

BURN BAN IN EFFECT, NO GROUND FIRES
by order of Presidio County

Mobile testing returns to Big Bend

TRI-COUNTY — As coronavirus case-counts pick up in the region, local officials have announced that the Texas National Guard is returning with more testing, including with stops in Marfa, Presidio, Alpine, Fort Davis and Terlingua.

Anyone interested in being tested can register online at TXCovidTest.org or by calling 512-883-2400. People do not need to have experienced symptoms to receive testing, though health officials at the sites will ask people about whether they’ve experienced coronavirus symptoms.

The locations of all testing sites will remain the same, with testing available from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Alpine will have testing next Tuesday, June 23, at the North Brewster County Emergency Response Center at 102 South 2nd Street in Alpine.

Next Friday, June 26, Marfa will have testing at the Marfa Visitor Center at 302 South Highland Avenue. The City of Presidio will have testing the next day: Saturday, June 27, at the City of Presidio EMS and fire station on 100 East FM 170.

On Sunday, June 28, Fort Davis residents can receive testing at the Fort Davis Volunteer Fire Department building at 202 Court Avenue, right next to the Jeff Davis County courthouse.

Finally, Monday, on June 29, Terlingua will have testing at the South Brewster County Emergency Response Center at 23250 FM 170.

Again, residents do not need symptoms to be tested. Locations and hours for the testing sites remain the same.

Rural radio stations to air Census 2020 program

The Rio Grande Council of Governments (RGCOG), has been busy promoting the importance of completing the 2020 Census. Their “Get Out the Count” Coordinator, Peggy O’Brien has scheduled two rural radio shows next Wednesday, June 24th on Alpine Radio and with Valentine Radio’s internet broadcast.

There will be featured interviews with community leaders and an opportunity for listeners to call-in to complete the 2020 Census and become eligible for prizes. The shows will air on Alpine Radio at KVLF-1240 AM + 92.7FM from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and on Valentine Radio online at valentineradio.net from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

The radio programs will help listeners learn about the importance of the Census and the impacts on rural communities.

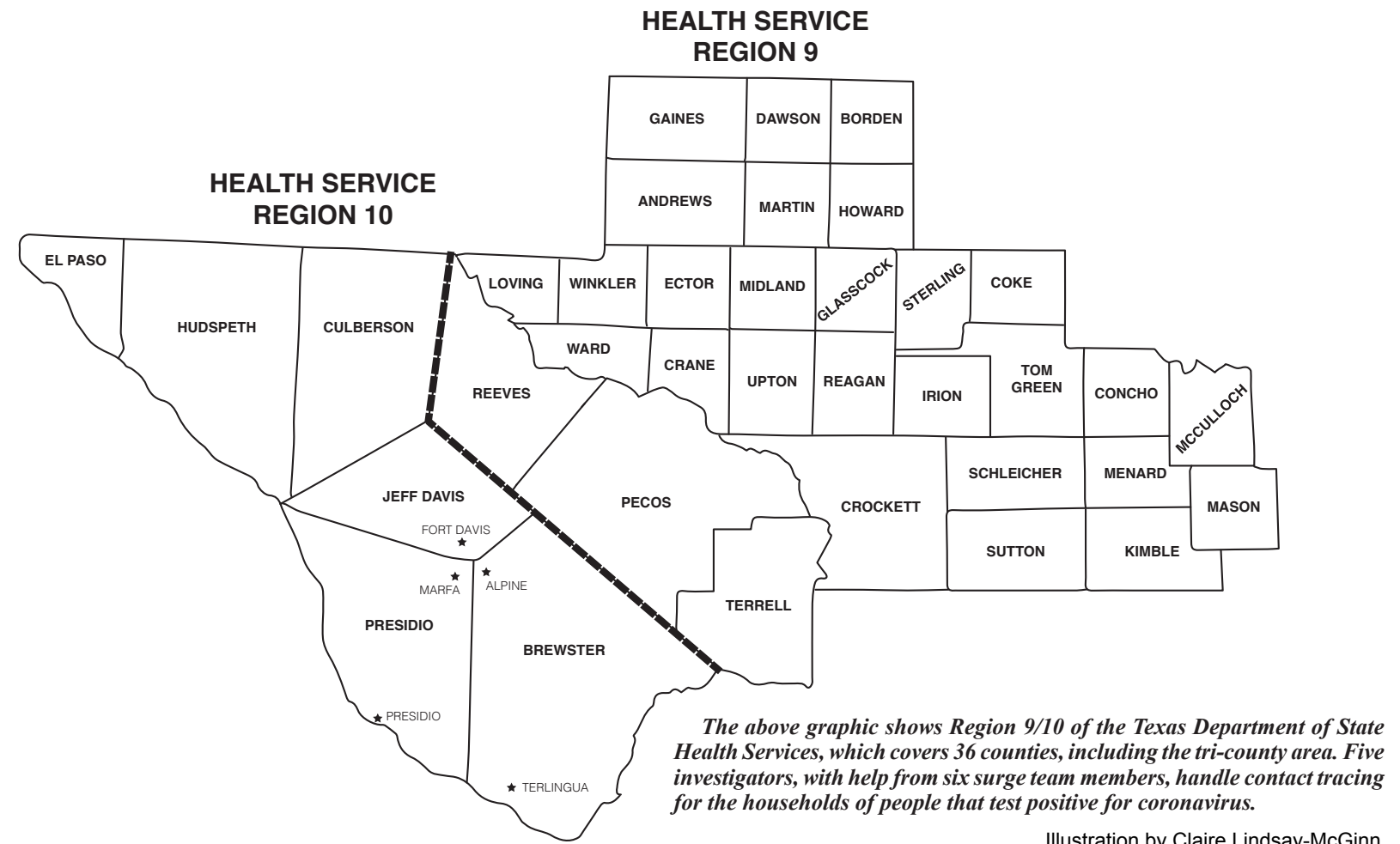
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The West Texan Media Group, LLC



Cases climb in tri-county as contact tracing overwhelms state and officials warn of spread



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TRI-COUNTY — Coronavirus is gaining a foothold in the tri-county region, with officials in both Presidio and Brewster counties warning of community spread as local case-counts reach nine active and one recovered in Presidio County and 21 active and one recovered in Brewster County. At press time, Jeff Davis County is still at zero cases.

Coronavirus has been in the region since April, when Brewster County reported its first confirmed case. But for the first time, officials

are seeing cases with no clear origin and are assuming community spread — meaning residents could pick up the disease not just with trips to El Paso and beyond, but with outings in the local community. And with the growing case-counts, it has fallen to the regional state health department to track the spread in West Texas.

“Five investigators in our region are working full time to do the contact tracing,” Presidio County Judge Cinderela Guevara said Wednesday. “The investigators are medical personnel, and they are bogged down and have the whole region to take care of.”

“Our region includes areas that have nursing homes, and quite frankly their priority is going to be the nursing homes because of how vulnerable those people are,” said Guevara.

Pecos County officials baffled by up-and-down case counts

By **STEPHEN PAULSEN**
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FORT STOCKTON — When it comes to coronavirus case-counts in Pecos County, state health officials have some explaining to do.

Earlier this month, *The Big Bend Sentinel* reported that coronavirus outbreaks at two Pecos County prisons — the state’s N5 and Lynaugh units — were driving accelerating case-counts in the region. And perhaps unsurprisingly, those numbers continued to climb in the ensuing days, last Monday hitting 105 cases.

Then, last Tuesday, something highly unusual happened: The number dropped precipitously, from 105 to 15.

The next day, the numbers continued their wild up-and-down trajectory, settling at 107 cases. The number didn’t change for days. By press time it had risen slightly, to 112.

Since the Texas Department of State Health Services tracks total cases and not just active ones, it’s almost impossible to imagine how the number could fall. After all, outbreaks are an

addition problem — not a subtraction one.

The Texas Department of State Health Services, which has responded to almost none of *The Big Bend Sentinel*’s questions since the coronavirus outbreak began, did not return calls or emails requesting more information on these Pecos County numbers. The state’s regional health authority, Region 9/10, declined to comment, instead referring questions to the main Austin office of the Texas DSHS.

Local officials are baffled. “Where did they get this number?” Pecos County Judge Joe Shuster asked in an interview. “We never dropped down to 15.”

For a time, one explanation seemed likely: perhaps the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which runs state prisons, decided to remove its number from county case-counts? After all, Jeremy Desel, director of communications for the agency, had previously expressed concern that some TDCJ numbers were being double-counted — for instance, if a prison employee was tested both at a prison and off-site. He felt the prison system was being unfairly criticized for

A map of Region 9/10 of the Department of State Health Services shows the tri-county is grouped into a region with 36 counties, that cover El Paso, Midland-Odessa and other rural areas in West Texas like Crane, where a recent outbreak in a nursing home is driving case increases.

The five core investigators are currently assisted by six surge team members to contact households of people who test positive in Region 9/10. All others potentially exposed to those who tested positive are now put through the state’s new online program, where tracers from across the state are assigned to contact people.

In a report from April laying out Texas’ “reopening” plans, state officials said they planned to coordinate with local health officials

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issues with Texas coronavirus tracking, which is the responsibility of DSHS, not TDCJ.

TDCJ’s frustration is understandable. While Texas DSHS continues to have the seventh-worst per capita testing rate in the nation, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, TDCJ has instead spent weeks “deploying significant testing,” including on asymptomatic patients, according to a May news release from the agency.

At press time, the TDCJ has tested over 107,000 people, including both prisoners and guards. Compare that to its total estimated prison population of around 131,000 inmates, according to data compiled by *The Texas Tribune*.

“We’ve been testing almost 100 percent of everyone in every unit,” a TDCJ spokesperson said.

But that explanation now seems unlikely for a few reasons. For one, TDCJ denies it’s made any changes to how it reports prison coronavirus numbers to the state.

“Not on your life,” a TDCJ spokesperson said when asked about the purported changes.

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Trial delayed in case involving child sex abuse website

By **STEPHEN PAULSEN**
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TERLINGUA — Tom Arthur’s trial has been pushed back to October as federal authorities, for at least the second time, have said they need more time to prepare their case.

Arthur, a resident of the Terlingua area, was arrested last year after the FBI in November conducted a raid on his Brewster County compound. Authorities later charged Arthur with three offenses: importation or transportation of obscene matters, engaging in the business of selling or transferring obscene matters, and obscene visual representations of the sexual abuse of children. Arthur has been awaiting trial in detention ever since.

In court filings and hearings, authorities offered more context for the arrest. They accuse Arthur of running a subscription-based website focused on text-based child abuse erotica, which they say was netting him between \$10,000 and \$14,000 per month along with another adult erotica website.

The case has proved complicated for a few reasons. While federal law clearly bars child pornography or visual depictions of it, the laws around similar text-based content are more convoluted.

In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “virtual child pornography is not ‘intrinsically related’ to the sexual abuse of children.” Congress responded the next year by restricting drawings, cartoons, sculptures and paintings that depict “a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct.”

While most of the federal case against Arthur focuses on text-based content, authorities have also said there was at least one obscene drawing on Arthur’s site. But that drawing was reportedly done by a website user, not Arthur — and while Arthur admitted to running the website, he insisted that any such drawings were “art,” according to court filings.

Arthur’s lawyer, Mark Bennett, has dug into these complex and shifting rules on obscene content to argue that the case against Arthur is baseless.

“Federal law does not even purport to forbid

the mere possession of *text* obscenity, whether in the home or out,” he argued in a filing from April. He also made a number of similar arguments, including arguing that rules on visual representations of child sex abuse are “void under the First Amendment.” He also argues that, since Arthur’s website contained content that was “allegedly obscene, but not child pornography,” it is “Congress’s job” to impose rules on it, not prosecutors.

The case isn’t just complex for legal reasons, though. Authorities have also run into logistical challenges as they comb through evidence seized from Arthur’s property and attempt to further investigate his website.

Arthur’s trial was initially set for January. But in court filings late last year, prosecutors said their case was “so unusual or so complex” that it was “unreasonable to expect adequate preparation” by that time. Instead, they requested the trial be reset for June.

Authorities said they’d seized large amounts of

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Tri-county prepares for wildfires amid severe conditions

By **BECK ANDREW SALGADO**
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TRI-COUNTY — As the heat of another West Texas summer arrives in the tri-county, officials are raising concerns that drought and heat are creating conditions for fire.

When talking about his outlook for this year’s wildfire season, Gary Mitschke, emergency management coordinator for Presidio County, first expressed that every year is a concern, but followed that by saying, “We usually get the numbers we are getting now toward August and September,” indicating that this year’s conditions are exceptionally dry at a much earlier period in time.

Cinderela Guevara, judge of Presidio County, said, if necessary, the county “will declare another state of emergency,” within Presidio County. One of the things that this state of emergency might entail is regulating the sale and use of fireworks, which could possibly be prohibited for the upcoming Fourth of July holiday.

The threat of wildfires in West Texas is more cyclical than solvable. In the past four months alone, the area experienced two major fires: the Holcombe Road fire and the Longfellow Complex fire, with the Longfellow impacting at least 6,000 acres and the Holcombe fire impacting an estimated 10,000.

Knowing this — and given the drought-stricken nature of the region — Brewster, Presidio and Jeff Davis counties have all implemented burn bans for their respective communities. For Brewster and Jeff Davis counties, this is no surprise, as both counties have been on burn bans since at least 2017. For Presidio County, however, this is recent, as their latest burn ban was implemented just last month.

Mitschke said he monitors the wildfire situation by checking the Texas Forest Service’s Keetch-Byram drought index that indicates drought and potential for wildfires on a scale from 1 to 800.

According to this index, a 575 or above is considered severe, and when speaking about Presidio County, Mitschke said that it is currently sitting at 588 “and climbing every day,” which he said is cause for concern.

Preventing fires can be tricky, said Mitschke, because implementing regulations and preparing trucks is essentially all he can do. Fires will happen, and “the most we can do is be prepared for them,” he said. He is trying to improve what he can, and this includes response times.

Currently, Mitschke, in conjunction with the county, is working on a project that could see water tankers placed at Presidio County airports in an attempt to combat fires. Currently these water tankers are located at the Fort Stockton airport, but under the project, they would be moved to Marfa.

The move to Marfa would hopefully achieve quicker response times. Currently, it takes “at least an hour” to reach communities in Presidio County from the water tankers in Fort Stockton, and that isn’t even considering the reload time required to continuously combat a fire. With the tankers placed in Marfa, response and reload times would look closer to “10 or 15 minutes,” depending on where the fire is.

As for how the county is preparing, Guevara said that she has met with the Red Cross to make sure that there “is always a general plan in mind” when handling wildfires that might arise. Guevara spoke on how that plan might look in the event of a fire.

“We have generators in different

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Cases climb

(Continued from page 1)

and “fully mobilize contact tracing of up to 4,000” tracers. For contrast, Illinois also plans to hire 4,000 contact tracers despite having less than half of Texas’s population. And as *The Texas Tribune* reported this month, Texas has even fallen short of that goal.

By June 4, the state had hired fewer than 3,000 such tracers, including 600 people at a company that received a \$295 million contract from the state. As reported by *The Dallas Morning News*, that company, MTX Group Inc., won’t “reveal the subcontractors involved in the project” or “say how much the tracers are being paid.”

When Governor Greg Abbott first allowed reopening, small counties like Presidio and Brewster with fewer than five cases could apply to open at an even higher capacity if they could meet a few requirements, including a contact tracing plan.

When Presidio and Brewster judges reached out to the DSHS about making their own contact tracing plans, they were told the state would instead take care of it for them. Following that assurance, they applied and opened at a higher capacity, depending on DSHS for local tracing needs.

In an interview Tuesday, Presidio County Health Authority Dr. John Paul Schwartz said he hadn’t heard from DSHS officials since they last confirmed a case on Friday, June 5 — eleven days earlier. “I’m just not getting the support that I need,” Schwartz said. “I’m not getting the feedback.”

After multiple attempts by *The Big Bend Sentinel* to contact the Texas Department of State Health Services in Austin, at press time, the agency had not responded to requests for comment about contact tracing or the escalating situation in Far West Texas.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Texas DSHS has only responded to one press request from *The Big Bend Sentinel* — and even then, they did not fully answer our questions. *The Big Bend Sentinel* last week filed a records request with the agency, asking for detailed information on its local contact-tracing efforts and is awaiting a response to the request.

“Local officials are frustrated at the meager response of the health department to the area,” Dr. Schwartz said. “Contact tracing is not generally discussed once the single case has been described,” he said. “There doesn’t seem to be lots of follow-up of what happens later. That’s been my experience.”

On June 5, Presidio County officials said they’d found a confirmed case of coronavirus in Marfa: a man in his 40s who is believed to have contracted the disease from traveling.

Luis “Junior” Nuñez, a Marfa resident, confirmed in a phone interview with *The Big Bend Sentinel* that he was that patient. And with four family members living at his home, health officials are treating those four as “probables,” which are not counted in official tallies.

One of the family member’s employers had expected to hear from the state about tracing, repeatedly checking their email and phones for any messages, but the employer confirmed that twelve days after the case was announced, they had still not been contacted.

On Tuesday night, another local business, barbeque eatery Convenience West, said on social media that it was temporarily closing after being “in contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus.” They found out not from state health officials, but from the concerned COVID-positive person.

Mark Scott, chef and one of the owners of the restaurant, said a resident who had stopped by to pick up food later contacted them to disclose they’d tested positive for coronavirus at a mobile testing site in Marfa on Friday, one of the newly announced cases here. At press time on Wednesday, the restaurant had not yet heard from the state.

“Zero contact at the moment,” Scott said in a follow-up call Wednesday morning.

In a phone call on Wednesday, Greg Davis, a Border Patrol spokesperson, confirmed that an employee at Big Bend Sector Headquarters in Marfa had tested positive for coronavirus. The employee is believed to have contracted the disease through travel and is now quarantining at home, Davis said. Local Border Patrol officials have not yet heard from the Department of State Health Services regarding the case.

“In a small community like ours, word travels faster than they can do their investigation,” Judge Guevara said about the state’s attempts to trace new cases as they emerge.

On Wednesday, Presidio County officially announced eight new cases in Marfa, all results from the most recent drive-through testing in Marfa. “Based on contact

“I think lives were saved here,” said a Marfa city official. “When it was on city council and the mayor’s watch, we didn’t have any confirmed cases. Now, we do. And that’s after the governor stepped in.”

tracing case investigations, all patients have residences in Marfa, Texas. All are community transmission. The majority of the cases range from no symptoms to mild symptoms,” according to Judge Guevara. Patients range in age from their teens to their 60s.

Alpine has not proven immune to rising case-counts, either. After finding a coronavirus case in South County in April, Brewster County’s case-count sat for weeks at just one. That patient recovered. Then, on Saturday, Brewster County announced six new confirmed cases. On Monday, it announced four more. In a news release this week, the Texas Department of State Health Services warned that in Alpine, “all transmissions are assumed to be community-spread.”

On Wednesday evening, Brewster County Judge Eleazar Cano announced the case total in Brewster had climbed to 22 total, saying “most were due to community transmission.”

As the local crisis grew, Stephanie Elmore, the emergency management coordinator for Brewster County, made a State of Texas Assistance Request for around 300 more coronavirus tests, which would be for the hospital to use, she said. At least some of the tests are earmarked for employees at an Alpine restaurant, which Elmore said had become a “hotspot” for coronavirus. Employees there were quarantining, Elmore said, and the restaurant was closing for 14 days to clean.

When Brewster County got its first coronavirus case in April, DSHS contacted that patient, Elmore said. Otherwise, though, she’s heard little about state contact-tracing efforts in the region. “I know they’re supposed to,” she added of state efforts, but she hadn’t “gotten the facts” on aspects of the state’s approach.

In its own statement on Saturday, Alpine Independent School District announced that one of its staff members had coronavirus. They began a 14-day closure “immediately,” cancelled all summer school for kids aged pre-K through 8th grade and said buildings would be “deeply sanitized.” Texas is directing people to disinfection guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which recommend waiting 24 hours or “as long as practical” to clean, opening windows and doors and turning on fans to “increase air circulation in the area” and disinfecting using EPA-registered disinfectants on all areas “used by the ill persons, focusing especially on frequently touched surfaces.”

Alpine public schools also cancelled their summer workouts and conditioning for athletes and the school summer meal program. Becky McCutchen, the superintendent for Alpine ISD, did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

Separately, Basecamp Terlingua, a short-term rentals company in Terlingua, said in a social media post that a group of four guests had all tested positive for coronavirus and that one had started feeling symptoms during their stay.

Basecamp also said the guests “did not heed our suggestion to stay out of local establishments.” In response, Basecamp said it was conducting its own contact tracing, which included contacting a server at an area restaurant who may have been exposed.

That’s precisely the job that state health officials said they would do for the tri-county. But as Texas plows ahead with its “reopening” strategy and contact tracing lags behind, that task is increasingly falling to tri-county officials instead. Local residents and businesses are also joining in the effort, for better or worse.

In the case of Basecamp Terlingua, those positives

will be counted in the guests’ home county and managed by their regional DSHS department. At press time, Basecamp had not confirmed if they were contacted by any state tracing officials.

When DSHS began tracing Marfa’s first case, Nuñez told health officials on June 5 that his family had stayed in place and left it at that. Local officials urged DSHS to look further into it, to which DSHS agreed.

Even under quarantine, Nuñez travels out of the region three times a week for dialysis, a regular emergency procedure required by some diabetics and people with other kidney issues to keep the organs in balance. Such trips are essential and considered a valid reason for travel, and Nuñez speculated that might have been where he contracted the disease.

But law enforcement authorities say that after being confirmed positive, Nuñez was also making visits around town, violating quarantine rules. Last week, county officials warned that Nuñez and his family had “not been respecting control measures.” For that reason, the Presidio County Sheriff’s Office warned on social media, “the probability exists of possible spread.”

In an interview with *The Big Bend Sentinel*, Nuñez insisted that he and his family had been following quarantine rules. But Steve Marquez, chief of the Marfa Police Department, said he’s received numerous calls from concerned citizens.

One person said they saw one of Nuñez’s children at a local store. Two said they saw Nuñez ordering from a restaurant. Another person at a store in Alpine put up a sign, urging employees not to serve the family. Chief Marquez said he followed up on the Marfa complaints with a warning for Nuñez that he could face charges if he was violating quarantine orders.

But the reports kept coming in. One person said they saw Nuñez’s wife at a park. One person said they saw Nuñez’s son at the post office.

On Friday, two people called to report that Nuñez was walking around town. Marquez called Nuñez. He denied that he was in Marfa, according to Marquez. “He advised me he was actually in El Paso” for dialysis, Marquez said. “He said he just spoke to his wife and that they [the family] were all home.”

Nuñez said he wasn’t sure why people were reporting seeing him around town. “It just kind of upsets you,” he said of the situation. “You don’t really know what’s going on, and then all of a sudden everybody sees you everywhere.”

Some residents on social media were furious with Nuñez over the alleged sightings. Others felt he was being unfairly turned into a pariah and rallied to his defense. An online “meal train” was set up for the family, so that residents could donate and deliver food.

Four days after the case was confirmed, Judge Cinderela Guevara released a statement that a regional DSHS department had taken action “to ensure the prevention of the introduction, transmission and spread of the disease in this community.” Namely, they issued an order that remains in effect until the person is notified by DSHS in writing when the incubation period has passed and they are no longer suspected of having the communicable disease. Should the patient with COVID-19 not comply, they would be subject to criminal prosecution, the statement read.

Nuñez, who said on Friday that he was feeling “fine,” was cheered by the outpouring of support. “It makes me feel a little welcomed,” he said. “Everybody is telling me to keep our heads up and get well soon.”

At press time, Guevara said Nuñez and his family have not yet been released from their quarantine order by DSHS.

Guevara wrote in her release that she was providing

that information to the public in response to “the many phone calls or texts with concerns of suspected person (or persons) not complying with control measures,” adding, “The only recourse for us in authority was to reach out to the Department of State Health Services Regional Medical Director.”

Nuñez, the first Marfa patient, said state officials have been regularly calling him. “They’ve been contacting us every day,” he said, “just to tell us to stay at home and stay in place until our quarantine days are over.”

For the county judge, contact with DSHS is less regular. “The only details they’ll give me are to do with if someone is positive, and then they’ll give me the generalized information that we have received,” Guevara said, including information like the anonymous person’s gender and a rough suggestion of their age. She added that because she is not a doctor, the state would give more information to the local health authority.

But Dr. Schwartz, the local health authority, isn’t hearing much, either. “The last time I talked to them, I had to pursue them, talk to them and pin them down, and I think that’s indicative of how poorly they’re handling this,” said the doctor.

Schwartz said he would like the state to provide better instructions and guidelines for those who test positive and to supply a caseworker that checks on them and helps them access services or get meals while they are mandated to stay home.

He also called for more comprehensive testing than the “sporadic,” one-day events in the Big Bend region and for more communication between the state and the county.

As for tracing, Schwartz said he wanted a report from the state after tracing had been completed for a case, informing the county of how many people came into contact with the positive case and making sure those folks are able to get tested quickly. “That’s what we need. That’s when we can design what to do on this end,” he said.

Chief Marquez has been unimpressed by the state response to the first confirmed coronavirus case in Marfa. “I would like to see where this contact tracing is,” he said. “We have a lot of vulnerable people here.”

Despite receiving no resources to conduct contact tracing, Marquez felt the task was falling to him. “It’s becoming ridiculous,” he added. “We want to help the situation, but we don’t know who to contact.” But he said local police were happy to help in the efforts “if the state wants to give us those resources.”

Teresa Todd, city attorney for the City of Marfa, said that from the start, Texas should have put local leaders in charge of contact tracing.

“I think it would have been a better system for money to have been given to local governments to hire contact tracers and handle that locally,” she said. “I think when you’re in a community and you know people, you just do a better job.”

Local contact tracers would have a better sense of patients’ movements and possible contacts, Todd argued. And besides, “we’ve got people out of work here,” she said. “I’d like for them to be hired as contact tracers.”

Marfa and Presidio County, she said, were doing a fine job of protecting locals from coronavirus. “And then suddenly, the governor swooped in,” enacting state rules that overturned local safety measures, even those requiring face coverings.

“I think lives were saved here,” she added. “When it was on city council and the mayor’s watch, we didn’t have any confirmed cases. Now, we do. And that’s after the governor stepped in.”



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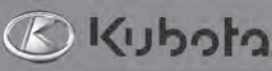
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With sentencing in Pecos, authorities deal blow to cactus black market

By STEPHEN PAULSEN
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PECOS — In a front-page story last year, *The Big Bend Sentinel* reported on efforts by the federal government to rein in what it calls the “cactus black market.” In a report from November, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it had dealt a “major blow” after four traffickers were sentenced for their role in harvesting, smuggling and selling “living rock” cacti, which are native to the Big Bend.

Those sentences are part of a years-long and multi-agency effort to crack down on such smuggling. Though living rock cacti aren’t endangered, their unique geographic distribution gives them a number of legal protections, including under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna. Exporting them is a felony.

That black market took another blow this month, as a man in Pecos pleaded guilty to his role in just such a scheme.

Henry George Bock II, 47, allegedly mislabeled living rock cacti to export them abroad. In 2018, authorities said they seized 41 living rock cacti at the International Mail Facility in Chicago, Illinois. All were allegedly mislabeled and shipped by Bock.

By mislabeling the cacti and non-protected species, Bock intended to “export and sell the plants for financial gain,” the Department of Justice said in a news release last week. Bock pleaded guilty to one count of mislabeled exports.

“When you mess with protected Texas cacti, you’re messing with Texas,” John Bash, U.S. attorney for the Western District of Texas, said in a statement. “My office will continue to work with our law-enforcement partners to protect our State’s natural heritage.”

Bock has not yet been formally sentenced, according to the DOJ release. The agency also said that five other people had been prosecuted and sentenced for their role in the scheme, though they declined to name those individuals or comment on whether there was a direct connection between this case and the one the Fish and Wildlife Service publicized last year.

It’s unclear if authorities suspect Bock was working with a few accomplices or part of a much bigger conspiracy. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Justice did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Regardless, the DOJ says authorities have found a “substantial trafficking organization” responsible for “smuggling thousands of protected living rock cactus from the Big Bend region of Western Texas” dating back to at least 2012. The ensuing crackdown has led to everything from package interceptions to residential search warrants throughout the desert Southwest.

In 2015, for example, authorities seized 3,500 living rock cactus, which were later placed in the care of the Plant Resources Center at Sul Ross State University. Many of them were still in garbage bags when they made it to a university greenhouse.

“A cactus lover would never put these in a garbage bag,” Karen Little, who runs the greenhouses for the center, previously told *The Big Bend Sentinel*. “These people are doing it for the money and preying on cactus lovers.”

Abuse website

(Continued from page 1)

evidence from Arthur’s Terlingua-area compound, including 95 boxes of “sexually-oriented books” that needed to be “inventoried, catalogued and photographed/scanned” and 25 media devices ranging from VHS tapes and flash drives to cell phones. All of it would take a “considerable amount of time” to analyze.

Bennett, Arthur’s lawyer, previously told *The Big Bend Sentinel* that while he preferred if the case weren’t delayed, “his chances of getting out are better if all the I’s are dotted and all the T’s are crossed.”

“We had no objections that would make any difference,” he said of the delay. The case got rescheduled for June.

Then, on Friday, prosecutors filed another motion asking for the case to be moved back to October. It was an unopposed motion, meaning Arthur’s lawyers agreed to the delay.

In the filing, prosecutors cited the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the court system, along with additional legal complexities in the case.

The United States government, they said, had made a request for “mutual legal assistance” from the Netherlands, where Arthur was allegedly storing contents of his website on a private server. Such requests are common when U.S. prosecutors want to interview a suspect in a foreign country — or in this case, gather digital evidence from abroad.

While the Netherlands made evidence seizures based on that request, U.S. authorities say it will nonetheless lead to more delays. In court filings, federal authorities said they heard from counterparts in the Netherlands that it could be at least two months before evidence from Arthur’s website is “turned over to U.S. law enforcement officers.” And after they get the data, the U.S. government will need to “make such material available for review by defense counsel and their experts,” which could take “additional time.”

In an interview Monday, Bennett confirmed that Arthur is still in prison awaiting trial. A federal judge in November denied Arthur bonded release after hearing — among other things — that Arthur was advertising and selling “armor-piercing” ammunition online.

Bennett said it is “unfortunate” that Arthur is awaiting trial in prison but said it is not unusual, given the circumstances of cases like these.

It could be months or years before Big Bend residents see an outcome from the case. And a number of questions remain unanswered, including whether authorities will pursue further charges against other users of the site. The U.S. attorney’s office for the Western District of Texas did not respond by press time to a request for comment on this question.

After all, at least one of the allegedly obscene images on the website was reportedly posted not by Arthur, but by someone else. And authorities in their initial court filings declined to name the website, noting that “some of the users of the website are still under investigation.”

In debate over reopening, “Visit Marfa” Facebook page becomes hotspot

By STEPHEN PAULSEN
stephen@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — Since the City of Marfa runs the Marfa Visitor Center, its website and, until recently, a dedicated Instagram, locals and visitors might assume that city leaders also run a related “Visit Marfa” Facebook page.

Some city leaders assumed the same. But there’s no formal connection — and now city leaders are planning to beef up their own social media presence for tourists due to a difference in philosophy with the main “Visit Marfa” page concerning the coronavirus.

While tourism in Marfa has become a hot-button topic during the pandemic, the “Visit Marfa” page has remained an unabashed supporter of tourism in the region. But as the debate on everything from lockdown measures to face mask recommendations becomes increasingly partisan, the City of Marfa is wary of locals or residents perceiving tourist boosterism as its official city stance. Some city leaders were not even initially sure who was running the page.

Dan Dunlap, a former Marfa mayor and current city contractor, started the “Visit Marfa” Facebook page around 2008 while he was mayor. For a while, Patrick Rivera, Marfa’s assistant director of tourism, helped run it, further cementing the association some Marfans have between the page and official city outreach efforts.

But Dunlap parted ways with Rivera earlier this year, Dunlap said in an interview last week — a move he said had nothing to do with the current debate in Marfa over how to balance desires for tourist dollars with concerns about public safety.

Instead, Dunlap said, he had used his own credit card to pay to boost a post on the site. And “since my credit is going to be on the line here,” Dunlap decided to remove Rivera and become the only administrator.

By Monday night, the city had removed its official “Visit Marfa” Instagram page, VisitMarfaTX. Mayor Manny Baeza said the city wanted to streamline its online information for visitors, noting that it had been difficult to keep up with all of the different social media accounts.

“That page is going to be removed,” Baeza said. He said the city wanted to funnel visitors into several “designated sites,” including official web pages run by the city, the Marfa police, the Marfa library and the Marfa Visitors Center.

The developments are part of a growing divide over how this tourist region should respond to the current coronavirus pandemic, which has surged across Texas in recent weeks. Officials in both Presidio and Brewster counties have warned of possible spread, citing accelerating case-counts

in the region.

The Facebook page has received fresh attention during the pandemic as it continues its core mission of directing visitors to Marfa businesses and area events. Texas leaders have been “reopening” the state for weeks and have overturned local rules meant to slow the spread of coronavirus, from face mask ordinances in Houston and the City of Presidio to the temporary ban on short-term rentals in Presidio County. But tri-county residents remain conflicted on whether local leaders should encourage visitors to the region, and some local businesses remain closed or are to-go or by-appointment only.

In the past week, the “Visit Marfa” Facebook page has posted more than a dozen times, including posts about local hotels, menu items at local restaurants and tourist attractions like Big Bend National Park. By contrast, the official “Visit Marfa” Instagram page hadn’t posted since February, when it remarked on a snow day. “I’ve taken the stance of not promoting [tourism] as much,” Rivera, the assistant tourism director who runs that page, said of his approach to the current pandemic.

Rivera declined to comment on the “Visit Marfa” Facebook page or on the broader debate over how to balance economic needs against coronavirus precautions. Multiple city officials said they were not aware of Rivera receiving any specific directives or policies regarding how to handle social media posts and promotions in general, given the circumstances.

Rivera said he posted when the city directed him to — for instance, by sharing in an Instagram story when there was an update to local coronavirus measures. But he said he had been cautious about promoting tourism during the pandemic.

“There are other things that are important,” he said. Namely: the safety of people who live here.

Dunlap told *The Big Bend Sentinel* that he’s received compliments and thank-yous — not complaints — for his recent efforts to continue promoting local businesses on Facebook. He also said he removed any links that might confuse readers about a formal connection with the city.

Instead, Dunlap said he’s happy to continue promoting businesses in his personal capacity as a resident. And if city leaders “don’t want me promoting Marfa, that’s just too bad.”

“The virus is terrible,” he added. “But destroying the economy is worse.”

On the “Visit Marfa” page, Dunlap has at times addressed this difference of opinion. In May, for example, a woman posted on the page to inquire whether Marfa currently wanted tourists.

“So does Marfa want people to come visit or

stay away for a while?” she wrote. “Confused by things I have read.”

“Please come and enjoy our beautiful weather and scenery,” Dunlap replied. He added that “the town is learning to open safely,” as were “surrounding towns and parks.”

At a city council meeting last week, Buck Johnston, a council member and local business owner, asked other city leaders about the page, noting that she had received questions and complaints about it. “The complaint was that the ‘Visit Marfa’ page was encouraging tourism too soon and too early,” she said in an interview Tuesday.

The issue prompted some confusion at the meeting. City leaders quickly determined that Rivera was no longer updating the page but weren’t immediately sure who was running it.

It didn’t take long to clear the air, though. The next day, Dunlap called Mandy Roane, the city’s director of community services, to clarify that he had started the page and is still running it.

Roane stressed there was no dispute between Dunlap and the city. “He created the page, so it’s his page,” she said.

Roane didn’t think anyone from the city had asked to be added back to the account. Instead, Marfa city leaders are considering another tack: setting up their own online landing site for visitors.

At press time, the details on that plan are still vague, with suggestions ranging from a new Facebook page and social media presence to more updates on the official VisitMarfa.com website. “You have to remember, this is all pretty new,” said Mayor Baeza.

City Attorney Teresa Todd said she was among the city officials who believed the “Visit Marfa” Facebook page was run by the city. She said the city wanted to clear up the confusion for both residents and tourists.

“For me, the issue is to make sure there’s separation between the city-owned website and this ‘Visit Marfa’ page that Dan started,” she said. “I think it’s in a different place and has different goals.”

The situation is a case study in how Marfans have split over coronavirus, coronavirus precautions and the ensuing national partisan divide over both. Marfans — many of whom work in or run tourist-oriented businesses — have often been united in their support for having a steady stream of tourists through the area, but coronavirus has changed that. And soon, there could be two Facebook pages geared towards visitors: one that prioritizes revving the Marfa economy back to life and another that prioritizes public safety.

Pecos officials

(Continued from page 1)

“We report to everyone that we’re supposed to. We haven’t changed any protocol.”

In a follow-up email to *The Big Bend Sentinel*, Robert Hurst, a communications officer with the agency, stressed the same point.

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “TDCJ provides information regarding offender/staff testing to DSHS.”

More importantly, though, the math doesn’t quite work out. Assuming that TDCJ or DSHS did actually remove its local prison data from Pecos County’s count, it would mean that Pecos County had reached its own count of 15 cases on Tuesday. But at that time, the county in fact had a count of 31 cases, according to Judge Shuster.

A few structural issues are adding to the confusion. For one thing, Texas prisons report their numbers to health officials in Austin rather than to local counties.

That process might make sense on a state level — after all, TDCJ is a statewide agency — but it keeps county officials less informed about outbreaks brewing in prisons in their own communities.

“That’s part of the problem,” Judge Shuster said. “They [TDCJ] report their figures straight to the Austin DSHS office. We report to El Paso — and then our numbers go from El Paso to Austin.”

Making matters worse, Pecos County — unlike Presidio and Brewster counties — doesn’t have its own local health authority. Instead, they rely on officials in DSHS Region 9/10, according to Shuster.

With Shuster just as confused about the numbers, he can only think of one explanation: maybe it was an error.

“It’s got to be that somebody entered the numbers in the wrong slot or something,” he said. “When I saw those numbers, I thought, ‘This is crazy.’ Because they’re not even close.”

Wildfires

(Continued from page 1)

invested in generators to assure that if for some reason there was no electricity in an area, we do have a place for people to go and there will be electricity,” said Guevara.

Guevara spoke about her goals going into wildfire season saying, “The goal is to have no fires,” but in the event of one, she expressed that preparations have been put in place to minimize the damage and, of course, keep the people living within the community safe.

When speaking about the burn ban in Presidio County, Guevara acknowledged that it expires on July 15, but said that “it is highly probable that we will go ahead and extend it, unless the conditions change drastically,” as the county is in the midst of a drought.

Both Mitschke and Guevara said that the community can help prevent wildfires by adhering to the burn ban that is in place and by also signing up for the county’s reverse 911 service that is designed to inform the community of possible dangers.

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Robert Guevara
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Oscar Luis Luna
Rose Luna
Rose Martinez
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Alice Miller
Claudio Nuñez
Mike Nuñez
Joe Nuñez
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Hector Sanchez
Terry Jean Shely
Norma Tercero

Salvador Valenzuela
Tiodoso Valenzuela
Cathy Vann
Jacquie Vess
Jim Bill Wells
Juan Williams



Opinions



HIGH DESERT SKETCHES

Tap dancing on the 1st Amendment with Gucci golf shoes

By GEORGE A. COVINGTON

The beauty of the American Constitution is that it was intended to be read by the “common man.” In those early days of our republic, women and enslaved people were not expected to read, debate, or understand the document that made this nation what it is today, not to mention vote. For more than 244 years, the document has evolved to include both women and Black people in the vote. Today, there are certain elements in our society who still believe it was a mistake to include literacy and voting among the rights of certain members of our political system.

The First Amendment simply states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

In the past few weeks, President Tweet has tap danced on the First Amendment with his Gucci golf cleats.

Let’s look at his actions bit by bit or tweet by tweet: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” You will notice that it does not mention the right to use a church as a photo op, and please remember the part that says, “Or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” In one fell swoop, President Tweet managed to crawl out of his White House bunker and instruct Attorney General William Barr to break up a peaceful assembly with tear gas and the threat of troops to walk across 1600 Pennsylvania Ave while blowing holes in the 1st Amendment.



The crowd outside the White House had shown no belligerence toward the Tweetster until the Park Police hit them with an array of unpleasant objects. When asked the following question: “Was it appropriate for the U.S. Park Police to use smoke bombs, tear gas, pepper balls, projectiles at what appeared to be peaceful protesters?” outside the White House on June 1, Barr objected to the description of pepper spray as a chemical irritant, saying, “It’s not chemical.”

A number of COVID-19 researchers stated quite loudly that tear gas and pepper spray cause major irritation of the nose, throat, and chest cavity that could lead to a greater susceptibility to COVID-19 in all the breathing passages. No one seemed impressed that the attorney general’s only cogent remark about the attack on a peaceful gathering was that pepper spray is “not a chemical.” He seemed to have totally ignored the First Amendment when it states, “Or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

President Tweet’s supporters have a history of trying to suppress any rally that might interfere with their personal beliefs or economic interest. In a new [report](#) from PEN America, a nonprofit organization that works to defend and celebrate free expression in the United States and worldwide through the advancement of literature and human rights, recently reported that in 2015 and 2016, prior to Trump’s presidency, bills that would restrict or otherwise criminalize demonstrations were introduced just six times and none became law. But after the 2016 election, the number of anti-protest proposals ballooned to 56 in 2017, 17 in 2018, and 37 in 2019 — 23 eventually became law over the course of those three years. Most of these bills heighten penalties for protesters who demonstrate near “critical infrastructure sites, march on public roadways,” or otherwise engage in conduct that law enforcement officials deem “unlawful.” Some require protesters to pay for law enforcement time, others shield officers from liability if they harm protesters.

For West Texas, the crucial phrase is “critical infrastructure sites,” which translates as pipelines. Alpine and its Black Lives Matter march & rally were mentioned in *The New York Times* and on National Public Radio.

Excerpt from *The New York Times*, “Protests Swell in U.S. and Beyond as George Floyd Is Mourned Near His Birthplace,” published June 6, 2020, updated June 7, 2020:

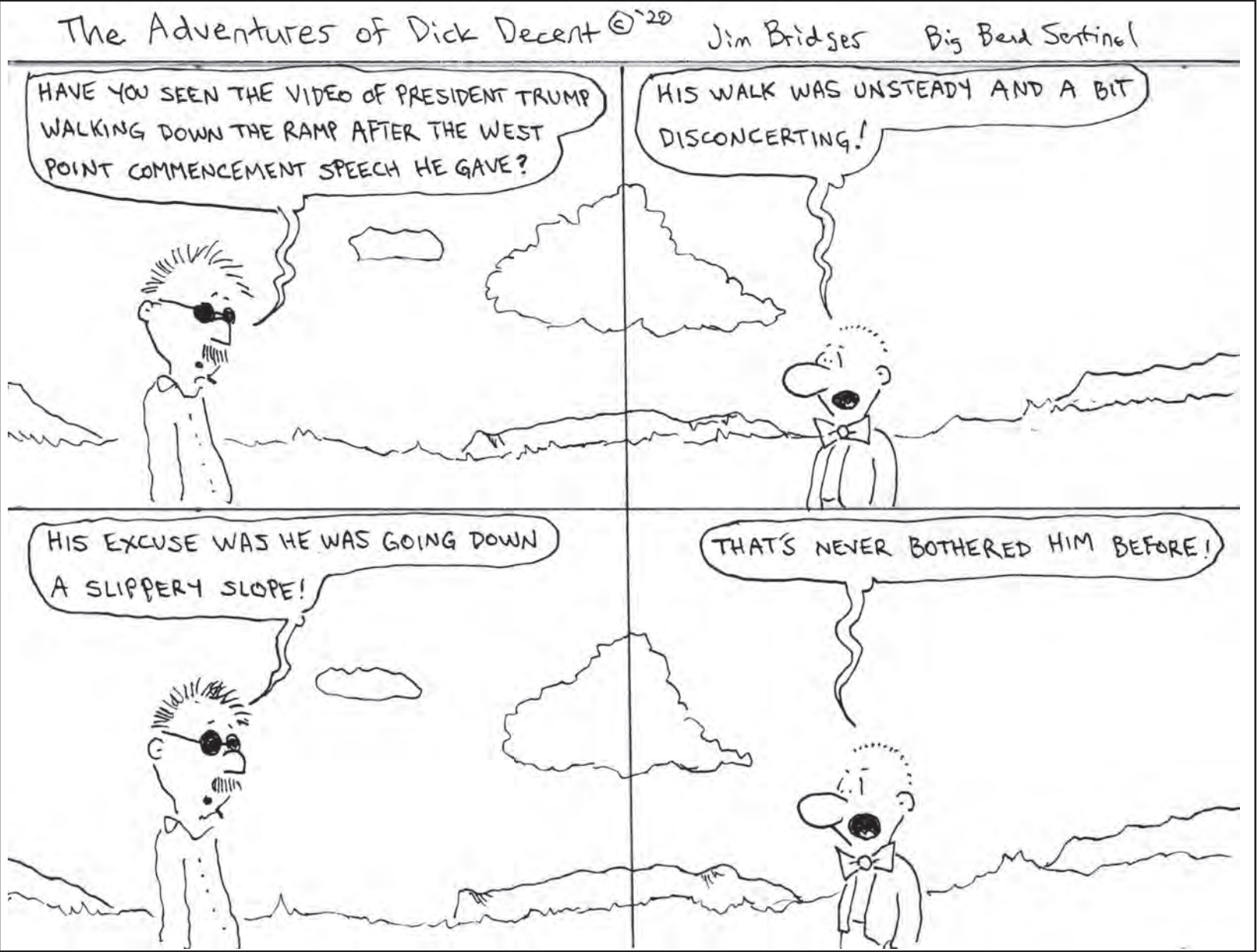
“Anti-racism demonstrations unfolded not only in major cities across the United States, but also in smaller towns and largely rural areas. ...

On Saturday morning, crowds converged in Alpine, Texas, to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

The scene in Alpine, which has a population of about 6,000 and is in the Big Bend region of Texas near the border with Mexico, surprised some local observers. Hundreds of protesters walked through the streets, hoisting Black Lives Matter placards and the flags of the United States, Mexico and Texas, before arriving at the Brewster County courthouse.

‘Pretty sure this is the largest turnout for a protest I’ve ever seen in the Big Bend region, equal to or bigger than the anti-pipeline protests from a few years ago,’ Travis Bubenik, a journalist based in West Texas, [said](#) on Twitter.”

George A. Covington has worked in the fields of law, education, journalism and disability rights. He considers himself retired from every one of them with the possible exception of journalism. He is a graduate of the University of Texas schools of Journalism and Law. He moved to West Texas – Alpine - in 1997 after a 20-year career in Washington, D.C. where he once served on the staff of the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives (Democrat) and shortly thereafter served as Special Assistant to the Vice President of the United States (Republican) 1989 to 1993.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Do we need to rename Fort Davis?

In 1854, the new fort was named for Jefferson Davis when he was secretary of war (1853-1857) — and not to commemorate his tenure as Confederate president. Perhaps the officers in command were buttering up the cabinet secretary in the hope of getting better funding. Davis famously backed the plan to station camels at Fort Davis, figuring they would be good for use as pack animals in the West Texas desert.

The name, Davis, was taken by the neighboring town, which became the county seat of Presidio County in 1850. County voters moved the seat to Marfa in 1885, but Davis citizens demanded a new county. Jeff Davis County was marked off in 1887, with Fort Davis again a county seat. And then there are the Davis Mountains, formerly the Limpia Mountains, the wonderful “sky island” of the Trans-Pecos. Are we going to change all these names after 150 years?

While many are understandably uncomfortable with memorials to the Confederate leaders, the Fort Davis name predates the Civil War. Does it make a difference that Jefferson Davis was never convicted of treason? “Repentance must precede the right of pardon, and I have not repented,” he said in 1881. However, he was included in a general pardon by President Andrew Johnson, although forbidden to hold office by the 14th Amendment. And then in 1978, Congress passed a resolution restoring his full citizenship, signed by President Carter. The text read, “Congress officially completes the long process of reconciliation.”

We could use a lot of reconciliation right now.

Roger Black
Marathon

Dear Editor,

I want to thank you for your front-page coverage of the Black Lives Matter march. I was unable to attend, and thus I appreciated your reporting by Abbie Perrault and the photos by Maisie Crow. Your coverage helped me feel a part of this important social movement, which touches us all. We are all one. You are serving multiple West Texas communities by reporting on an Alpine event which, sadly, was poorly reported in Alpine and not covered in the Fort Davis newspaper. The march, which drew more than 300 people, received better coverage in New York than in Alpine.

In COVID-19 isolation, I have taken advantage of extra time at home to read writings of Black leaders. I was particularly moved by the April 16, 1963, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr. He wrote: “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Diane South
Fort Davis

...

Dear Editor,

This is a request for people who have traveled here from out of the area: please be considerate of the people who live here and wear a mask, at least in the grocery stores.

Buying groceries is essential and not optional for most locals, many who wear masks do it to help keep you safer. I believe it is a small thing to ask. Let’s play it safe.

Pam Gaddis
Alpine

...

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Community

DRAWING OF THE WEEK



“Basketball”
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At the Chinati Foundation, the safety and well-being of our visitors and staff are among our highest priorities. We are aware of the health concerns surrounding the coronavirus (COVID-19), and upon the recommendation of local West Texas health officials, Chinati has been advised to close to the public until further notice. The tri-county region has limited health resources, so to be a good partner to our local community and community of visitors, we are taking the recommendation seriously.

Thank you for supporting the Chinati Foundation. As a public institution, we both rely on the public for support and believe it is our responsibility to be a good public partner in return. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause and we look forward to welcoming you to Chinati in the future.

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Marfa students awarded Big Bend Sentinel scholarships

By **ABBIE PERRAULT**
abbie@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — *The Big Bend Sentinel* has awarded its annual scholarships to two graduating seniors of Marfa High School, Alyanna Hernandez and Tais Chanez. In an exceptional, unique year, these students have overcome obstacles to graduate during a global pandemic. It is only fitting that this year’s two \$500 scholarships have been awarded to students who are planning to study in the medical field.

The student applicants this year proved that there is a bright cohort of students graduating from Marfa High School’s Class of 2020, heading to great things in the next steps of their journeys.

Both Hernandez and Chanez are bound for Sul Ross State University to pursue careers in the medical field, and the pair stood out for their descriptive abilities as they both envisioned where their educations would take them in life. The two will be studying full time this coming semester, no matter what challenges they face as their new school adjusts to life with coronavirus.

In her application, Hernandez said that while coronavirus upended her senior year, it also deepened her desire to pursue an education in the medical field.

“We weren’t given a warning, no preparations as to how to approach any of this,” she said of the onset of coronavirus during her senior year spring break. “Thinking back, I would never think this would be how I spend the last few weeks at Marfa High.”

“My plans were to attend Sul Ross State University and pursue a career in the medical field,” Hernandez wrote. “My goal is still that but on a more serious note, watching this pandemic has ignited my desire to be on the front lines more than ever.”

Hernandez says she has thought about being a doctor since elementary school, but since her freshman year, she has set her eyes on medicine more resolutely. She hopes that an education at Sul Ross’s new nursing program will be the first step in determining where in medicine she plans to go.

Hernandez received two other scholarships toward her Sul Ross education: the Ernest Chavez Memorial Golf Scholarship and the Polson Memorial Scholarship.

As for Chanez, the graduate finished high school in three years, along with raising her 18-month-old son. “I’m excited for this new chapter. My son is getting older and he requires more time, and I want to spend more time with him. I have morning classes, and in the



Alyanna Hernandez



Tais Chanez

afternoon I’ll be free to work and take care of my son. And meeting new people is a great thing too.”

It was actually her childbirth that inspired her to pursue medicine. “I really chose nursing after I gave birth, because the nurses I had when I gave birth were so amazing,” Chanez said in an interview. She hoped to play that role for others one day.

“I want to be a nurse, specifically a neonatal nurse or a labor and delivery nurse. I just know I want to work with babies and with moms,” she said. “Maybe during the process of getting my nursing done, if I find a certain area I’m more interested

in, I’ll be happy as long as I’m just a nurse.”

Chanez also received scholarships from The Marfa National Bank, the Marfa Live Arts Crown scholarship and the Marfa Rotary Club.

“This scholarship would be going towards my education to help me pursue my future career, nursing, without having to worry too much about having financial issues,” Chanez wrote in her application. “I am looking forward to attending school and becoming somebody in life, especially for my son, so receiving this scholarship will be an incredible lift into reaching my goals.”

Marfa community supports infected members through “meal train”

By **BECK ANDREW SALGADO**
beck@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — Months into the COVID-19 pandemic, cities across America have been ravaged by growing cases, but small towns are not exempt from the rapid grip of the contagious virus. In these tight-knit communities, COVID-19 can look much different, as an amalgamation of fear, rumors and accusations can translate into anger in places like social media.

The virus, however, can also cause unity, as seen in Marfa, where within weeks of the town’s first case, a meal train was made to help provide food for the Nuñez family, in hopes of making it easier for them to quarantine.

Laura Brugette, the organizer of the meal train, said that in a smaller community it is important to support each other and work together to keep everyone safe. Brugette emphasized the importance of compassion in a

time such as this, saying she noticed “a lot of hate on social media,” and that was difficult for her to see.

To combat this, Brugette decided that starting the meal train would be a productive way to replace this hate with compassion.

“To help care for the family, while also keeping everyone safe just seemed like the ideal thing to do,” said Brugette.

When speaking about the meal train, she said she felt it was important to make one because in smaller towns, luxuries such as delivery and pick-up groceries are not present. She sought a way to make it easier for the Nuñez family to stay safe while also getting food.

Additionally, Brugette said that community buy-in for the meal train was swift, and within a day of creating the page, the full two weeks had been filled by community members who were eager to help provide food.

Among the people who signed up to provide food was Florcita Zubia, Marfa resident, who

said she decided to sign up because “you never know when it’s going to be you or one of your kids, and I would appreciate it if that was my family and people were willing to help out,” just as they have for the Nuñez family.

Zubia said that she feels the ability to come together in the Marfa community is great and because “everyone knows one another,” there is an extra layer of intimacy that comes with helping fellow members of the community that just can’t be achieved in a city.

Zubia also expressed that she feels the meal drive is a wonderful idea for not only Marfa but any small town that wants to support members and promote safety. Safety, during this pandemic, is of the utmost importance for someone like Zubia who has a child with severe asthma that she wants to protect.

In a world entrenched in fear, Zubia says that knowing she and others in the community are taking the proper precautions brings her comfort in a time where that is hard to come by.

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Weekly SUDOKU

by Linda Thistle

	9			4		7		
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	6				3		8	
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Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ♦♦♦

♦ Moderate ♦♦ Challenging
♦♦♦ HOO BOY!

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King Crossword

ACROSS

1 St. Louis landmark
5 Hostel
8 Grime
12 Silver salmon
13 Kan. neighbor
14 Sandwich cookie
15 Destruction
16 Thrilling
18 Passage
20 Idles
21 Still
22 "You've got mail" co.
23 Really fun time
26 Leave out
30 Thither
31 Beer cousin
32 Queue
33 Shout out
36 Co-star with Ball, Arnaz and Frawley
38 Branch
39 Dine
40 Larynx output
43 Surpasses
47 "My bad"
49 By word of mouth
50 Night light?
51 Atmosphere
52 Loosen
53 Paquin or Quindlen
54 Final (Abbr.)

DOWN

1 Land measure
2 Sauce thick-ener
3 Stylish
4 Sweethearts
5 Klutzy
6 Adjoining
7 Leno's net-work
8 "Is that so?"
9 Eye part
10 Landlord's due
11 Garb

55 Exam
17 Sporty Camaro (Abbr.)
19 Emeritus (Abbr.)
22 Chopper
23 "See ya"
24 Bagel topping
25 Anti-apartheid org.
26 Shade source
27 Samovar
28 "What's up, —?"
29 Ram's mate
31 Intent
34 Gap

35 War god
36 Carpet cleaner, for short
37 Went to a restaurant
39 Put forth, as energy
40 — cava
41 The yoke's on them
42 PC picture
43 Painter Nolde
44 Sea eagle
45 June honorees
46 Coin aperture
48 Water (Fr.)

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Puzzle solutions for last week's issue

— **Weekly SUDOKU** — — **King Crossword** —

Answer

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

Solution time: 21 mins.

S	T	A	B		D	A	D		F	A	T	S
A	R	I	A		J	R	A		O	N	I	T
G	E	N	T		S	I	M		I	L	A	T
A	F	T	E	R	C		E	L	I	C	I	T
				A	I	L	S		T	O	O	
O	S	C	U	L	A	T	E		S	N	O	W
I	O	U		L		L	I	O	N	S		D
L	U	L		L		M	O	D	U	L	A	T
				P	O	T		D	O	M	E	
S	P	A	C	E	D			D	O	O	D	L
T	A	B	U	L	A	T	E			N	E	E
E	L	L	S		S	I	R		I	C	E	D
M	E	E	T		H	E	M		D	O	R	Y

Coronavirus measures, and a teacher retires: This week at the Marfa school board

By STEPHEN PAULSEN
stephen@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — At a socially-distanced school board meeting in the Shorthorn Gym on Monday night, school officials discussed a range of topics, from staff pay to how the school district is preparing for possible coronavirus outbreaks.

Speaking to the board, Superintendent Oscar Aguero offered proposals for what precautions the school would take. But he said officials would have to wait to iron out those details, noting that he was joining a call with the Texas Education Agency on Tuesday — the next day — about that subject.

Little came out of that TEA meeting, despite climbing coronavirus case numbers in Texas. Instead, Aguero told The Big Bend Sentinel, the TEA commissioners told him and other school officials that they will have to wait until next week for more guidance on coronavirus precautions.

Only one concrete decision came out of the meeting: the TEA will not require students to wear face coverings or other personal protective equipment. “It makes it difficult for us to plan,” said a frustrated Aguero.

Coronavirus measures

With students out of school and the 2020-2021 school year fast approaching, Marfa school officials are still waiting on TEA guidelines to determine what school will look like in the fall. At the board meeting, Superintendent Aguero offered a range of suggestions, including creating “dual classroom” set-ups (so that there would be a sanitary extra classroom if a student or teacher came down with coronavirus) and making hallways one-way to prevent crowding and congregating.

Still, the TEA has said that if schools do return to in-person classes, they will need to give each student 45 square feet of space — a feat that could be difficult, given Marfa ISD’s old classrooms. “We may have to do half days,” Aguero said. But Allison Scott, the new Marfa High School principal, worried that if parents had children in multiple grades, such guidelines could leave them “running back and forth” to pick up and drop off children.

The school is trying to balance concerns with public safety with those for education. It hasn’t

been easy. “For the majority of the kids, I know distance learning isn’t the best way for them to learn,” Aguero said. “Especially the younger ones.” And he said the school district has a duty to “ensure equitable instruction.”

The school district settled on August 10 as a tentative start date. The proposed schedule has about two weeks of “bad weather days” built in, in case the school needs to temporarily close. The school district is hesitant about having summer schooling, with Aguero citing “all the outbreaks.” But the issue might be a moot point: Marfa summer school is typically only for “test retakers,” Aguero said, and TEA this year waived its standardized testing requirements.

Meanwhile, on-site athletic workouts started up again on Wednesday, said Linda Ojeda, the district’s athletic director. The workouts will only be outdoor cardio workouts and for the time being will not involve any indoor strength training, she said. Students will be required to bring their own workout supplies like water bottles and towels — though Ojeda said she was urging students “to minimize the amount of things that we’re bringing from one location to this location.” Students will not be allowed to use locker rooms and will be barred from joining workouts if they experience any coronavirus symptoms or have contact with a patient.

Money matters

On Monday’s agenda were a number of financial topics. Among them were proposed changes to the school district’s tax collection rates. But Aguero asked the board to table that discussion until later, and the school board agreed.

Aguero also proposed — and the school board accepted — a proposed 2% pay raise for the elementary principal, the athletic director and all supportive staff, which includes everyone from bus drivers to custodians. The new high school principal was excluded from that proposal because she is a new employee with a new contract. As superintendent, Aguero was also excluded. So were teachers, who already have regular raises built into contracts.

School board members were largely in support of the move, citing increasing costs of living and the coronavirus pandemic. “I say we give them a raise,” said board member Teresa Nuñez. “They’ve done a lot.” She added that

school workers had “all stepped up” during the coronavirus pandemic and that the board should “do our part to say thanks to them.”

There was also a discussion of employee health insurance. The plan school workers had during the 2019-2020 school year was cancelled, Aguero said. He presented the board with two alternatives, one that would cost \$4,000 more per year for the school district than the previous plan, and one that would cost an extra \$10,000.

Aguero urged the board to choose the latter, saying it offered far better options for school workers. Ultimately, the school board agreed.

“There was more choice of doctors,” Aguero said in a follow-up call on Tuesday. “That was the biggest thing for me,” especially given the limited medical resources in the region. Better yet, the second plan offered staff better options for going out-of-network.

Honoring teachers

Sara Tandy, a (mostly) 5th and 6th grade teacher at Marfa Elementary School, has taught in Marfa since 2016 and had a previous stint at the school in the mid-2000s, Aguero said. But on Monday, she told the school board she was retiring.

“This little school consists not only of highly qualified teachers,” Tandy told the board, “but of people who actually enjoy their job and are willing to work hard.” Marfa Elementary School Principal Amy White presented Tandy with a YETI cooler as a parting gift. The school typically gives rocking chairs as presents to retirees, but Tandy said she preferred a high-quality cooler. “‘I’m not going to be sitting on my porch like an old lady’ is kind of what she said,” Aguero explained.

Marfa ISD also regularly holds an end-of-year luncheon to debrief, catch up and honor all employees who have served at the school district for five, 10, 15 or 20 years. But given the coronavirus pandemic, this year “unfortunately we can’t do that,” White said.

In lieu of in-luncheon honors, White gave The Big Bend Sentinel a list of veteran workers at the schools. Valerie Valerio has now been at Marfa ISD for 20 years, while Maria Medrano has served for 15. Armidia Villarreal has been at the school for 10 years. Cheri Aguero, Eliza Barton, Joshua Kelly, Mayra Marquez, Socorro Mena, William Thornsburg, Jose Salgado and Gerardo Ureste have now all served for five.

OBITUARY



Suehs

Ann Blanton Suehs passed away on June 3, 2020 in Kerrville, Texas with her family by her side. Ann was a fourth generation Texan born in Marfa, TX on May 28, 1947 to Ira and Jean Blanton. She moved with her family to Austin in 1955, where she attended Austin High School and University of Texas at Austin. On January 31, 1970 she married her high school sweetheart Bill Suehs. In 1980 she returned to West Texas where she devoted her time and talents to family, friends and charity. Ann passed on her love for food, entertaining, traveling and watching West Texas sunsets to her two daughters.

Ann was preceded in death by

her parents, Ira and Jean Blanton, sister Gail Baker and son-in-law Greg Garcia. She is survived by her husband of 50 years, Bill Suehs, brother Dr. Ira Y. Blanton, Jr., daughters Laura Garcia and Mary Jean Parker (Daniel Parker), granddaughters Bianca Garcia and Vivian Parker, as well as numerous nieces, nephews and cousins.

A celebration of life will be held for family as she is laid to rest at her family ranch in Marfa. The family would like to receive your remembrances to share as they celebrate Ann’s life. Please feel free to leave remembrances at www.grimesfuneralchapel.com. The family would also like to thank the nurses and doctors of Peterson Hospital, Capital Home Health Services and her personal caregivers.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to the Peterson Health Foundation at <https://www.petersonhealth.com/about-peterson/foundation/> or a charity of your choice. Funeral arrangements are entrusted to Grimes Funeral Chapels of Kerrville.

SRSU executive team sets guidance for Fall 2020 semester

By TRAVIS HENDRYX
Sul Ross State University

ALPINE — Sul Ross State University will open as scheduled for the fall semester on August 24, 2020. Additionally, the university announced its intent to return to face-to-face academic instruction. As part of its “Safe School, Safe Students” initiative, the university will also implement new policies to maintain social distancing and follow CDC guidelines.

A university task force has been closely studying the specific needs of Sul Ross campuses, faculty, staff and students, since just after the pandemic began. The task force has also been monitoring directives from both the medical community and federal, state and local leaders. The task force’s recommendations were recently discussed by the Sul Ross executive team.

Sul Ross will operate its fall schedule with some modifications: laboratory and other hands-on instruction will be front-loaded to take place towards the beginning of the fall semester. All instruction after the Thanksgiving holidays will be delivered online. All instructional classrooms have been modified to allow for social distancing; hand sanitizing stations have been placed at the entrances and exits of instructional facilities, and campus pedestrian walkways will be altered to emphasize and maximize one way traffic patterns where necessary.

“Sul Ross is blessed with plenty of room and much wide-open space to allow for social distancing,” said University President Pete Gallego. “Nothing is more important than keeping our students, faculty and staff safe as we deliver a quality education to those we serve.”

Sul Ross has four campuses serving both Far West Texas and the Middle Rio Grande region. Each campus will implement the same basic procedures. However, each campus will also have the flexibility to incorporate new policies in response to changes in state or local circumstances. This allows for the fact that the COVID situation is fluid and constantly changing.

“Our university is the smallest public university in Texas. We all know each other and we’ll take care of each other. If things change, we will respond quickly. We don’t have a big, messy bureaucracy to slow things down. COVID has made all of us rethink our priorities. Our goal is to make Sul Ross the safest university campus in Texas,” continued President Gallego, “Everyone now knows that bigger isn’t necessarily better and that population density isn’t always a good thing. We want Sul Ross to be as safe as being home.”

The Sul Ross task force and administration will continue to meet regularly, monitor the pandemic and the accompanying public health situation, and make necessary adjustments as needed to keep the university community safe.

Balmorhea State Park to expand 7 times its size

By CARLOS MORALES
Marfa Public Radio

BALMORHEA — Balmorhea State Park will soon stretch well beyond the walls lining its historic spring-fed pool, adding some 640 acres to the Far West Texas attraction.

The expansion could include nature trails and scenic views but won’t immediately be available for the public to access. The 643-acre acquisition has been seven years in the making and will vastly expand the park’s size from 108 acres to a total of 751 acres.

“This is an exciting acquisition not only from a conservation standpoint but also the opportunity to increase recreational activity for our visitors,” said Director of Texas State Parks Rodney Franklin in a press release.

“Wildlife viewing and hiking are core activities at our parks, and providing more space for this is critically important, particularly at Balmorhea

State Park.”

The 600-acre land acquisition includes Carpenters Hill, a stretch of land originally part of the park when it was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

The acquisition was purchased through a federal conservation fund established by Congress in the 1960s to “invest in parks, preserve our history and protect our local, state, and national collection of lands and waters,” according to a press release from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The fund uses earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing to make land and preservation investments.

While Texas parks have started reopening as the state lifts coronavirus restrictions, Balmorhea State Park remains closed.

The park closed last summer to fix extensive maintenance problems across the entire park.

Multiple contractors are working on a range of projects spanning from a complete overhaul

of the park’s sewerage system to finishing long-standing repairs on campgrounds and the San Solomon Courts.

Since May 2018, the West Texas park has closed on three separate occasions — including the most recent closure — for a period that has spanned, so far, 19 months. The first two closures were partial and affected the pool area only. But the most recent closure, which began September 2019, has been park-wide.

The pool’s most high-profile closure lasted nearly nine months while contractors made \$2 million worth of repairs to a crack in the concrete lining underneath the high dive. The structural damage was first discovered during a 2018 pool cleaning. At that time, the park reopened as the swim season began.

In the last 10 years, visitation to the far West Texas swimming hole has greatly increased, causing the park to cap the daily number of visitors it allows.

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Preview begins Friday, June 19th from 5:00pm -7:00pm.
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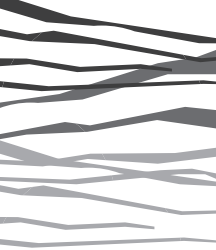


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Marfa ISD provides free breakfast and lunch for all children 18 years and younger. <i>Please be on the look out for a Marfa vehicle for deliveries at the following locations and times:</i>	Mando's Restaurant Parking lot or Apartments on Spring and Columbia	Porter's Field or USDA on Ave D <i>Robertson Cafeteria will be open for drive-by pick up from 9:00-10:00</i>	Blackwell Playground or Marfa Villa <i>presented by</i> 



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