

A disservice to taxpayers

Inappropriate for Goose Creek to keep discussions of public business a secret

The Texas Attorney General has correctly ruled Goose Creek was wrong to withhold the names of committee members charged with assessing the need to change the name of Robert E. Lee High School and other schools in the district.

As you recall, the Facilities Names Committee was created after a 4-3 school board vote not to change the name of Lee after weeks of highly charged public debate.

But withholding the names was only the tip of the iceberg. The district made 40-plus volunteers sign silly, non-binding secrecy pacts. The district edited audio recordings of two-hour meetings down to 30 minutes and released that to the public and patted themselves on the back for being transparent.

Moreover, the school district said it would not even provide transcripts of the meetings to the public or board members.

So what was accomplished here? Other than researching the cost of changing school names (and what is the cost of doing the right thing anyway?), next to nothing.

We've said it before, and we'll say it again. Government belongs to the people. And when it comes to records and meetings, government — and in this case Goose Creek — is supposed to act on the presumption of openness.

It is wholly inappropriate for Goose Creek to force volunteers to discuss community business in secret instead of choosing the path of transparency.

The panel's final report will be unveiled at Monday's school board meeting. This report, they say, will include committee outcomes, survey data and recommendations, but, in truth, it will be information distilled by district administrators and only what they think is appropriate for the public.

District honchos think they know what's best for taxpayers and parents because we apparently cannot handle the truth.

Regardless of what is stated in the report, it's inarguable the district should have been infinitely more open and communicative with families and taxpayers on a topic of such tremendous importance for much of the community.

Maybe the district is embarrassed by the racially tinged, even offensive statements made by some members, and wants to protect them.

Here's an example of what the district is hiding. After a January meeting, the facilitator, Alton Frailey, a well-known and widely respected Texas administrator, abruptly resigned and refused payment for his undoubtedly expensive services.

We asked why. The district said "personal reasons."

It was clear early on, that was not the case. In truth, he resigned after a school board member's wife — who somehow got named to the panel — went on a racist tirade against "Blacks," according to members of the committee.

Brenda Clem and her husband, Goose Creek Trustee Richard Clem, both longtime district teachers, declined to comment on her statement.

According to people present, Brenda Clem's comment went something like this: If you Blacks don't want people to ... then stop committing crimes, stop being on the news. It was a familiar, cruel racist trope.

"Our jaws dropped," said one panel member. Another called it outrageous and hurtful, and a dagger to the process.

Clem sent a resignation letter to the next meeting but did not apologize, committee members said. Clem's rant apparently was the last straw for Frailey, who put Goose Creek in his rear view mirror as fast as he could.

To us, it is in the community's best interest to know that the wife of a board member was appointed to this secret panel and made racist comments. We're sure the people Mr. Clem represents think so too.

Ultimately, the public cannot effectively participate if it is not allowed to hear discussions — even hateful ones — about policy matters such as renaming a nearly century-old school named after a slaveholder and defender of that practice.

The district's clandestine actions on this front have been a disservice to the people of Baytown and Highlands.

Goose Creek administrators work for the public not themselves. They should remember this fact next time they consider slipping behind closed doors to do the district's business.

—David Bloom

One crisis will make you forget about another

One crisis will make you forget about another. This past week, the arctic tundra visited Texas, and thanks to poor leadership and bad weatherization, most of the state was (and some still are) without power, i.e., heat, and water.

Our family friends who had power the whole time, offered their home to us. As any parent knows, sleeping in cold temperatures with a baby in the house is tricky. We never co-slept with him, so we didn't feel comfortable starting now, and the thought of his small body, cold, in his crib created a deafening worry. We have a fireplace in our bedroom, but with the flicker of the flames and its inability to truly warm a room, we knew it wasn't the best option. We could have made do, just as many families did, but when we got the offer to stay somewhere with heat, we forgot about social distancing and braved the icy roads.

2020, and now 2021, has been one crisis after another. What with an unstable president (Trump), a crippling pandemic, and a political divide that seems to get wider every time it has the option, I find myself asking, what gives?

After the birth of my daughter (who just turned 5!) I struggled with



JUSTA LANIE GARRETT

the transition into motherhood. I remember feeling I was being tamed, like a wild horse, as all my life's insecurities and weaknesses came to a forefront and made me question everything. And yet, in the mess of it all, I felt it was somehow preparing me for the future. Maybe this was it. Or maybe something even worse.

There are times in history, times of reinvention and turmoil and grief that bring generations, traumatized and changed, into the following years. After the Great Depression, people held onto things, even the smallest leftovers because they knew what it was like to be without. After WWII, traditional roles took precedent and families easily owned their own homes to create a sense of normalcy.

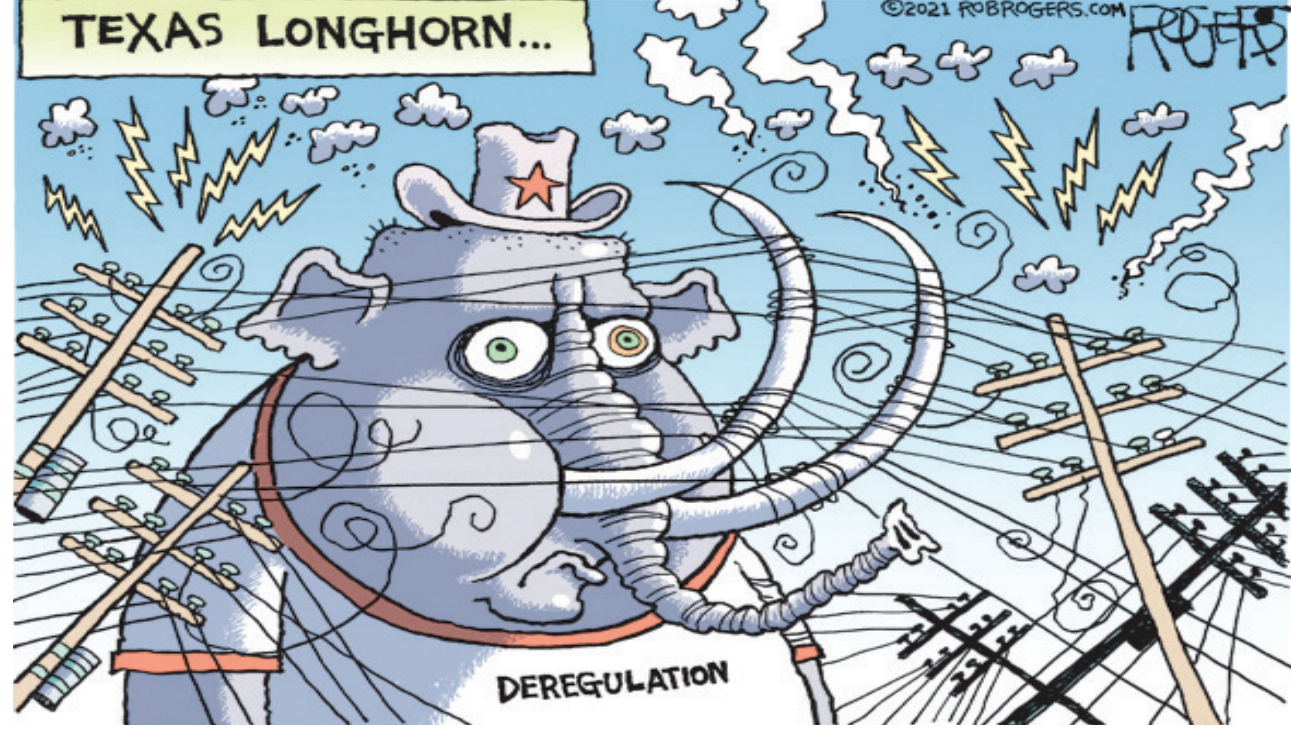
Maybe this is our Depression. Maybe this is our WWII. If so, what societal changes will we carry and try to push onto future generations? What new neuroses will we have to overcome?

Once we returned home, like most, we had to get creative with how we would get water, not only for consumption but to flush toilets. While my husband had to go to work, I was outside collecting snow melt draining from our gutters. As my son took a nap, my daughter and I bundled up, and I made a game out of collecting snow into buckets so we could flush, and she could get some fresh air. Surviving can be inspiring. We all became our own versions of Bear Grylls.

Despite this crisis, we still had our good, vindictive friend, COVID lurking in the shadows. I read a hopeful article from The Atlantic, titled "When Will Life Be 'Normal' Again, Post-Pandemic?" which proposed a reasonable timeline of how we will get to our new normal. Like the dead grass that is my front lawn, that is all our front lawns, we still have a lot of work to do. But our future will eventually break through, like new growth, green and promising. For now, it feels there's a lot of catching up to do.

I can't help but wonder what our next crisis will be.

Justa Lanie Garrett is a lifelong resident of Baytown.



Several items, including a truly sad note

A few things. **THING NO. 1:** Let's get the sad news out of the way first.

You know how shocked you are when, out of the blue, you learn about the unexpected death of someone you admired and had known for a great number of years? I have wrestled with just such a situation since I learned of the passing of Dr. Robert Tausend, my outstanding dermatologist since, like, 1992.

Now, I only saw Dr. Tausend, or Robert as he allowed me to call him, a couple of times a year at his Pasadena office. But we built up a friendship over the years, mainly because we shared the same political views.

We had many a political conversation over those 29 seasons as he "electrocuted" ugly looking spots off of my muscular body. We stopped short of high-fiving, mainly because he had that take-no-prisoners "zap pistol" in his hand.

My last visit was just a few months ago. He was his usual friendly self, although the visit was a pretty quick one since I had only a few pimple-like spots on my bod.

When he finished torching my little bumps, I ask him when he wanted to see me again. "See you in six months," he said as he walked out the door.

That will always be my last memory of him.

I learned of his passing when my niece, Ashley Whitaker, went for a checkup. It was hard to comprehend. It has bugged the heck out of me. I can't shake it.

THING NO. 2: I feel guilty about the hellish weather we endured last

week. I almost feel responsible.

You may recall that in a Jan. 9 column predicting the future for 2021, I typed that it would snow not once but twice this year. That prediction came true. I wish it hadn't.

In my 60-plus-plus years, I've never experienced anything like the Winter Marauder we experienced.

As has been announced, millions of homes throughout Texas lost power. Many lost water. Many lost both. At our fashionable home in the highly religious neighborhood along St. Andrews Drive, we went powerless for more than 50 hours. Later, we turned off our water because of leaks. Fortunately, our son Scott called as the bigshot blast was headed our way. Worried about his elderly parents, he invited us to stay with him, daughter-in-law Jackie, and grandson Devin. They live on the east side of town, and are equipped with a ready-to-go generator. Thankfully, His call came just after we lost power about 8:15 a.m. on that Monday. He called again about an hour later.

We still weren't ready to pack up and move to his home on Winterhaven. Surely the lights would come back on soon.

Nope. **(NON-EDITOR'S NOTE:** I'm thinking "Winterhaven" was certainly an appropriate street name during the storm.)



JIM FINLEY

On this date: In 1784, John Wesley, the co-founder of Methodism, chartered the first Methodist Church in the United States in Leesburg, Virginia.

In 1844, a 12-inch gun aboard the USS Princeton exploded as the ship

rush began in earnest as regular steamship service started bringing gold-seekers to San Francisco.

In 1953, scientists James D. Watson and Francis H.C. Crick announced they had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA.

Finally, as the temperature plunged in our dark house, we called and told Jackie we would rent a room. They picked us up.

We ended up spending three nights, and thank heaven for the generator because we lost power several times.

We were well taken care of. Of course, we haven't seen our bill yet.

I won't be predicting more snow anytime soon.

THING NO. 3: When we first saw the letter, we immediately started dreaming about vacations, new cars, a new pair of Wranglers, etc. Times they were a looking up.

The letter was from the Teacher Retirement System, known as TRS to us insiders. Wife Margie's monthly check would be increasing.

My beautiful bride spent more than a quarter-century as a first-team secretary at Horace Mann Junior when it was located on Pruett Street. Her top-notch secretarial teammates were Lou Ann Barth and Sue Stephenson, and they remain great friends almost 50 years later.

Now comes a reward for that work, right? Wait. Then we looked closer. How much of a monthly increase would she receive?

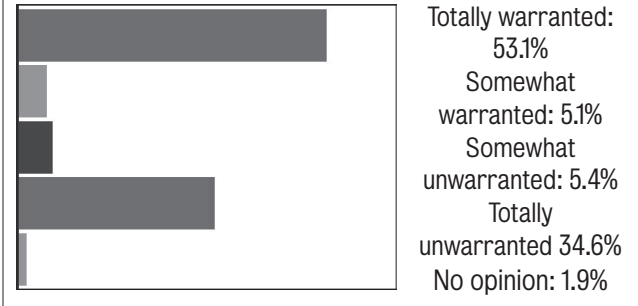
\$1.20, or \$14.40 per year, if my math is correct.

Forget vacations, forget the Wranglers. But we're not complaining. We need the money.

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Baytown Sun Weekly Survey

Last week, Baytown Sun readers were asked "Do you think the criticism that Sen. Ted Cruz has received for flying to Cancun during Texas's current severe winter weather is warranted or unwarranted?"



This week's question: "Do you support full casino gambling in Texas?" Respond at www.baytownsun.com

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