

Capital Highlights

Special session coming this fall



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Texas lawmakers will adjourn the regular session on Monday — Memorial Day — but Gov. Greg Abbott has already indicated he will call a special session in the fall to grapple with redistricting after detailed census results are finally released.

Last week, Abbott told lawmakers he would put them in charge of deciding how to spend nearly \$16 billion in federal money the state received for COVID-19 recovery efforts. During the first two rounds of stimulus funding, Abbott decided how the money would be spent, which angered some legislators.

The special session comes just months before the 2022 primaries, with Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, Attorney General Ken Paxton, and Comptroller Glenn Hegar all planning to seek re-election.

That raises the possibility of other topics being added to the special session that could appeal to the governor's base, according to the San Antonio Express-News. Abbott has drawn one primary opponent, former state Sen. Don Huffines.

Mask mandates largely a thing of the past in Texas

Abbott last week issued an executive order banning all government and public entities from mandating the wearing of masks. The order went into effect May 21, except for public schools, which can require masks until June 4.

Local governments or officials can be fined up to \$1,000 for requiring the wearing of masks, although businesses can still require them. Most large retailers, such as Walmart, Costco and Target, announced they were ending mask requirements.

However, state-supported living centers, government owned or operated hospitals, state prison juvenile justice facilities, and county and municipal jails are exempt from Abbott's order and can still require masks be worn.

A day in Texas with no COVID-19 deaths

For the first time since March 21, 2020, the state's Department of State Health Services on Sunday, May 16, said no deaths related to COVID-19 were reported.

The milestone was noted by Abbott and others, though celebrations were tempered at least among some, the Houston Chronicle reported. The hiatus was short-lived, however, as DSHS reported 23 new deaths the following day.

The number of Texans hospitalized who are COVID-19 patients is at its lowest level since last June, according to DSHS, with 2,070 cases that were lab confirmed as of Sunday.

The number of new cases in the past week in Texas, as reported by the Coronavirus Resource Center at Johns Hopkins University, stood at 12,290, down 17.5 percent from the previous week and continuing the steady

decline statewide. A total of 269 deaths were recorded statewide for the same time frame.

Meanwhile, the number of Texans who are fully vaccinated reached nearly 9.8 million.

Drought conditions easing under widespread storms

Much of the state has experienced a soggy May thus far, with widespread precipitation blanketing much of the eastern and central regions. As a result, drought conditions have eased except in the Panhandle and West Texas and the counties around Laredo on the border.

The Texas Water Development Board reports a total of 44% of the state's area is now under moderate or worse drought conditions. By comparison, we reported on April 4 that drought conditions existed in more than two-thirds of the state.

Texas opts out of federal jobless assistance plan

Abbott last week announced the state will no longer accept federal jobless assistance funds after June 26, including the extra \$300-per-week approved earlier this year by Congress.

The state is also leaving a federal assistance program that provides aid to self-employed and gig workers not normally covered by unemployment insurance. The move is intended to encourage people to return to work, as restaurants and other businesses say it is difficult to attract workers.

"The Texas economy is booming, and employers are hiring in communities throughout the state," Abbott said. "According to the Texas Workforce Commission, the number of job openings in Texas is almost identical to the number of Texans who are receiving unemployment benefits. That assessment does not include the voluminous jobs that typically are not listed, like construction and restaurant jobs."

The state's jobless rate was 6.7% in April, according to the Texas Workforce Commission, down from the record high of 12.9% in April 2020.

Secretary of State Hughs to step down

Texas Secretary of State Ruth Ruggiero Hughs will step down at the end of May, she announced last week. Hughs was appointed by Abbott in August 2019. However, the Texas Senate never formally confirmed her nomination. Abbott will now be free to appoint a new secretary of state, who could be confirmed during the upcoming special session.

Learn more about college savings plans offered by state

The state of Texas offers three tax-advantaged plans for higher education —the Texas College Savings Plan, the Lone Star 529 plan and the Texas Tuition Promise Fund. Parents can learn more about the plans by watching a webinar on four dates in June and July. Register for the webinar here: <https://www.texastuitionpromisefund.com/events/>.

Gary Borders is a veteran award-winning Texas journalist. He published a number of community newspapers in Texas during a 30-year span, including in Longview, Fort Stockton, Nacogdoches and Cedar Park. Email: gborders@texaspress.com.

Guest Column

A hopeful start



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Hopeful, encouraging, timely... those were a few of the words that were shouted out at the beginning of the recent Aledo ISD Parenting University session on Thursday, May 20. This interactive engagement resulted from the speaker asking 40-plus participants, "What are your thoughts about being here today?" Danny L. Ross, a licensed professional counselor, conducted a two-hour workshop entitled "A Community of Connectedness" as part of the school board's plan to increase dialogue about race and ethnicity issues in our community.

As a parent of a recent graduate of the Aledo school system, I attended the event to see how our community would respond to an open discussion about our different cultural experiences. Given all the unfortunate and politically charged rhetoric about Critical Race Theory in the news and on social media, I was concerned that the exchanges at this parenting university might prove to be confrontational. Due to Danny's excellent tone, energy, and easy-going style, he quickly allowed the group of black, brown, and white participants to relax and enjoy the night's activities.

As a skillful and experienced facilitator, Danny modeled a simple way of telling his story and then allowed the audience

members to respond to three questions about how our families handle challenging subjects. Each audience member wrote their replies on post-it notes and stuck them on a wall in the room. Reading these notes aloud, we began to see that many of us in the room have similar experiences regardless of the color of our skin.

The second series of group exercises allowed us to explore the meaning of culture and subcultures. Each table prepared a large flip chart on what we considered Texas Culture. Once again, it was interesting to see, regardless of race or ethnicity, how many shared the same items, i.e., BBQ, football, trucks, country and western music. Having created a safe space for us to share and learn, Danny then asked us what happens if a subculture within a dominant culture does not seem heard, understood, or respected?

This realization allowed us to peacefully acknowledge that some of the events in the Aledo community are related to this idea that the black and brown community members are not consistently heard.

A powerful part of the workshop was when we paired up with someone we did not know to share our first experiences with race. We discussed early encounters, times in college, and how race impacts our work environment. Because Danny had moved us from large group activities to table exercises to now one-on-one engagement, the room was buzzing with people sharing their thoughts and feelings about race. Given the negative and divisive nature of race dialogue on social media and the major news

networks, it would have been good for the whole world to see a group of POC and White adults having an honest conversation about race. No yelling or shouting — but open dialogue and deep engagement.

As the evening progressed, we covered topics like microaggressions, perspective, selective distortion, cross-racial dialogue, and how to create change. These topics could have resulted in a group breaking into factions and destroying the atmosphere of shared learning. However, this evening proved that when adults and parents who care about our community come together for the common good, we can achieve change.

I want to thank my black and brown neighbors for taking the risk and engaging in this public dialogue on race. To the members of the school board and administration that put on the workshop, I hope you make good on the promise that this is not a "one and done" event. We know that we have years of work to do in our community if we are going to make sure that race is understood and that racism has no place in Aledo. Please bring back Danny Ross for a second workshop, and let's figure out how to get 400 in the room.

As Danny wrapped up the night, he asked the group again, "How are you feeling now?" It was terrific to hear people of color and whites shout out, "More hopeful, more encouraged, thankful..." The nervous energy that started the meeting had turned into a collective power that was inspiring. To my friends and neighbors in Aledo — let's keep this positive movement going!

Slings&Arrows

...and that's a wrap!



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When 1995 arrived and I was almost two years shy of 40, I had never done *anything* for more than three years (other than go to school and college).

I did own another business in the 1980s, and it might have gone on for more than three years if it had gone on — but it didn't.

A chance encounter with an acquaintance set in motion a series of events that led to me taking ownership of *The Community News* on May 25, 1995.

So here we are — 26 years is "a wrap."

So as you receive this newspaper, it will be the beginning of year 27. I can't wait!

It's a little bit scary and a little bit exciting that, in this business, you just never know what the next day is going to bring, or who is going to walk in the door, or what's going to happen when the phone rings. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's tragic, but it is always a story that needs to be told.

Thank you for allowing us into your lives for the past 26 years. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve this community. And now it's time for the next thing!

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We welcome letters, articles and guest opinions from our readers. Opinions expressed in this newspaper will be labeled as opinions, editorials or letters, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the ownership. Letters should be signed, and limited to approximately 300 words. All submissions to the newspaper should

include a telephone number in case we have questions. Letters are due by Monday at noon for that week's paper. Community announcements, achievements and obituaries are due by noon Friday for the following week's paper. Send submissions to news@community-news.com.

Photos submitted should include names of the people in the photograph. For ease in submitting photographs electronically, visit our contact form at community-news.com/contacts.

The Community News does not charge for timely wedding, engagement and birth announcements provided they are of reasonable length. Lengthy announcements will either be edited to a reasonable length or, at the discretion of the person submitting the announcement, be charged a fee. The deadline for submitting announcements is noon Friday for the following week's paper.