effort to ban texting while driving gains speed

Texas among last states to take action as safety concerns rise with fatalities

By Dug Begley

An uphill battle to make drivers put down their phones is picking up momentum after four tries by state Rep. Tom Craddick, as more people pile onto the message that Texas must end what some consider a road safety epidemic.

House Bill 62, authored by Craddick, R-Midland, breezed through its first House Transportation Committee hearing Thursday and unanimously sent to the full chamber for debate and, supporters hope, a vote.

"I think we need to move this forward quickly," said committee Chairwoman

Geanie Morrison, R-Victoria.

Forty-six states ban texting while driving, and 17 ban the use of all handheld devices, Craddick said, adding that Texas' lack of a ban has cost lives. In 2015, the last year for which confirmed statewide data is available, 476 people were killed in accidents in Texas in which investigators said distracted driving was involved.

Safety continues on A19



J. Patric Schneider

In a common sight in Houston, a motorist texts as she drives along Westheimer near the Galleria Thursday.

Pruitt signals major shift at EPA

Chief discounts human role in climate change

By James Osborne

Scott Pruitt, the new head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said Thursday that he questioned man-made carbon emissions contributed significantly to climate change and later signaled at an international energy conference in Houston that he would undo Obama administration policies aimed at slowing global warming.

Pruitt, a climate change skeptic who downplayed those views during his recent confirmation hearings, said in an interview with C N B C that there was still "tremendous



Pruitt

disagreement" about the impact of human activities — a reference to burning fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal — in accelerating climate change.

"So no, I would not agree that it's the primary contributor to the global warming that we see," he said. "We need to continue the debate and continue the review and the analysis."

Pruitt made those comments before appearing at CERAWEEK by IHS Markit in downtown Houston, where leaders of the some of world's largest oil and gas companies have acknowledged that climate

Pruitt continues on A19

OIL PRICES DROP BELOW \$50 AMID OPEC DOUBTS PAGE B1

CITY | STATE



Victoria Advocate
A fire destroyed the Islamic Center of Victoria on Jan. 28.

Suspect is linked to Victoria mosque fire

Federal officials say a man arrested for possessing a destructive device is responsible for a January fire that destroyed the mosque, but he hasn't been charged in the blaze. **Page A3**

CONGRESS

Republicans push health bill along in House

GOP leaders drive their effort to dismantle Obama-care over its first hurdles and claim fresh momentum. **Page A15**

WORLD

Up to a dozen civilians died in Yemen raid

A U.S. military investigation has determined that a raid killed up to a dozen civilians, the most specific admission yet of an unintended loss of life. **Page A16**

WikiLeaks offers tech companies aid with security

Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, says the organization will work with Apple, Google and other tech companies to fix flaws that have allowed the CIA to hack into their devices. **Page A15**

Filling 'a very coveted' position

Academic, fiscal strengths key for MD Anderson job

By Jenny Deam and Andrea Zelinski

The search will start quickly to find a new president at MD Anderson Cancer Center, focusing on those with not only a pedigree worthy of the nation's premier cancer hospital but also the financial savvy to stabilize an institution nearly half a billion dollars in the red.

An interim president will be named "within two weeks" and a permanent replacement for outgoing president Dr. Ron DePinho will be found "as soon as possible," Dr. Ray Greenberg, the University of Texas System's executive vice chancellor for health affairs, said Thursday. A search committee expected to be formed this month will include MD Anderson faculty, staff, UT leaders and community members.

The leading candidate to emerge from this six- to nine-month process will assume one of the most prestigious positions in health care, supervising a vast team of world-class clinicians and researchers and running an institution that launched the "Moon Shots" program in **Cancer continues on A11**

BROCK-BUSTER

Texans deal QB to Cleveland



Michael Ciaglo / Houston Chronicle

Brock Osweiler's career with the Texans is done after one season.

It was just a year ago when the Texans signed quarterback Brock Osweiler as the answer to the team's quest for success. After a season in which Osweiler was ineffective, booed and benched, the Texans found a way to start over. The team traded Osweiler and a second-round draft pick to Cleveland, getting only a fourth-round pick in return. The Texans cleared more salary cap space to find a new answer for next season. **See coverage on page C1**

Despite apartment glut, developers eager to build

By Nancy Sarnoff

So many luxury apartments have opened recently that landlords are offering move-in bonuses, free rent and chances to win weeklong cruises just to fill them up.

Some Houston developers say it's time to start building more.

The owner of Memorial City Mall, for example, announced Thursday it

would begin construction this month on an 8-story building with 327 luxury rental units and a rooftop pool.

Over the last few months, other established builders have announced plans for new high-end apartment projects even as their peers suffer through one of the worst multifamily downturns in years.

Weingarten Realty Investors, a publicly traded

company that owns neighborhood shopping centers throughout the county, last month said it would add a 30-story apartment tower to its flagship retail property, the River Oaks Shopping Center.

And Midway, developer of west Houston's CityCentre, recently began tearing down a 1990s apartment complex near Buffalo Bayou Park where **Apartment continues on A19**



MetroNational

This rendering depicts a Ziegler Cooper-designed apartment complex slated for Memorial City.

Index

Business ... **B1** Daily Digital **A2** Horoscope **D5** Obituaries **B8**
Comics.....**D5** Directory ...**A2** Lottery**C9** Sports..... **C1**
Crossword. **D4** Editorials **A20** Markets.....**B6** Weather... **B10**

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EXPIRES 03/16

FROM THE COVER

Pruitt plans to roll back Obama-era rules

Pruitt from page A1

change is a threat to the global environment and the industry must take steps to lower emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to slow its pace. The overwhelming scientific consensus is that the use of fossil fuels is raising temperatures around the world, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

"The world needs more energy," Ben van Beurden, chief executive of Royal Dutch Shell said Thursday morning. "But we also need to produce all that energy while emitting much less carbon dioxide."

'Stranded cost' burden

Pruitt, who followed van Beurden by a few hours, criticized policies under former President Barack Obama that aimed to push the power sector away from fossil fuels through tighter regulations on emissions and incentives encouraging renewable generating technologies such as wind turbines and solar panels.

Pruitt said power companies should be able to decide how to supply electricity to the grid without government regulators picking "winners and losers."

"When regulators act in such a way to displace investments that you made within two to three years after you did it, you get a lot of stranded cost," Pruitt said. "Stranded costs are being borne by consumers in a way I don't think is healthy for having a pro-growth, pro-environment agenda."

Pruitt gave brief remarks, and was later interviewed by Dan Yergin, the vice chairman of



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Environmental Protection Agency chief Scott Pruitt said, "The future ain't what it used to be at the EPA" during a speech at CERAWEEK in Houston, where he cited a shift from Obama-era regulations.

IHS Markit. Unlike many of the oil executives who took the stage during the week, Pruitt was not asked about his views on climate change.

President Donald Trump has expressed his own reservations about climate science, and pledged during the campaign to relax regulations on coal, which emits the highest amounts of greenhouse gases among fossil fuels.

He is also considering whether to pull the United States from the Paris agreement on climate change, a landmark 2015 deal in which the leaders of close to 200 nations agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the de-

cadecades to come.

A 2013 report by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, a body that draws on the work of thousands of scientists from around the globe, said there was at least a 95 percent chance that "human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century."

Pruitt's past on emissions

Pruitt was confirmed as the EPA administrator on a party line vote in the Senate last month. In his last job as attorney general of oil-rich Oklahoma, Pruitt repeatedly challenged in court efforts by Obama to rein in

carbon emissions, including the Clean Power Plan, which sought to reduce emissions from power plants.

After his nomination as EPA administrator, Pruitt took a softer line. In his Senate confirmation hearing in January, Pruitt said, "The climate is changing, and (human activity) contributes to that in some manner."

When pressed by Sen. Bernie Sanders, the former Democratic presidential candidate from Vermont, whether he believed that humans were the primary cause, Pruitt responded, "My personal opinion is immaterial to the job."

Pruitt's comments Thursday

"Stranded costs are being borne by consumers in a way I don't think is healthy for having a pro-growth, pro-environment agenda."

Scott Pruitt, EPA administrator

drew a sharp rebuttal from his predecessor, Gina McCarthy.

"Science is about empirical evidence, not beliefs," she said in a statement.

"When it comes to climate change, the evidence is robust and overwhelmingly clear that the cost of inaction is unacceptably high. I cannot imagine what additional information the Administrator might want from scientists for him to understand that."

EPA's new 'future'

In his speech Thursday, Pruitt promised to re-create the EPA, focusing the agency on areas like cleaning up Superfund sites and maintaining clean drinking water supplies. And he said the agency needs to listen when state officials and industries object to its rules and regulations.

"Right now the focal point I think as we get into the agency, one is dealing with these regulations I think are an example of regulatory overreach," Pruitt said, citing Obama's Clean Power Plan as an example. "The future ain't what it used to be at the EPA."

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Safety concerns starting to outweigh rights of drivers

Safety from page A1

In the last two legislative sessions, bills to ban texting while driving failed to get out of both the House and Senate. In 2011, Craddick's bill passed both chambers but was vetoed by then-Gov. Rick Perry, who cited his concerns with "a government effort to micromanage the behavior of adults."

Craddick and a crowd of supporters came ready Thursday to shoot that argument and others down. Data and common sense, he said, show texting while driving is dangerous, adding it is up to lawmakers to enact rules to make all streets safe.

"If we do not, I think we are derelict in our duty," Craddick said.

Supporters compared the lack of a law to turning a blind eye to drinking and driving, which has significantly reduced since laws were toughened three decades ago.

Drinking and driving also can be complex to enforce and lead to monetary fines — two things critics have pointed out — but no one doubts the value of the laws, Craddick said.

No one spoke against the bill during Thursday's committee hearing.

Gov. Greg Abbott's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In 2014 as a candidate, Abbott said he worried about "micromanaging" driver behavior, but has softened his stance since, telling reporters he would give any bill "serious consideration."

Widespread support of ban

A texting ban has the support of business officials, the insurance industry and local law enforcement.

"It is horrific," said Houston Police Capt. Matthew May. "Unless you have gone out to a scene and literally have had to assist picking up body parts, you do

not understand how devastating a crash can be."

As written, Craddick's bill would ban texting while driving, but allow the use of handheld phones, GPS systems and software to continue. Motorists also could send text messages via voice-activated technology, such as the systems installed in many new automobiles.

More than 90 Texas cities, including Galveston, Bellaire, Missouri City and Tomball, have handheld phone bans of their own, ranging from a prohibition on all uses to only banning texting while driving.

Craddick said in January that Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick were receptive to a statewide texting ban, citing the inconsistency in many metro areas.

A host of other bills have been filed in Austin that would ban the use of handheld devices for any reason or that try to find common ground short of a total ban. Rep. Chris Turner, D-Arlington,

speaking after Craddick, said his own bill to ban texting while driving when a minor was in the vehicle was "a backstop" in the event Craddick's bill failed.

Epidemic among young

Safety advocates and police believe the problem of texting is growing, especially in places that do not have penalties for the behavior.

"This is an epidemic especially with the younger generation being glued to their device at all times of the day including when they are driving," said Noel Johnson, representing the Texas Municipal Police Association.

May said in Houston, approximately 10 percent of the 86,000 crashes in 2016 involved distracted driving.

Some of the most emotional testimony during the committee session came from family members who lost loved ones in crashes that involved texting and driving.

"You spend days crying on the ground or screaming up and you look for positive things to lock onto," said Denton resident James Shaffer, explaining why he became active in seeking a statewide ban.

Shaffer's wife and daughter were killed in an April 9, 2016, crash that killed another mother and young child when their cars crashed head-on in Argyle. News reports from the time cited distracted driving as the cause of the crash.

Shaffer rejected the claim made by some critics in the past that a texting ban took away drivers' liberties.

"It is preventing you from taking someone else's liberties," he told lawmakers.

"You are not guaranteed the right to drive in the state of Texas."

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Apartment builders 'gently push on gas' to prepare for future

Apartment from page A1

it will build a mid-rise mixed-use building with luxury rentals, high-end office space and an H-E-B grocery store.

The strategy might not be as counterintuitive as it seems.

"There's really nothing wrong with starting to build now," said commercial mortgage veteran Hal Holliday.

Houston developers have historically adhered to a feast or famine approach.

When job growth and population exploded in Houston soon after the nation's financial crisis, landlords were able to raise rents to new highs. Developers quickly put stakes in the ground and a glut began to form.

When the price of oil took a nosedive, the financing spigot dried up.

Proposed projects were canceled as developers finished their buildings hoping for oil to turn around.

Despite the oversupply, Holliday said developers should be planning for future demand.

"If we slam on the brakes and don't try to gently push on the gas we're going to find ourselves back into a pent-up demand situation, and that's always accompanied by rising rents and probably too many people jumping in," he said.

Memorial City project

MetroNational, which will own the Memorial City apartments, is a family-owned real estate and development company that has long owned hundreds of acres around Interstate 10 and Gessner.

Its new apartment complex, which will be developed in partnership with



Slate Real Estate Partners, is part of the company's goal to further the area's reputation as a premier mixed-use destination. Beyond the mall, the Memorial City area has multiple office towers, a hospital and a hotel.

"As Houston goes up and down, they'll say we've been here on this campus 60 years," said Slate's Benjamin Pisklak.

"Let's build an asset that stands the test of time."

MetroNational officials weren't available to comment Thursday.

The apartments will be built just behind the mall on a parking lot at the northwest corner of Barryknoll Lane and Memorial City Way.

Ziegler Cooper Architects designed the building, which will have one-, two- and three-bedroom units ranging in size from 555 to 1,796 square feet. Opening is slated for late summer 2019.

The project isn't the only new multifamily that will open in the area in relatively short order.

MetroNational's new Hotel ZaZa, now under construction, will include 133 upscale apartments.

In two years, the local apartment market should be improving rapidly, said Greg Willett, chief econo-

mist of Richardson-based RealPage, a real estate data firm.

"From our perspective it's probably time for the capital market sources to take the redline off Houston," he said.

Eyeing an upswing

That's not to say this year isn't going to be brutal for landlords.

Occupancy will continue to drop, as will rental rates, especially in the urban neighborhoods where much of the construction has taken place. Willett said rents are off about 6 percent from where they were last year.

Some 27,000 new units are in the lease-up phase, yet only about 30 percent of those are rented, said analyst Bruce McClenny of Apartment Data Services.

About 13,000 more units are expected to be

developed this year. Those numbers taper way down into 2018 and continue to trail off.

Until that happens, "we've got a lot of ground to cover," McClenny said.

Despite the glut, other developers have pitched new projects, which they expect to be open once the recovery has taken hold.

Weingarten officials said they aren't overly concerned about timing because the company plans to own the property for the long term.

By its estimated opening date in 2021, however, the market could likely be on another upswing.

"I'm not at all alarmed what's happening now," said Holliday. "Capital sources and developers are taking risks on construction."

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Feds probe listeria cases linked to cheese

ASSOCIATED PRESS

HARTFORD, Conn. — Authorities are investigating a multistate listeria outbreak linked to a recalled cheese that has sickened several people and killed two, in Connecticut and Vermont.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health announced Thursday it's investigating with federal officials and agencies in other states.

Federal officials say the Listeria monocytogenes bacterium linked to the outbreak likely originated

from a soft raw milk cheese named Ouleout made by Vulto Creamery in Walton, N.Y. The creamery recalled several soft cheeses Tuesday. It hasn't returned an email seeking comment.

Six cases have been confirmed in Connecticut, New York, Vermont and

Florida. The names and hometowns of the people who died haven't been released.

Officials say Vulto's cheeses were sold at a Whole Foods in Fairfield, Conn., and potentially at specialty cheese shops around the state.

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