A LOOK BACK AT THE YEAR IN SPORTS | A9

WEEKENDER

HILL COUNTRY NEWS

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2021 year in REVIEW

TOP STORY OF THE YEAR

Another COVID Christmas?

Threat of a new variant casts a shadow over the new year

BY RICHARD STONE
EDITOR AT LARGE

When we entered 2021, the country was in the grips of a deadly surge in coronavirus cases. As we exit 2021, it appears that the new year will bring us another wave, this one spawned by a new variant and a fairly large unvaccinated population.

We didn't have effective, broadly available vaccines during last winter's wave. That one resulted in frighteningly high

See **COVID**, page **A6**



Historic snowstorm disrupted cities

BY JOSH MONIZ
SENIOR REPORTER

Cedar Park, Leander and the rest of Texas are arguably still thawing out from the lasting consequences of the historic February snowstorm that shut down most of the state at the start of the year.

The unexpected severity of Winter Storm Uri coupled with Texas officials' failure to require energy companies, especially natural gas companies, to winterize contributed to the Electric Reliability Council of Texas's (ERCOT) failure to meet the energy demand spike caused by the entire state suddenly heating their homes. As a result, rolling blackouts were experienced across the state and 3.5 million people in Texas were left without power during freezing conditions.

The storm and outages resulted in 210 deaths statewide with causes ranging from exposure to carbon monoxide poisoning caused by improper usage of power generators to emergency personnel being unable to reach people in need.

The storm resulted in U.S. 183 and other highways having sizable sections closed for over

See **SNOWSTORM**, page **A5**

Record-setting snowfall and a covering of ice blankets Cedar Park and Leander, Texas, on February 15, 2021.

SCOTT W. COLEMAN

Elections sweep away Leander, Cedar Park majorities

Leander ISD bonding fails

BY JOSH MONIZ
SENIOR REPORTER

2021 was the election year that never ended.

The May 2020 municipal elections were pushed back to the packed November 2020 General elections due to the coronavirus pandemic, meaning local residents had barely a few months before it began again with the May 2021 municipal elections. Those elections likewise bled into Leander's runoff elections in June and eventually into the November elections.

While the November 2020 elections had more dramatic races and historically high voter turnout, the municipal election in Cedar Park and Leander this May ended up being more impactful for local residents. Most notably, the new Council majorities elected in 2018 and 2019 were almost entirely swept away in one election.

The ousted Council members unseated many long-serving Council members and received praise for repealing many long-criticized city regulations. But many of these members also faced criticism for creating numerous controversies and divisive meetings, including several pushing to make the nonpartisan

See **ELECTIONS**, page **A4**

LISD endures year of turmoil over books

BY LILLY CHANDLER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Controversy came to Leander ISD early this year, when the district's high school student choice book club came under fire from outside groups claiming the groups' reading lists included books push a particular social agenda or featuring what they claim was pornographic material.

See **SCHOOLS**, page **A4**



The subject of classroom books wasn't the only controversial issue Leander ISD dealt with this year. Like many districts across the state, school administrators were at odds with the state government over masking requirements, and other pandemic-related protocols, which sparked a number of protests, like this one on U.S. Highway 183 at its intersection with RM 2243 in Leander on Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2021.

JOSH MONIZ

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ad COUNCIL

YEAR IN REVIEW

MOST-READ STORIES FROM OUR WEBSITE

Here are the most-read stories as published on hillcountrynews.com in 2021. We were a bit surprised that there weren't more from Winter Storm Uri but we published quite a few on that topic. In aggregate, an awful lot of people read them but only a few of the individual stories made the list of most-read stories.

The first list is of the top stories, regardless of where they were produced. The second list is of the most read stories produced by the Hill Country News team.

TOP 10 STORIES

- When Texas ended its mask mandate, the event cancellations started – and the losses are adding up *(Texas Tribune, state news)*
- Public health officials recommend Leander ISD close for 10 days to stop spread of COVID-19 *(Local)*
- Once all the rage, the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine has all but disappeared *(wire, nation)*
- The answer on guns is staring us in the face *(wire, opinion)*
- Texas governor demands Biden add cartels to terrorist list, but didn't squawk when Trump decided not to *(wire, state)*
- Don't get COVID-19 booster vaccine too soon *(wire, nation)*
- "Don't mess with Williamson County": Wilco, state leaders seek to block Austin from using hotel to house homeless people *(local)*
- We loved our pensions, then our employers took them away *(wire, opinion)*
- Some people shouldn't be in a position of authority *(wire, opinion)*
- Misleading information, lies on social media cause challenges for Cedar Park, Leander emergency response *(local)*

TOP 10 LOCALLY PRODUCED STORIES

- Public health officials recommend Leander ISD close for 10 days to stop spread of COVID-19
- "Don't mess with Williamson County": Wilco, state leaders seek to block Austin from using hotel to house homeless people
- Misleading information, lies on social media cause challenges for Cedar Park, Leander emergency response
- Boil water notice in Leander, Jonestown but none in Cedar Park; Wilco Judge Gravell dispels rumor
- Update: Jim MacKay, Leander ISD trustee, to resign from the school board 'immediately'
- Worst weather since '89 projected to deliver several inches of snow, -15 degree wind chill
- Williamson County to have first ever Fair and Rodeo
- Leander police investigating stabbing at Leander H-E-B
- Penniman-Morin running for Cedar Park Council, Councilor Kelly will resign soon
- Leander Council candidate Mike Sanders rebuked as "unethical" by TX GOP Chair, Council members and candidates over secret recording of opponent

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LET'S GO TO THE FAIR

In October, thousands of people packed the Williamson County Expo Center in Taylor for the county's first-ever fair and rodeo. The event featured a professional rodeo, live music from big-time artists Roger Kreager and Tracy Byrd, a full-blown carnival and midway, a creative arts fair and local vendors. Organizers estimated that more than 11,000 people attended the three-day event.

RICHARD STONE

2021 TOP HEADLINES

There was a lot of news made over the last year. Here is a month-by-month rundown of our top headlines from 2021:



RICHARD STONE

SWEEPSTAKES! In June, the Hill Country News won a coveted Sweepstakes trophy from the Texas Press Association, one of only nine newspapers in Texas to earn such an award. Along the way to the Sweepstakes trophy, the paper won First Place awards for General Excellence, commentary, headlines, page design, sports coverage and live online news coverage; Second Place for editorial writing; Third Place for feature writing and Fourth Place awards for news, feature and sports photography.

JANUARY

- Wilco rolls back capacity limits as latest spike hits
- Cedar Park finds Transit options not viable
- Leander works on comprehensive plan

FEBRUARY

- Arctic blast – schools close, businesses close as freeze causes roving outages
- Local nursing homes suffer another massive coronavirus outbreak
- 2020 Money in politics
- Editorial: We've lost something with D.C. wrapped up in barb wire
- Firefly awarded $93M NASA contract
- City of Austin Oks Candlewood purchase, Wilco elected officials vow to block it

MARCH

- Cedar Park, Leander look for answers after snowstorm
- Abbott lifts mask and capacity limits, repeal results in few changes
- Cedar Park wins first state championship
- Lawsuits filed over Candlewood
- All adults can now get vaccinated, local economy already healing from pandemic, second phase of Wilco Forward launches

APRIL

- LISD book controversy, discussions begin
- Chamber survey: Most businesses will keep mask requirements
- Leander Police dispatcher stabbed to death by son
- Travis County indicts Chody, Nassour and 2 deputies involved, Big Fish sues Wilco
- 2021 local election funding returns to normal levels, big donors still rule
- Two Cedar Park men among 35 people caught in major drug bust
- Arboretum shooter faces triple capital murder charges
- Wilco shuts down mega vaccination sites

MAY

- Sederquist, Ross, Penniman-Morin, Duffy and Harris buck incumbents wiping out almost all remnants of 2019 elected officials, Thompson and Esmeralda go into runoff
- Cedar Park's 3-year terms, ban on talking about executive session content ballot Qs fail while Qs giving city manager more rights to sign things, automatic resignation triggering when running for different office passes
- Leander ISD book protests begin with ineffectual S.I.C.K. day protest seeking changes
- Vaccination efforts to doctors and pharmacies, more than half of county still not vaccinated
- Analysis: Big money donations failed, show limits when voters turnout
- STAAR testing raises concerns due to COVID challenges
- WilCo GOP rebukes Mike Sanders for secret recording
- Firefly Aerospace raises $75M ahead of first rocket launch
- Abbot bans schools from requiring face masks

JUNE

- Firefly Aerospace announces plans to add 682 new jobs in Cedar Park
- Gov. Abbott signs Javier Ambler law banning law enforcement from entering reality TV contracts
- Emseralda, Thompson win narrow runoff
- Leander repeals public comments limits
- Rouse baseball heads to state for first time
- Chody, Nassour evidence tampering charges will go to trial in Travis County
- Wilco, Austin still heated debates over homeless hotel
- Hill Country News sweeps newspaper awards
- Greg Kelley documentary 'Outcry' wins Emmy
- Leander ISD considers $933M school bond

JULY

- Delta variant first case found in Wilco
- STAAR results show Leander ISD, Texas lagging
- Hill Country News investigation: Solar users raise alarms about PEC's proposed funding changes
- Bucy, Democrats flee state to prevent quorum for voting suppression
- Cedar Park man convicted of impersonating FBI agent
- PEC withdraws solar pricing hike after HCN investigation, solar owners opposition
- Wilco backslides into Red Phase
- Austin homeless hotel continues to get opposition
- Chody drops election fraud lawsuit
- NW Austin man charged for shooting father who tried to protect his daughter
- Man faces 1st degree murder after stabbing in Cedar Park

AUGUST

- Leander ISD puts $772M bond on Nov ballot
- COVID cases surge, running out of hospital beds, Wilco judges order masks for courtrooms
- Leander ISD expands remote learning options
- Wilco to sue over homeless hotel
- Driver shortage, high COVID cases run rampant with start of school
- 2020 Census – Wilco among fastest growing counties in Texas
- Cedar Park proposed 1.5 cent cut, lowest since 1998
- Wilco health district pushes to close school for 10 days due to surging outbreak

SEPTEMBER

- Local veterans grieve end of Afghanistan War, 20th 9/11 anniversary marked
- Firefly Aerospace's first rocket explodes 2 minutes after launch
- August and September has record high COVID deaths
- Leander ISD Trustee Jim MacKay resigns citing book ban argument
- Wilco Commissioners approve a deal to bring Samsung plant to Taylor/Wilco
- Cedar Park businesses optimistic about future, split on masks
- No ICU beds left in the region as infections rise
- Perfect Game to build 16 field sports complex

OCTOBER

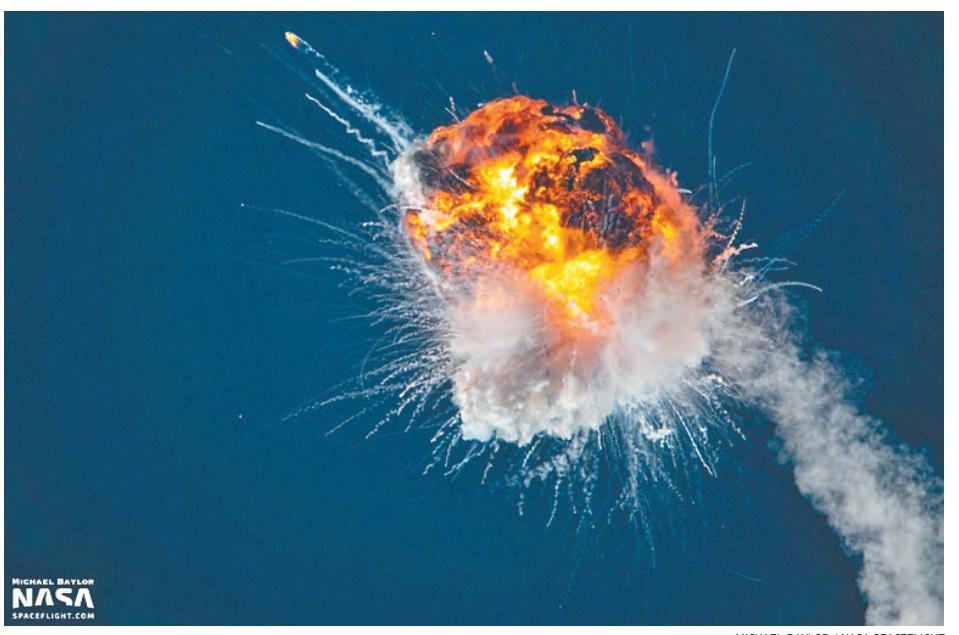
- Cap Metro to add second track between Lakeline, Leander
- Redistricting maps dilute local political power of local cities
- Sade Fashokun appointed to open Trustee spot
- State, local Business groups, chambers of commerce push back against Abbott's ban on businesses requiring vaccination for employees
- Leander ISD trustees update Board Operating procedures, public comments rules after disruptive meetings

NOVEMBER

- Two of three Leander ISD bonds fail
- Leander ISD among schools cited in demands by Abbot, and by a Republican lawmaker, for list of "inappropriate" books from Texas schools
- Wilco commissioners redrawn maps shift county focus toward Cedar Park, Leander as they grow
- Vaccinations of kids 5-11 begin, Leander ISD hosts clinic
- Cedar Park Chamber awarded 4-star designation by US Chamber
- Chody, Nassaur face additional evidence tampering charges
- Samsung officially announces selection of Taylor for $17B plant
- Nearly 75% of Wilco residents age 5 and up have at least one dose of vaccine

DECEMBER

- Leander was also finalist for Samsung plant, highlighting Wilco's international profile among businesses
- Texas, WilCo get first Omicron case; vaccination push urged
- School shooting panic disrupts schools for 2 weeks with fake information
- Leander ISD removes a few controversial books from reading lists, still stocks them in schools. WilCo Commissioners delay CARES funding as a result. One week later, commissioners grant the money



MICHAEL BAYLOR / NASA SPACEFLIGHT

FAILURE TO LAUNCH Cedar Park-based Firefly Aerospace's unmanned Alpha rocket explode Thursday, Sept. 2, approximately 2 minutes and 30 seconds after its inaugural launch from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California.

YEAR IN REVIEW



HARRISON FUNK

In July, HD136 Representative John H. Bucy III (L) held a town hall event, sponsored by the Hill Country News, on the patio at Whitestone Brewery.

REDISTRICTING results in chaotic political boundaries

Every 10 years, once the Census is completed, Texas lawmakers are tasked with adjusting political boundaries to account for shifts in population.

The west part of Williamson County has experienced a lot of growth in the last decade, so it was no surprise that boundaries for state and federal offices shifted. But the changes were much more significant than anyone expected.

As a result, lawmakers gave Leander and Cedar Park a crazy-quilt of representative districts, especially those for the Texas House of Representatives and U.S. Congress. Depending on how one views the maps, our neck of Williamson and North Travis counties are represented by two different state representatives, two different state senators and three different congressmen.

One could make the argument that the maps given to us represent a bounty of elected officials. One could also make an equally valid argument that our area has been so fractured that few of our elected officials will give us much thought.

For example, a Cedar Park driver could see the consequences of this divvying up by driving through eight different political districts while heading southbound down U.S. 183. They would transition from the city split among three House districts and two Senate Districts at Whitestone Boulevard, from the 31st Congressional District into the 10th Congressional District at Brushy Creek Road and back out again into the 37th Congressional District by Lakeline Boulevard.

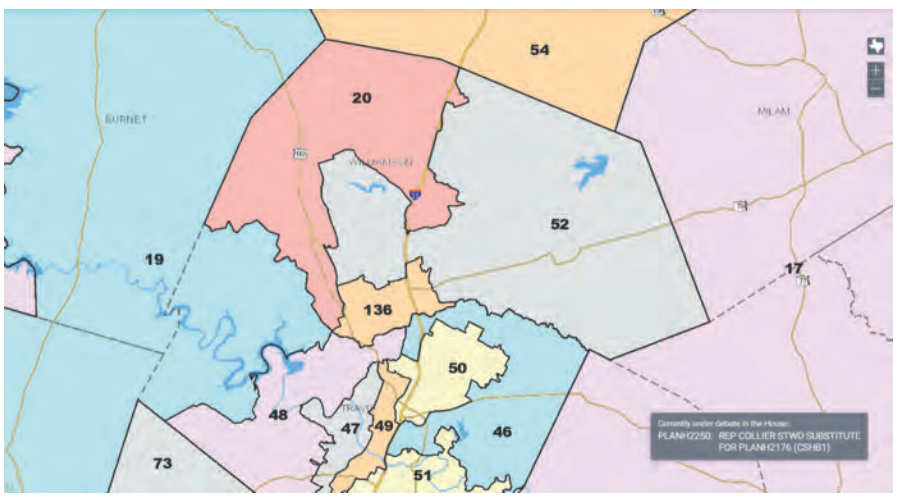
The current 31st Congressional District, represented by long-time Republican incumbent U.S. Rep. John Carter, is an ideal compact district with a distinct political identity because it is almost exactly Williamson County and Bell County, excluding a western quarter of Killeen.

However, the map makers carved out portions of the county for CD10 and CD17 giving Williamson three congressional representatives.

The biggest impact for Cedar Park and Leander under the Texas Senate maps is a new C-shaped District 24, which is an open seat extending all the way to the south of San Antonio and far west into the middle of the state. The district pulls both cities and Liberty Hill out of their long-time District 5 home and into this new, far-flung district. The rest of Williamson County will remain within the new District 5, which is roughly the same layout and will continue to have Sen. Charles Schwertner serving as the incumbent.

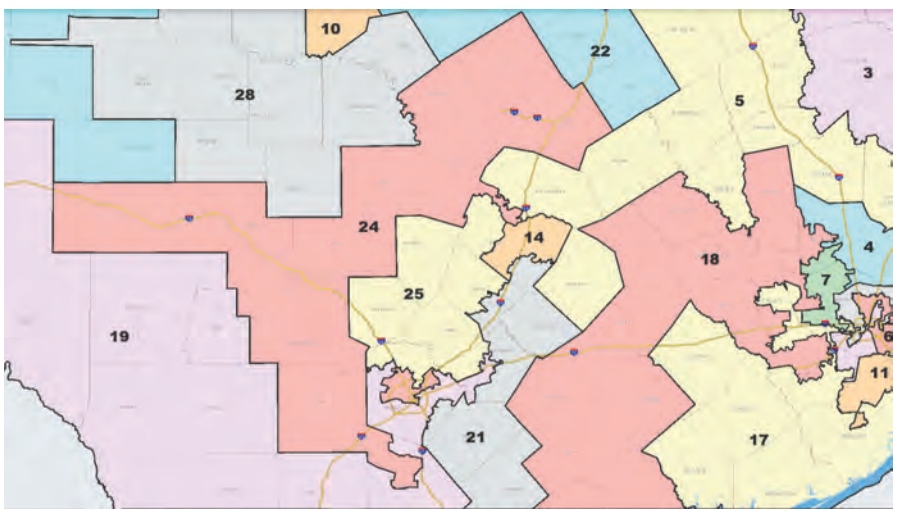
Finally, while the unusual shapes and limbs on districts in the other maps are poised to create representation problems for Williamson County's legislative needs and political interests, the Texas House map creates ideal, compact boundaries that bring all three of the county's districts exclusively inside the county boundaries.

As a result, all three districts will now be exclusively focused on the needs of the county and its cities without having to prioritize other areas, allowing for a focused delegation in the Texas House.



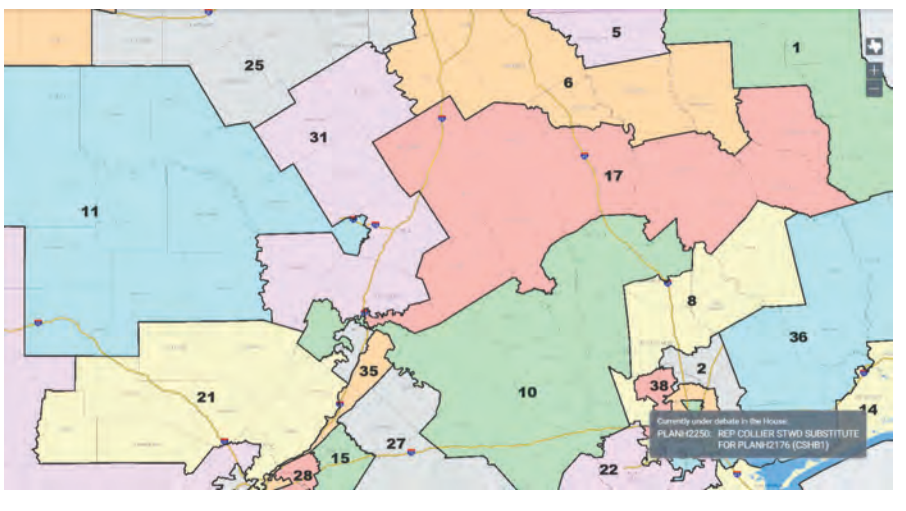
TEXAS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

The newly passed Texas House redistricting map dramatically realigns Williamson County's three districts while achieving the long-sought goal of bringing them all within the county's borders.



TEXAS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Texas Senate - Proposed New Districts



TEXAS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Texas Congressional Districts - Proposed New Districts

However, even this ideal layout still presents consequences for Cedar Park and Leander by splitting these cities among the three districts.

Cedar Park will be broken up into three parts at the intersection of Whitestone Boulevard and U.S. 183A and dispersed among the districts. The section west of U.S. 183A will go into the new District 20, represented by Terry Wilson, while the eastern side will be split with north of Whitestone Boulevard going to the new District 52, which incumbent Rep. James Talarico vacated in favor of HD50 in north Austin, and south going to the new District 136, represented by John Bucy.

Repercussions of Ambler's death continue to roil WilCo

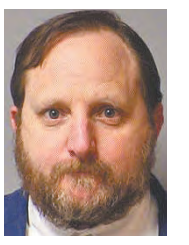
BY LILLY CHANDLER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

This March marked the second anniversary of Javier Ambler's death, an event that has caused ripples through Williamson County and Texas.



JAVIER AMBLER

Ambler was killed when Williamson County Sheriff's Office deputies repeatedly tasered him while the now-canceled reality television show Live PD was filming despite his cries for help and warnings about his heart condition. While Ambler was killed in 2019, the details about Ambler's death did not become public until 2020, at which time it joined the national conservation about the wave of Black men being killed in police custody that ranged from George Floyd's death in Minneapolis to Michael Ramos's death in Austin.



ROBERT CHODY

In the wake of Ambler's death, the Texas Legislature passed the Javier Ambler Act legislation, authored by Rep. James Talarico (D-Round Rock), that would ban Texas law enforcement agencies from entering into contracts with reality television shows.



JASON NASSOUR

Former Wilco Sheriff Robert Chody and the county's general counsel Jason Nassour were indicted on felony tampering with evidence charges related to the destruction of the Live PD video in Williamson County back in September 2020.

Nassour was also indicted for additional felony evidence tampering charges in Travis County. The County has not yet confirmed whether Chody or anyone else has also been indicted in Travis County.

The two were indicted on Nov. 9 by a Travis County grand jury on new conspiracy to tamper with evidence charges related to how they handled the investigation into Javier Ambler's death while in the custody of Williamson County Sheriff's deputies.

Chody's attorney E.G. Morris told the media that he believes the State's case has numerous deficiencies and that Chody was following both federal statutory law and Williamson County Sheriff's Office's own written policy at the time by not seizing the Live PD footage at the time. He claimed the basis for the indictment was contrary to federal law.

Most recently, a major milestone in the legal wrangling following Ambler's death occurred when Williamson County settled the Javier Ambler wrongful death lawsuit for $5 million on Dec. 14. The county will directly pay $1.6 million and its insurance will pay the remaining sum.

Meanwhile, former Williamson County deputies J.J. Johnson and Zach Camden, who were indicted by a grand jury on manslaughter charges in Ambler's death, also appeared in court that day for a separate hearing for their respective cases. The defense sought copies of the video shot by "Live PD" that was shot but not live during Ambler's death, which "Live PD" producers said back in 2019 was destroyed as part of their typical procedures because they allege the Sheriff's Office told them it was no longer needed for the investigation.

Separately, former Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody and current Williamson County General Counsel Jason Nassour's grand jury indictments for evidence tampering related to the destruction of that "Live PD" tape are still pending.

WilCo battles Austin over hotel

BY LILLY CHANDLER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

On Feb. 4 the Austin City Council voted 10-1 to purchase its fourth hotel, the Candlewood Suites hotel at 10811 Pecan Park Boulevard, to convert into long-term, affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness. The vote was followed by protests against the plan by business owners and homeowners who live near the Candlewood site.

The City's overarching plan is to purchase 10 hotels or motels, one per district, and convert them into affordable housing to help homeless people stabilize their living situation and transition out of poverty, creating a more sustainable solution for Austin's growing homeless population.

In February, the historic snowstorm further highlighted the life-or-death stakes behind Austin's need to make progress with addressing the needs of those in its boundaries without a home.

The Williamson County Commissioners Court objected to not being briefed about the project until the vote to purchase it was announced, with commissioners learning about it during their Feb. 2 meeting from public comments objecting to it.

The Austin City Council approved the purchase on Feb. 4, despite the Court's formal request for a 180-day delay on the vote to purchase the hotel so they could provide input for the project. Days later the Court voted to hire a law firm to look into its options for preventing the City's plans at the Candlewood site, including potentially considering a lawsuit.

The lawsuits continued in March, when area business Chaudhari Partnership, which owns two hotels near the Candlewood site, filed a lawsuit claiming that the City is violating the deed restrictions that prevents any residential development on the subdivision.

Commissioners voted Aug. 17 to take legal action against the city.

The purchase of the hotel ultimately passed 7-4.

Rupal Chaudhari, of Chaudhari Partnership, worked with other area business owners to found Stop Candlewood, a group opposing the hotel's purchase. Stop Candlewood hosted town hall events where people could discuss the project, after claiming their questions were not answered at the City of Austin's town halls.

Chaudhari has since announced her candidacy for Travis County judge.



On Feb. 10, Williamson County Judge Bill Gravell (R) attended a rally at the Candlewood hotel that protested a decision by the City of Austin to buy the building and develop it into a facility to aid homeless people in the area. State Sen. Charles Schwertner (C) also spoke at the rally. The Austin City Council voted Thursday, Feb. 4, to purchase the Candlewood Suites hotel at 10811 Pecan Park Boulevard, near N FM 620 and the TX-45 overpass just south of Cedar Park.

JOSH MONIZ

YEAR IN REVIEW

Cedar Park, Leander ride wave of new businesses moving into the county

BY JOSH MONIZ
SENIOR REPORTER



COURTESY PERFECT GAME

Williamson County is open for business.

Cedar Park and Leander rode the wave of businesses moving into or expanding in the county this year, which will add tens of thousands of new jobs over the coming years and millions of dollars in new sales tax revenues.

All of these gains are occurring alongside the benefits the cities will receive from major businesses that are also moving into Austin and Travis County, such as Tesla relocating its headquarters to Texas next to its planned Gigafactory Texas plant.

The most significant development in Williamson County was the announcement of the $17 billion Samsung plant coming to Taylor, which will benefit all of the county's cities by adding about 1,800 employees that will live and buy houses in surrounding communities.

Samsung is expected to break ground on the new plant as early as January 2022 and be operational by the first quarter of 2026.

Leander was also a finalist in Samsung's international search for its next plant site. Williamson County securing two of its cities as contenders, much less landing the final location, highlights how desirable the county has become worldwide for businesses.

Leander itself has enjoyed its own growth, finally gaining enough businesses that residents don't feel obligated to exclusively travel to Cedar Park for food and entertainment.

Notable additions range from the opening of a second H-E-B store and a local branch of the Cedar Park restaurant Blue Corn Harvest to several new restaurants opening in the Old Town District, including Thirsty Chicken and the more sporadically open Maggie Mae's that is still working on securing staffing.

The Old Town District is also looking at future expansions into this next year with the plans to build Old Town Park, which will also provide a space for new events and festivals, and tentative plans to add a food, drink and entertainment location in the Davis House location.

Leander also secured new companies of its own, including getting California-based knife manufacturer Cangshan Cutlery to move their headquarters to the city. The company will add 300 jobs to the area with its 400,000-square-foot production and administrative facility that will generate an estimated $150 million in annual revenues. The company plans the relocation for 2023.

Lastly, Leander saw the establishment of the new nonprofit The Leander Foundation, which will seek to help the City of Leander by securing funding for new park amenities, new quality-of-life initiatives aimed at raising the City's profile and helping other local nonprofits. By being a nonprofit entirely separate from the City, the Foundation can solicit donations from corporations, businesses and local residents for specific projects, which the City cannot legally do in the same way, while pursuing grants only available to nonprofits.

Meanwhile, Cedar Park enjoyed an even more explosive year - both metaphorically in the large number of businesses it attracted and literally as Cedar Park-based Firefly Aerospace gained international attention with its first rocket launch.

Firefly Aerospace itself announced plans to add 682 jobs by expanding into a new, 45,000-square-foot facility. The company plans to use it to design and develop a lunar landing system to fulfil the $93.3 million NASA contract they secured in Febraury, which will require them to take a payload to the moon by 2023.

The company secured over $75 million midway through the year towards its goal of raising over $300 million to finance the company's expansions through 2025.

Firefly gained international attention with the launch of Alpha, its first unmanned rocket, on Sept. 2. The rocket successfully took off but immediately exploded 2 minutes and 30 seconds into its flight. Despite the setback pushing back their original plans to begin commercial rocket launches in December, the company said the flight provided valuable data that will help them do better on the next launch and improve all future rockets.

In other news, the home shopping network Shop LC announced it had entered into a development agreement with the City of Cedar Park to construct a 200,000-square-foot national headquarters in the city, which will add 1,000 new jobs.

Under the agreement, it will be built by Sept. 30, 2024.

Perfect Game also entered into an agreement with the City to build its new headquarters in Cedar Park and construct a massive sports complex with 16 synthetic turf ballfields and retail components for hosting national and regional amateur baseball and softball tournaments, which the City hopes will create a sports tourism industry in Cedar Park.

Construction of the facility is expected to start June 1, 2022, and be completed by March 1, 2024.

Looking forward, a $400 million, 117-acre hotel and convention center that will be anchored by the super-regional retail company NFM (Nebraska Furniture Mart) is planned under the City's master development agreement with the developer.

The project is tentatively scheduled to begin construction in 2024 with the NFM store opening in 2025.



CITY OF LEANDER
Leander City Council member Esmeralda Traube was sworn into office Thursday, June 17.



CITY OF LEANDER
Leander City Council member Nacole Thompson was sworn into office Thursday, June 17.

ELECTIONS

from page A1

seats explicitly conservative.

The wave of new and returning Cedar Park and Leander candidates that won this year ran on refocusing Council meetings on planning for their cities' rapid growth, ending divisiveness at Council meetings and expanding transparency. In the wake of their victories, the new Leander Council rolled back controversial limits on public comments and library room rentals.

"We together are going to change this town because we cannot be ignored anymore," Leander Mayor Christine Sederquist said during her acceptance speech. "This is a town...now run entirely by you, that listens to every word you say and takes it into consideration."

Their message appears to have resonated because both cities saw the victorious candidates swept into office primarily by new voters who cast a ballot for the first time locally in November 2020 or this May. The new voters were enough to exceed the ousted Council member's totals, which were remarkably close to the totals that had gotten them elected in the first place.

Campaign fundraising totals also returned to lower levels after spiking in 2019 and 2020 due to a few, concentrated donors who finances the overwhelming majority of a few candidate's campaigns. The May elections showed that, while this concentrated fundraising can have an impact if the opponent is surprised by them or cannot match their totals, it lacks long-term staying power for the candidates it supports, especially if the opponent can match the fundraising or public is more aware of who is funding the different races.

The newly elected Council members have been a mix of political affiliations but the elections have resulted in sizable number of sitting Council members who openly identify as Democratic, which would have been unheard of in either city in previous decades. However, unlike some of the ousted Council members, they have intentionally not made their political affiliations a part of their campaigns nor mentioned them during their time on their respective councils.

In Leander, Leander Mayor Christine Sederquist unseated former Mayor Troy Hill, a drastic turnaround given Hill's sizeable victory margin when elected in 2018. Her victory simultaneously coincided with her going from being a minority dissenting voice on the Council to leading the new Council majority after new Council members Nacole Thompson, Becki Ross and Esmeralda Traube won their races. Due to the sheer volume of candidates who ran this year, Traube and Thompson both won their seats in the June runoff elections.

In Cedar Park, Council members Anne Duffy, Jim Penniman-Morin and Kevin Harris defeated former Council members Dorian Chavez, his wife Claudia and Collin Klein by nearly 2-to-1 votes. Chavez had previously been unseated in the November 2020 elections by Council member Heather Jefts, who herself had been unseated in the 2019 elections.

Additionally, former Council members Rodney Robinson and Tim Kelly declined to run this year.

BALLOTS

2021 was also a year of ballot questions, including Cedar Park's five ballot questions in May and the eight Texas Constitution amendments considered by voters in November.

For Cedar Park, automatic Council member resignations when running for a different elected office and expanding City Manager rights for signing agreements passed while efforts to expand Council terms to three years and limits on discussing what was debated in Executive Sessions failed.

For the state constitutional amendment, all eight of them passed with clear majority support. The changes ranged from expanded charitable gambling for certain rodeo organizations to new bonding options for cities to address underdeveloped or "blighted" sections of their towns to enabling surviving spouses of veterans and active-duty soldiers killed in action to retain their homestead exemptions.

Williamson County residents approved all of the amendments by almost identical margins. The only notable exception was county residents passing Proposition 3, which prohibits local elected officials from being able to limit religious service even in a pandemic, by 6% lower than the statewide margin.

SCHOOL BONDING

Lastly, the 2021 elections will have serious consequences for Leander ISD's future following the defeat of two of its three bond propositions.

The district staff estimated they would need to build nine new schools over the coming decade to serve the 20,600 new homes and 12,400 additional students anticipated to move into the district's boundaries.

The district sought $772.2 million in bonding for all three propositions, which included items to build five new schools, classroom renovation with 13 existing schools and lighting and sound equipment replacement in many of the schools' auditoriums.

Ultimately, only the $33.3 million for replacing aging laptops and electronic devices for students and teachers passed, although $10.4 million of it was contingent on the other propositions passing.

Looking forward, the Leander ISD Board of Trustees will discuss whether to redraw attendance zones or maximize existing facilities in January.

They will also have to consider whether to call a new bonding proposition for 2022. They would have to call them by Feb. 18 to get on the May 2022 election ballot or by Aug. 22 to get on the November 2022 general election ballot.

SCHOOLS

from page A1

Critics have been highly organized and focused on grabbing attention for more than a month. Those efforts ranged from outside groups protesting prior to board meetings, to one woman providing comments against the books while bringing a sex toy and harness into the meeting to illustrate her point.

Defenders of the books featured in the clubs contend that they allow students of diverse backgrounds and life experiences to read stories with which they can identify, find representation and give them the opportunity to "see themselves" in the literature they select. They and several trustees repeatedly noted much of the vitriol being slung relied on fundamental misinformation about the staff, the books and the district alike. They also argued some of the critics' allegations of pornographic material was actually objections to any sort of representation of LGBTQ individuals.

After three review cycles, a small number of texts from the 20-2021 reading list were found to be questionable and were pulled. At the same time, he said, the academic team went to work to begin establishing strong lines of communication so that parents and teachers were fully aware of the books being offered to students.

On April 28, some parents held their students out on a S.I.C.K. day — an acronym for Stop Indoctrinating our Children K-12. The protest's Facebook event page said the goal of those parents and students was to demand the district provide "neutral classrooms focused on core academics, a teacher code of ethics and professional responsibility and a curriculum development policy in order to respect parental rights and transparency."

The debate soon received national attention, with Carmen Maria Machado, the author of one of the books under review called "In the Dream House," wrote a letter to New York Times about the importance of her memoir to include dialogues and experiences to young adults.

"While our books may contain passages that are potentially uncomfortable, challenging or even offensive, exposure to our books is vital to expanding minds, affirming experiences, creating appreciation for the arts and building empathy — in short, respecting the adults that the students in Leander, Texas, will soon become," Machado wrote for the New York Times.

Former Place 5 LISD Trustee, Jim MacKay, resigned from the board in September, citing the controversy over both the books under review and the district's COVID-19 mitigation tactics as his reason.

MacKay said his decision was informed by the district's lax oversight of various literature programs — some of which he called pornographic — and the apparent unwillingness of the board as a whole to hold LISD Superintendent Dr. Bruce Gearing accountable for that and other things.

"I cannot, and quite frankly will not, support a superintendent or board that turns a blind eye to the incredible harm we are potentially doing to our innocent children," he said in a letter to the community. "I have failed in my promise to protect our most vulnerable."

Gov. Greg Abbott joined the discussion in Nov., when he called on the Texas Education Agency, Texas State Library and Archives Commission and State Board of Education to block books with "overtly sexual" content from schools, including school libraries.

After review from the district's Community Curriculum Advisory Committee (CCAC), 11 titles will no longer be available to the High School Student-Choice book clubs, including the novel "In the Dream House." and the graphic novel versions of "The Handmaid's Tale" and "The Lottery."

Despite this action, LISD faced pushback from the Williamson County Commissioners Court. On Dec. 13, commissioners voted 4-1 to withhold as much as $9 million in federal CARES money from the Leander and Round Rock school districts because of what one commissioner called "smut in the rooms of kids."

The next week, commissioners agreed to use some of their remaining federal CARES Act funds to reimburse the Leander and Round Rock school districts for some expenses they incurred as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The court approved about $3 million in funding for Round Rock ISD on the condition that the reimbursement requests follow the guidelines laid down by the county and that the district follow its own guidelines for reconsideration of objectionable books. They approved $2.9 million for LISD.

YEAR IN REVIEW

Rumor-driven panics disrupt local schools, government

BY JOSH MONIZ
SENIOR REPORTER

It's hardly news that rumors and misleading information are shared too easily online over social media, resulting in a variety of negative societal impacts.

But it has boiled over into a pressing local issue that repeatedly disrupted Leander ISD's schools and local government operations in Cedar Park and Leander this year by causing reoccurring panics.

The issue is too complex to narrow down to a particular cause but several recent trends have contributed to its growth. Whether it is significantly more people joining local social media groups and pages due to social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic or sites like Facebook pushing out comments and updates from a post faster and more frequently or just people growing lack of confidence in local officials' ability to handle serious issues like school shootings, the process has sped up how widely and frequently misinformation is shared before officials can fact check it.

Paradoxically, these same trends have also helped local residents network and support each other during the pandemic.

The sinister aspect of the problem is that the speed at which the posts can be shared creates a feedback loop where new arrivals misunderstand or misrepresent the initially shared rumors, only for this confusion to be mistaken for additional supportive evidence and encourage people to doubt official's conclusions because it doesn't square with the rumors they had already heard.

During the historic February snowstorm that caused widespread power and water outages, well-intended but hastily shared rumors resulted in emergency lines being bogged down, people seeking out the wrong officials to help on issues and the dissemination of misinformation about why the outages happened, which still show up periodically online to this day.

In Cedar Park, several apartments that suffered water outages due to a water main break within their property falsely claimed that the City of Cedar Park had shut off the water. These apartments' bid to avoid the ire of their residents quickly resulted in residents taking the claim at face value and widely sharing it on social media, creating a months-long misperception in the public that Cedar Park had experienced a water outage during the storm.

In Leander, the issue was even stronger where people sharing rumors despite not knowing how the city's water system works resulted in the widespread and persistent perception by residents that Leander was running out of water. In actuality, Leander's only operating water plant at the time had been subject to the rolling power outages so frequently that it temporarily couldn't keep water production up with local residents' consumption. The issue was caused by a failure at one of PEC's power stations, which Leander neither controls nor can access. Additionally, Leander already has enough water supply to meet all residents' needs for the next few years and recently approved an expansion to its BRCUA water plant that will add even more water supply capacity.

Despite these facts, the idea that Leander lacked enough water remained persistent for most of the year. It also may have impacted Leander's May municipal elections. The issue didn't decide any race on its own but did contribute to existing perception against some of the incumbents, such as criticism over former Leander Mayor Troy Hill's combative response to criticism. As a result, when he and other Council members faced criticism over their handling of the storm, their factually correct statements that Leander wasn't facing any water shortage ended up frequently being portrayed by local residents as them not taking the issue seriously.

The February incident also highlighted how excessive sharing of rumors locally contributes to future rumors and panics by saturating the online discourse. For example, false claims that Williamson County Judge Bill Gravell had shut down power locally for political reasons were dispelled by official release but the core claim went on to repeatedly resurface for weeks, each time with different elected officials being accused of the action. No local elected official has the legal power to shut down any power stations. Because rumors were being shared so freely at the time, the inherently contradictory nature of these claims largely went unnoticed because people had already been primed by other rumors to find it plausible.

Later in early December, Leander ISD had several schools disrupted over two weeks by new panics fueled by sharing rumors and misinterpreted Snapchat screenshots online. Well-intended parents and students, who were experiencing anxiety over finals and recent school shooting incidents, repeatedly shared the rumors about an alleged pending school shooting plot with thousands of other people before or instead of sharing it with school and police officials. In actuality, all of the rumors turned out to be completely false.

As a result, the sheer volume of posts shared across school-focused Facebook groups hindered local police's ability to investigate their validity. They warn that it could have been a dangerous problem if the rumors had turned out to be true.

It also saturated the local online environment enough that new panics kept popping up in subsequent days at other schools within when another person woud discover the original rumors or similar posts and msitakenly assume they apply to their school. The pattern only ended due to the official end of the school year.

Going forward, the incidents have led local entities to consider working on new methods for reporting alleged incidents. Leander ISD has been the most proactive so far by producing guidelines for how to report an alleged incident productively without spreading rumors, which they have subsequently shared with every rumor they have had since investigated at the end of the school year.

SNOWSTORM

from page A1

a week and cities' local roads snarled or unusable for more than a week until the ice and snow eventually melted. Cedar Park, Leander and other area cities faced challenges because they didn't have any snowplows nor snowplow blades they could attach to trucks due to how rarely snow is an issue.

Other challenges for Cedar Park and Leander were caused by the power outages, which occurred in the local PEC system and were outside of their control. Most notably, a failure at a PEC station resulted in Leander's only operating water plant being repeatedly turned off during the rolling power outages that PEC had to conduct to prevent the system from failing. As a result, the plant temporarily ran out of water due to it not being able to operate long enough when power would return to keep up with Leander residents' consumption, resulting in a water outage and subsequent boil water notice that lasted several days.

Other residents, even in cities like Cedar Park that never experienced disruptions to their water plants, faced water outages caused by frozen pipes bursting on their property or in their apartment complex. The storm and burst pipes also impacted several local government buildings and 17 Leander ISD schools, resulting in many of them remaining closed for days or weeks after the snow eventually thawed.

In addition to the water and electricity shortages, many residents faced food shortages as restaurants and grocery stores were forced to close due to their freezes lacking power, desperate residents buying out their entire supply and food trucks being unable to reach them and resupply their shelves.

Lastly, local cities had to spend a substantial chunk of money this year repairing ice damage to their local roads.

In the wake of the disaster, Cedar Park and Leander took numerous actions to help local residents and prepare for future potential snowstorms, ranging from Cedar Park providing utility relief and fee waivers for a short period to Leander adding backup generators to their water plants.

Local residents stepped up to help each other during the storm. Countless residents with power or generators hosted those trapped without water or power in their homes and numerous people volunteered to help those in nursing homes. Leander's first H-E-B received national attention for allowing shoppers to take their full shopping carts without paying when they lost power. Local breweries each distributed tens of thousands of gallons of clean drinking water from their tanks to local residents without water service.

Elected leaders also pitched in with actions ranging from Rep. John Bucy (D-Austin) helping to organize water trucks and water bottles being delivered to local cities to Leander Mayor Christine Sederquist and other Council members volunteering at those water refilling stations to former Leander Mayor Troy Hill delivering electric heaters to local residents during the storm.

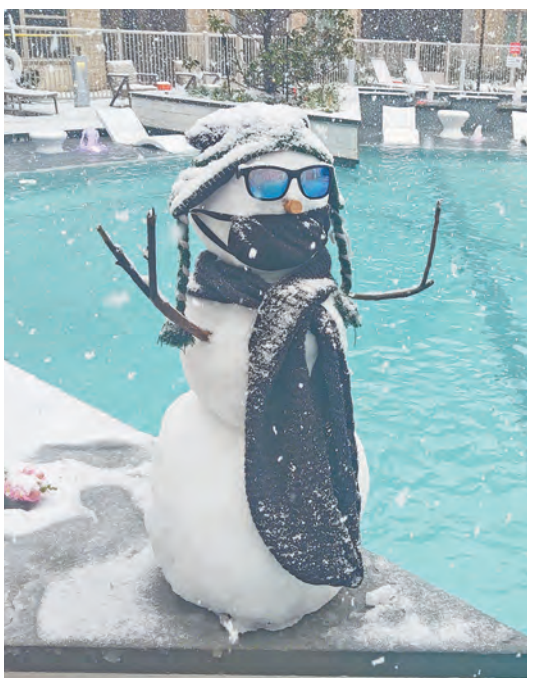
"In times of crisis, we see good and bad in people. Today and last night, I saw good," Hill said.

The consequences of the storm led to the ousting of ERCOT CEO Bill Magness and the resignation of at least seven ERCOT board members along with the Texas Legislature passing numerous bills aimed at addressing the system weaknesses that caused the crisis.

However, the Legislature and Texas officials are facing serious criticism that their new regulations provide loopholes for natural gas and other energy companies to avoid winterization efforts, which would undermine even the hundreds of millions of dollars electrical cooperatives and companies have spent to address electrical grid issues. With the potential for another snowstorm in early 2022, it remains to be seen whether Texas will have learned from its failure to prepare before this year's storm or whether history will repeat itself again.



JOSH MONIZ
The statue at the entrance to Cedar Park Townhomes was encased in ice during the historic February snowstorm.



JOSH MONIZ
Chase Breckel, 14, and Cole Breckel, 11, made a snowman next to the pool at The Alden at Cedar Park apartment complex.



SUDOKU

					1			2
		5		3		8		4
				9		1		
	4			1				8
		7						
		9		6	4	2		
		8	9		3			7
			5					
	5	2						6

Level: Intermediate

Here's How It Works:
Sudoku puzzles are formatted as a 9x9 grid, broken down into nine 3x3 boxes. To solve a sudoku, the numbers 1 through 9 must fill each row, column and box. Each number can appear only once in each row, column and box. You can figure out the order in which the numbers will appear by using the numeric clues already provided in the boxes. The more numbers you name, the easier it gets to solve the puzzle!

Fun By The Numbers

Like puzzles? Then you'll love sudoku. This mind-bending puzzle will have you hooked from the moment you square off, so sharpen your pencil and put your sudoku savvy to the test.

ANSWER:

3	9	4	8	7	1	6	5	2
1	7	5	6	3	2	8	9	4
2	8	6	4	9	5	1	7	3
5	4	3	2	1	9	7	6	8
6	2	7	3	5	8	9	4	1
8	1	9	7	6	4	2	3	5
4	6	8	9	2	3	5	1	7
7	3	1	5	8	6	4	2	9
9	5	2	1	4	7	3	8	6

YEAR IN REVIEW

Leander examines ending relationship with Cap Metro

BY JOSH MONIZ
SENIOR REPORTER

Leander's tumultuous relationship with the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Cap Metro) rail system may finally face a reckoning in 2022.

Leander residents have repeatedly voted to remain within the Cap Metro system since joining in 1985, voting in favor of staying in the system back in 2000 and joining the eventual rail system introduced in 2004.

Cap Metro expanded its ride-share service area for Leander this year and recently announced plans to spend $9.8 million to add a second rail between its Leander and Lakeline rail stations to speed up how frequently trains can depart. It has also been working on long-term plans to eventually add rail service all the way from the Leander Station to Austin's airport.

Under state law governing membership in Cap Metro, Leander and other participating cities must pay in its revenues from its 1% sales tax, which represents half of the total amount any city is allowed by the state to levy in sales tax.

As Leander has rapidly grown in recent years and its sales tax revenues have increased, the cost of the City's participation in the system has come under fresh criticism. Notably, several Council members have argued the City could exit the system, provide its own public transits for less than its membership and use the remaining funds to finance economic development agreements that would encourage new businesses to open in Leander.



JOSH MONIZ

Leander's train station on the Cap Metro rail system.

After the previous Leander City Council majority - which supported putting a potential exit before voters in a ballot - was swept out of office this May, they tried to vote on the issue during a Briefing Workshop just minutes before the new Council members could be sworn into office. The effort failed because ballot issues cannot be passed during workshops, it cannot be passed without public comment and it requires the Council to craft the final ballot language.

The move also ultimately proved unnecessary because Leander Mayor Christine Sederquist and the current Council majority have shown they are open to putting an exit vote before voters pending the completion of a Transit Study, which was finally completed and presented to them on Dec. 16.

The study's finding found several interesting, competing elements that the Council will have to consider in 2022.

The study found that an exit from Cap Metro wouldn't significantly hinder new developments and businesses from opening in Leander because too many other factors go into the decision for a rail system to be deciding factor. However, it also found that having a rail system could be a critical factor in Leander differentiating itself in a crowded field.

Cap Metro's rail system, which currently represents the majority of Cap Metro's cost of operations, suffers from a lack of a sufficiently dense amount of places to visit along its length and currently brings only a minimal amount of people into the city. However, much of the Leander Station's long-term purpose is pending the completion of the $715 million Northline development to attract visitors to the city. Northline and other major Leander developments are aiming to break ground on portions of their projects in 2022.

The study found that Leander could build and operate its own turnkey public transportation for about $3 million annually, which could get residents around town or allow them to still use the rail system by shuttling them to the Lakeline Station. However, the study notes the costs of the operation could grow substantially well into the future as Leander grows.

The study also doesn't address how Leander will handle bringing people into Leander to support Northline and other developments if Cap Metro stops operating the Lakeline Station following their departure nor how to deal with growing traffic jams on U.S. 183.

The Council will review draft language for putting a Cap Metro exit before Leander voters in 2020 at their Jan. 6 meeting, as well as review language for using those sales tax revenues to establish a Type B economic development entity.

Leander cannot exit the Cap Metro system unless a majority of voters approve it with a vote.

If Leander voters approve an exit, Cap Metro is legally required to immediately end service. However, Leander will still be legally required to pay off its share of the debt Cap Metro has incurred maintaining and improving the rail system, which was estimated to be $33.7 million back in May. As a result, Leander would continue to pay Cap Metro its 1% sales tax for approximately the next three years in exchange for no service in order to pay off its debt.

Looking forward, if voters shoot down an exit, the Council will still have options to petition the Texas Legislature to revise the laws governing Cap Metro, which the rail system cannot change on their own, to reduce how much smaller cities are obligated to pay into the system.

COVID

from page A1

daily new cases and fatalities. In all, the winter surge (December 2020-February 2021) claimed more than 200 lives in Williamson County, most of them over the age of 65.

Though older people and those with underlying health conditions were able to get a first dose earlier, vaccines became broadly available by April and that showed in the county's health statistics. By May, it appeared that the virus was pretty much under control.

Still, too many people shunned the free vaccines so when the Delta variant appeared, and schools began to fill, WilCo, along with the rest of the state, suffered through an even more frightening surge — largely among teens, who were not yet eligible, and those who didn't take advantage of the vaccine.

Our first report of the Delta variant was June 25. By the end of August, the virus was again burning across the state and didn't subside until the middle of October. That surge killed another 200 WilCo residents but these victims were largely unvaccinated and younger than 65.

By October, most people were approved to have a third shot to better ward off the virus' impact.

While the pace of viral transmission decreased through November and much of December, it never dropped to the low rates we enjoyed during the summer. Instead of averaging 10-12 new cases a day, as was the case in June and early July, WilCo's 7-day average never dropped below 50 new cases.



ROUND ROCK EXPRESS

Curative, one of WilCo's vaccine hubs, set up a large vaccination site at the Dell Diamond in March. By May, those large, drive-thru clinics had been disbanded.

Around Thanksgiving, we learned of yet another coronavirus variant, Omicron. Early reports suggest that this variant is more contagious than anything we've seen to date and our vaccines aren't quite as effective at preventing infections, though they remain effective at preventing severe illness.

As this issue goes to press, Omicron is pushing Delta out of the picture, case counts are rising again and health officials warn of another grim winter, especially among those who have yet to be vaccinated against the virus.

However, the news isn't all bad. Right before Christmas, the Food and Drug Administration approved a new, at-home treatment that could help stem future waves while more and more people are getting their first shots.

WilCo 2021

By the numbers

Cases by the numbers

- Total Number of Tests given: 527,534
- Number of Positive Tests: 47,633 (About 9% of all tests given, and about 8% of WilCo population)
- Fatalities: 544 (Of those, 247 have died since vaccines were widely available on April 1)
- Largest Single-day Report: Sept. 1, 658 cases
- Highest 7-Day Avg.: Sept. 1, 469.86
- 7-Day New Case average of more than 100: July 21 - Oct 19 (92 days)

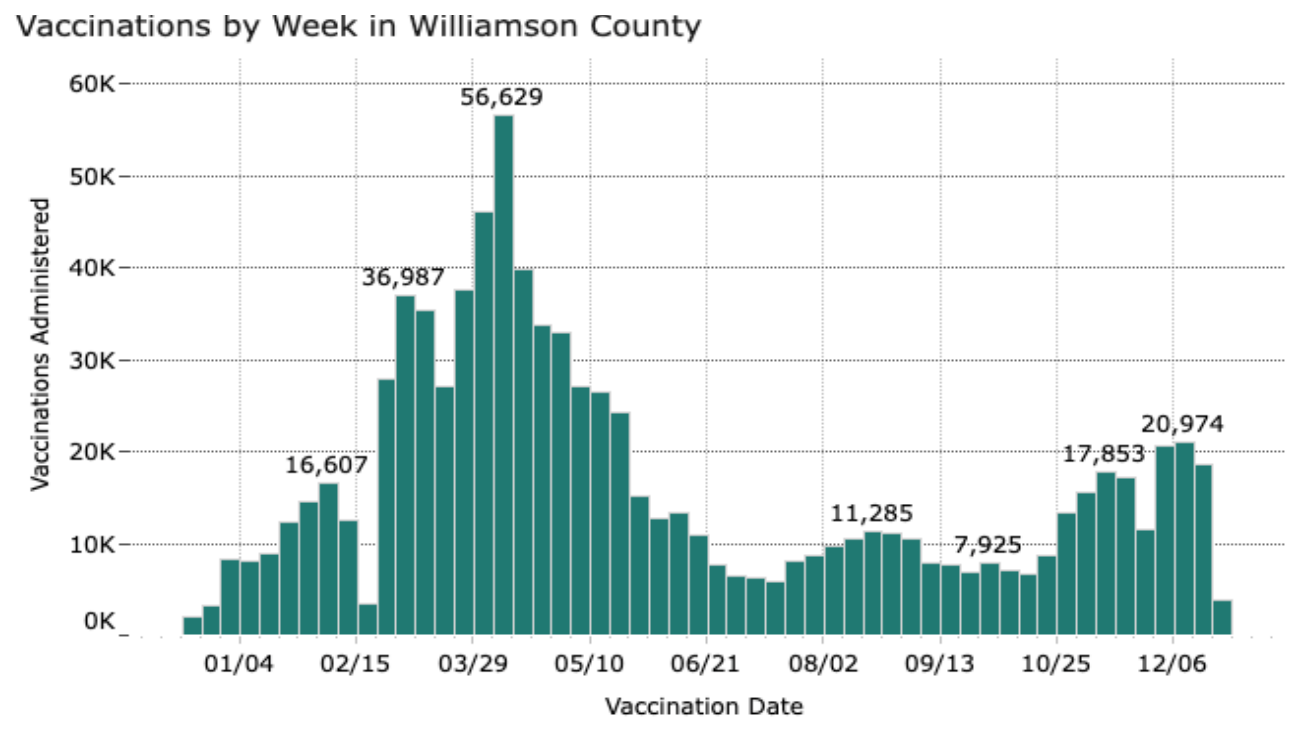
Vaccines, by the numbers

- Doses Administered: 882,773
- Eligible with one dose: 427,563 (77.5%)
- Eligible fully vaccinated: 375,888 (68.13%)
- Booster Shots administered: 108,495
- Percentage of Population 65+ Vaccinated with At Least One Dose: 99.99%
- Percentage of Population 65+ Fully Vaccinated: 91.28%

2021 Reported Deaths by Month

Jan.	111
Feb.	74
March	52
April	12
May	13
June	7
July	12
August	54
Sept.	92
Oct.	63
Nov.	28
Dec.	14
Unknown+	12
Total	544

+Some fatalities were added after monthly reports. It is not known when those deaths occurred.
** All data is as of Dec. 20, 2021*





By November, children ages five and up we eligible for the vaccine and parents breathed a sigh of relief.

MATT MITCHELL/ LEANDER ISD

Cedar Park Chamber of Commerce

Log onto
CedarParkChamber.org
for more information
512.260.7800
1460 E. Whitestone Blvd. Suite 180

Cedar Park Chamber Takes A Look Back At 2021



Tony Moline, IOM, PCED
President and CEO

Wow! At the beginning of this year, I really thought that we were heading down a path of getting back on track. Businesses were opening up again and customers were shopping locally. And then we had an uptick in COVID and a Winter Storm that seemed to take out most of our businesses and homes. It has been another wild year, and the Cedar Park Chamber wants to thank our businesses for continuing to promote our great community and stay strong during these difficult times!

The Chamber had to be fluid with some of our events. We turned our Banquet into a Luncheon, we moved Cedar Fest to the summer, added a 2nd Golf Tournament and had to cancel our Taste of Cedar Park event. But when we look at the events we had, it was another great year. Spring Golf Classic – SOLD OUT! Cedar Fest BBQ Competition – SOLD OUT! Fall Golf Tournament – SOLD OUT! Our major events did well, and we have our businesses and members to thank!

Some of our membership programs and events included hosting 26 different ribbon cuttings, six Lunch Connect luncheons, five Power Networking Breakfasts and four Business After Hours events. These are programs that started off a little slow for us in 2021 and we are excited to have them returning to full force in 2022.

We also hosted some newer events and programs. We surprised 6 different businesses with our Cash Mob. The Cash Mob included a group of ten individuals who walked through the doors and spent money at their establishment – and it was a complete surprise to those businesses. We hosted five community Blood Drives for our businesses which were always full. We promoted Restaurant Month in October which was wildly successful. We had over 29,000 unique users during that time period and showcased many of our local eateries. At the time of this newsletter, we are in the middle of our "Tony on a Shelf" campaign that showcases our retail establishments and encourages our residents and businesses to support our local economy. It is going to be as big as our Restaurant Month campaign.

We began our 21st Leadership Cedar Park Class which has a great group of business owners and individuals in senior leadership positions participating. This is a nine-month program where the class will learn about economic development, local, state and county government, non-profits and much more. They will learn leadership skills, different communication styles and how to be effective in their work environment.

We have been actively advocating on behalf of the business community in Cedar Park. We hosted 6 separate "Coffee with the Council" events throughout the last half of the year. Our Legislative Council met each month to work on our Legislative Priorities and were very active during the legislative sessions and special called sessions. We held a Candidate's Forum and sent out issue advocacy alerts and statements on different legislative actions. As the CEO of the Chamber, I participated or went to 36 different City Council Meetings, ten Leander ISD Meetings, as well as participated with the Cedar Park Bond Advisory Task Force, Leander ISD Community Facilities Advisory Committee, LISD Bond Task Force and participated in the Community Advisory Committee for the new Cedar Park Chief of Police.

The Chamber also received its 4-Star Accreditation from the US Chamber of Commerce. This was awarded to the Cedar Park Chamber of Commerce in November. We received this for our, "sound policies, effective organizational procedures, and positive impact on the community." This Accreditation put the Cedar Park Chamber in the top 3% of Chambers of Commerce in the United States. There are over 7,000 Chambers of Commerce in the U.S. Currently, only 200 Chambers carry this designation. Of the 41 Chambers in Texas who are Accredited, Cedar Park is one of only fifteen 4-Star Accredited Chambers in the State. We are extremely proud of that fact.

As you can see, it has been a busy 12 months for the Cedar Park Chamber. We appreciate the support of our business community and of our residents. The Chamber wants to take a moment to also recognize our business leaders who serve on our Board of Directors, Ambassadors and volunteer at events. We could not be the Chamber we are without your leadership. Thank you for all you do!

Past Events



HTeaO Ribbon Cutting: Congratulations to HTeaO Cedar Park on their 1-year anniversary! On Thursday, December 2nd we were honored to be able to help them celebrate with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony. For delicious refreshments and more stop by their location at 804 West New Hope Dr.



Ranch Road Jewelry: Ranch Road Jewelry celebrated their Ribbon Cutting on Friday, December 3rd! It was a fantastic event with so many of our community members present. If you haven't given them a visit, be sure to stop by at 1400 E. Whitestone Blvd. Suite 600.



Lunch Connect: Guest Speaker Jan Gross' inspirational presentation about the art of "Showing Up Well" kept her audience on December 8th Luncheon at Hill Country Bible Church, captivated.



Leadership Cedar Park Class: The Leadership Cedar Park Class enjoyed visiting local non-profits on their Social Services Day. They heard from several non-profits and learned how they too can support the Cedar Park community.

Renewing Members:

Express Oil Change and Service
Reveal Dental
SmileOn Orthodontics
RE/MAX 1
Austin Business Journal
Cedar Park Physicians Associates-Avery Ranch
Cedar Park Vision
Cedar Park Women's Center
Family Medical Center
Frost Bank
Leander ISD
McDonalds (Cypress Creek)
Minyard Sons Services
Prosperity Bank
Southstar Bank SSB
Heroes Night Out
UniFirst
Cedar Park Regional Emergency Center – Leander
Christ Together Austin – Education Connection
Central Texas Pain Center
Jupiter House Preschool
HTeaO Cedar Park

Welcome New Members:

Whiskey Oak Realty Group
Handyman Connection of Cedar Park
Total Dog!
Community Exposure
My Team Home and Commercial
Sara Groff for JP 2
State Representative Terry Wilson
Curry Pizza House
PuroClean of Northwest Austin

Upcoming Events:

January 12th
Cedar Park Chamber State of the City
11:30 am -1:00 pm
Hyatt Place Austin / Cedar Park
1315 E New Hope Dr., Cedar Park

For more information on our upcoming events please go to CedarParkChamber.org

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950 PUBLIC NOTICES

INVITATION TO BIDDERS

Sealed Bids, in duplicate, addressed to Gehan Homes, LTD., Austin, Texas, will be received at the office of Pape-Dawson Engineers, Inc., located at 10801 North Mopac Expressway, Building 3, Suite 200, Austin, Texas 78759, until 3:00 p.m. Local Time, January 20, 2022, and then publicly opened and read for "HAWKES LANDING NORTH, PHASE 2" for Leander, Williamson County, Texas.

Scope of Work of the Contract includes the following: Wastewater Improvements.

Bids received after the closing time will be returned unopened. A MANDATORY pre-bid conference will be held on January 6, 2022 at 3:00 p.m. Local Time, at the office of Pape-Dawson Engineers, Inc., 10801 North Mopac Expressway, Building 3, Suite 200, Austin, Texas 78759. Attendance by each prospective bidder or its representative at the pre-bid conference is MANDATORY, and no Bid will be opened unless the bidder or representative was present at the pre-bid conference.

Each Bid must be accompanied by a Bid Bond or a certified or cashier's check, acceptable to the Owner, in an amount not less than five percent (5%) of the total amount Bid, as a guarantee that the successful bidder will enter into the Contract and execute the Payment and Performance Bonds on the forms provided, and provide the required insurance certificates within seven (7) days after the date Contract Documents are received by the Contractor.

Copies of the bidding documents are on file at the following locations: 10801 North Mopac Expressway, Building 3, Suite 200, Austin, Texas 78759.

The Owner reserves the right to reject any or all Bids and to waive all defects and irregularities in bidding or bidding process except time of submitting a Bid. The Successful Bidder, if any, will be the responsible Bidder which in the Board's judgment will be most advantageous to the District and result in the best and most economical completion of the Project.

GEHAN HOMES, LTD.

REQUEST FOR SEALED BIDS

Sealed Bids addressed to **City of Lago Vista**, will be received at **City Offices, 5803 Thunderbird, Lago Vista, TX** until **11:00 A.M., January 25, 2022 for the Water Treatment Plant No. 3 Sludge Drying Beds and Allegiance Bypass Water Line Improvements.** Bids will be opened publicly and read aloud shortly thereafter on the same date in the place and address of bid opening. A non-mandatory pre-submittal conference will be held via web, on January 18, 2022, at 11:00 AM. Copies of the notices will be available at DemandStar under ID: CIPWT-2020B. A hard copy or electronic file of all Bid Documents may be secured from the office of S.D. KALLMAN, L.P., 1106 South Mays, Suite 101, Round Rock, Texas 78664, phone: (512) 218-4404, for the non-refundable sum of one hundred dollars ($100.00) per set. An electronic file of the same documents may be secured for the non-refundable sum of fifty dollars ($50.00) per set, made payable to S.D. KALLMAN, L.P.

RFP for Lease of Golf Carts

The City of Lago Vista is accepting sealed bids from qualified vendors for sixty (60) golf carts for a lease period of 48 months to be used at the City of Lago Vista Municipal Golf Course, Lago Vista, Texas. All bids shall be clearly marked as "Golf Carts" and must be received by **8:00 a.m., Thursday January 20, 2022.** Applicant names of all proposals will be read aloud on **January 20, 2022, at 11:00 am** at City Hall; 5803 Thunderbird, Lago Vista, Texas 78645.

Three (3) copies of the bids shall be submitted signed, sealed, and delivered to Sandra Barton, City Secretary, City of Lago Vista, 5803 Thunderbird, Lago Vista, Texas 78645. (512-267-1155)

The Request for Bids, Summary and the Scope of Services information for this project are available from the above noted individual, and/or office and on the City's website at https://www.lagovistatexas.org/span_doing_span_business/bid_opportunities.php

It is recommended that bidders discuss the equipment needs with the Golf Course Director, Chris Godwin at 512-267-1170 or at cgodwin@lago-vista.org. prior to submission of the bid.

The City of Lago Vista reserves the right to reject any and all bids, to waive irregularities, and to accept the bid deemed the best value to the City.

Notice of Public Hearing

Notice is hereby given that the City of Jonestown City Council will hold two public hearings giving all interested persons the right to appear and be heard on the proposed annexations by the City of Jonestown, Texas, of the following described property:

Being public right-of-way consisting of an approximate 1.52 acre portion of Hill Road generally located North and West of Johnson Road, East of Beach Road, and South of the Sandy Creek Arm of Lake Travis situated in Travis County, Texas.

Being public right-of-way consisting of an approximate 0.99 acre portion of Johnson Road generally located North and West of Trails End Road, East of Hill Drive and South of North Rim Drive situated in Travis County, Texas.

The first public hearing before the Jonestown City Council will be held on Thursday, January 13, 2022, at 6:30 p.m. The second public hearing before the City Council will be held on Monday, January 17, 2022, at 8:30 a.m. Both public hearings will be held at the City of Jonestown City Council Chamber, 18649 FM 1431, Suite 3A, Jonestown, Texas.

Information concerning these requests are available for viewing at Jonestown City Hall, 18649 FM 1431, Suite 4-A, during the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. You may call 512-267-0359 or e-mail cjolly@jonestowntx.gov for more information.

NOTICE TO UNSECURED CREDITORS

Notice is hereby given that original Letters Testamentary for the Estate of JAMES LESTER JONES, III, Deceased, were issued on December 14, 2021, in Cause No. 21-1206-CP4, pending in the County Court at Law No. 4 of Williamson County, Texas, to: JAMES MICHAEL JONES. All persons having claims against this Estate which is currently being administered are required to present them to the undersigned within the time and in the manner prescribed by law.

JAMES MICHAEL JONES
Independent Executor
Estate of JAMES LESTER JONES, III, Deceased
11501 CENTURY OAKS TERRACE APT 3133
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78758

DATED the 27th day of December, 2021.

LAW OFFICES OF ROBERT P. HOFFMAN, P.C.
P.O. BOX 965
ROUND ROCK, TEXAS 78680-0965
TELEPHONE NO: (512) 453-1895
E-MAIL: rphoffmanlawofc@aol.com

Robert P. Hoffman
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YEAR IN REVIEW



SCOTT W. COLEMAN
The Cedar Park Timberwolves hold the state championship trophy after a 46-39 win in the Class 5A state title game against Frisco Liberty on March 10, 2021 in San Antonio, Texas.

Cedar Park girls hang a banner in year full of deep playoff runs

BY ZACH SMITH
HCN SPORTS EDITOR

High school athletes have needed to be extra vigilant over the last year with the COVID-19 pandemic still raging.

But through it all, they have persisted, and 2021 was a historic year for schools and individuals in the area, especially in Leander ISD, which saw three teams make it to a state final and one win it all.

When a game got canceled or postponed, the joy was not diminished. It's been an unforgettable year, for sure.

CEDAR PARK GIRLS' BASKETBALL WINS FIRST-EVER STATE TITLE

Head coach Donny Ott fell to his knees moments before the final buzzer sounded. Four years of hard work had built up to the ultimate prize: state champions.

Cedar Park won the state title for the first time in school history on March 10 at the Alamodome in San Antonio, holding off a late charge from defending state champion Frisco Liberty to earn a 46-39 win.

"What makes this feel so good is that I know we earned it," Ott said. "We had to do it with some of the craziest circumstances and

See **HIGH SCHOOL**, page **A10**



ANDY NIETUPSKI
Shortstop Joe Sparschu (12) throws to first base in the UIL State 5A Semifinal Championship baseball game between the Hallsville Bobcats and Rouse Raiders. The game was played on Thursday, June 10, 2021, at Dell Diamond in Round Rock, Texas.

Fan support highlights first year for Austin FC

BY ZACH SMITH
HCN SPORTS EDITOR

For the longest time, Austin claimed to be the largest city in the United States without a professional sports team. That all changed in 2021 when Austin FC took the pitch.

On the field, the Verde & Black didn't quite meet expectations, finishing well below the playoff line and second to last in the Western Conference.

But off the field, the impact was loud and persistent. Season tickets sold out in record time, the team was one of the top merchandise sellers in MLS and Q2 Stadium was the only venue in the league to see out every match.

The story of Austin FC started a few years ago, but 2021 held many significant firsts that will most likely resonate in the city for years to come.

THE FIRST MATCH

Restrictions meant the first-ever match for Austin FC would be in front of a less-than-full house at Banc of California Stadium in Los Angeles, but the air was still full of excitement. Austin FC lost 2-0, but goalkeeper Brad Stuver gave a preview of the All-Star caliber season he went on to have with a save in the first moments of the game.

"We've got to be realistic," Austin FC head coach Josh Wolff said after the loss. "There is lots to build on. I think that's part of the understanding that there's a process, and you can't get everything right in the first month or two of your existence."

Some of the on-field observations from that first match, including Stuver, the defensive partnership between Matt Besler and Jhohan Romaña and the need for a true center forward persisted for the rest of the year.

But the fans had been waiting for that moment in April, and it was just the first taste of an epic season from a fan perspective.

THE FIRST GOAL (AND WIN!)

Diego Fagundez scored the first-ever goal in Austin FC history in a 3-1 win over the Colorado Rapids on April 24 in Commerce City, Colo.

As soon as the ball crossed the line, Fagundez, perhaps the player most connected to the supporters, sprinted over to the packed away supporters and threw up an "LV" hand sign for the Los Verdes supporters group.

Cecilio Dominguez sprinted to the fans after both of his goals in the win, and midfielder and team captain Alex Ring picked up the megaphone to lead a chant after

See **AUSTIN FC**, page **A10**



ANDY NIETUPSKI
The Texas Stars' two games against the Charlotte Checkers scheduled for Friday and Saturday have been postponed due to league COVID-19 protocols within both teams.

Texas Stars' series against Charlotte Checkers postponed

BY ZACH SMITH
HCN SPORTS EDITOR

The Texas Stars' two games against the Charlotte Checkers scheduled for Friday and Saturday have been postponed due to league COVID-19 protocols within both teams.

Make up dates have yet to be determined.

The Stars last took the ice on Saturday, Dec. 18 in a 3-2 win over the Rockford IceHogs. The Stars' had their games scheduled for Dec. 21 and Dec. 22 against the Manitoba Moose postponed due to league COVID-19 protocols and related travel concerns affecting the Moose.

The next two games on the Texas schedule include back-to-back games against Manitoba at home on Jan. 7 and Jan. 8.

Texas is in last place in the Central Division with an 8-11-3-1 record and has just three wins in the last 10 games.

In college football, nothing lasts forever

BY MARK BRADLEY
THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Clemson's fab four is no more. The non-playing principals who led the Tigers to the College Football Playoff in six consecutive seasons have scattered. Dan Radakovich, the athletic director who gave Dabo Swinney all he desired, has jumped to Miami. Tony Elliott, the play-caller for the entirety of that CFP run, will become head coach at Virginia. Brent Venables, the best defensive coordinator in the sport, has bounded back to Oklahoma, which once fired him, as head coach.

None of this is surprising. Indeed, the surprise was that Clemson kept this bunch intact this long. Only the head coach remains, and we've learned not to discount Dabo. Still, it's hard to imagine the Tigers being better over the next few years than they've been over the past decade. If not for Clemson's continuity, Nick Saban would have a national championship ring for all his fingers plus one thumb.

The lesson herein isn't novel: Nothing lasts forever. There's also a subtext: College football keeps getting harder to manage, even if you're at a place that has every resource. Think how much has changed since 2017, which wasn't so long ago. College players can receive money for use of their name/image/likeness. They can avail themselves of the transfer portal, which has stretched the concept of recruiting to a level unimagined.

A coach still must find new players. The coach also must re-recruit his players – or else he can watch them go elsewhere and win a title or a Heisman Trophy, if not both. We think of Joe Burrow and Justin Fields. We think of Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray. We think of JT Daniels and Jahmyr Gibbs.

It's remarkable how impatient institutes of higher learning can be when it comes to football. LSU fired Ed Orgeron not two years after he won a national championship. He was replaced by Brian Kelly, who'd taken Notre Dame to the playoff twice and stood a chance to make it with this year's team. He couldn't wait to see if the Fighting Irish was in or out. LSU had $100 million with his name on it.

Dan Mullen was pushed aside a year after taking Florida to the SEC title game. Oklahoma, which made the playoff three years running, saw Lincoln Riley jump to USC. Oregon lost Mario Cristobal to Miami, which began wooing replacements even as incumbent Manny Diaz was out recruiting.

None of the institutions cited above is a directional school. These are all Power 5 jobs, though power can be a slippery slope. The Big 12 is set to welcome Cincinnati, BYU, Houston and Central Florida. This happened after Oklahoma and Texas announced their intentions to join the SEC. There's thought Riley left Oklahoma because he'd rather coach in the Pac-12, where there's no Alabama, no Georgia, no LSU – at least not yet.

The CFP has been in place since 2014. Before that, there was the Bowl Championship Series. Before that, there was the Bowl Coalition. Before that, Bear Bryant decided where he wanted to spend the holidays and everyone else haggled over what was left. The playoff includes four teams. Its elders aspire to see it grow to 12, though those folks can't seem to agree on what they've agreed to do. A press conference announcing playoff expansion was expected earlier this month in Dallas. It was never held. The sixth in-person meeting regarding expansion ended with no resolution.

Going by this season's final

See **FOOTBALL**, page **A10**

AUSTIN FC

from page A9

the win.

"To feel our people and see our people here was amazing. It's that kind of energy that drives us," Dominguez said.

The winning feeling was one the players and fans would experience just eight more times during the 34-game season, but the first one will stick with the group for a long, long time.

THE FIRST GAME AT Q2 STADIUM

Hours before the match even started, fans filled the parking lots at Circle Brewery and Hopsquad Brewery. Just over three hours before kickoff, they marched to Q2 Stadium for the first time and made quite the impression, shutting down a lane of Braker. Matthew McConaughey walked out with a bongo drum in a bright Verde suit to kick off the night, and things only got rowdier from there.

When the team needed energy, Dominguez pumped up the crowd, and the crowd responded in full voice. The drumming and singing didn't stop from the south end for the entire match.

Technically, the U.S. Women's National Team broke in the $240 million stadium with a 2-0 win over Nigeria on June 17, but the scoreless draw against the San Jose Earthquakes was the moment Austin FC fans had been waiting for, and it was an unforgettable evening.

GALLAGHER SCORES FIRST GOAL AT Q2 STADIUM

There's truly no place to hide your emotions on the soccer pitch.

When things are going poorly, the frustration is hard to miss. But when the game is clicking and the good vibes are flowing from the players to fans in a brand new stadium primed to explode in a city starved for soccer, the emotions can be hard to contain.

July 1 was one of those nights.

"I woke up and had a good feeling, and I'm just like 'F it, we're going to score tonight," forward Jon Gallagher said. "It was a surreal moment that I'll never forget."

After 37 shots with no goals in the first two games at Q2, Austin FC smashed the Portland Timbers 4-1 for its first win at home.



SCOTT W. COLEMAN PHOTOS

Above, Austin FC forward Kekuta Manneh (23) during a Major League Soccer match between LAFC and Austin FC on April 17, 2021 in Los Angeles, California. Left, Austin FC co-owner and Minister of Culture Matthew McConaughey warms up the crowd by playing a bongo before the start of a Major League Soccer match between Austin FC and the San Jose Earthquakes on June 19, 2021 in Austin, Texas.



SCOTT W. COLEMAN

Glenn Grizzlies senior guard Jaylen Thompson (5) shoots the ball during a high school basketball playoff game between Beaumont United and Glenn on March 9, 2021 in Houston, Texas.

HIGH SCHOOL

from page A9

obstacles. We had to stay ready. I've been in coaching for 21 years, and this is the greatest feeling I've had in my life outside of marrying my wife and having my two kids."

Ott took over more than four years ago. In that span, the Timberwolves have the one state title, four straight undefeated district titles and a winning streak that is still intact and has lasted more than a calendar year.

During the course of the title-winning season, Ott said he watched more than 300 hours of film scouting opponents throughout the season, which equates to about two and a half hours a day if you start from the first day of practice on Oct. 21 until the title game.

Cedar Park has won 19 straight games to start the 2021-22 season, is the top-ranked 5A team in the state, and is No. 22 nationally according to ESPN.

COACH CHAD KREMPIN HELPS ROUSE BASEBALL ADVANCE TO STATE TOURNAMENT FOR FIRST TIME

Five years ago, the Rouse baseball program was coming off a season in which the Raiders failed to win a district game and finished the season on a 14-game losing streak.

Since then, Rouse has won two district titles, made the playoffs every year they've been held and advanced to the state tournament for the first time in school history in June.

What changed before the season five years ago? Chad Krempin was hired as head coach.

Rouse started the year with 12 wins in a row and climbed to as high as No. 2 in some statewide baseball polls. Once district play started, the Raiders weren't as consistent and finished fourth in District 25-5A.

But the Raiders caught fire in the postseason, upsetting the No. 24 team in the first round, got past No. 7 Cedar Park in the third round and swept No. 2 Gregory-Portland and Dripping Springs to reach Dell Diamond.

Rouse lost 4-2 in the state semifinals to Hallsville on June 10.

"They've set a standard and taken us to new heights. We're going to get back here, and someday we're going to win it," Krempin said.

VANDEGRIFT GIRLS' SOCCER CONTINUES SUCCESS WITH TRIP TO STATE FINALS

The Vipers have been to the state tournament four times since the school opened in 2009. They advanced to the final this season, losing 2-1 to Lewisville Flower Mound in April.

There was a period of time during the regular season where the Vipers had to quarantine for a week and make up their games in quick succession. But that didn't stop them from staying focused on the end goal.

The offense came alive in the playoffs, as Vandegrift outscored its opponents 24-4 in the six games leading up to the state final.

One of their focuses for the 2021 season was to honor the 2020 seniors, who missed out on the postseason a year ago after it was canceled due to the pandemic, and it's safe to say they did just that.

GLENN BOYS' BASKETBALL ADVANCES TO STATE SEMIFINALS IN FIFTH FULL SEASON

There's something about the Grizzlies that like to surprise people.

The Glenn basketball program is still young — the 2020-21 season was its fifth full season — but it got on the map and advanced all the way to the state semifinals, before losing to No. 2 Beaumont United on March 9.

Then-senior guard Jaylen Thompson was named district MVP, and scored a team-high 25 points, grabbed six rebounds and had a pair of assists in his final high-school game.

A few years ago, the Glenn football team won a district title and made it to the second round of the playoffs in its first full season. That set the expectation for the Grizzles, and the basketball team has followed suit.

FOOTBALL

from page A9

rankings, these teams would have made the playoff had it been 200 percent larger: Notre Dame, Ohio State, Baylor, Mississippi, Oklahoma State, Michigan State, Utah and Pitt. There are 130 FBS programs. A 12-team grid would give 9.2 percent of them a shot at a national championship. It would also add at least two weeks to the season. Remember how college presidents claimed a longer schedule would be deleterious to their athletes? Guess those athletes can work a little longer for their NIL money.

This is college football. Everything changes, everything except Saban. And he turned 70 on Halloween.



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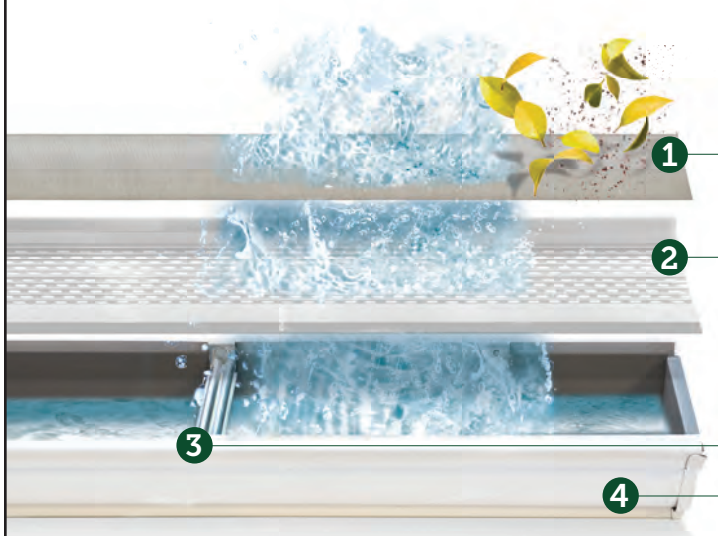
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DISNEY/TNS
Disney's "Encanto"

On the big screen

THE BEST MOVIES OF 2021

BY JOSHUA AXELROD
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

While 2020 was largely spent unable to enjoy a movie on a big screen, 2021 saw a return to movie theaters that, for this cinema lover at least, was extremely welcome.

That's not to say there weren't plenty of movies to watch on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video and a plethora of other streaming-services. Whether how a film is consumed actually affects enjoyment of it is a debate that will continue to rage as streaming films becomes more prevalent, but it's just the reality of the moment that there are more platforms on which to watch movies than ever before.

Without further ado, here are my top 10 favorite movies of 2021. You'll probably wonder where some of your favorites are. Feel free to let me know how I failed you!

10. "SHANG-CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS"

This is a classic Marvel origin story that enjoyed the added benefit of a genuinely fascinating dynamic between the titular hero (Simu Liu) and his father (Tony Leung). It also features a hilarious and genuinely sweet turn from Awkwafina, who frankly should just be in everything this franchise cranks out from now on. Great stuff, Marvel.

9.) "ENCANTO"

"Hamilton" auteur Lin-Manuel Miranda had his hand in four films this year — three of which made this list — including "Encanto," Disney's latest animated musical about a young girl with no powers in an extremely magical family who turns out to be the only one who can save them all when disaster looms. Miranda did the music for "Encanto," so naturally it rules. It's bursting with color, imagination and a sweet message for kids about recognizing everyone's value despite their differences. Also, shout out to Stephanie Beatriz, who voices the protagonist Mirabel and had an awesome 2021 between "Encanto," "In the Heights," "Maya and the Three" and the final season of "Brooklyn Nine-Nine."

8.) "CYRANO"

A musical version of the classic "Cyrano de Bergerac" story could have gone sideways in the wrong hands. Instead, director Joe Wright crafted a fascinating display of balletic choreography, melodramatic but effective songs and, most crucially, two wonderful performances from Peter Dinklage and Haley Bennett.

Dinklage in particular evokes a fascinating combination of staggering confidence in his abilities and paralyzing anxiety about his stature that could easily earn him an Academy Awards nomination. "Cyrano" is Wright reminding us just how potent his productions can be when he taps into his full cinematic potential and Dinklage leveling up after spending years chewing on "Game of Thrones" dialogue.

7.) "IN THE HEIGHTS"

Full disclosure: I'm a big fan of the "In the Heights" Broadway show and the movie adaptation was probably my most anticipated movie of 2021. For the most part, it didn't disappoint thanks to director Jon M. Chu's ability to stage eye-popping musical numbers and a cast who were downright exuberant as they brought his vision to life. More big, boisterous movie musicals like this one, please!

6.) "THE POWER OF THE DOG"

Netflix has officially entered the top-10 chat with this gorgeous and thematically dense western from director Jane Campion. It follows brothers Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) and George Burbank (Jesse Plemons), who do their best to make a living as cattle ranchers in 1920s Montana. Their lives get complicated when George marries Rose Gordon (Kirsten Dunst), who brings her son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) to live with them.

The performances are excellent across the board, and Campion's camera just eats up all those amazing shots of New Zealand landscapes standing in for the American West. Expect this one to make a splash come awards season.

5.) "TICK, TICK ... BOOM!"

The 2021 award for best director-actor duo goes to Andrew Garfield and Lin-Manuel Miranda in this Netflix musical-biopic hybrid about the life of "Rent" composer and lyricist Jonathan Larson. Taking in "tick tick ... Boom" is like watching Broadway explode on Netflix, which for some may sound terrible but for this particular son of a theater critic was a slice of movie heaven. (Yes, this list is extremely musical-heavy. That's both because musicals are my jam and 2021 just happened to be an incredible year for that particular genre of film.)

4.) "THE MITCHELLS VS. THE MACHINES"

Allow me to take my analytical critic hat off for a second and tell you all that Netflix's animated roboocalypse flick "The Mitchels vs. the Machines" is the hardest I've laughed at anything all year, I've watched it multiple times since its April release and it's a crime against cinema that the Golden Globes didn't nominate it for best animated feature. The animation is gorgeous, the jokes fly fast and free, and it's all wrapped in a heartwarming message about cherishing your family no matter how annoying they can be.

3.) "KING RICHARD"

It's been too long since Hollywood has gifted us with a sports flick this well-conceived. "King Richard" portrays all the lengths that Richard Williams (Will Smith) goes through to ensure his daughters Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and Serena (Demi Singleton) can realize their potential to become tennis stars.

This one is just an acting tour de force that starts at the top with Smith disappearing into his role as a father with the best intentions who sometimes goes too far in pursuit of his children's future greatness.

2.) "WEST SIDE STORY"

Many would probably find it blasphemous to say that director Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" is better than the 1961 original. While declaring that might be a tad hyperbolic, Spielberg's version certainly updates "West Side Story" in important ways — especially its racially sensitive casting — while not skimping on the spectacular dancing and vocal performances for which this story is known. I would argue that this is the best film Spielberg has made this century and is possibly one of the best he's ever come out with over his long, storied career.

1.) "BELFAST"

The year's best movie, in my humble opinion, is writer-director Kenneth Branagh's semi-autobiographical film about a young boy and his family trying to live as normally as possible during The Troubles in 1960s Northern Island. It's an ultimately feel-good narrative coated with tangible danger lurking around every corner and a family unit that feels as real as any you'll ever see on the big screen.

All the performances are just exquisite, with Caitriona Balfe and Ciaran Hinds in particular likely to pick up rightfully earned Oscar nominations for their work. Moviemaking doesn't get much more sumptuous or life-affirming than "Belfast."

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Small screen, big stories

2021's TOP TV SHOWS

BY KATE FELDMAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

This year, television made us laugh and cry. Sometimes we laughed until we cried. Sometimes we cried until we laughed.

There was a sympathetic sex therapist, a murder mystery in a Manhattan building, another whodunit set in a Hawaiian resort. And, of course, there was Ted Lasso.

Here's the best of the best:

10. SEX EDUCATION

The Biggest Bad on TV this year wasn't kit man-turned-"Wunderkid" assistant coach Nate from soccer sitcom "Ted Lasso." Nor was it Ridgeway from fantasy historical drama "The Underground Railroad" or even one of the mean girls on the "Gossip Girl" reboot. No, it was Hope Haddon, the new headmistress at Moor-

See **TELEVISION**, page **A12**



CRAIG BLANKENHORN/HULU/TNS
Selena Gomez, Steve Martin and Martin Short star in "Only Murders in the Building."

6 ESSENTIAL GAMES OF 2021

BY TODD MARTENS
LOS ANGELES TIMES

It's not the shooting, or the running and the jumping. All those things are fun, of course, and make up the basics of a number of games, including several of my favorites from this year.

But when I look back at the games that meant the most to me in 2021, I largely think of emotional experiences, games that asked me to either rethink how I interact with a digital text, or left me with questions to ponder. In other words, they're conversation starters, and they're among my top picks for 2021 because they feel like dialogues themselves. Such, after all, is the joy of the interactive medium.

1. 'THE ARTFUL ESCAPE' (XBOX CONSOLES, WINDOWS)

An animated reverie in which turtles have warp powers, giant fish revel in the power of dance, and we run and jump among forests that transform into neon-lit galaxies, "The Artful Escape" is part "Fantasia," part "Yellow Submarine" and all wonder. Its soul, however, is its story, one young person's quest to find a personal voice and grow comfortable in their own skin. Don't worry about the rock 'n' roll imagery. There are guitar solos, yes, but jazz, pop and alien rhythms too. "The Artful Escape" wants to dance with anyone who's ever had the thought, "I'm dabbling with the idea of becoming someone else entirely."

2. 'PSYCHONAUTS 2' (XBOX CONSOLES, WINDOWS, MAC)

A game about mental health that's funny, often challenging and full of outlandishly drawn set pieces — just get past the larger-than-life dental imagery in its opening sequence. The sequel a decade and a half after the original, "Psychonauts 2" is a triumph because it understands the wackiness and silliness inherent in run-and-jump video games, placing our hero in the sort of ridiculous scenarios that make sense only in games and animation. Soar on a giant letter around someone's cranium? Sure, why not? But it's through these exaggerations we see how fragile all of our minds can be.

3. 'SABLE' (XBOX CONSOLES, WINDOWS)

"Sable" handles two of the most stressful, existential questions any of us will ever have to deal with — who are we ... and what kind of person do we want to be — in the most relaxing, thoughtful manner possible. Set within a "Dune"-like desert landscape — only here there's no war — we hover around landscapes on a quest of discovery. Along the way we encounter others, many of whom have favors for us to compete, but here helping and talking to them is a way to better get to know our own character's desires. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll figure out what we want do with our lives. Or maybe we'll explore forever.

4. 'CHICORY: A COLORFUL TALE' (PLAYSTATION CONSOLES, WINDOWS, MAC)

On the surface, "Chicory" is an adventure game inspired by "The Legend of Zelda," in that we travel among forest towns and caves on a quest to heal the land. Black-and-white worlds become intricate coloring books — or messes of color, depending on your playstyle and, well, artistic sensibilities.

But it's also a game about believing in the power of one's own creativity, the surprise or astonishment that comes from an attempt to draw or paint, and the sometimes paralyzing stress of having to live up to others' expectations for ourselves. "Chicory" wants to communicate with the player, as interested in solving puzzles as it is raising questions.

5. 'UNPACKING' (WINDOWS, MAC, NINTENDO SWITCH, XBOX CONSOLES)

We're constantly building the story of our lives, an evolving narrative that we live amid and inside. This theme is explored in "Unpacking," a beautifully restrained and relaxing game that at its most basic is about the puzzle of organization. "Unpacking," though, is ultimately a story about growing up, with life's changes told through the items we own, the items we acquire and the ones we forever hold onto but keep just out of sight.

What makes it such a lovely game is that we never meet any human characters. We get a glimpse of passions — art, painting, reading, video game playing — and some hints at fears, such as the moment our unseen protagonist writes that it feels like a big step to move in with a significant other, but "Unpacking" allows us to let our imaginations wander.

6. 'LAST CALL' (WINDOWS)

"Last Call," an autobiographical game from Nina Freeman and Jake Jefferies, is described by the creators as a "poem exploration game." But what that really means is that it provides an opportunity to get inside someone's mind, in this case a young woman who is a survivor of domestic abuse on the verge of a move.

Like all of Freeman's vignette-style games, it's deeply personal, but what makes it powerful is that we must speak into our computer microphones to advance through the home, letting our protagonist know we've heard her and we're there for her. We may not fully relate to her experience, but forced to pause and vocalize our thoughts, we come to understand the emotional havoc that has transpired.

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Grooving along

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2021

BY GEORGE VARGA
THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

There can never be too much good music, but too much music may be another matter.

At the start of this century, before streaming took over and before YouTube and TikTok existed, about 30,000 albums were released annually. That totaled around 2,000 albums per month — each with an average of 10 to 12 songs — far more than any one person would have time to hear, let alone absorb.

In 2020, according to the Recording Academy — under whose auspices the Grammy Awards are presented — an average of 60,000 songs were released online, per day, and more than 20,000 albums and songs were submitted for Grammy nomination consideration.

Accordingly, I could easily come up with a different list each week of my favorite albums of the past year and still be just scratching the surface, just as I did in 2020. For 2021, these are my choices — at least for this week.



ALLEN J. SCHABEN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS

Rhiannon Giddens performs on the Mustang Stage on the first day of Stagecoach country music festival at the Empire Polo Fields in Indio, California, on April 28, 2017.

RHIANNON GIDDENS, WITH FRANCESCO TURRISI, "THEY'RE CALLING ME HOME" (NONESUCH)

In 2022, former Carolina Chocolate Drops singer, violinist and banjo player Rhiannon Giddens will become the first artist in history to perform the world premiere of an opera they composed, be featured at the Stagecoach country-music festival in Indio and do a tour showcasing music they wrote for a Nashville Ballet production.

This year, the golden-voiced Giddens and her partner, Italian-born multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi, released a captivating duo album, "They're Calling Me Home." It was recorded in their home studio in Dublin during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

A stunning mix of country, gospel, blues, Celtic and Italian folk and classical music traditions that sound fresh and vital, the dozen-song album seamlessly moves from genre to genre while breathing new life into all of them. It's difficult to imagine any other artists who can deliver such striking renditions of Monteverdi's 1632 madrigal "Si Dolce è'l Tormento," the 19th century spiritual "I Shall Not be Moved" and the early 20th century Appalachian country-blues lament "O Death," let alone make them sound so perfectly matched.

ROBERT PLANT AND ALISON KRAUSS, "RAISE THE ROOF" (ROUNDER)

The 14-year gap between former Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant and bluegrass queen Alison Krauss' first duo album in 2007 and the new "Raise the Roof" underscores the unhurried, often languid pace of their music. The vintage country, blues, folk and New Orleans R&B songs they perform here — by such varied artists as the Everly Brothers, Allen Toussaint and Merle Haggard — are as enchanting as the singularly beguiling vocal blend Plant and Krauss achieve.

SONS OF KEMET, "BLACK TO THE FUTURE" (IMPULSE!)

Led by English saxophone sensation Shabaka Hutchings, the tuba-anchored Sons of Kemet and an array of guest vocalists fuse calypso, jazz, funk, hip-hop, dub-reggae and trap. Their songs address oppression and liberation, individual struggle and collective triumph, with a winning combination of grit and grace, breathtaking agility and earthy conviction.

SIERRA FERRELL, "LONG TIME COMING" (FAT POSSUM)

West Virginia singer-songwriter Sierra Ferrell may not be the missing link between Patsy Cline, Linda Ronstadt, Maria Muldaur and Iris DeMent, but she bridges the years and stylistic links between them with admirable poise and earthy charm.

Ferrell is completely in her element whether singing gentle swing ("The Sea"), a perky mambo ("Why'd Ya Do It"), a ragtime-flavored ode ("At the End of the Rainbow"), a jaunty bluegrass song ("Silver Dollar"), a snappy calypso ("Far Away Across the Sea"), or a new country song that sounds wonderfully weathered ("West Virginia Waltz").

THE WEATHER STATION, "IGNORANCE" (FAT POSSUM)

The fifth album by Canada's Tamara Lindeman, who records as The Weather Station, addresses the perils of climate change in gently captivating songs that would likely earn smiles and approving nods from such kindred musical spirits as Joni Mitchell, Feist and Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks and Christine McVie.

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Tom Ellis, left, and Aimee Garcia in "Lucifer," one of the TV shows filming in California in 2021 under its tax incentive program, according to FilmLA.

JOHN P. FLEENOR/NETFLIX/TNS

How COVID changed TV

REPORT SHOWS LASTING IMPACT OF PANDEMIC

BY ANOUSHA SAKOUI
LOS ANGELES TIMES

LOS ANGELES — California remains the top locale for television productions industrywide, but the COVID-19 pandemic heavily disrupted the pipeline of new shows, according to a new report.

The state remained the most prolific of the major production centers, hosting 97 projects in the 2021 cycle, which ended May 31, according to an annual survey of the television industry by FilmLA, the nonprofit group that coordinates film permits for the region.

However, the pandemic paused or scuttled some programs that were not renewed, leading to an ongoing shortage of programming, the report concluded.

"Production is returning but the production pipeline logjam remains for the time being," the report stated.

The health crisis halted an estimated 198 U.S.-based English-language TV series between mid-March and mid-June 2020. Overall, 331 series were available for viewing in 2021, down 26.8% from the previous year, the report said.

Signs of a recovery emerged in the second quarter when TV drama production rose to pre-pandemic levels, with total shoot days totaling 1,501, up 120.7% over a five-year quarterly average.

Boosted by state tax incentives, California remained the leading location across all television platforms (cable, streaming and broadcast), followed by New York, Georgia and British Columbia.

The state — home to such shows as Netflix's "Lucifer" and "13 Reasons Why" — accounted for 27% of all streaming shows nationwide, with 41 productions. That was well ahead of Georgia and New York, which came in a distant second and third, respectively.

Among the top three filming destinations, however, California experienced the steepest year-over-year decline. The state's total of 97 series in 2021 was down 39% from the previous year. New York fell 32%, with 41 series. Georgia tied with British Columbia, which each attracted 39 shows. B.C. dropped 19%, while Georgia remained unchanged from the prior year.

One explanation was that the Peach State resumed filming earlier than many other states. The crisis shut down production in Georgia for just two months in the spring of 2020, versus three months for Los Angeles and most other film hubs.

Amid the upheaval, streaming has remained a leading form of TV viewing.

There were 177 shows on streaming platforms from mid-2019 to mid-2020, overtaking for the first time both the number of cable shows (164) and broadcast shows (111). The trend continued in the 2021 cycle, which produced 145 streaming shows, 103 cable shows and 83 broadcast programs.

Between 2011 and 2021, the number of streaming shows grew at an average annual rate of 35.4%. That was compared with 2.2% for broadcast series; the production of cable shows actually declined by an annual rate of 1.8%, according to the report.

Over the last decade the number of broadcast shows fell from 34% of available series in 2011 to 24% in 2021; cable series had an even steeper decline, dropping from 63% to 33%. Streaming platforms saw their share of series grow to 43% in 2021, up from just 3% in 2011.

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TELEVISION

from page A11

dale Academy on "Sex Education," played by Jemima Kirke. And it is the utter charm of the rest of the Netflix show that made the third season flourish, even with an almost unwatchable villain.

9. "INSIDE"

Everyone was sick of COVID shows by about February, and rightly so. We were already living it; why watch it on TV, too? The one exception to that rule was Bo Burnham's breathtaking comedy special "Inside," filmed entirely in isolation as we watch the comedian dissolve into himself. The songs were as profound as they were funny, filled with an aching despair that yearned back to Burnham's YouTube days, but with almost 15 years of self-reflection added to the mix. It's Burnham at his best, even when he's at his worst.

8. "WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS"

"What We Do in the Shadows" is one of those shows that you convince your friends to watch by just telling them to trust you. Now in its third season, it not only has earned that trust but continues to surpass itself when that seems impossible. Weird shows tend to burn out or drift toward the center in order to stay on the air. "What We Do in the Shadows" has no interest in meeting you in the middle, and the bizarre vampire comedy is better for it.

7. "WE ARE LADY PARTS"

Ignore the uncomfortable title and the girl boss vibes and all of a sudden you have a bold, brash, loud exploration of Muslim women living unashamed and unapologetic. The five British women who make up the punk rock band are looking for different things, come from different backgrounds and are in different places in their lives, but they all know they want — and deserve — something more. "We Are Lady Parts" wants more for its women, too, and with an aggressive, drum-heavy soundtrack, it's going to find it.

6. "MAID"

In a way, "Maid" is a success story. Single mom Alex (Margaret Qualley) gets out. She figures out food stamps and housing assistance. She skips meals and schleps around a vacuum to her housecleaning gigs. She beats a system built to help people that was broken by design. At its best, "Maid" tells of mothers and daughters. Of dreams of a better life for the next generation.

5. "TED LASSO"

The second season of "Ted Lasso" taught us two things: that no one knows how to watch weekly television anymore and that being nice isn't always enough. Our favorite mustachioed soccer coach's Pollyanna routine is a coping mechanism, an excuse to bury anything deeper than the mysteries of Coach Beard and to hide behind bad puns and a true and abiding love of Renee Zellweger.

"Ted Lasso" is still hilarious, of course. Sam Richardson's locker room meltdown and Brendan Hunt's hula hoop dance will haunt us forever. Roy Kent's entire tenure as a pundit could and should be taught in journalism classes around the world. But the heart was always the thing, and in the second season we finally got to see that heart break a little.

4. "BLINDSPOTTING"

Every year, one show swings bigger than the rest. In 2021, that was "Blindspotting," the spinoff sequel of the 2018 movie of the same name from "Hamilton" alum Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal. A star-making turn for Jasmine Cephas Jones as Ashley Rose, a suddenly single mom after her partner is sent to prison, was breathtaking, heartbreaking and stunning. Jones raps as she rages, then quiets, accepts, because she has to. Because she has a son to raise alone, to convince that everything is fine, to shield from reality.

3. "HACKS"

After "Watchmen" and "Mare of Easttown," the resurgence of Jean Smart came to a head with "Hacks," the unfairly hilarious and yet full of heart series about an aging comic and her up-and-coming hanger-on (Hannah Einbinder). "Hacks" magically balances two different worlds with a lightness and humor that comes from both Smart, a TV icon, and Einbinder, a newcomer to the small screen. Behind the laughs, though, is the despair of two women spit out on either end of their careers and the strength to fight for what they want.

2. "THE WHITE LOTUS"

Set against the gorgeous backdrop of a luxury Hawaiian resort, a cast of misfits descends on the island, dragging along literal and figurative baggage. At the show's core is a murder mystery, but that barely matters. Instead, the draw is its monstrous characters: the self-indulgent rich kid, the self-obsessed businesswoman and whoever Jennifer Coolidge was playing with her usual chaos and charm. They are in the self-made hell where they feel most comfortable, if only because it means they can complain constantly and do nothing about it. And showrunner Mike White's nimble touch means that we can hate every one of them yet still crave more.

1. "ONLY MURDERS IN THE BUILDING"

"Only Murders in the Building" did not have anything particularly revolutionary to say, nor did it change how we watch TV, but my goodness it was funny. A ridiculous true-crime podcast parody that actually understood the subject it was mocking? A delightful cast of Steve Martin and Martin Short, buoyed by a spectacular Selena Gomez who not only holds her own against two comedy legends but stands out? Martin lying upside down in an elevator in a bowler hat? What more could you ask for? "Only Murders in the Building" knew exactly what it wanted to do and it succeeded at exactly that. The murder mystery was merely a narrative device and the show knew that, too. Instead, everyone just stood back and let its leads flourish.

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Biden to address nation on Jan. 6 anniversary

BY DAVE GOLDINER
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

President Joe Biden plans to address the nation on Jan. 6 as the U.S. marks one year since the storming of the Capitol.

Without offering details, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that Biden would make some kind of speech to commemorate the deadly attack carried out by thousands of supporters of former President Donald Trump.

"It's safe to say the American people will hear from him on that day," Psaki said. "We'll have more to say as we get closer."

Biden's decision to address the nation sets up a dramatic direct conflict with Trump, who says he will hold a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida that day.

Congress plans a "solemn commemoration" and prayer vigil to remember the shocking attack, in which Trump supporters sought to block lawmakers from certifying Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election.

The mob, many of them members of white nationalist groups, marched on the Capitol after Trump urged them in a rally that morning to go there and "fight like hell" to overturn his election defeat.

The rioters overwhelmed outnumbered police and marauded for hours through the Capitol, hunting down perceived enemies including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence.

After initially tepidly opposing the attack, Trump supporters have since turned to cheerleading the attackers and downplaying the seriousness of the mob attack.

Trump now insists that the riot was nothing more than a peaceful protest to dramatize his claims of election fraud, for which he has failed to provide any evidence.

The ex-president says he'll tell reporters about new developments in his seemingly never-ending effort to cast doubt on Biden's win in several swing states, even though Republican election officials and judges have dismissed his claims out of hand.

Trump is increasingly feeling the heat from the congressional select committee investigating Jan. 6.

Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., an outspoken critic of Trump who broke ranks with the GOP to join the committee, has suggested the panel has uncovered evidence that he obstructed the work of Congress by planning and inciting the attack.

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BY ELLA CERON
BLOOMBERG NEWS

Hunger is rising this holiday season with the U.S. Census Bureau estimating more than 21 million Americans didn't have enough to eat in early December as pandemic relief payments run out and grocery prices rise.

Low-income families may soon face more pressure with monthly child tax credit payments ending and the Senate deadlocked on legislation to extend the program backed by President Joe Biden.

The number of households in which there was sometimes or often not enough to eat reached 9.7% this month, a five month high, according to data collected between December 1 and 13 by the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. That figure in households with children sunk from 11% to 7.8% in August, after the first child tax credit monthly payments went out.

Grocery prices in the U.S. are up 6.4% from a year earlier. Food banks are also seeing a rise in demand, and clinics meant to help malnourished and underfed children have seen an increase in patients.

The child tax credit payments serve as an advance on the tax return received by two-parent households making less than $150,000 per year. Parents receive $300 monthly for each child under the age of 6, and $250 per month for each child under 18. Households making more than that get a smaller credit. The majority of parents have reported using the mid-month cash infusions for food, according to Census Bureau surveys between July and September. Studies have found making the payments permanent could significantly reduce childhood poverty.

The last of the scheduled payments for the expanded child tax credit were sent out on Dec. 15. The Build Back Better Act includes language that would extend payments through 2022. The bill's status is up in the air, however, after Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, on Sunday said that he would not vote for it.

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Opportunity to expand broadband could change rural Texas

BY ALEX ROARTY
MCCLATCHY WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Texas is about to be on the receiving end of what experts say is the most expensive effort ever to give more people high-speed internet at home.

It's going to be a big test of all levels of government.

Federal and state officials are embarking on an ambitious partnership to bring broadband internet to all corners of the state, drawing from part of a $65 billion fund passed by Congress this fall as part of an infrastructure law signed by President Joe Biden.

Texas, according to experts, is likely to receive as much money for the expansion as any state, given its vast rural geography where high-speed internet is often the hardest to find. If done right, experts say it could transform the rural parts of the state, giving residents a chance to participate in the modern digital economy, visit doctors online, and even enjoy streaming home entertainment — an upgrade some liken in importance to rural electrification efforts nearly a century ago.

But the coming infusion of cash is also creating a massive logistical challenge for government officials expected to implement the plan, challenging their ability to coordinate with each other and stave off political feuds that could derail the project.

"If we blow it and other states blow it, if the nation doesn't do this right, this might be the only chance we have with this quantity of funds," said Robert Wood, who runs special projects at the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts and is deeply involved with the state's effort to expand broadband internet access.

Wood called the money earmarked for the expansion a "generational opportunity" but one that comes with a "multitude of challenges."

One group, Connected Nation Texas, estimates that about 820,000 Texans don't have access to high-speed internet. Those people are primarily concentrated in West Texas, the Panhandle, and parts of the Rio Grande Valley, the type of sparsely populated rural areas where internet service providers have determined broadband internet doesn't make economic sense for their companies.

Both in Texas and nationwide, the federal investment in expanding broadband is the "most significant funding push in U.S. history," said Tyler Cooper, the Dallas-based editor in chief of BroadbandNow, which covers the social and economic impact of broadband internet.

"I do anticipate there will be a lot of growing pains along the way," Cooper said. "But this could be transformative for a lot of those areas."

Commerce Department officials say they're pleased that Texas this year created a Broadband Development Office, which should lead all implementation and coordinating efforts within the state.

Texas was one of the few states in the nation that didn't have a comprehensive plan or agency designed to handle broadband expansion, Wood said.

But that office also has only one full-time employee right now, Wood added, with plans to bring on two additional employees in January. And it is still trying to process money allocated to it by another federal law, the American Rescue Plan signed in March, before even ramping up efforts to apply for grant money from the infrastructure law.

Wood says he's excited about the state's chance to expand broadband but is mindful of the pressure the state is under to get it right.

"One thing is, and it's not a criticism, but I think the thing that I worry a little bit about is that there's going to be a lot of pressure to get money out fast, and fast is not always good," Wood said. "Again, this is money we hope shapes our nation for the next however many decades."

Beyond the logistical challenges, some officials worry that politics could endanger the federal and state partnership.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott on Tuesday sent a letter to state agency leaders to "review all provisions" of the infrastructure law before applying for any grant money.

Democratic Rep. Colin Allred said the letter worried him, concerned it indicated the state wouldn't be as eager to apply for as much federal funding as it could or would be hesitant to promote programs like one designed to lower internet costs for low-income families.

"This is a program that really needs to be administered by the state," Allred said. "And for it to be successful, it's going to need full buy-in from the state."

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No puppy for Christmas: Pet scams proliferate

BY TNS NEWSFEATURES
STATELINE.ORG

The puppy was supposed to be a Christmas present for her husband, Bryan.

But after Lauren Case, a registered nurse from Warren, Arkansas, plunked down $850 via a cash app for a cute teacup Yorkie named Rosy she saw online, she began to get suspicious.

She had paid an initial $600 by Zelle, a payment app she had never used before but that her bank confirmed as legitimate. But then the supposed breeder asked for another $250 for a "nanny" to carry the dog to her on an airplane. Finally, Case put the website address into a search engine and found lots of complaints.

"It was something I really wanted, so I ignored the little voice in my head," she said, kicking herself for sending money before doing the checking.

There will be no puppy in the Case household this Christmas.

Despite numerous pleas, Case never got the Yorkie or her money back. The website then disappeared, Case said, only to pop up later with the same puppy pictures.

In retrospect, she said, there were warning signs. There was no phone number and several of the words on the site were misspelled.

"You don't think someone's going to screw you over, but they do," she said in a phone interview.

Case has filed a complaint with the Arkansas Attorney General's Office, which is looking into the allegations. Similar complaints have skyrocketed across the country, boosted in part by more people looking to adopt pets during the pandemic. Attorneys general in numerous states have launched investigations, filed lawsuits and issued warnings about the pet fraud.



DREAMSTIME/TNS

Online pet scams have surged with the proliferation of adoptions during the pandemic.

In the first year of the pandemic, pet adoptions soared, according to the American Pet Products Association, with ownership rising in 2020 to 70% of American households, an all-time high.

But the pet frenzy also created a shortage, giving scammers a bigger opening in which to work. Pet scams "more than doubled last year and are on pace to be pretty much the same this year," said Steve Baker, international investigation specialist for the Better Business Bureau, which has a scam tracker for bogus pet sites. "It really, really took off during the pandemic.

"I don't think it's possible to search online for puppies and not come across a scam," he said in a phone interview.

The scammers often pattern their sites after legitimate puppy companies, using the same fonts and sometimes even the same pictures and descriptions, but altering the pictures just slightly — by adding a holiday bow or Santa hat at this time of year, for example.

The Better Business Bureau said online shopping scam reports to its BBB Scam Tracker — for scams of all types — skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, people lodged 1,515 pet scam complaints with losses of $1 million. In 2020 that rose to 4,552 complaints with losses of $3.3 million. Pet scams made up 34.5% of all the online shopping scams reported to the bureau.

The number of pet scams remains high this year. In the first nine months of 2021, there were 3,116 reports with losses of $2.4 million.

The BBB says pet scammers usually don't allow the buyer to meet the animal in person. Scammers also typically require the buyer to use some kind of "pet delivery" service, with charges tacked on for extras, such as delivering the pet to the buyer, a special crate for transportation or even some kind of COVID-19 protection shot (which doesn't exist for dogs) once the buyer has made an initial payment.

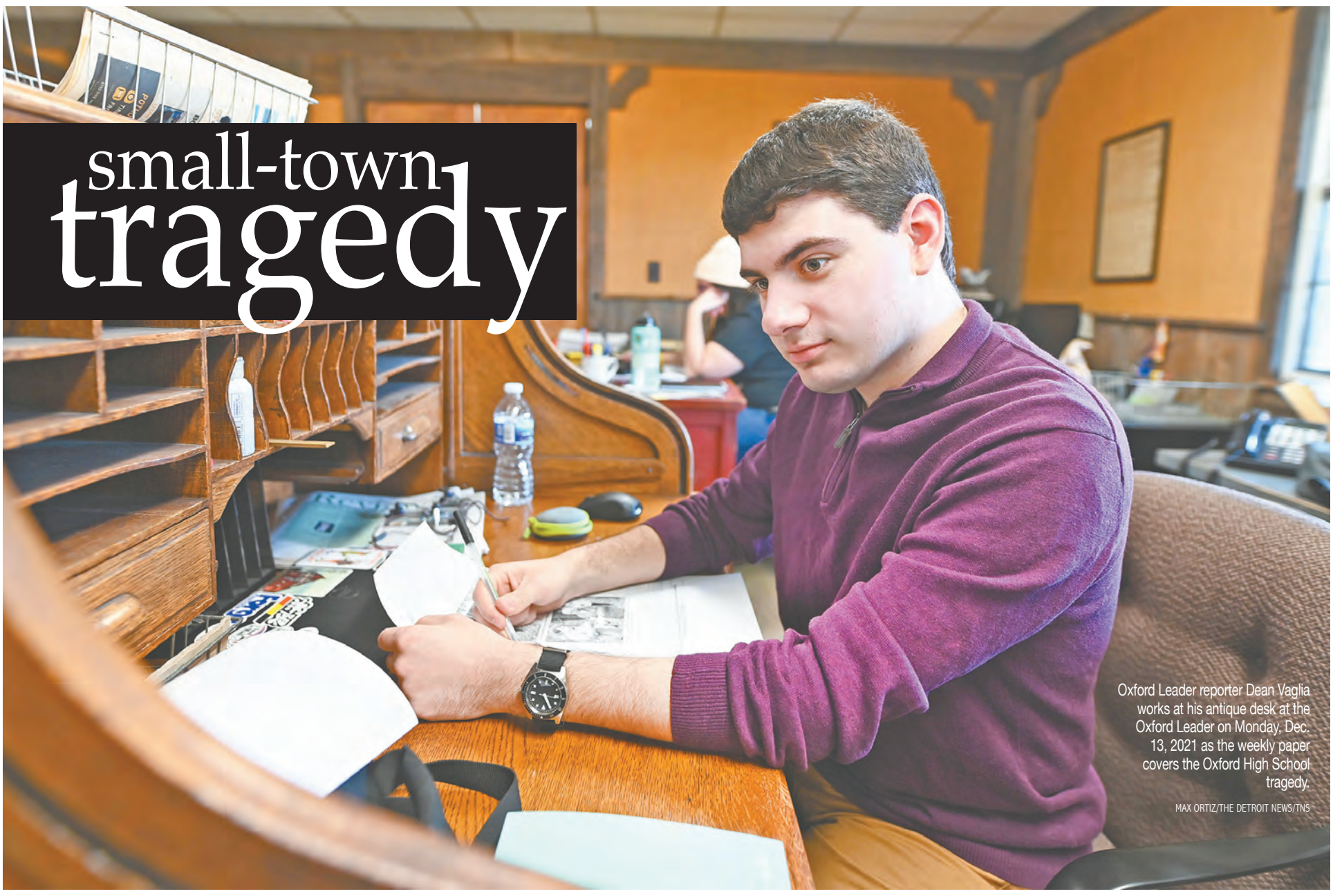
Younger people were more likely to be scammed in 2020, with 51% of them under age 44, and the average financial loss reported to the BBB Scam Tracker was $722.

While 82% of pet scam reports involved dogs, the BBB said, other animals included cats, birds and iguanas.

The scams have hurt genuine internet pet sites. Courtney Dean, social engagement director for pawrade.com, a legitimate site, said people are staying away from online pet purveyors because they are fearful.

"People automatically assume when they see us, that we are one of 'them,'" she said in a phone interview. "All day long, I'm defending our service."

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Oxford Leader reporter Dean Vaglia works at his antique desk at the Oxford Leader on Monday, Dec. 13, 2021 as the weekly paper covers the Oxford High School tragedy.

MAX ORTIZ/THE DETROIT NEWS/TNS

Oxford newspaper treads lightly as it covers mass shooting

BY FRANCIS X. DONNELLY
THE DETROIT NEWS

OXFORD, Mich. — Under different circumstances, reporter James Hanlon would have attended the Soup & Sweet Stroll on Dec. 3, bantering with residents as they visited downtown restaurants before the lighting of the village Christmas tree.

Instead, he went to a vigil for a tragedy so horrific it swamped downtown with mourners.

Hanlon, who would have been welcomed at the former, wasn't wanted at the latter.

His job was to bear witness at a time the town craved privacy. Four students at Oxford High School were fatally shot and seven other people wounded a few days earlier. A fellow student was charged in the shooting.

Journalists began showing up in the small community. Most were mindful of the sadness surrounding them as they described the horrific event and its aftermath.

For Hanlon, the balancing act of covering a tragedy is especially precarious because he works for the local newspaper, the Oxford Leader.

His relationship with the town is more intimate than the relations of other press. The victims weren't strangers. Most had appeared in the weekly paper for academic or athletic exploits.

The Leader has always been equal parts civic chronicler and local supporter. With the mass shooting, however, it changed from booster to interloper. After a death in the family, the family had turned against it.

"We definitely give people their space," Hanlon said. "We respect their privacy as much as we can."

Hanlon, 29, one of two reporters at the Leader, joined the paper two years ago. It's his first job in journalism.

He covers many beats but none bigger than education. The schools account for half the stories in the paper, he said. One of the Leader's goals is to get every single student into the paper before he or she graduates.

Hanlon has made several dozen visits to the high school, with its towering glass façade and blue football field.

Several weeks before the shooting, he watched a dress rehearsal by the theater department. Kids were staging a play about a 1940s' radio broadcast of "It's a Wonderful Life."

Hanlon also has written about students away from school. In July, he interviewed Kylie Ossege, who was injured in the shooting. The story described how she competed at equestrian events at the Oakland County Fair.

Learning that Ossege was one of the victims made the tragedy more personal.

"It made it that much more real, that much closer to home," Hanlon said.

On Nov. 30, Dean Vaglia, the paper's other reporter, interviewed the village police chief about a gas station charged with selling liquor to minors.

He then went home to let his Schnoodle puppy out and heat up a cup of macaroni and cheese. He planned to cover a high school basketball game that night.

At 1:04 p.m., he received a text from his editor saying a fleet of police cars and ambulances had just raced past the newspaper office on Michigan Highway 24. Someone on social media counted 14 vehicles. The editor didn't know where they were going or why.

The most police cars Vaglia said he ever saw at an incident were three. He ran upstairs to swap the cameras in his bag before flying out the door.

Vaglia, 22, who graduated from Oakland University in April, had been a reporter for five months.

"This is the biggest story that will ever happen to us. I can't see a bigger one," he said.

One reason journalists cover tragedy is for the story behind it. Reporting helps people understand why the events occurred and, maybe, how they could be preventedin the future. It also could bolster financial and other support for the victims.

But Oxford and its 3,600 residents aren't preoccupied with journalistic ideals. They are hurting and protective of their neighbors. The town nicknamed the Gravel Capital of the World is in rubble.

Some residents were upset that news cameras were at a vigil in nearby Lake Orion even though they were allowed by the church hosting the event. Others were angry with TV reporters using the school as a backdrop while filing live reports.

Don Rush, assistant publisher, Sherman Publications and the Oxford Leader, works on the layout of the Oxford Leader from his office. He said he went into one shop to protest the posting of a "Media Free Zone" sign. "As a local business, I hope we're still welcome," Rush said.

Six days after the shooting, Don Rush, assistant publisher of the Leader, went downtown to get a cup of coffee.

The windows of nearly every shop had signs that read "Pray for Oxford" or "Proud to be Oxford Strong." A Christmas tree in the small downtown park turned into a memorial. Beneath the tree weren't presents but flowers.

Outside a coffee shop, Rush spotted a sign entitled "Media Free Zone." It said any journalist who entered the shop would be charged with trespassing and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

The nonplussed journalist walked into the shop. He told the merchant that among the press she was prohibiting was the local newspaper.

"I understand the perception of the media, but I took it personally," Rush told The Detroit News. "As a local business, I hope we're still welcome."

Rush, 58, also has read comments on social media where people described how they had told journalists they weren't welcomed. He said the anger is part of the grieving process but, still, it stung.

In the days after the shooting, his phone hummed steadily with calls and texts. People wanted to know how they could help. Organizations asked him to spread the word about their fundraising efforts.

The newspaper, whose circulation is 1,600, has been around a lot longer than Rush. Founded in 1898, it has been a stolid citizen of Oxford for 123 years.

Every fall, it dutifully reported about the Scarecrow Festival. In the summer, it wrote about the Lone Ranger Parade and Festival.

Rush described it thusly in a column last year:

"One hundred and twenty-two years of births and deaths, jubilant celebrations and tragic events, love and loss, sorrows and the joy shared by families and businesses who have come and gone."

On the day after the shooting, the Leader held its weekly planning meeting, where staff discussed what it would report during the following week.

Outside the corrugated steel building was a lawn sign exhorting the high school football team: "Wildcat Pride/ The Leader/ Go Cats."

Rush, who has been the editor since the last one left two years ago, told his two young reporters what he expected from them.

After all the other journalists leave town, the Leader will still be here, he said. The paper needed to cover the tragedy with compassion, empathy and respect.

Part of the paper's responsibility is to help the community heal, move forward, he said.

"Everyone is on edge. Everyone is still holding their breath," Rush told The News. "We just have to be a little more caring."

A week later, a hearse bringing the body of one of the shooting victims to a funeral home was escorted by seven police vehicles with their lights flashing. A Leader photographer snapped a photo as the procession passed the newspaper office.

The victim's family didn't mind media coverage, but Rush didn't run the photo. He didn't see the point.

"What purpose would that serve our readers? It might be too much," he said. "But I've seen funeral services online and the procession on TV, so I don't know."

"They aren't necessarily looking to relive the moment," Vaglia said about students and teachers. "They want to get past it. They and everyone else want to get back to normal. Ultimately, we need to give them space to grieve, find whatever normalcy they can."

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Some states have yet to spend any federal COVID relief aid

BY BRYAN LOWRY AND JEANNE KUANG
MCCLATCHY WASHINGTON BUREAU



CHUCK MYERS/TNS

WASHINGTON — Eight states have yet to authorize spending any of the billions of dollars in federal aid they received under President Joe Biden's COVID-19 relief plan earlier this year, according to a think tank analysis.

States have until 2024 to spend their portion of the $350 billion in federal aid distributed to state and local governments as part of Biden's American Rescue Plan. The aid to states and local governments made up roughly a sixth of the $2 trillion relief package approved by Congress in March, one of Biden's biggest legislative victories.

Many states have steered those funds toward replacing lost revenue or economic relief programs, but a handful of mostly Republican states will head into the new year without having spent a dollar from the program. The eight states cumulatively represent roughly $16.5 billion in unspent aid.

GOP-controlled governments in Missouri, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota have yet to budget their funds, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which has tracked state use of the federal aid.

Rhode Island, the only Democratic-controlled state yet to budget the funds, is expected to approve a plan in early January when its legislature reconvenes.

In contrast, Missouri Republican Gov. Mike Parson's office told The Kansas City Star that he won't fully lay out his plan for the funds until he delivers his annual State of the State address in January.

When Missouri received its first tranche of its $2.7 billion in federal aid in May as its legislative session was winding down, Parson said his administration would deliberate on long-term uses for the money to roll out the following year.

A White House official said the law gives states multiple years to spend the money by design.

"First, the State and Local Program was designed for short term and long-term recovery support, including helping localities as new variants of COVID-19 emerge. The law allows funds to be obligated through 2024," a White House official told McClatchy this month as the omicron variant began rapidly spreading throughout the country.

Policymakers in Missouri and other states that have been slow to spend the funds are expecting to use some of the money for one-time investments in infrastructure rather than short-term economic relief or COVID-19 response.

Parson has suggested spending $400 million toward increasing broadband access across the state. Another likely use is helping local governments make improvements on wastewater, stormwater and drinking water utilities, according to lawmakers.

Missouri state Rep. Doug Richey, an Excelsior Springs Republican who chairs a committee that will weigh spending proposals, said he expects another major expenditure to be a nearly $120 million overhaul of the state's aging IT system. He said lawmakers want to avoid setting up programs that will require future obligations by the state.

"We're looking at one-time appropriations," he said.

South Carolina Republican Gov. Henry McMaster's office pointed to the state's legislature when asked about plans for the state's roughly $2.5 billion in federal aid which remains unspent.

"The General Assembly is ultimately responsible for allocating the funds and they're expected to do so when they come back for regular session in January," Brian Symmes, a spokesman for the governor, said.

This month, the Biden administration has made suggestions to states about how to use the unspent funds. For example, Biden directed the Treasury Department last week to clarify to states that they can use the funds to replace lead pipes in drinking water systems.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona also issued a letter encouraging states to use the funds to help fill school staff shortages "to ensure that students have access to the teachers and other critical staff they need to support their success during this critical period."

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