



NEW ENVY

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'WOOD SWEEPS

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WEATHER

High 93 Low 69
TOMORROW
High 93 Low 71
SATURDAY

FYI

Fire Chief Hodge announces retirement

Round Rock Fire Chief Larry Hodge announced Tuesday he will retire, effective Feb. 26, 2011, concluding a 40-year career in the fire service. Hodge will be 65 on Feb. 4, 2011.

"I came to Round Rock to finish this phase of my career with an outstanding fire department in an outstanding city and Round Rock has allowed me to meet those goals," Hodge said. "For this opportunity, I want to say 'thank you' to the firefighters and staff and to the many city employees who have made my tenure successful and to the City Councils, past and present, for their support."

Among the highlights of Hodge's tenure in Round Rock:

- The city improved its Public Protection Classification to a 2 in 2010 from a 4 in 2005. Public Protection Classifications, which measure a fire department's ability to respond to a fire, range from 1 (best) to 10 (worst).
- The department began rescue apparatus service at stations No. 3 and 4, with two-person crews as the primary first responder to emergency medical calls that account for more than 70 percent of calls for service.
- The Round Rock Fire Department was the first fire department in Williamson County to provide Paramedic Emergency Medical First Responder services.
- The department grew to seven stations from five, and grew to nine fire companies from six.
- There was one aerial apparatus (ladder truck) in the department in 2005; now there are three aerial apparatus in front line service and one in reserve.
- In less than five years, fire department staffing increased from 86 full-time employees to 121 full-time employees.
- With the establishment of Emergency Services District No. 9 in 2006, the city started receiving funds for providing fire and emergency medical services to certain unincorporated areas of Williamson County that we had been providing at no cost.



Hodge

"Chief Hodge led our fire department through a period of tremendous growth and he worked diligently to increase firefighters' capacity to provide life-saving care to our citizens," City Manager Jim Nuse said. "His leadership was critical to improving response times and ensuring our firefighters have the best equipment and training to do their jobs."

The city will begin a nationwide search to find a replacement for Hodge, who began work in Round Rock in 2005.

OLD TO BECOME NEW AGAIN



Leader file photo

Above: The silos of the Hutto Co-Op Gin Co. as they remained in 2005. Below: An artistic rendering of plans for the Hutto Co-Op District, which will feature a new city hall, public park, amphitheater and other amenities.

Hutto project honors city's past and looks to future

By MARCIAL GUAJARDO
Managing Editor

In 2003, a watershed event in Hutto's history occurred with the closing of the Hutto Co-Op Gin Co.

With its tall, metal structures and grain silos located just a few yards off U.S. Highway 79, the co-op was easily one of the most recognizable buildings in Hutto, which had a population of 1,250 just two years earlier. The town had remained largely agricultural in the years since the co-op was opened in 1937.

Co-op managers that year auctioned off the remaining feed and supplies in the co-op store, as well as gin equipment. Parts of the gin had been sold earlier, and soon little remained on the dusty, 18-acre site except a few empty buildings, including silos.

A few city leaders, including then-Mayor Mike Fowler, hoped to save what was left, but others were skeptical. While Fowler spoke of keeping ties to the city's agricultural past alive and envisioned an entertainment district at the site, others wondered if it would be economically feasible

to clean up the site and facilities. The metal buildings onsite had replaced the original wooden ones in the '80s, and thus had little historic value.

Since then, time has seemingly been pushed into fast-forward. Hutto has reached an estimated population of 17,120 today – a growth rate of

the Hutto Co-Op District, which will transform the site into a green initiative featuring a new city hall, a public park with amphitheater and a multi-use building. The silos will stay, incorporated into the designs to add appeal, maintain ties to the city's history, and possibly improve the structures to come.



1,260 percent. Down the road on Highway 79, a sprawling H-E-B Plus has been opened, as has a Wal-Mart, and the co-op site lies in the shadow of a Home Depot blocks away.

Still, the structures remain dusty and vacant.

Soon, however, that also will change.

New designs drawn

An architectural firm has drawn up a design concept for

"Hutto really could be a town starting a precedent for other towns, not only in Texas, for the foresight in this," said Michael Antenora, managing principal of Antenora Architects, an Austin-based firm which led the needs assessment survey and design concept of the project. "It feels like it's the right direction."

Mike Fowler's vision of an

See CO-OP, page 2A

County officials peeved at court

Monitoring program leads to ire against commissioners

By BRAD STUTZMAN
Leader Editor

Livid is not too strong a word, in describing how some Williamson County elected officials are reacting to news that computer activity in their office is now being monitored.

Is it standard operating procedure or political spying? Perfectly secure or a potential compromiser of confidential information? That depends upon whom one asks.

County Judge Dan Gattis and Jay Schade – the county's senior director of technology services – say there's no cause for concern.

"All it does is give us the ability to see who's on the Internet," Gattis said.

But County Attorney Jana Duty and County Treasurer Vivian Wood are each registering strong reactions to the computer monitoring, which apparently started last week and is an outgrowth of the county's recently adopted social media policies.

"They put spyware on the county computer system in order to monitor computer activity of county employees," Duty said. "It went live, I believe, Thursday of last week. I wouldn't call it Internet policy. As far as I know it was never on the [commissioners court] agenda."

"It can be good thing, depending on how it is used," she said. "I don't think it's a good thing, considering none of our department heads or elected officials knew."

Wood and District Attorney John Bradley each also said they were not aware of the monitoring.

Bradley – who was headed out of town – told the Leader via e-mail Tuesday afternoon: "I was unaware. I would like to speak to the County Judge and IT before expressing any opinions."

Wood said she and other elected officials should have

See COMPUTERS, page 2A

Lights, camera, action



MARCIAL GUAJARDO/Leader
A film crew sets up a shot in the backyard of a home in the Meadows at Chandler Creek neighborhood Tuesday evening. Austin-based director and screenwriter Bradley Jackson shot scenes from his short film, "The Man Who Never Cried," in Georgetown, Pflugerville and Round Rock in about a week's span. It stars Keir O'Donnell ("My Generation") and Jess Weixler ("Teeth").

United Way, Volunteer Center team up for 'Day of Caring'

By LAURI ZACHRY
Leader Staff

Volunteers throughout Williamson County and Central Texas are invited to participate in United Way of Williamson County's Day of Caring Friday, Sept. 10 from 9 a.m. to noon.

United Way has partnered with the Round Rock Volunteer Center for the Day of Caring event, said United Way of Williamson County Chief Professional Officer LeAnn Powers.

"Imagine the potential of over a hundred volunteers giving just a few hours of their time on the morning of Sept. 10," Powers said. "We have three great opportunities where the collective efforts of volunteers can make a truly remarkable impact on children and youth – from pre-school to high school. Joining together in volunteer opportunities such as these really embodies what it means

See UNITED, page 2A

CO-OP: First phase of development scheduled to open in 2013

Continued from page 1A

entertainment district is near fruition, with an open park space and the amphitheater envisioned to host events such as live music performances and farmers markets.

But current city leaders are driving the plans, working to fulfill city government's need for additional office space.

Antenora noted Hutto City Hall is 100 percent occupied at this time with lease space in an adjacent retail center also being used. The police department is "shoehorned into the space they have," Antenora added.

The city currently can afford

to build a new City Hall facility of approximately 32,000 to 35,000 square-feet, according to the city's HuttoCoopDistrict.com website.

A building of that size will provide an adequate amount of space for city administrative staff for years to come, according to the website.

Plans call for a silo dubbed "The Long Building" to serve as the basic structure for an interim City Hall. The silo would be cut into four pieces and relocated about 150 feet – creating room for the civic park space and creating a "Texas city square" planners hope will become the city's hub.

City staff would move initially from existing offices on Front Street to the interim City Hall. The departure of city administration from the Front Street offices would allow for the arrival of police personnel from their cramped quarters.

Approximately \$6.9 million has been set aside for the first phase of the project, which will include the interim City Hall and possibly the civic open park space. The first phase is slated to be built in 2012 and open in 2013.

That will have it opening just two years after another watershed date in the city's history – Hutto centennial.

City residents had input on the project, as did city leadership and businesses, through a charette design process. A Feb. 27 session led to a list of possible ideas for the co-op district, outlined on HuttoCoopDistrict.com.

The project is one that has created a buzz around town, especially among those who lived in Hutto before the end of the co-op, Assistant City Manager David Mitchell said.

"I've heard the passion people have for that site," Mitchell said. "They're passionate about a significant agricultural aspect of our city. What's important to them is important to us."

Additional phases of the co-op district call for a permanent City Hall and a justice center for police and municipal courts. Changes to the city's master plan calls for a "civic block" to be added, which would provide some municipal functions as well as business and entertainment opportunities.

City officials said they have been impressed with Antenora's work on the project, as well as the work the firm did on its conversion of Austin's Penn Field from a former World War I Army airfield to an upscale mixed-use campus. That project played a role in its selection for the co-op district project.

COMPUTERS: Elected leaders say they were unaware of program

Continued from page 1A

been consulted before computer monitoring procedures were put in place.

She said county commissioners "don't realize" that although they approve budgets, they are not in charge of other elected county officials.

"What the hell are we doing?" Wood said. "This is not a police state. Come on."

Some wonder if politics involved

Duty and Royger Harris – an investigator in her office who also founded

and serves as interim president for the recently formed Williamson County Employees Association – each said they believe the monitoring is politically motivated.

"In my opinion, they did it because of the Employees Association," Duty said. "They are regularly criticizing the commissioners court and the commissioners are frustrated about being criticized. I believe this is an attempt to find out who is criticizing them."

"The timing is peculiar," Harris said. "They just updated the

social media policy a couple of weeks ago. And now this."

Commissioners have consistently stated the social media policy – which is part of the larger Employee Manual they approved Aug. 24 – is primarily meant to curb what Pct. 1 Commissioner Lisa Birkman of Brushy Creek called "excessive" Internet use for personal business.

During commissioners court discussions about social media use, Birkman said she can take criticism and it is not her aim to stifle dissent.

In an opinion column published in the Aug. 31 Leader Birkman wrote: "However, I disagree strongly with employees writing anonymous, untruthful, harassing, and/or discriminatory statements on social media sites about county business or fellow employees.

"I also do not support excessive use of personal social media sites by employees at work when the taxpayers are paying for their time."

Confidentiality compromised?

Regardless of whether the computer monitoring is politically motivated, Duty and Wood each said they deal with confidential information that could be compromised if people outside their offices view it.

"We do 90 percent of our financial transactions on the Internet now," Wood said. "Who can see

"What the hell are we doing? This is not a police state. Come on."

— Williamson County Treasurer Vivian Wood

it? What can they see?

"It is my responsibility as an elected official [and] when there is no discussion, when I don't know anything about this product, where is the assurance?"

Duty expressed similar concerns, stating people in her office deal with information protected by attorney/client privilege, as well as confidential information in Child Protective Services cases.

"In my office there's a lot of things that are confidential by law, that the commissioners court and the IT director have no business looking at," Duty said.

Like Wood, Duty said she is an independently elected official and – in order to maintain checks and balances in government – her office must operate outside of commissioners court oversight via computer monitoring.

"For example," she said, "say my office is investigating the county commissioners or the county judge. The county judge or county commissioners should not be able to access information about investigations of them."

Duty said she will demand that her office be excluded from the monitoring and – if the commissioners court does not voluntarily comply – she will file an injunction (basically calling on them to cease and desist) in one of the county's district courts.

'Hostility' noted among county officials

Schade said equipment needed for the computer monitoring cost \$13,000 and similar equipment has been "utilized in the past, off and on."

Harris disagreed with that assertion, stating: "The old [monitoring] appliance has not been in use. It's been sitting on a shelf. People have told me that."

Harris declined to identify the source of his information.

Harris and the Employees Association – represented by the Austin legal firm of Keel Nassour – on Tuesday morning filed a Freedom of Information request with the commissioners court, asking when "[in] compliance with Open Meeting Act voting," commissioners authorized the "purchase

or implementation of the computer monitoring program."

Schade, meanwhile, appeared genuinely surprised by the uproar.

He said fears of politically motivated computer spying are off base.

When asked if there was a political motivation behind the monitoring, Schade said: "Not from my perspective."

"It's always been a policy of ours that county computer equipment is to be for county business," Schade said.

Schade said only he and one other person in his office have access to the computer monitoring program, stating: "All you can see is where employees went to. All you can see is [a particular employee] went to this site. They [commissioners] never even implied they want to see who's on the logs."

He said the monitoring is in keeping with the county's new social media policy and also to ensure computer traffic of a non-business nature is not tying up the county's broadband space.

Harris said he does not blame Schade for the controversy, stating: "I don't believe for a second Mr. Schade did this on his own. I believe he was told [by the commissioners court] to implement it."

One longtime county government employee said it has literally been decades since he has seen what he called "this level of hostility" between elected county officials."



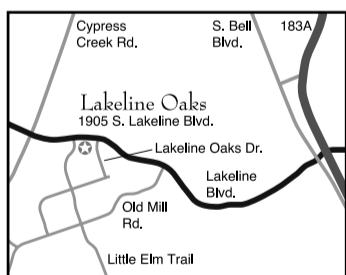
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UNITED: Volunteer opportunities abound

Continued from page 1A

to 'Live United,' the ongoing theme we embrace and advocate at United Way of Williamson County."

Three volunteer sites, one in the northern part of Williamson County and two in the southern part, offer a variety of ways to get involved.

At Berry Springs Park, just north of Georgetown, a partnership with Williamson County will have volunteers creating a Born Learning Trail.

The Born Learning Trail offers a series of outdoor games posted on signs, giving parents and other caregivers the opportunity

to create learning opportunities for young children.

In addition to creating a trail at the park, volunteers will make several landscape improvements on the gravel trail in the and natural gardens, Powers said.

"The creation of the Born Learning Trail is a way of using nature as a learning tool," she said.

There are two volunteer sites in Round Rock.

One of them is the Neighborhood Conference Committee building at 201 Round Rock Ave.

A program of LifeSteps, this project will have volunteers cleaning and painting in and around

the building in preparation for their fall program that focuses on keeping kids in school.

The other site is at WBC Opportunities Round Rock Head Start, 110 S. Brown St., where volunteers will help create a safer playground for the children in their program.

Powers said she hopes about 100 volunteers total come out Sept. 10.

She said H-E-B has donated water for volunteers. American Fence has donated poles so volunteers can mount signs in Berry Springs Park.

Powers said United Way of Williamson County

volunteers participate in about two to three Day of Caring events each year. The next Day of Caring is scheduled for the Martin Luther King holiday in January 2011.

"Volunteering in Williamson County has increased over the years," Powers said. "We have a lot of people here who want to give their time and their resources."

To register for the Day of Caring, call the Round Rock Volunteer Center at 733-7625, visit unitedway-wc.org and click on the button for the Sept. 10 Day of Caring or visit the Round Rock Volunteer Center's website at volrock.org.

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