

Alto ISD mulls hurricane shelter operations at AHS

Board tables issue to ensure campus safety

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STAFF WRITER

The Hurricane Rita evacuations of 2005 highlighted the need to be prepared in case of an emergency evacuation. The Alto ISD Board of Trustees deliberated the initial phases of entering into an agreement with the American Red Cross for use of the Alto High School (AHS) gymnasium and cafeteria as a shelter during Monday's regular meeting.

Superintendent Dr. Ray DeSpain said the plan would entail using the gymnasium for cots and showers and using the cafeteria to feed the evacuees.

"I think this is something we need to do," Dr. DeSpain said.

Board President Freddy Johnson agreed, but voiced concern about the potential for

damage to AISD facilities.

"I have no problem with (using AHS as a shelter), but I want to protect our school district," he said.

Dr. DeSpain said Item Five on the American Red Cross Recitals provided for repairs that were due to negligence on the Red Cross's part.

Board member Greg Duplichain voiced concern that Item Five might not cover damage done by evacuees. The board decided to table the issue pending further research and allowing the district's attorney to review the matter.

The board approved the 2007-2008 school calendar, with the first day of school taking place on Aug. 27 and graduation being scheduled on May 31, 2008.

Head Start programs for 2007-2008 will begin with

students four-years old. Dr. DeSpain said this was to maximize academic readiness and AISD staff.

The board voted to hire Jeanette Moore to teach elementary school for the coming school year and accepted the resignations of teachers John Hillis, Stacy Wright and Robin Birdwell.

Dr. DeSpain recognized Board members Teddy Pearman for six years of service and Randy Sturrock for 12 years of service.

Ms. Pearman and Mr. Sturrock are not seeking reelection.

The board will meet at 7 p.m. Monday, May 21, at the Alto ISD administration building to canvass school board election results, swear in new board members and reorganize the board.

Sheriff

continued from pg. 1A

and a diesel truck.

"We once sold 24 firearms seized from a drug deal," he said. "That added \$3,300 to the account."

Sheriff Campbell noted, "We only sell firearms to licensed gun dealers. All the other stuff gets sold to the general public."

He said the reason is so no one buys a gun from his department, robs a store, then claims he bought the gun from the sheriff's department.

Sheriff Campbell said when an item is to be sold, it is advertised in the newspaper and auctioned off. The funds raised then go to purchasing new equipment, in this case, Glock-22, 40-caliber

handguns.

"We decided to buy new weapons and they (deputies) wanted Glocks," Sheriff Campbell said, adding that Glock supplies 78 percent of the law enforcement market.

Lt. David Womack said he prefers Glocks because they are lightweight, have a lighter trigger-pull and hold more rounds in the magazine and are durable.

"They have a durable finish, you can't make one rust," he said. "Glock also has a good follow-up program. You can send someone to Glock-Armor School to learn how to fix them."

Sheriff Campbell said he plans to send Lt. Womack and

one other deputy to the school in the coming weeks.

Sheriff Campbell said the department bought 28 new handguns, so they would have two extra guns in case one malfunctions and has to be sent for repair.

The Glocks come equipped with three clips and night-sights for a price of \$429 each. The Department traded in their old weapons, Sig model-23, 40-caliber handguns, for \$255 each. The net price paid for the new Glocks was \$4,872.

Sheriff Campbell said by using seized money to purchase the guns, he would not have to rely on the taxpayers to purchase new weapons.

American Rivers

continued from pg. 1A

legislature within the next month.

American Rivers is a national organization founded in 1973 to protect and preserve the rivers of the U.S., Ms. Wodder said.

"We work with the decision makers, which is why our headquarters ate in Washington, D.C.," she said. "We are also finding ourselves working more with state legislatures."

American Rivers contacted more than 2,500 local river groups to take nominations for the most endangered rivers. The Neches River was nominated by Gina Donovan of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources.

"My reaction to the Neches River being placed on the list is one of elation, but also one of sadness," Ms. Donovan said. "I am elated because a national organization, such as American Rivers, sees how imperiled this awesome river is in East Texas. I am saddened because we are on the list. We have such a tremendous asset. The state should be protecting this last free-flowing river in Texas."

Ms. Donovan said she wants Texans to realize what natu-

ral beauty they have in their great state. She said, according to the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Neches River and seven miles of the Devil's River in west Texas closely resemble what the early settlers saw when they traveled through Texas.

"That is phenomenal to me," Ms. Donovan said, "that the Neches River is what our forefathers saw when they came to Texas. Not to protect that, to me, is a sin."

"The point to this report is to put a spotlight on these rivers," Ms. Wodder said. "We would encourage people to be better informed. They can do so by visiting our Web site, www.AmericanRivers.org. There, they can understand what is up with this river, then get in touch with their representatives to encourage them not to go forward with the legislation for the unique reservoir legislation."

Ms. Wodder said that the Texas Water Development Board showed that the water from the Fastrill Reservoir would not be needed for 50 years. She described the city of Dallas as being the worst water waster of the big cities in Texas.

"According to our data, which is from 2001, the average Dallas resident used 250 gallons of water per day. By comparison, the average Houston resident used 160 gallons of water per day," Ms. Wodder said.

"There are handy ways to conserve water and they are becoming easier and better with every passing day," she said. "There is room in the existing water supply and treating water as a valuable resource means a continued flowing Neches River."

Ms. Wodder said healthy rivers are the most valuable resource a community can have. She said healthy, flowing rivers contribute to the health, safety, recreation and economy of a local community, citing the Texas State Railroad and Neches River Hunting Clubs. The report, which names the Neches River as the sixth most endangered river in America, also points out that if the Fastrill Reservoir were built, the Texas State Railroad and two state parks would be forced to close.

"We want people to see rivers are a valuable resource and to throw them away is short sighted," Ms. Wodder said.

State Railroad

continued from pg. 1A

the state rail authority to a private operator.

Mr. Hilderbran said that he believes there are several options worth pursuing, and he said he wanted to hear from both sides to gain their insight on those options.

He said one option is to package the Texas State Railroad with a group of historic sites which may be transferred from TPWD to the Texas Historical Commission. Another option is to amend the bill and the contract that the TSR Operating Agency signed to make it conform to the committee's wishes.

There may be some other legal issues surrounding the creation of a rail authority that may be unconstitutional as the issue is being presented now.

"It may take a couple of weeks to sort this all out,"

he said.

Dr. Terry Colley, assistant executive director of the Texas Historical Commission, said that his agency has pledged support to help the TSR any way that it can.

"We are cautiously optimistic about the transfer of the state historic sites," he said. "If including the railroad with the historic sites is the desire of the Legislature, then we'll work with that scenario."

Privatization is not the only "track" being pursued for the Texas State Railroad. State Rep. Chuck Hopson (D-Jacksonville) is hoping that his Article 11 rider in the omnibus Appropriations bill will pass, which outright funds the TSR and keeps it under the jurisdiction of the state parks system and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept.

"That's my first choice," said

Summary of bills relating to TSR Privatization

HB 3113 and SB 1659: Relating to the transfer of the Texas State Railroad to, and the creation of, the Texas State Railroad Authority; granting authority to issue bonds or other similar obligations or to create public debt.

Rep. Hopson.

He predicted that he will know more about the chances of the Legislature approving his funding request within a couple of weeks.

Bonding authority was removed from Sen. Nichols' substitute bill because if a private rail operator is contracted, that company may seek funding on the open market.

Fastrill

continued from pg. 1A

complain that this designation makes it more difficult to sell land, and that in some instances, land prices decline. Supporters of the designation say this is the only way to plan for the future.

The group of 19 proposed sites impact more than 600,000 acres of land.

State Rep. Robby Cook (D-Eagle Lake), author of HB 2470, compared the concept to booking a hotel for a wedding reception 15 years from now; there is a chance that the wedding will never occur.

He said that there is no guarantee that the 19 reservoirs will ever be built in Texas.

Most environmental groups at the committee supported HB 2470 because a component requires a water surcharge to be paid to former landowners as a type of royalty.

This bill drew harsh opposition from Bill Ceverha, a former state representative from Richardson in the DFW Metroplex who currently serves on the water board of Region C.

Mr. Ceverha said that the proposed bills are the result of thousands of meetings, extensive research and more than seven years of planning. "The

bills are absolutely vital."

He urged the committee to look ahead 50 years and create an environment in Dallas that promotes dynamic growth. He objected stridently to the concept of fees being paid to former landowners.

Rep. Harvey Hilderbran (R-Kerrville) expressed concern that a big city such as Dallas can use powers of eminent domain and travel 200-300 miles to condemn property. "This is not what our forefathers envisioned."

Mary Decker and Gene Decker, both of Jacksonville, spoke in opposition of the designation of unique water sites. Ms. Decker gave the committee copies of Richard Donovan's book on the Neches River, "Paddling the Wild Neches."

She said that Dallas has plenty of water available and that a conservation plan is needed for those residents. She warned committee members, "I hope you will be careful about this, and that you will let rivers and streams flow."

Mr. Decker predicted that the decisions made in the Legislature on water will make or break the state in the future.

He said that even large lakes in the U.S., including Lakes Mead and Powell, are drying up because the environment is damaged. He asked the committee to look behind the requests to construct reservoirs and determine if foreign interests are being served.

Even though he does not serve on the Natural Resources Committee, state Rep. Chuck Hopson (D-Jacksonville) sat in on the committee hearing for several hours last Wednesday.

After the meeting, he told the Cherokeean Herald, "It was good to see people from the district testify about our water issues. When citizens take the time to travel to Austin it highlights the importance and passion for these issues. Water is the future of East Texas. We need to do everything we can to protect our natural resources. I do not support an outside group or region coming in and altering our community."

Many of the persons in the "standing room only" hearing room signed up to testify several hours before being called. And being on the list three hours before the committee convened was no guarantee

of having an opportunity to speak.

Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, waited more than 10 hours and left the hearing at 2:30 a.m. without having an opportunity to address the committee.

"I will have to submit my concerns about the legislation in writing," she said. "What I wanted to be able to say is that there is no way that the state is going to need 19 reservoirs in the foreseeable future. The state water plan identifies other water sources adequate to meet the needs of DFW-North Texas without building any of the four proposed for that area."

"Any reservoir that is actually needed will get built. This bill encourages boondoggles for the benefit of individuals and companies that make hundreds of millions of dollars off of dam construction, land speculation and use of public money for expensive public-works projects," she said.

Ms. Bezanson has been an outspoken opponent of the construction of Lake Fastrill.

A group of property owners

in the Sulphur River basin captured the attention of the committee with their sincerity.

Molly Barridge stood at the podium and asked her nine traveling companions to stand. "You are looking at nine property owners who travelled 300 miles one way to address you. They represent 14,000 acres of working farm land that will be impacted."

"Take a long, hard look at us," she said. "We left our farms and jobs to be here. We have no expense accounts, and we are your backbone. We raise your cattle, your lumber and lease our land for people to hunt." She cited her brother, who is a Marine in Iraq. "Will you steal his land while he's protecting your homeland?"

The group opposes the creation of Marvin Nichols and suggested that the answer lies nearby at Lake Wright Patman. The water level is maintained at 220 feet as a flood control lake, but the spillway is capable of retaining 259 feet. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns the land around the lake, and no additional property would need to be condemned if the water level is raised.

Rep. Hilderbran said he shares some of the concerns of persons testifying against the designation for 19 new reservoirs.

"We must think about the unintended consequences of actions," he said. "Our job is to balance and do what's best for the state at large. Some bills may need changing. We may need some of these sites; we may need to remove some from the bill. But we do not need to remove all of them."

Summary of bills related to Lake Fastrill

○HB 2470: Relating to the construction of reservoirs and assessing fees on water impounded in a reservoir;

○HB 1681: Relating to the preservation for development of sites of unique value for regional water supply reservoirs and the preservation of river and stream segments of unique ecological value.

○HB 2187: Relating to the development, management, and preservation of the water resources of the state.

Rusk

continued from pg. 1A

situation the Texas Attorney General ruled that voters had to approve a sale.

If this applies to the Texas State Railroad and the campground, an election may be required in November.

Mr. Stutes replied that the legislature could allow the city to transfer the property without an election.

The city deeded all but a small tract at the depot to the state in 1974. The ownership of 88 acres at the campground remains city property.

The city should gain a water customer, the council was told. American Heritage Railway will also generate tourist dollars for the area.

During the first year they are planning three or four special events including "Thomas the Tank."

Of the \$12 million the TSROA is requesting the state to transfer to the railroad, most will be used for track maintenance.

In another matter, the council approved a contract with Marks Lanham to operate the swimming pool.

Mr. Lanham will receive his pool operator certification on May 3. Grand opening is planned for June 2. "I hope to have everything ready for the Senior Finale to use the pool if they want on graduation night, May 25," he said.

He will be paid \$8,000 on May 25 and equal payments of \$4,000 in June, July, August and September. He will pay all of the operating expenses with the exception of water, which is provided by the city.

The council approved an audit report from Lynn Acker of Acker and Company, the city's independent auditor.

"Overall the city's financial records are in good shape," he said.

The council delayed action on an oil and gas lease on city property until the next meeting.

Proposed restrictions for the lease were discussed. The

matter will be on the agenda for next month's meeting.

Several discussed concern of drilling in front of the civic center. If this happened it would affect the swimming pool and trucks will tear up the city street, they said.

Kris Morgan, a surveyor, said he would like to see the entrance made from FM 343 on the Atoy Mountain. A road would be built through the property, which could later be used by the city.

Following public hearings, the council approved changing zoning for property in the Easy Living Subdivision from single family to multiple family residential to allow

Bobby Tosh an opportunity to construct a duplex.

Also, the council approved a special use permit for Bryan P. Cook to locate a manufactured home on property on Ray Street.

A contract with Cherokee County was approved for election services at a cost of \$250.

Mary Ann Patterson was named election judge and Andrea Patterson, alternate judge.

A police car was purchased from Bob Frances Ford for \$21,277.75. The car was to be delivered Monday. Equipment is expected to cost approximately \$3,800.

A truck for the public works department was purchased from Bob Francis Ford for \$17,955.02. Delivery date was Monday.

A tractor with a brush hog was purchased from Rucker Equipment in Palestine at a cost of \$19,992. The tractor was to be delivered in three days.

The next regular meeting of the council will be Thursday, May 10.

Attending the meeting were Mayor McCarty; Council members Morgan, Walter Session, Don Jones, Donald Woodard and Sam Florian; City Manager Mike Murray and City Secretary Fran Wendeborn.