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## Ernie Villarreal sentenced to 27 months, \$314,500 repayment

By Mary Cantrell  
mkcantrell@bigbendsentinel.com

TRI-COUNTY — Ernie Villarreal was sentenced to 27 months in federal prison and ordered to pay restitution to Valentine ISD in the amount of \$314,497 in a federal court proceeding in Pecos on Wednesday.

Villarreal, 43, of Marfa, pled guilty to eight counts of wire fraud and one count of theft concerning programs receiving federal funds in November for defrauding Valentine ISD, where he previously worked as the business manager and tax assessor collector. The Wednesday sentence was handed down by U.S. District Court Judge David Counts.

Valentine ISD Superintendent Debbie Engle urged the court to hold Villarreal accountable in a manner reflective of the “severity of his wrongdoing” in a victim impact statement at Wednesday's sentencing.

“The consequences of his actions go beyond the monetary loss — he has disrupted lives, fractured trust, and placed an undue burden on an already struggling community,” Engle said.

The sentence Villarreal received is light compared to what he was facing — up to 10 years in prison for the federal theft charge, and up to 20 years in prison for each wire fraud charge, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office (USAO). However, it was the maximum sentence based on a recommendation from the U.S. sentencing commission, which took into account several factors including the amount embezzled, the fact that Villarreal had no criminal history and more.

Villarreal used several methods to defraud the small district where he was employed — including using ISD credit cards to make personal purchases totaling over \$100,000, issuing unauthorized checks from ISD accounts to himself totaling over \$10,000, and issuing unauthorized checks to cover personal expenses owed to a credit card company totaling over \$20,000. He also generated fraudulent payments to current and former employees for work that had not occurred and routed the payments to his own personal bank account. The total loss to Valentine ISD was \$314,497.

Villarreal used the ill-gotten funds for hundreds of personal purchases, including travel, lodging, home improvements, hardware store purchases, personal cell phone bills, fuel, oil changes, convenience store purchases, Airbnb rentals, personal flight purchases, and various other unauthorized purchases.

In Engle’s victim impact statement — which she provided  
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The West Texan Media Group, LLC



Photo courtesy of USBP Big Bend Sector Strategic Communications

Up to 500 military troops, along with Stryker combat vehicles, will soon be deployed to the Big Bend region to assist the local Border Patrol Sector with surveillance and detection operations.

## Army officials: 500 troops in Big Bend will not be arresting subjects

By Sam Karas  
sam@bigbendsentinel.com

ALPINE — On Friday morning, officials from the Department of Defense (DOD) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) hosted a press conference in Alpine to field questions from local media outlets about the military deployment underway in the region. Since March 13, over 200 troops have been deployed to the tri-county area, with plans for up to 500 over the next few weeks, officials said.

The American forces will be

mirrored by a deployment from Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, who promised 10,000 active duty troops along her country’s northern border. Five hundred of those arrived in the Ojinaga area in February, said Mexican Consul Gamaliel Bustillos.

Maj. Jared Stefani, who is leading the Big Bend battalion, explained that American troops will be involved in “enhanced surveillance and detection,” and will not be responsible for arresting and detaining folks suspected of breaking immigration law. “We

are committed to providing the necessary support to ensure the security of our nation's border and provide world-class support to the Big Bend Sector Border Patrol, who is the lead agency in this operation,” he said.

Troops are coming from Fort Carson, Colorado, and are a part of the Joint Task Force Southern Border mission, headquartered in Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

For last week’s issue, *The Big Bend Sentinel* reported on tentative plans to house soldiers at large encampments at the Marfa and

Presidio airports. Those plans have not yet been set in stone, said Lt. Col. Sarah J. Ray, the 10th Mountain Division’s chief of public affairs, with officials set to make a final decision about where troops will be stationed in the coming weeks.

During the question and answer period of the conference, *The Sentinel* asked the gathered representatives about policies related to the use of deadly force, referencing the killing of Presidio High School senior Esequiel Hernandez, Jr. by a Marine on line  
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## White descendants say ‘sham adoption’ was attempt to ‘disinherit’ them

By Rob D’Amico  
rob@bigbendsentinel.com

PRESIDIO COUNTY — When tensions were high heading toward a Summer 2023 trial to try and remove James “Jim” White III as trustee of the historic 65,000-acre Brite Ranch in Presidio County, a pair of Jim’s siblings tried a rather unusual tactic to gain leverage in their lawsuit against him — adopting a then 59-year-old man to be their heir, according to court records.

While Jim’s children have made “sham adoption” allegations before in an October 2023 lawsuit against their uncles, Beau and Mac White,

a new petition by three of them attacking the adoption was filed earlier this month and now includes the adoptee — Geoffrey Scott Connor as a defendant.

Jim’s daughter, Raphael White Woodward, said the nearly seven years of court battles are a result of her father’s intent to save the ranch and not have it be sold. “I witnessed my dad cultivate a deep love for this land,” Woodward wrote to *The Big Bend Sentinel*. “His connection to the ranch began long before he took on the challenge of its preservation. Unfortunately, the preservation of Brite Ranch was threatened by a sham, a fraudulent adoption scheme

orchestrated by my uncles.”

Documents in past and recent court filings outline how Jim’s brothers — who had no children at the time of the pretrial proceedings in 2021 — threatened to adopt a child if they didn’t get a fair settlement in their lawsuit against Jim. That move would divide the inheritance and result in a potential \$27.8 million loss to Jim’s children, with the ranch's value in total set at about \$65 million.

Jim’s son Cuatro took the lead in filing motion for partial summary judgement last month seeking a ruling that Beau and Mac violated their fiduciary duties for the ranch trusts by not notifying Jim’s children

of the adoption, which would hurt them as beneficiaries, and therefore the adoption should not impact the heirship of Jim’s children. The petition could be headed for a hearing as soon as April 15 in the 394th District Court in Marfa.

The ranch is currently owned by the Jane White Trust (Jane was the siblings’ mother), of which Jim is trustee on behalf of his siblings in addition to the four individual smaller land trusts belonging to each of the siblings. When the sibling trustees die, their children will be beneficiaries. Currently, Jim’s children are Cuatro White,  
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## Newspaper lawsuit raises question: Was the ‘dead suspect loophole’ really closed?

By Rob D’Amico  
rob@bigbendsentinel.com

PECOS — When *Pecos Enterprise* Publisher Smokey Briggs asked the Pecos Police Department for bodycam videos of a police shooting that killed a local man, he thought he was just doing his job to ensure the videos matched what the police wrote in reports about the incident. After nearly a year and a half battling for that information, he said the newspaper has now been forced to file a lawsuit to obtain it.

“I’m not saying the shooting was not justified,” Briggs said. “But as a news organization, I think this

is a very important part of our job, to gather information and get it to our readers. I just want to be sure everything is being handled correctly, and that means — under Texas law — I get to see reports and videos of what happened.” (Briggs also runs the *Monahans News* and prints *The Big Bend Sentinel* and *Presidio International*.)

Briggs had the law on his side, or so he thought, since the last Texas Legislature in 2023 closed what was known as the “dead suspect loophole,” which previously allowed law enforcement to withhold documents and video involving a dead suspect who had not been

convicted of a crime.

But when Briggs asked for the information in the months after the 2023 shooting through formal public records requests, the Pecos Police Department refused and withheld the information. The Texas Rangers that had investigated the shooting also refused, and the Texas Attorney General’s (AG’s) Office — which reviews law enforcement denials to releasing information — ruled in favor of the police in February of 2024.

What angered Briggs was the AG’s justification for not releasing the information — a Texas Family Code statute (261.201) allowing

documents related to child abuse or neglect investigations to be withheld.

“The Pecos police never even brought that up as an issue when they went to the attorney general,” Briggs said. A child in the dead man’s family was interviewed several days after the shooting, but that information should be separate from the information about the actual shooting, he said.

Killed in the shooting was Adam Lee Ybarra, 37, of Pecos. His brother, Alvaro Navarette, a witness to the shooting, told *The Big Bend Sentinel* that he is also angry about  
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## Marfa ISD personnel updates

**Interim superintendent still under evaluation, high school principal resigns**

By Mary Cantrell  
mkcantrell@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — While it has been nearly two years since the Marfa ISD School Board named Arturo Alferez interim superintendent, his evaluation and certification process is still ongoing, according to Board President Teresa Nuñez.

The board has met five times over the past two months, for both regular and special meetings, all of which included closed session discussions of superintendent evaluation and employment.

On Monday, the board executed the following item: “Consider and take Possible Action to Accept Resignation by Arturo Alferez of his 2024-2025 Interim Superintendent Contract and to Approve Administrator Contract for the 2024-2025 School Year with Temporary Interim Superintendent Stipend Agreement for Mr. Alferez.”

In a follow up with *The Big Bend Sentinel*, Nuñez explained that the district’s lawyers found that the word “administration” was missing from Alferez’s current interim superintendent contract. He was first extended an interim superintendent contract for the 2023-24 school year, which the board then extended for the 2024-25 school year.

“So, per our lawyers, he had to resign from that current contract, and then we put him on the corrected, which was just that one word — administration — contract,” Nuñez said.

But, for all intents and purposes, she said, his employment status as the head of the district has not changed. The district’s lawyers did not respond to a request for comment by press time.

The new administrator contract the board extended to Alferez on Monday ends in June 2025 and a decision regarding his employment for the 2025-26 school year has not yet been made, Nuñez said.

Alferez is not a certified superintendent and has been working towards earning that credential since he was named interim, she said. This summer he took superintendent courses with the Region 18 Education Service Center. In October, when asked by *The Sentinel* what the status of his certification was, Nuñez said Alferez needed to “complete some hours” with Region 18 then would schedule his test.

This week, Nuñez said Alferez will schedule to take his test sometime in April. There is no time limit to how long an interim superintendent may be in place.

Trustees are waiting to see Alferez’s superintendent certification test results, she said, before making a decision about his employment for next school year. “It just depends on how he does on his test, if we move on naming him the superintendent or still offering him an administration contract for the next school year,” Nuñez said.

The board is confident that Alferez will pass his test and has completed all other requirements to become a certified superintendent, she said. “We’re moving in the right direction,” Nuñez said. “That’s our whole goal is to make sure we do have the certified, right person.”

Nuñez said other metrics — like staff retention, student outcomes and growth, dual credit and career technical education (CTE) participation and early childhood education partnerships — are also being considered by the board in Alferez’s evaluation process.

Alferez did not respond to requests for comment on his superintendent certification pursuit beyond the statement that “testing will be done in April.”  
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## 500 troops in Big Bend

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watch with Joint Task Force 6 in 1997. “With our standard rules for the use of force, soldiers do have the right to defend themselves,” Stefani explained.

Stefani hadn’t been familiar with Hernandez’s story before arriving in the area, but had been prompted to learn more and reach out to family members by Presidio County Judge Joe Portillo. “[His story] touched me in two different ways,” Stefani said. “The first is as a father, thinking about how that would impact a family and have lasting impacts on the community. The second one is as a commissioned officer out there making sure that every soldier is performing the functions they are required to do based on the standard rules for use of force.”

Lloyd Easterling, the Big Bend Sector’s new chief patrol agent, said that the CBP and DOD’s joint strategy under the Trump administration is much different from what the Big Bend region saw in the ‘90s. Rather than having military personnel in ghillie suits staking out the river, this deployment will be highly visible, with some units patrolling the area in large Stryker vehicles. “Nobody’s going to be hidden, everything will be in plain sight,” he said. “We want people to see where [the troops] are — it’s a method of deterrence.”

DOD representatives told the gathered reporters that they hope that this visibility will extend into soldiers’ time off, too — they’ll be free to unwind at local restaurants and businesses. Major Stefani said that members of his battalion have also expressed an interest in exploring area parks and volunteering in the community.

How large of an economic and social impact these soldiers have on the Big Bend remains to be seen, but historically speaking, the histories of the US military and Presidio County are tightly entwined, starting with a deployment of one hundred cavalrymen to Marfa in 1911. “None of those men knew that they were founding a military post that would be here for the next thirty-five years and would eventually become Fort D.A. Russell. They could never have imagined that a hundred years later that post would be an internationally-known art center, [the Chinati Foundation]” historian Lonn Taylor wrote in an address written to mark the encampment’s centennial. “Those troopers and their officers regarded Camp Marfa, as they called it, as their temporary home and supply base while they patrolled the Texas side of the Rio Grande.”

Even this publication has its roots in military operations along the border — before it was the paper of record for Presidio County, *the Big*



Staff photo by Mary Cantrell

*From left, Border Patrol Sector Chief Lloyd Easterling, Maj. Jared Stefani and Lt. Col. Sarah J. Ray field questions from local reporters at a press conference on Friday.*

*Bend Sentinel* was the cavalry post newsletter.

Like any period of massive change, locals have been hesitant to trust. Over the weekend, images of the Strykers headed to Presidio started circulating on social media. The reaction among tri-county residents was overwhelmingly negative, with many questioning why such a large number of support troops had been sent to the historically least-busy Border Patrol sector experiencing what could turn out to be its lowest traffic since the 1960s.

Chief Patrol Agent Easterling explained that the low numbers don’t automatically mean that the mission has been accomplished — he said that the Trump administration regards success as zero crossings and “full operational control of the border.”

On Wednesday morning, DOD and CBP officials teamed up with Presidio ISD Police Chief Joel Nuñez to do some public outreach and education

at Presidio Elementary School. Nuñez had been receiving calls from community members about the Strykers and wanted to dispel some rumors and misconceptions. “These vehicles arrived yesterday and they wanted to let the students see them before being sent out into the field since these vehicles will not be seen in town that often,” he told *The Sentinel*, explaining that — for the most part — Army personnel will be driving standard unmarked vehicles to get around in city limits.

During Wednesday’s Commissioners Court meeting, both Precinct 1 Commissioner Deirdre Hisler and Precinct 4 Commissioner David Beebe spoke highly of Maj. Stefani and his crew. “He’s the kind of guy I think you can trust,” Beebe said. “I’m not worried about the leadership of this group.”

Fernando Garcia, executive director of the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR) — a border watchdog and advocacy group with a branch in Presidio — still fears for the safety of local residents. Despite the DOD’s insistence otherwise, he believes that this deployment is a violation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits the military from enforcing civilian law. “In that sense, we believe that this deployment is breaking the limits of the Constitution,” he said.

At Friday’s press conference, DOD staff preemptively countered this concern by saying that the deployment was within the bounds of the Posse Comitatus Act because the surveillance support roles carried out by deployed troops will free up Border Patrol to conduct field work and make arrests. Garcia isn’t convinced by this logic — given that folks detected by the military and flagged for arrest by Border Patrol could be detained by these undeputized troops.

In the fall of 2024, BNHR and the Texas Civil Rights Project released a report on “troublesome patterns of abuse” the group alleges were carried out by members of the National Guard deployed to the border in places like Eagle Pass, where CBP and the DOD have been working together for years. He insists that — while the Border Patrol’s record isn’t perfect, in his organization’s view — they are better equipped through training and acclimation to border communities to enforce the law.

On May 3, the group will host a peaceful demonstration in El Paso to demonstrate that the effects of these alleged abuses could have far-reaching effects. “Even people in the interior should be concerned about this,” he said. “They are setting up a precedent — this could happen other places in the United States.”

## Marfa ISD personnel

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### Junior high and high school principal resignation

Junior High and High School Principal Candy Dominguez tendered her resignation to Alferez on March 20, which was accepted by the school board on Monday. Dominguez started at the district just this year, after the high school principal role had been vacant for a year

following the resignation of Luane Porter in the summer of 2023.

In her letter of resignation, provided to *The Sentinel*, Dominguez did not list a reason for her resignation but cited her various accomplishments over the past year — from the creation of a new discipline matrix to enforcing the dress code and Texas 90% Attendance Law — and

school events she attended.

“I thank you for the opportunity that I was given and will forever be grateful to have served the Marfa ISD & Marfa Community as a whole,” Dominguez wrote to Alferez. “I wish you, our students and the entire Marfa Community much success.”

Trustees extended new contracts to other district

administrators including its current CFO, athletic director and elementary principal in late February, but not to Dominguez. This week, Alferez expressed gratitude for Dominguez’s time at the district.

“We want to thank Dr. Dominguez for her service to our students and district,” Alferez said. “We wish her the best in her future endeavors.”

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Alpine Historic District update

ALPINE — Alpine City Council members recently heard updates from Post Oak Preservation Solutions regarding the process of establishing a nationally-recognized historic district for downtown Alpine.

Council voted to use hotel occupancy tax (HOT) funds for a historic district survey in August 2024 following the Holland Avenue fire. If achieved, the national register status will help property owners within the district boundaries offset restoration costs with tax credits and grant funds.

Post Oak Founder Ellis Mumford-Russell explained that a national register nomination for Kokernot Field, which is being pursued separately from downtown, was submitted to the Texas Historic Commission (THC) on March 12. She said the firm is confident that it will be approved, ushering the project into subsequent phases ultimately culminating in a National Park Service (NPS) review in May 2026.

For the downtown Alpine historic district, Mumford-Russell said on-the-ground surveys of buildings were conducted in January, and a determination of eligibility — an initial hurdle Kokernot already cleared — was recently submitted to the THC. The established period of significance is 1884 to 1975, she said, with the oldest known building being the J.C. Carr-Bob Slight House at 406 N 5th Street.

In total, the historic district stretches across 53 blocks, she said, including 339 resources, 262 of which are “contributing” — buildings older than 50 years that have not been heavily altered. Mumford-Russell said they chose the boundary based on the concentration of buildings older than 50 years in the part of Alpine where “the core of the development was organized on both sides of the railroad tracks.”

The proposed historic district boundary is still subject to revision, she said, but has been expanded to include more cultural resources on the south side of the railroad tracks. “We learned a lot more about important stories and institutions there on the south side to include,” Mumford-Russell said.

Councilmember Reagan Stone asked whether recent federal government

actions may impact the project, to which Mumford-Russell said possibly the historic tax credits and more likely the grant funds, which are often distributed by the federal government to the states, but the situation is still uncertain. She said NPS staffers that handle national register nominations have not yet experienced any cuts.

*If you have information about a historic structure in downtown Alpine or photos or memories to share, email [alpine@postoakpreservation.com](mailto:alpine@postoakpreservation.com).*

### Marfa High School attendance trends down

MARFA — Attendance at the Marfa Junior High and High School has been on a downward trend as of late, according to numbers shared in a school board meeting this week.

Junior high attendance is 92.7% for sixth grade, 91.01% for seventh grade and 90.07% for eighth grade. High school attendance was down for every grade level compared to attendance figures calculated at the end of February, with particularly troubling figures for ninth and twelfth graders.

Attendance at the high school is 87.48% for ninth grade, 91.98% for tenth grade, 91.97% for eleventh grade and 85.99% for twelfth grade.

The average attendance for the elementary school is 94.56% while the average for the entire district is 91.87%.

School board members expressed dismay at the low attendance rates, with Stela Fuentez asking Interim Superintendent Arturo Alferez how the district is planning to increase attendance particularly for ninth- and twelfth-grade students.

Alferez said seniors no longer have “open campus,” where they were allowed to leave school grounds for lunch but that school policy states students who are 18 years old can check themselves out. He said district leaders are trying to be proactive by delivering letters to homes and pursuing truancy cases with the local justice of the peace. But illness, including COVID, the flu and stomach bugs, were contributing to low attendance.

Athletic Director Linda Ojeda said the district recently started preventing junior high and high school students from participating in sports and extracurricular activities if they are not showing up to class before, the day of, and after events. “If a student does not attend school the day after an event, we are revoking their opportunity to compete in the next event,” she told *The Sentinel*.

### Train derails near Kent again

#### From The Van Horn Advocate

KENT — The Advocate received a tip last Friday morning from a traveler who witnessed what

appeared to be a train derailment near Kent, Texas, about 40 miles east from Van Horn. Therese Bauer was on Interstate 10 traveling to Guadalupe Mountains National Park when she began filming the aftermath of a fresh derailment. The scene was strewn with dozens of overturned train cars, including some tankers with their contents leaking.

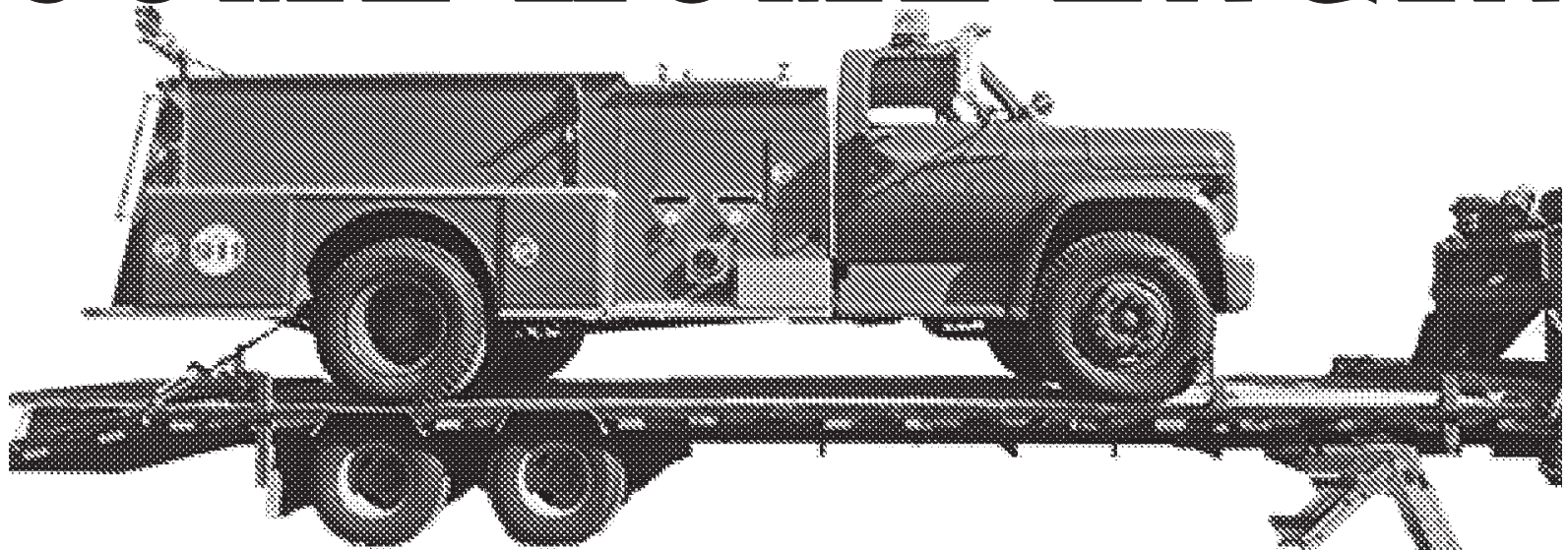
Cody Davis, with the Culberson County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), responded to a call before 5 a.m. regarding a possible hazmat situation. Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), Maintenance Away workers and subcontractors were dispatched to the location immediately to assess the damage and determine if hazardous cargo was listed on the manifest.

The Advocate received this initial statement from UPRR media representative Robynn Tysver: “Approximately 33 Union Pacific train cars derailed in Culbertson (sic) County near the small community of Kent, Texas. No one was injured, and there were no HAZMAT releases. Local officials were notified, and cleanup is underway. The cause of the incident remains under investigation.”

Tysver reiterated two days later that there were no hazardous materials released and confirmed that the white material (as shown in pictures), was solid PVC resin which had been remediated from the site. On Tuesday, railroad officials added that cleanup at the site was continuing and added that they have repaired the track allowing rail traffic to resume, but they were still removing the damaged cars.

This marks the third incident in about 10 years for UPRR. On January 30, 2017, I-10 was closed after a Union Pacific train derailed, again near Kent. The Texas Department of Transportation initially identified one of the six cars marked as containing hazardous material as leaking but soon discovered that the frost-like substance on cargo marked butane was just dirt dust. Culberson County Sheriff’s Department was dispatched to the scene and an area around the crash was set as an evacuation zone, which included a section of Interstate 10 forcing a detour. The interstate was closed after the accident but reopened about three hours later. Two years prior to this incident, there was another close call around the same area, with another derailment resulting in the loss of 7 train cars, but fortunately, there were no injuries.

# WELCOME HOME ENGINE 22!



Many thanks to the Ellis Unit Bus Barn team, who renovated our 1977 Chevrolet Pumper. This \$13,600 undertaking could not have been possible without the generous support from individual donations and those who give monthly via their Marfa utility bill. A special shout out to Mac and Julie White, who volunteered their time to haul our beloved truck back home.

Having Engine 22 as both backup and as an additional response apparatus is another step in the Marfa Volunteer Fire Department’s commitment to ensure a prepared and safer Marfa.

Thank you, the Marfa Volunteer Fire Department

# Newspaper lawsuit

(Continued from page 1)

the bodycam footage being withheld. He and Ybarra family members have not been allowed to see videos either, he said. Ybarra was bipolar and was switching medications at the time of the shooting on November 26, 2023, Navarette said, and Ybarra was in distress before the incident.

Ybarra had a confrontation with his ex-wife earlier in the day and rammed her car and smashed her car window, according to police reports. Police responded with a visit to a residence where reports of “shots fired” were called in, and Ybarra was there in the living room, possibly trying to set the house and furniture on fire. Navarette, who was also there, said he was trying to deescalate the situation inside the living room. Instead, police officers came into the home and tased Ybarra, which caused an axe he was holding to fly out of his hand, Navarette said. Pecos police reports stated that Ybarra threw the axe at the officers, at which point they shot him.

Navarette said he believes officers should have done more to deescalate a situation with someone experiencing mental health issues. Although he was in the room and witness to what happened, videos could equip him to make a better determination of whether the police were justified in opening fire, Navarette said, particularly since he was traumatized after seeing his brother killed.

“That day there was no need for loss of life,” Navarette said. “At that time, I wasn't aware that [Pecos] had mental health officers, but none of them were dispatched.”

Talking to a Texas Ranger about his investigation into the shooting did little to give Navarette faith in law enforcement, he said. “It's not like he was there to do an investigation. It was more like he was there to exonerate [the police officers].”

A February 2024 grand jury ultimately declined to indict any of the officers involved. The Texas Rangers also concluded their investigation of the officers, court records showed, and thus, the Pecos Police Department could no longer use an “ongoing investigation” status as a legal means to withhold records. (Police officials did not release the names of the police officers that shot Ybarra. Although a review of records in the court filings made it possible to determine the names of the two officers involved, *The Sentinel* is not publishing them at this point since there were no indictments or findings of criminal acts by the Texas Rangers.)

Closing the dead suspects loophole?

The Texas Public Information Act (PIA), which makes a wide variety of government documents public record, has exemptions to allow law enforcement and prosecutors the discretion to withhold some information — usually documents and evidence for open investigations or prosecutorial material that hasn’t led to a conviction or deferred adjudication. If a suspect died before being charged and convicted, law enforcement agencies used to contend that the records on them didn’t have to be released because there was technically no conviction.

While the exemption was meant to protect the privacy of individuals not convicted, the obvious roadblock to transparency was that the dead suspect loophole included people killed by the police. The loophole provided no transparency for journalists, advocates and sometimes family members trying to ensure police were justified in shooting suspects or for in-custody deaths.

Most commonly withheld were body and dash camera videos of shootings. (Although many departments had voluntarily started releasing videos of police shootings in recent years.) Law enforcement also sometimes



Photo by Maisie Crow

**Pecos Enterprise Publisher Smokey Briggs looks over incoming print orders with his son Charlie at their press in Monahans.**

used the loophole to withhold suicide records, leaving some family members questioning “no foul play” determinations in relatives’ suicides without any tools for investigating the deaths on their own.

Texas Rep. Joe Moody tried for three legislative sessions to pass similar legislation to what ultimately cleared the Legislature in 2023 — HB 30 — which intended to close the dead suspect loophole and mandate the release of records. HB 30 states that an exception to releasing information under the PIA “does not apply to information, records, or notations if a person who is described by or depicted in the information, record, or notation, other than a peace officer, is deceased or incapacitated.”

The impetus for finally getting bipartisan support for the bill was the May 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, where journalists and parents battled the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and Uvalde authorities for more information on the actions of law enforcement in the shooting, which killed 19 children and two adults. DPS and Uvalde police used the dead suspect loophole to initially deny the release of information.

PIA champions — like the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas, which advocates for open records — hailed the bill as a new era in providing the tools needed for journalists and others to get the information needed to examine police-related deaths or mass killings like Uvalde.

“I worked this for six years,” Moody said in a social media post after the bill’s passage. “But Uvalde elevated the issue for the last one, and I’m so proud to finally deliver a path to the answers the people deserve.”

When a citizen files a records request, the responding government agency is typically required to either supply the records within 10 days or request an opinion from the AG on whether they can deny the request with an exception under law — which the Pecos Police Department did. The office then usually has 45 days to

respond. (Extensions can sometimes apply.)

Briggs said he wasn’t exactly surprised that the Pecos Police department stonewalled his PIA requests, but what the AG ruled seemed to be a way of restoring the loophole in some cases. The AG’s office stated in its ruling not that the Pecos police “could withhold” the information, but it “must withhold” it under the Texas Family Code Section 261.201. That section states investigative information must be withheld in most circumstances involving investigations and reports of “alleged or suspected abuse or neglect” of a child.

“There wasn’t any child abuse for the exception to somehow apply,” Briggs said. “Literally, the attorney general plucked it out of thin air.”

Taking the police to court

Briggs appealed the AG decision, and it was denied. His remaining option to battle on is in the courts, and last month his attorney filed a petition for mandamus lawsuit, which forces the Town of Pecos City (its official name) and the Pecos Police Department to defend their position in a district court.

Briggs’ attorney, Joe Larsen, said it means the city and police will have to defend the AG’s decision. “So, congratulations, Town of Pecos City,” he said. “You now get to defend the AG. So, it's going to be interesting to see if the AG tries to help or if the city is just out there by themselves.”

In the lawsuit, the *Pecos Enterprise* argues that “because the law enforcement action and reports do not involve (1) a report or investigation of neglect or abuse of a child or (2) an investigation under [Family Code] Chapter 261, section 261.201 is inapplicable to the information responsive to the Requests for Information.”

Larsen said the AG ruling in Brigg’s case could impact numerous “dead suspect” cases in the future. If a police shooting involves a domestic dispute, that might play into investigations about children, which could

then trigger the use of the Family Code to withhold information. “So, it seriously undermines the dead suspect loophole [closure],” he said.

Jim Hemphill, an attorney and a Texas Freedom of Information Foundation Texas board member, said the use of the Family Code is troubling, but it’s possible that the Pecos Police Department submitted examples of the requested information it wanted to withhold that might tie it to that code.

“When the requester doesn't always know the nature of all the material that's being withheld, it's really hard for the requester to make an argument,” Hemphill said. “Also, when the governmental body makes an argument that they say is a factual assertion to the attorney general, there's no way to dispute that at the attorney general level. Hopefully, more information, at least information about the basis for the withholding, will be revealed during the litigation. Sometimes the requester has to file suit just to fully figure it out.”

Larsen stated in the lawsuit that he did try to get a reason for the exception to release records with calls to the AG’s office inquiring why it “issued a summary letter ruling with no examination of the facts, and no argument on the law.”

“I reminded [an AG official] that interested organizations supporting government transparency had been working for years to plug the ‘dead suspect’ loophole ... and now, in the first case where it would be applicable, the AG took it upon itself ... to apply Family Code section 261.201,” the lawsuits states. “I told him that, as applied by the AG, this Family Code section is a made-up exception, made up for the benefit of law enforcement to conceal their files. [The AG official] said that he ‘doesn’t necessarily disagree,’ but that the AG ‘would not revisit the letter ruling,’” Larsen recounted in the lawsuit.

The petition argues that any child abuse or neglect investigation would have been completely separate from the incident that let to Ybarra’s death. “[The Pecos Police Department] did attach a copy of the incident report and video among the materials that it submitted to the attorney general in connection with its requests for letter ruling,” the lawsuit states. The incident report does not reference abuse of a child in its summary information or any of the police narratives. The offenses listed [for Ybarra] are: (1) Aggravated Assault, (2) Stalking, (3) Aggravated Assault with a Deadly Weapon and (4) Criminal Mischief. ... None of the descriptions in the incident report match any of the definitions of ‘abuse’ set out in Chapter 261, and the police report of this incident cannot be said to be a report of abuse of a child.”

The Town of Pecos City answered the lawsuit with a “general denial” of all claims made by the *Pecos Enterprise*, and the parties have entered the discovery phase of the lawsuit. The Town of Pecos City has retained a Houston law firm, Feldman & Feldman, to argue its case. The firm did not respond to a request for comment, nor did Pecos Police Chief Lisa Tarango.

For Briggs, watching the dead suspect loophole bury information from the public eye has been tortuous. “I mean, it was the idea that you have to release all the information if you arrest someone — or a certain amount of information — but if you kill him instead of arresting him, nothing has to be released. That's insane,” he said.

Briggs said officials should embrace a truly closed loophole. “I would be horribly embarrassed to be a public official, a police chief for Pecos, whatever, claiming that, ‘Oh well, we killed the guy. So, nobody gets to know what happened,’” he said.

# Ernie Villarreal update

(Continued from page 1)

to *The Big Bend Sentinel* — she explained to the court that Villarreal’s actions have had a “deep and lasting” cultural, as well as financial, impact on the community of Valentine.

“This breach of trust extends far beyond a financial loss — it is a betrayal that has damaged relationships and eroded the community’s confidence in the integrity of the district’s leadership,” Engle said. “Teachers, staff, administrators, and parents who had trusted the district’s leadership are now grappling with feelings of anger and frustration.”

She testified that the stolen funds have decreased resources available to students, teachers and families

in a majority low socioeconomic district. “The stolen funds were supposed to enrich the educational opportunities for students, provide necessary resources for teachers, and maintain school facilities,” Engle said.

In a follow up with *The Sentinel*, Engle said the district is pleased that the judge went with the maximum recommended sentence and that Villarreal’s restitution payments will be used to address the district's various financial needs. “As the money comes in, it will be used to address the needs at the time,” Engle said. “We hope to use it to improve some of our student opportunities and programs.”

Villarreal has been out on bond since September

2024. His attorney Shane O’Neal said because he has done well on bond he will self surrender at the direction of the Bureau of Prisons between 30 and 60 days from the sentencing.

O’Neal said Villarreal “realized that he made mistakes.” “He took responsibility for that, knowing that it's gonna cost him financially, it's gonna cost his reputation, it's gonna cost his future,” he said.

But O’Neal argued that proper supervision and typical financial controls were not in place at the district, which he hopes the community recognizes and works to prevent in the future.

“The unfortunate thing is that there's a temptation

here to say, ‘He's bad. We've gotten rid of the bad apple’,” O’Neal said. “I think it would be valuable if the community stepped back a little bit and said, ‘In what ways can we have not put this temptation in front of somebody that we signed up for two jobs instead of having two people work in this office?’”

The FBI investigated the case with assistance from the Texas Rangers and the Department of Education Office of Inspector General. Assistant U.S. attorneys John Fedock, Scott Greenbaum and Chris Skillern prosecuted the case.

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# Opinion

### Uranus Is afoot: ‘Retrograde chaos’

I'm still a fake astrologer. ...and a lazy one, given that my last column appeared in early 2022. But the stakes are high and it's time to weigh in.

We are currently immersed in an unusual period which began November 25, 2024, and continues through April 12, 2025. Astrologer Ray Merriman calls this interval "retrograde chaos." By now, even your dog understands a typical Mercury retrograde: travel delays, miscommunications, computer snafus, and general mayhem of your best laid plans. Now, throw in consecutive and concurrent retrogrades with Venus and Mars, along with Mercury, and your Saturday morning burnt toast becomes a three-alarm fire. We're talking peak confusion and uncertainty on a global basis.

Astrologically speaking, is it any surprise that the King of Chaos currently sits in the Oval Office (not to mention Donald Trump?)

In August/September of 2024, Merriman wrote some remarkable predictions for his book Forecast 2025. Remember, at the time of his writing, Trump not only hadn't yet been reelected, but he was behind in the polls.

Below are several of these predictions:

(1) With Mars retrograde, and in opposition to its co-ruler Pluto (death and rebirth) look for a "revenge-minded cleaning initiative. Many people directly or indirectly connected to the government may find their roles terminated" ... DOGE ball anyone?

(2) With Uranus (shocking change) on the cusp of the 7th House (representing contracts and deals with a nation's allies) "old alliances may separate from the United States. Events arise quite suddenly and unexpectedly in this arena." The shameful treatment of President Zelensky in the White House comes to mind, not to mention the global effects of the dizzying Trump tariff proclamations still playing out today.

(3) Merriman predicted the possibility of controversial mass deportations and border control reform. That didn't take long, did it? And it looks like Presidio County will have a front row seat going forward.

(4) "This period of disruption will follow a pattern of start-again, stop-again executive actions." Promises to usurp Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland are like some dystopian game show, and we're the dumbstruck studio audience. Among other abominations, the DOD's website removed all mention of the Tuskegee Airmen, Navajo Code Talkers, and all manner of heroic men and women in uniform. The ensuing outcry has restored them to their rightful place. But not restored are the Voice Of America, key funding for life-saving research and treatment at the NIH, agricultural science, and worldwide programs of decency and generosity too numerous to name. Also lost are the livelihoods of tens of thousands of our neighbors, friends and fellow citizens. Gone.

I can only close with the wish emblazoned on my favorite (blue!) baseball cap: MAKE ORWELL FICTION AGAIN.

Jack Copeland  
Marfa

...

Dear Editor,

Well — Trump shows his true personality — small minded, power hungry, egotist.

1. Fine everyone who had anything to do with the investigation of the Capitol RIOT.
2. Pardon all the thugs who were convicted of riot crimes.
3. He shows no respect for the rule of law.
4. Now he's started firing our top military generals — one Black & one female.
5. Most of all — he's kowtowed to Putin siding with him against Ukraine.
6. Wait for Russian troops marching in Washington, D. C.

Hugh Johnson  
Alpine

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DO YOU HAVE IDEAS ON HOW TO KEEP  
IT SOLVENT?

MAGA

SPENDING TAX PAYER MONEY  
ON TAX PAYERS IS SOCIALISM!

MAGA

IT SEEMS YOUR FOCUS IS ON  
HELPING THE RICH WHO DON'T  
PAY TAXES!

MAGA

TO BE FAIR, THEY DO PAY SOME TAXES!

MAGA

THAT'S WHY WE NEED TO KEEP THE  
TAX CUTS FOR THE WEALTHY!

MAGA

THAT DOESN'T SEEM FAIR!

COMMIE!!

MAGA

OUR WATER MATTERS

**Texas Stream Team:**  
*empowering communities  
to protect their  
water resources*

By Trey Gerfers

Although the cost-cutting bacchanalia of the current administration is grabbing all the headlines, water science programs in Texas have long been subject to tight budgets and vanishing funding.

One approach to addressing this shortfall has involved the training and engagement of so-called citizen scientists. Perhaps the best example is the Texas Stream Team, “a statewide environmental education and volunteer-based water quality monitoring program” that trains ordinary citizens “to collect and submit surface water and environmental quality data that can then be used to promote and protect the 191,000 miles of Texas waterways,” explains the website of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment. “Texas Stream Team brings together community members, students, educators, academic researchers, environmental professionals, and both public and private sector partners to conduct scientific research and promote environmental stewardship.”

According to Aspen Navarro, deputy director of Watershed Services with the Meadows Center, the “program was originally established by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s Surface Water Quality Monitoring department... to help fill gaps in professional monitoring, especially as state funding is limited and not all waterways are monitored regularly. Having an army of passionate Texans has helped fill these gaps for decades.”

The numbers are impressive. Navarro, who heads up the Texas Stream Team, reports that “12,778 community scientists” have been trained “throughout the duration of the Texas Stream Team program. Some individuals have opted to attend multiple trainings, so in total, we’ve issued 13,197 certificates.”

The work of the Texas Stream Team is especially important because “Texas is a hotspot for freshwater biodiversity, supporting 191 fish species, 50 species of mussels, and nearly one-quarter of all U.S. crayfish species,” according to Texas Parks and Wildlife. These species need a variety of habitats to thrive, including rivers, creeks, wetlands, and reservoirs. But these habitats are increasingly at risk due to drought, invasive species, and pollution. The Native Fish Conservation Network reports that 48% of Texas’ fish are currently considered “imperiled,” further highlighting the urgent need for focused conservation efforts.

There are 25 major river basins in Texas and all of them have Texas Stream Team monitoring sites. Among the many issues confronting these basins, says

Navarro, “[b]acteria is the number one impairment...and while our current [testing] method is state-approved, it is subjective, time-consuming, and costly. These are issues we’re constantly researching to make community science monitoring more accessible and accurate as new research and equipment emerge.”

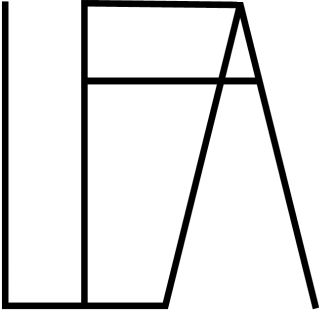
Another hurdle involves “maintaining long-term volunteer engagement and retention,” explains Navarro. “Sustaining participation from free volunteers over time can be challenging, especially as...volunteers’ availability and priorities shift. We ask volunteers to commit to at least a year of consistent monitoring so we can gather temporal data. However, for volunteers with monitoring sites that are performing well, they may not see concerning results, which can make the work feel mundane.” As a result, Texas Stream Team is “always looking for ways to make participation more exciting through group activities, adding additional parameters, and establishing goals...[because] consistent results are great for the waterbody and surrounding area.”

One of the biggest rewards for citizen scientists themselves is the relationship that grows out of close contact with a lake, river, or wetland. “When you spend time monitoring a waterbody,” explains Navarro, “you develop a deeper, more intimate connection with it...you begin to notice the subtle changes that occur over time, like variations in water levels, the presence of certain species, or shifts in water quality... You start to recognize patterns and potential threats...that might have gone unnoticed before. Essentially, you begin to see the waterbody not just as a resource or backdrop, but as a living entity that requires care and stewardship. This shift in perspective makes the monitoring work more meaningful because it transforms your role from a passive observer to an active participant in the ecosystem’s well-being.”

The contribution of citizen scientists to statewide data-gathering efforts cannot be underestimated. According to Navarro, “I never doubted the value of community science programs, but I was initially amazed by how comparable our community science data is to professional state monitoring. Dr. Kelly Albus, now with the Texas Water Resources Institute, conducted an analysis when I first joined the program showing a high comparability rate.” Internal quality control measures conducted each quarter continue to show that citizen science data “are always spot-on with the state findings,” says Navarro. “These reminders validate how precious community science programs are. We need them, and scientists are relying on them more than ever before.”

To donate to the valiant work of the Texas Stream Team, visit: <https://bit.ly/41Z9dhh> or email [TxStreamTeam@txstate.edu](mailto:TxStreamTeam@txstate.edu) for more information.

Trey Gerfers serves as general manager of the Presidio County Underground Water Conservation District. A San Antonio native, he has lived in Marfa since 2013 and can be reached at [tgerfers@pcuwcdd.org](mailto:tgerfers@pcuwcdd.org).



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## 1977 Chevrolet fire engine gets a new lease on life



Staff photo by Mary Cantrell

Photo courtesy of Gary Mitschke

Engine 22, a 1977 fire truck, was recently restored and will be brought back into service by the Marfa Volunteer Fire Department.

By Mary Cantrell  
mkcantrell@bigbendsentinel.com

MARFA — Engine 22, a 1977 Chevrolet cherry red fire engine, is coming out of retirement to once again serve the town’s citizens through the Marfa Volunteer Fire Department. Fire Chief Gary Mitschke said he isn’t sure exactly when the truck was first purchased by the department, but it was sent off for restoration in September of 2022 after sustaining damage as a result of being stored outdoors.

(The fire department has since expanded its indoor storage.) Other than a deteriorating paint job and some mechanical issues, the old engine performed well, he said, and was only out of service for five years before being sent off for a makeover. “This is an old truck, but it’s still a good pumper,” Mitschke said. “I think we’ll get a lot more years of service out of it, keeping it up and maintaining it.” Mitschke — cognizant of the modest fire department budget — pursued a contract between the City of Marfa and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to have the

fire engine repaired by inmates at Huntsville State Prison, specifically the Ellis Unit Bus Barn team, which primarily refurbishes old school buses for parades. “They did a great job,” Mitschke said. “They repainted the whole thing, fixed what they could cosmetically, inside and outside. They serviced the engine for us and repaired anything that was wrong with it. And I think they checked the pump too.” The cost to repair Engine 22, minus transportation costs, was \$8,700, compared to hundreds of thousands of dollars

it would have cost the department to purchase a new truck, Mitschke said. Mac and Julie White helped keep project costs down by donating transportation services. The pumper returned to Marfa last week after its two-year hiatus and now sits indoors at the fire station. On Monday, volunteer fire fighters washed the truck and filled up its gas tank. Engine 22 will serve as a back up pumper and may eventually be a part of a strategy to station emergency response vehicles on either side of the railroad tracks in case of an emergency.

### DRAWING OF THE WEEK



Raven Martinez  
11th grade - Etching of Zoey

### Sudoku & Crossword puzzles:

**UNIVERSAL Sudoku Puzzle**

Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3x3 box contains every digit from 1 to 9 inclusively.

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

### Solution from last week's puzzle:

SOLUTION:

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

### Universal Crossword

Edited by David Steinberg March 12, 2025

**ACROSS**

1 Emperor who fiddled  
5 Peep from a sheep  
8 Cribbage markers  
12 Fiddled (with)  
13 Keebler cookie maker  
14 “Darn right!”  
15 Watcher  
17 “We gotta go!”  
19 Home of the Himalayas  
20 Mo. with a Back to the Future Day  
22 Hair-raising cry  
23 Lions’ lairs  
24 This girl  
25 Laughs or cries, maybe  
29 Sewer line?  
31 Two or more songs in one  
32 Kinda sorta  
34 “Mom” has two of them  
35 Stretch the truth  
36 Bitter beer, briefly  
37 Gorilla, for instance  
38 Bit of ink on the body  
39 Phrase of commitment  
40 “Wee” fellow  
41 Lady’s title, perhaps  
42 Rage  
43 African antelope

**DOWN**

44 Word before “cream” or “cube”  
45 Aromatic shop  
47 Get ready for the big game  
49 Singer Harry  
50 Alternative to com  
51 Something forbidden  
54 Name hidden in “code breaker”  
55 “Not impressed”  
56 Trumpeting bird  
57 “You almost messed that up”  
61 Walk through deep snow  
63 Wild hog  
64 Arthur of “The Golden Girls”  
65 Zones  
66 Six-legged insects  
67 Currency in Japan  
68 Cheeky

7 \*When a New Year’s Eve party typically ends  
8 Warm jackets  
9 Offshoot of punk  
10 Hairstyling goop  
11 Show that had a “More Cowbell” sketch, for short  
12 Spot on the small screen  
16 \*1968 horror film starring Mia Farrow  
18 Check into  
21 Pure  
26 \*Spice made from peppers  
27 \_\_\_\_ Shakur  
28 Certain black card

30 They no longer work  
32 Feet in a meter?  
33 Jack who eschewed fat  
35 Work (out)  
46 Senior villagers  
47 “How unkind!”  
48 Not certain  
52 Bother persistently  
53 Bills currently issued in the U.S. but not Canada  
57 Org. for the Jazz and Magic  
58 + or - particle  
59 Bird-watcher, maybe  
60 Neckline shape  
62 Kendrick Lamar’s genre

### PREVIOUS PUZZLE ANSWER

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | O | V | A | S |   | M | E | G | A |   | P | D | A |   |   |   |   |
| B | U | I | C | K |   | S | O | D | A | S |   | L | E | G |   |   |   |
| C | I | R | R | O | C | U | M | U | L | I |   | A | V | A |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |   | T | E | A | R | S |   | L | A | S | S | O | S |
| L | S | U |   | L | O | H | A | N |   |   | E | M | U | S |   |   |   |
| I | P | O | D |   | C | I | N | C | I | N | N | A | T | I |   |   |   |
| M | U | S | E | S |   | D | I | C | E | D |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| P | R | O | B | O | N | O |   | S | U | R | F | A | C | E |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |   | A | B | O | D | E |   | D | O | V | E | R |   |
| C | I | C | C | A | R | E | L | L | I |   | R | E | D | O |   |   |   |
| A | R | A | L |   |   | S | K | I | D | S |   | N | E | S |   |   |   |
| C | A | R | E | E | R |   | B | L | I | N | G |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| T | I | P |   |   |   | S | E | E | E | Y | E | T | O | E | Y | E |   |
| U | S | E |   |   |   | P | A | S | T | A |   | A | D | R | E | P |   |
| S | E | T |   |   |   | Y | M | C | A |   |   | R | E | S | T | S |   |

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### Deep Blue by Desiree Penner and Jeff Sinnock

|    |    |    |   |    |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|----|
|    | 1  | 2  | 3 | 4  |    | 5  | 6  | 7 |    | 8  | 9  | 10 | 11 |
| 12 |    |    |   |    |    | 13 |    |   |    | 14 |    |    |    |
| 15 |    |    |   |    | 16 |    | 17 |   |    | 18 |    |    |    |
| 19 |    |    |   |    | 20 | 21 |    |   | 22 |    |    |    |    |
| 23 |    |    |   |    | 24 |    |    |   | 25 |    | 26 | 27 | 28 |
|    |    | 29 |   | 30 |    |    |    |   | 31 |    |    |    |    |
| 32 | 33 |    |   | 34 |    |    | 35 |   |    |    | 36 |    |    |
| 37 |    |    |   | 38 |    |    | 39 |   |    |    | 40 |    |    |
| 41 |    |    |   | 42 |    |    | 43 |   |    |    | 44 |    |    |
| 45 |    |    |   | 46 |    |    | 47 |   |    |    | 48 |    |    |
| 49 |    |    |   |    |    |    | 50 |   |    |    | 51 | 52 | 53 |
|    |    |    |   | 54 |    |    | 55 |   |    |    | 56 |    |    |
| 57 | 58 | 59 |   |    |    | 60 |    |   |    | 61 | 62 |    |    |
| 63 |    |    |   |    |    | 64 |    |   |    |    | 65 |    |    |
| 66 |    |    |   |    |    | 67 |    |   |    |    | 68 |    |    |

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## MARFA SHORTHORNS SPORTS CALENDAR

29th - 30th: HS Track Meet in Alpine

## OBITUARIES



**Williams**

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” – 2 Timothy 4:7 KJV

**Mark Owen Williams** was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on October 25, 1956, to French Byron and Patricia

Ann Williams.

Mark graduated from Riverside High School in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1975. In 1980, he graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in geology and a minor in physics. After college, he began working in the geology field for major oil companies in Texas and Oklahoma.

On November 3, 1984, Mark married “the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on,” the one and only, Shirley Ann Mitchell Williams — the love of his life. They were married for 40 wonderful years. Mark selflessly cared for Shirley through her health challenges and lived out what it means to love like Christ. They eventually moved west to Brewster County to join Shirley’s parents in business. The

Mitchells' businesses grew into a well-known source for furniture, flooring, and construction. Mark was active in all aspects of the businesses.

In 2002, Mark and Shirley founded the thriving Grace Christian Fellowship church, where he pastored until his passing. Together, they led ministry teams to many nations, including the Samoan Islands, Yucatán, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, Africa, and Puerto Rico. They preached the Word of God and witnessed many miracles, with signs and wonders following them. The Great Commission was not just a passage of Scripture, but a way of life.

In 2013, he co-founded the Whole Life Wellness Center to teach others holistic, natural ways to obtain healing. He co-authored a book with

his wife, Shirley Williams, and her parents, Cordell and Odena Mitchell, titled Stage 4 Cancer Gone. In 2017, with help from mentors and a great staff who believed God, he and Shirley expanded the Wellness Center under the name Healing-Revolution, reaching nationwide and international audiences. Mark was an aspiring pilot and avionics fanatic. He loved all things with engines that went fast. Of all the titles Mark held, “Dad” and “Grandpa” were his favorite. He loved to play with his grandchildren. He taught them how to fish, play sports, swim — and, most of all, he taught them about Jesus.

Mark is survived by his three children: daughter Shatiel (Adam) Brant of Carson City, Nevada; daughter Shanee (Josiah) Obbink

of Alpine, Texas; and son Vaughn Williams of Alpine, Texas. He is also survived by seven grandchildren: Amalee (13), Jaren (11), and Levi (9) Brant; Aubreigh (6), Haizleigh (4), and Ethan (2) Obbink; and Kaius (1) Brant. He is also survived by his brothers: David (Robin) Williams, Lane (Jutanah) Williams, Matthew Williams, and Daniel (Jerilyn) Williams, along with numerous nieces and nephews.

He was preceded in death by his parents, French and Patricia Williams, and his beloved wife, Shirley Ann Williams. Mark will be missed by all. He made an impact wherever he went and always gave the glory to God.

A visitation will be held Friday, March 28, 2025, at Grace Christian Fellowship in Alpine, Texas at 6 p.m.

with the funeral service taking place the following day Saturday, March 29, 2025, at 10 a.m. at Grace Christian Fellowship. Internment will take place at Marathon Cemetery in Marathon, Texas, following the funeral service.

Donations in his memory can be made to:  
Grace Christian Fellowship  
P.O. Box 1255  
Alpine, Texas 79830  
[www.gcfalpinetx.org](http://www.gcfalpinetx.org)

Services have been entrusted to Alpine Memorial Funeral Home in Alpine, Texas and messages of support and condolences may be left by visiting [www.alpinememorialfuneralhome.com](http://www.alpinememorialfuneralhome.com).



**Church**

**Olga Prieto Church**, a beloved member of the Marfa community, passed away on March 17, 2025, in El Paso, Texas, at the age of 82. She was born on November 5, 1942, in Marfa, Texas, to Catarino and Maria Baeza Prieto.

Olga's life was marked by her dedication to education and her faith as a devout Catholic. She pursued her passion for teaching by obtaining a bachelor's degree in education from Sul Ross State

University in Alpine, Texas. Olga began her career as a student at the historic Blackwell School in Marfa and later became a teacher in both Presidio and Sierra Blanca, Texas. Her commitment to her students and her community did not go unnoticed; she was honored as the "Educator of the Year" in Sierra Blanca.

Olga was not only a dedicated educator but also an active volunteer, generously giving her

time and energy to her church. Her contributions to the community will be remembered fondly by those whose lives she touched. She earned the title of "Steward of the Year" for the Diocese of El Paso in 2020.

She leaves behind her loving family, including her sister Yolanda Aguilar; her son Javier Moguel; her daughter Cecilia Bejarano; her son Russell M. Church; along with seven grandchildren and

seven great-grandchildren who will cherish her memory and the love she bestowed upon them.

Olga is reunited in eternal rest with her parents, Catarino and Maria Baeza Prieto; her brother, Manuel "Mel" Prieto; and her sister Frances "Kika" Jimenez.

Visitation will be held on March 29, 2025, at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Marfa, Texas, from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m., followed by a prayer service at 9:30 a.m. A Mass

will commence at 10 a.m., leading to her burial at Cementerio de la Merced at 11:15 a.m.

Olga will be deeply missed, but her legacy of love, education and faith will endure in the hearts of her family, friends, and all who were fortunate to know her.

Services have been entrusted to Alpine Memorial Funeral Home in Alpine, and gifts and condolences may be left by visiting [www.alpinememorialfuneralhome.com](http://www.alpinememorialfuneralhome.com).



**Sanchez**

**Benjamin Lee Sanchez**, born on November 5, 1976, in Alpine, Texas, passed away on February 17, 2025, in Anchorage, Alaska. Benjamin was a talented artist who expressed his creativity through drawing and tattoos. His artistic

spirit was a significant part of his life, and he touched many lives with his unique and beautiful artwork. He was known for his ability to capture emotions and stories through his art, leaving a lasting impression on everyone who saw his work. Ben was a hard worker and showed his talent not only with art work but also as a landscaper. He loved working with his hands and sharing his talent.

In addition to his artistic talents, Benjamin was known for his kindness, generosity, and sense of humor. He had a way of making everyone around him feel special and loved. His friends and family will always remember his warm smile and the joy he brought into their lives.

He is preceded in death by his

father, Joe P. Sanchez; uncles Henry Sanchez and Danny Lujan; and grandparents Harry Joe and Lydia Lujan. Ben is survived by his mother, Laura Lujan; two daughters, Suzette Sanchez (28) and Esmerelda Sanchez (1); sister Joann Sanchez; and niece Mackenzie Sanchez as well as numerous aunts, uncles, cousins and friends.

Benjamin's memory will live on through his art and the love he shared with his family and friends. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him. A celebration of life will be held in his honor on April 5, 2025, at St. Mary’s Church Hall in Marfa, Texas, at 1 p.m. His family would love for those who love him to come out and share stories and most of all show love for him.



**Kirby**

**Christopher Robert Kirby**, 58, died in his sleep on March 18, 2025.

Chris was a 1984 graduate of Dickinson High School, Dickinson, Texas. He attended Sul Ross State

University, Alpine, Texas, graduating in 1988, with a degree in range animal science.

“Kirby,” at 8 years old, began spending every summer at Prude Ranch, making Fort Davis his permanent home after college graduation. He pursued his lifelong dream of managing ranches and cattle operations in West Texas until his “retirement.” Chris was extremely knowledgeable with native plants, animals and artifacts, and if he didn’t know something, he’d make it up, captivating his audience until he broke down in laughter.

His devotion to family, friends, his work and his community as well as his quick wit and humor will be terribly missed.

Chris is preceded in death by his parents: mother, Barbara Peterson House; father, Robert Roy Kirby; and stepmother Margaret Engeron Kirby.

He is survived by his stepfather, Samuel Giles House; stepsister, Lynn House Scanlon; sister, Lisa Kirby Berne; brother-in-law, Eric Berne; nephews Cooper and Gage Berne; brother, Robert Ross Kirby and sister-in-law, Rachel Winn Kirby, and their children; uncle, Jim Peterson, wife Ginny and daughter Katy Brown.

A celebration of Chris will be held this summer in Fort Davis, Texas. Remembrances and condolences may be shared with the family at Mobile Mortician of Texas’ web site: [www.mmoftexas.com](http://www.mmoftexas.com).

## Food Pantry of Jeff Davis County launches \$20,000 match challenge

JEFF DAVIS COUNTY — The Food Pantry of Jeff Davis County is inviting donors from across the region to help unlock a \$20,000 matching grant in April — funds that will go directly toward purchasing fresh produce for local families in need.

The grant comes from the Carl C. Anderson Sr. and Marie Jo Anderson Charitable Foundation of Dallas, Texas, and will match all individual donations made during April, dollar for dollar, up to \$20,000. If successful, the campaign will fund the Pantry’s Produce Plus program, which provides high-quality fruits and vegetables each week to families in Fort Davis, Valentine and Davis Mountains Resort.

“We’re not just handing out calories,” said the pantry’s executive director, Vicki Gibson. “We’re focused on fresh, healthy food that supports long-term health — especially for children and senior citizens. That’s not easy to do out here, but it’s what our community deserves.”

Recent cuts to federal food assistance are already impacting rural areas. West

Texas Food Bank announced the loss of a \$600,000 federal grant that helped reduce purchasing costs for food pantries across the region. As a result, the Food Pantry of Jeff Davis County expects to face a \$10,000 increase in its food budget in 2025.

“This matching grant gives us a chance to get ahead of the curve,” Gibson added. “We’re calling on donors — near and far — to help us meet this challenge so we can continue offering fresh produce to our clients.”

The campaign is already off to a strong start, with several early donations — including \$1,000 from a local couple who chose to remain anonymous. “We realize how important and expensive it is to have access to fresh produce here in West Texas. The Food Pantry fulfills a critical need in this area.”

The Food Pantry distributes food six times each month and also provides healthy snacks to all students in Fort Davis ISD and Valentine ISD, as well as at the Kids Pantry at the Jeff Davis County Library. Jeff Davis County



currently ranks #1 in Texas for school-age child poverty — making nutritional support programs more critical than ever.

The pantry receives no government funding and relies entirely on private donations.

### How to help:

- Donate online at [www.foodpantry-jdc.org](http://www.foodpantry-jdc.org)
- Mail a check to: Food Pantry of Jeff Davis County, PO Box 244, Fort Davis, TX 79734
- Or scan the QR code above

## 1st Presidio Bank Celebrating 50 Years of Excellence



It is with great pleasure to extend an invitation to you as we celebrate this momentous occasion.

This milestone marks fifty years of dedication, growth, and success, and we would be honored to have you join us in commemorating this achievement.

**Date:** April 5, 2025 - Saturday

**Time:** 6pm - 11pm

1st Presidio Bank

601 Erma Avenue, Presidio, TX 79845

The evening will begin with a cocktail hour, followed by dinner and live music.



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# ‘Sham adoption’

(Continued from page 1)



Photo by Jill White

Jim White, foreground, wrangles cattle in a October 2016 roundup on the Brite Ranch.

Marti White, Clint White, and Raphael White Woodward. Another of Jim’s siblings, who has been involved in some of the court filings — Hester Ann White — has three children. Geoffrey Connor would be an adopted heir of both Beau and Mac unless the petition against that status succeeds.

The sprawling Brite Ranch in southwestern Presidio County, near Capote Peak, was once 125,000 acres settled by Lucas Charles Brite in 1885, who went on to form one of the largest herds of Hereford cattle — three to four thousand pure-bred breeding cattle — in the nation. At one time, the Brite Ranch included a post office, store and school.

Jim, who had lived on the ranch for more than 50 years, continued to run a cattle operation when he became the ranch trustee in 2008. In 2018, his siblings sued him for breach of fiduciary duty for investing money in ranching operations and hiring family members instead of ensuring distributions to the siblings. An August 2023 district court jury ruled in favor of the siblings and Jim was removed as trustee and barred from the ranch. An 8th Court of Appeals ruling in December nullified the jury verdict and sent the case back to district court for another trial. The district court reinstated Jim as trustee on March 11, but numerous petitions are still active in the case.

While Beau and Mac’s threats of adoptions didn’t surface in court records until settlement negotiations in the 2018 lawsuit against Jim, the roots of the threats took form in comments made by Beau long ago during negotiations of the various ranch trusts that were formed in 2008.

Monte Kimball — now the newly-elected 394th District Court judge and longtime attorney for the family members at various times — helped handle those 2008 trust agreements. In a conversation with one of Cuatro’s attorneys — Donovan Campbell Jr. — around that time, Kimball was already hearing of an idea to disinherit Jim’s children. In an affidavit Campbell filed in court, the attorney wrote: “Mr. Kimball stated and admitted to me the following: On one occasion after these transactions, Beau telephoned Mr. Kimball and admitted and stated ... that if he became dissatisfied with how those Trust transactions worked out for him, he would just ‘adopt a little [racial slur] boy’ and, practically speaking, disinherit Jim’s children (Cuatro, Marti, Clint, and Raphael) from obtaining their inheritance interests as remainder beneficiaries of said Trusts.”

### Who is Geoffrey Connor?

Beau and Mac both officially adopted Connor in 2022. Connor, now 61, is an attorney and former Texas secretary of state appointed by Rick Perry in 2003. He resides in Bastrop, Texas, and since leaving office in 2005 he has been involved in numerous organizations working with international and security policy. In addition to his degrees in International Studies and law, he achieved a Ph.D. in history in 2016 from the University of Texas.

His LinkedIn page now lists him as “Honorary Consul of the Kingdom of Belgium.” In a 2021 LinkedIn post congratulating him on that honor, a Belgian official wrote: “He has worked with Belgium in an official capacity as a state official and later as a volunteer to help facilitate Belgian visits.” On his page, Connor describes his work as: “I promote Belgian interests, seek to foster trade and cultural ties for Belgium and aid Belgian subjects in my area.”

Connor also lives in a stately, historic 1852 Bastrop house and has hosted parties attended by state and local political officials. In February 2021, his property was considered by local officials as a location for relocating two confederate monuments from the Bastrop County Courthouse, but county officials ultimately chose another location.

While Connor ran in prestigious Republican political circles for decades, it was through Beau’s wife that the connection to the Whites formed. Beau’s late wife, Kathleen Harnett White, had an accomplished career in government and was also connected to the same people Connor served. She served on the Texas Water Development Board (appointed by then Gov. George W. Bush), the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (appointed by Perry) and the Lower Colorado River Authority (appointed by Perry).

It’s unclear exactly how close Connor and Beau and Kathleen White were, but numerous newspaper social columns show Kathleen and Connor attending the same parties. Social media shows the three shared a love for Jack Russell terriers — Connor’s dog is named “Cap.” “I’ve come to Maryland for the national Jack Russell Terrier championship show,” Connor posted on Facebook in 2015. “I love this! I’m with my friends Beau and Kathleen White who have won this competition several times. I’m rooting for their dogs, but there are many wonderful dogs here.” Another post shows him bottle feeding one of the White’s puppies.

Despite the close ties between Beau, his wife, and Connor, the Whites still living in Marfa give no indication in court filings that they even knew who he was. Raphael gave an affidavit for the current lawsuit stating, “Geoffrey Scott Connor is a stranger to the White and Brite families. He is not related by blood or marriage to the White or Brite families and was not a close friend. ...”

Connor initially corresponded with *The Sentinel* asking to see questions

but has since not replied to requests for comment. Beau and Mac declined to comment for this story.

### The “threatening” email

Court records show that during the pre-trial period on the lawsuit to remove Jim as trustee, settlement negotiations were underway for the parties. At one point on December 13, 2021, Beau and Mac’s attorney — Frank Ikard — sent Jim’s attorney an email that began, “I want to try one more time to seriously convey my previous offer. I honestly believe my offer is a win/ win settlement for all parties.”

The settlement offer included Jim selling about 30,000 acres of the Brite Ranch — with him getting to pick which portions — to generate a \$25 million payment to his siblings. Jim also would get “exclusive use” of the ranch.

“If this offer is not accepted on or before December 15, then both of my clients will proceed to adopt children,” Ikard wrote. He wrote that if Jim didn’t accept the settlement, his children would “lose half the value” of their interest in the ranch and “they will be involved in years of litigation against Beau and Mac’s children to partition the ranch.” (The plural “children” indicates Beau and Mac may have considered adopting more than one child, instead of both adopting Connor.)

The settlement was rejected, and attorneys for Jim’s children now call the email “threatening” in their filing. The current petition by Jim’s children maintains that Beau and Mac breached their fiduciary duty to show “loyalty, honesty, and full disclosure” by not informing the beneficiaries of their intent to adopt Connor. “At no point prior to, or after, ‘adopting’ Geoffrey Connor, did Mac or Beau ever inform me of the effects of such adoption on my remainder interest in their Children’s Trusts and the Jane White Trust and/or that such adoption would be wrongful self-dealing on their part and breaches of their fiduciary duties as Trustees of said Trusts,” Raphael wrote in an affidavit.

The petition also said Beau and Mac gave testimony in previous court settings saying they had no children after they had adopted Connor.

Once the adoption became known to White family members, it led to an encounter between Mac and Raphael described in her affidavit. “On the eve of the original trial in this case, I encountered Mac drinking at a local restaurant called Spirit Marfa. My husband and I had a conversation with Mac as we were leaving. This conversation was the first time either of us had spoken to Mac in years. Mac was loud and the conversation was awkward. Mac stated that the trial would be ‘bad’ for Jim and Cuatro and they should settle. At that point, I asked Mac why he adopted Geoffrey Connor. Mac replied so that he and his wife would be “taken care of.” He further stated that they had an “arrangement” with Geoffrey to ensure that they would be “taken care of,” but that he could “get rid of him if the family wanted to cut a deal.”

An attorney for Beau and Mac later reiterated the reason for the adoption in a statement that ran in an October 18, 2023, article in *The Sentinel*. “The shares of the Brite Ranch pass, under the terms of the Jane White Trust, only to then children of the current four owners. Because Beau White and his wife Kathleen had no natural children and [Mac] White and his wife Julie had no natural children, the apparent scheme of James White, III was for his own children to own a double portion of the ranch when their uncles died,” wrote attorney Deborah McClure. “After [Jim] prevented Beau and Mac, for years, from receiving proper income from the Trust, they became very worried about the future for them and their wives. Beau’s wife Kathleen is now incapacitated with dementia and is in a memory care facility. Beau decided to adopt Geoff Connor, a close personal friend of him and his wife of many years. In this way Geoff could be responsible for Kathleen’s care if Beau passed first. Later, [Mac] White decided to do the same thing so Geoff could care for Julie if [Mac] passed first. Each brother adopted Geoff, but their wives did not.” (Kathleen Hartnett White died on August 6, 2024.)

Attorneys for Jim’s children also argue that the structure of the adoption lends credence to their claims that it is fraudulent. “The bizarre structure of the adoption — an adoption where the purported adoptee has two different adoptive fathers, both of whom are brothers (making the purported adoptee his own cousin) — yet the wives of each adoptive father did not join in the adoption,” they wrote in their petition.

“This plot, of double adoption involving prior Secretary of State Geoff Conners, sought to undermine the ranch’s integrity and exploit its resources for personal gain. Raphael wrote in her statement to *The Sentinel*.

*Editor’s note: When asked for comment this week, McClure emailed to say she had not given The Sentinel a statement — a portion of which is included in this article — for an October 23 article, and she asked that those comments be retracted from that story. The Sentinel located the statement sent from her email account and forwarded it to her. McClure emailed back, “No comment.”*

For more background see [bigbendsentinel.com/brite-lawsuit](http://bigbendsentinel.com/brite-lawsuit).

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

February 14, 2002

### Air I-10 speed limit raised; U.S. 67, 90 to follow

That long drive to El Paso just got a little bit shorter. No, the number of miles hasn’t changed, and the seemingly endless construction shows no signs of slowing down.

The Texas Department of Transportation will just allow you to drive it a little faster. The speed limit on Interstate 10 through Hudspeth, Culberson, and Jeff Davis had just ticked up a notch from 70 to 75 miles per hour, according to TxDOT officials in El Paso. The nighttime speed limit remains at 65 miles per hour, officials said.

The change is thanks to a law written by State Representative Pete Gallego and passed by the Texas Legislature last year allowing speed limits to be increased in all Texas counties with a population density of less than 10 persons per square mile.

Interstate 20 has also sped up, with daytime limits increased to 75 miles per hour along a section stretching from the-I-10 intersection to the Pecos River. Next up for changes are long lonely stretches of U.S. 90 and U.S. 67 throughout West Texas.

Representatives of TxDOT’s El Paso and Odessa districts say they are working together on proposals to raise speed limits on U.S. 90 from Van Horn east all the way past Marathon and on U.S. 67 from Alpine to Fort Stockton. If approved by TxDOT commissioners in Austin, these changes would go into effect in April of this year.

Later this year, TxDOT will study U.S. 67 from Marfa to Presidio and from Fort Stockton north to the Tom Green County line for possible speed limit increases. Switching the speed limits on two-lane roads is a bit trickier than the interstates, according to Mike McAnally, Director of Operations for TxDOT’s Odessa District. “With interstates it was easy: you just put the signs up,” he said. “When you get to the two-lane roads, you’ve got striping and passing zones to take care of.”

# Judd Foundation

Experience Donald Judd’s art as installed within his former living and working spaces in downtown Marfa. These spaces, including his libraries and studios, consider his ideas for the permanent installation of art within historic buildings.

Free for residents of Presidio, Brewster, and Jeff Davis counties.

Judd Foundation is open Tuesday through Sunday and offers two distinct guided visits. Please visit our office, 104 South Highland Avenue, or website for the current schedule.

For more information and to book reservations please visit [juddfoundation.org](http://juddfoundation.org) or call 432 729 4406.

## JUDD

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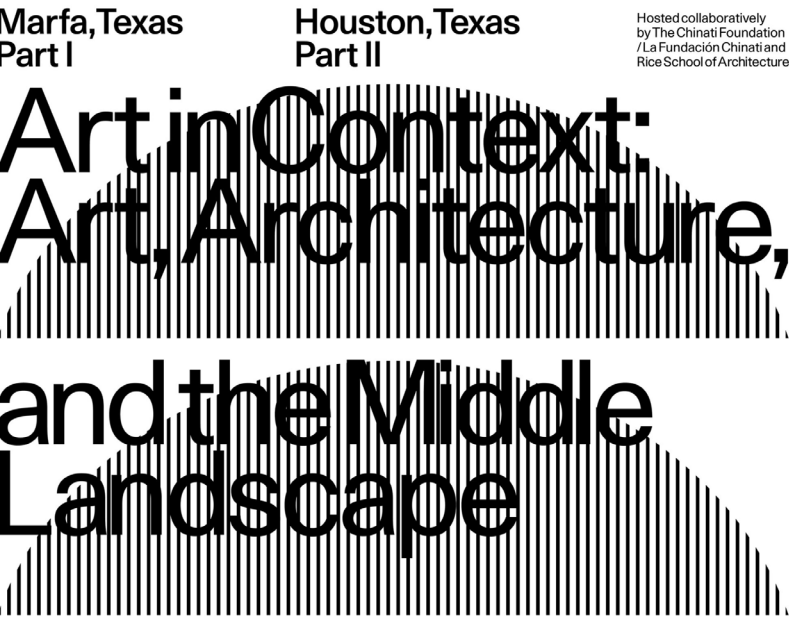
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## Chinati hosts architecture symposia

From the Chinati Foundation

MARFA — “Art in Context: Art, Architecture, and the Middle Landscape” is the latest in a series of symposia presented by The Chinati Foundation. Since 1995, Chinati has organized six symposia — each one focused on a particular aspect of the museum’s mission or collection and documented in an accompanying publication that includes essays and edited transcriptions of lectures and conversations.

Part I (Marfa, April 4–6, 2025) will explore the relationship between art, architecture and land at Chinati by focusing on one of the most significant examples of their integration: the former artillery sheds that house Donald Judd’s 100 untitled works in mill aluminum. Considering both the history of the buildings and their broader influence on museum architecture, Part I will focus on current efforts to restore the structures, preserve Judd’s architectural interventions, protect the art, and care for the

surrounding landscape.

Part II (Houston, November 14–15, 2025) will extend these conversations to address pressing challenges in contemporary art and architecture practices. Through panels and discussions, participants will explore the tensions between environmental and art conservation, imagining future strategies for sites of ecological precarity and cultural significance. The symposium will coincide with an exhibition staged in the new Rice University Architecture Gallery, running September 4 through December 2, 2025.

In Marfa, Judd considered the specific legacies of a place that is neither urban nor rural — a type of environment that American cultural historian and literary critic Leo Marx termed “the middle landscape.” Judd’s work at Chinati invokes multiple understandings of historicity, frames the sites of work in relationship with their earliest uses, and provides opportunities for artists to determine the installation of their art within this context.

“Art in Context: Art, Architecture, and the Middle Landscape” will investigate art and architecture practices in socially, politically, and ecologically turbulent times, while imagining productive and sustainable futures of maintenance and repair, adaptive reuse, and environmental conservation.

This symposium is hosted collaboratively in two parts by The Chinati Foundation/La Fundación Chinati and Rice School of Architecture and organized by Caitlin Murray, director of the Chinati Foundation; Stephen Martin, director of Preservation and Planning at the Chinati Foundation; and Troy Schaum, associate professor at Rice School of Architecture.

Generous support has been provided by Lee and Mike Cohn and Lori and Alexandre Chemla. Speakers, schedule, and registration information for Part I in Marfa can be found at chinati.org/symposium2025/.

## A variety of homestead exemptions could lower your property taxes!

A homestead exemption lowers the school district property taxes on your home by lowering its value. If your home is valued at \$150,000 and you receive a \$100,000 homestead exemption, your home will be taxed as if it were worth \$50,000.

### Who qualifies for an exemption?

Anyone who owns a home on Jan. 1 and uses it as a primary residence on that date is entitled to a \$100,000 homestead exemption to lower school taxes. A person who acquires property after Jan. 1 may receive the residence homestead exemption for the applicable portion of that tax year immediately on qualification for the exemption if the preceding owner did not receive the same exemption for that tax year. It doesn’t matter if your home is a house, condominium or mobile home. Counties, cities and special taxing districts may also offer homestead exemptions.

### Are other exemptions available?

If you’re disabled—or if you’re 65 years old or older—you are entitled to an additional \$10,000 school tax exemption on your home. And if you qualify for the age 65 or older or disabled exemption, you’re also entitled to a permanent, locked-in “ceiling” on the school property taxes on your home. The county, city or junior college may adopt a tax ceiling for age 65 or older or disabled homeowners. The age 65 or older homeowners school tax ceiling transfers to the surviving spouse if he/she is age 55 or older at the time of death, lives in and owns the home. Age 65 or older homeowners (or their surviving spouses age 55 or older) also may transfer the percentage of school tax paid, based on their former home’s school tax ceiling, to a new home.

If you are a disabled veteran, surviving spouse or surviving child of a disabled veteran, you are entitled to an exemption of a portion of your residence homestead's appraised value. This includes homesteads donated to disabled veterans by charitable organizations at no cost or not more than 50 percent of the good faith estimate of the homestead's market value to disabled veterans and their surviving spouses.

If you’re a disabled veteran awarded 100 percent disability compensation due to a service-connected disability and a rating of 100 percent disabled or a determination of individual unemployability from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, you are entitled to an exemption from taxation of your residence homestead's total appraised value. Surviving spouses of veterans who qualified for this exemption or who would have qualified for this exemption if it had been effective at the time of the veteran's death are also eligible with certain restrictions.

If you are the surviving spouse of a U.S. armed services member killed or fatally injured in the line of duty or an eligible surviving spouse of a first responder killed in the line of duty, you are entitled to an exemption from taxation of your residence homestead's total appraised value.

### Do I have to apply each year?

No. If you had a homestead exemption on your home last year, you won’t need to reapply unless your chief appraiser requires it. However, if you haven’t received an exemption on your present home—or if you’ve moved to a new home—you’ll need to file an application for exemption. If you are age 65 this year, you may file for the age 65 or older exemption up to one year after the date you became age 65. And if you became disabled, you may file for the disabled person’s exemption.

### When and where should I file?

File applications by April 30 at your local appraisal district office. If you need more time, contact us at:

Presidio County Appraisal District  
P O BOX 879 /107 E TEXAS STREET  
MARFA TEXAS 79843

432-729-3431 (MARFA OFFICE)  
432-229-3963 (PRESIDIO OFFICE)

A public service announcement courtesy of your local appraisal district.

## ¡Una variedad de exenciones fiscales de la residencia podran reducir sus impuestos de la propiedad!

Una exención fiscal de la residencia reduce los impuestos de la propiedad al disminuir el valor de la misma. Si su residencia está valorada en \$150,000 y recibe una exención de \$100,000, pagará los impuestos de una residencia valorada en \$50,000.

### ¿Quién califica para una exención?

Cualquier persona que es el dueño de una propiedad el primero de enero y la utiliza como residencia principal en esa misma fecha tiene derecho a la exención fiscal de la residencia de \$100,000 para reducir los impuestos escolares. Una persona que consigue propiedad despues del 1ero de enero puede recibir la exencion fiscal de la residencia para la porcion apicable del año inmediatamente de calificar por la exencion fiscal si el dueño anterior no tuvo la misma exencion fiscal en el mismo año. No importa si la residencia es una casa, un condominio o una casa móvil. Los condados, ciudades y distritos imponibles especiales también pueden ofrecer exenciones fiscales de la residencia.

### ¿Hay otras exenciones disponibles?

Si esta discapacitado o si tiene 65 años o más, tiene derecho a una exención adicional de impuestos escolares de \$10,000 para su residencia. Y, si cumple con los requisitos para exención por la edad de 65 años o más, o es discapacitado, también tiene derecho a una cifra de impuestos congelados al llegar a cierto punto específico y permanente de impuestos escolares por la propiedad. El condado, la ciudad o universidad comunitaria pueden congelar el límite de impuestos para las personas de 65 años o más o los discapacitados. Los límites de los impuestos escolares para las personas de 65 años o más pueden ser transferidos al cónyuge sobreviviente si el sobreviviente tiene 55 años o más al momento del deceso, es el propietario y reside en la propiedad. Los propietarios residenciales de 65 años o más (o sus cónyuges sobrevivientes de 55 años o más) también pueden transferir a una nueva residencia el porcentaje del impuesto escolar pagado y basado en el límite máximo de impuestos.

Si es un veterano discapacitado, cónyuge sobreviviente o hijo sobreviviente de un veterano discapacitado, tiene derecho a una exención de una porción del valor tasado de su residencia. Esto incluye residencias donadas a veteranos discapacitados por organizaciones caritativas sin costo o no más del 50 por ciento de la estimación del valor de buena fe de mercado de la residencia, a los veteranos discapacitados y sus cónyuges sobrevivientes.

Si es un veterano discapacitado que recibe compensación de discapacidad de 100 por ciento debido a una discapacidad conectado al servicio y una calificación de 100 por ciento discapacitado con una determinación de que no puede cumplir ningún oficio del Departamento de la Administración de Veteranos de los Estado Unidos, tiene derecho a recibir una exención fiscal para la residencia del valor tasado total. Los cónyuges sobrevivientes de veteranos que calificaron para esta exención o que habrían calificado para esta exención si hubiera sido efectivo en el momento del fallecimiento del veterano también son elegibles con ciertas restricciones.

Si es un cónyuge sobreviviente de un miembro de las fuerzas armadas de los Estados Unidos que murió en acción o el cónyuge sobreviviente elegible de un primer respondedor muerto en el acto de servicio, tiene derecho a una exención sobre los impuestos del valor total tasado de su residencia.

### ¿Tengo que aplicar cada año?

No. Si usted tenia una exención de la residencia en su hogar el año pasado no es necesario solicitar nuevamente a menos que el jefe de tasaciones lo requiere. Sin embargo, si usted no ha recibido una exención en su residencia actual o se mudó a una nueva residencia, debe de presentar una solicitud de exención. En caso de cumplir 65 durante este año, puede solicitar para la exención por edad de 65 o más hasta un año después de que cumplió 65. Y si usted se incapacitó, puede solicitar la exención de la persona discapacitada.

### ¿Cuándo y dónde puedo registrar?

Declare las solicitudes antes del 30 de abril en su oficina del distrito de tasaciones. Si necesita más tiempo, póngase en contacto con nosotros en:

Presidio County Appraisal District  
P O Box 879 / 107 E Texas Street  
Marfa, Texas 79843  
432-729-3431 / 432-229-3963

Este es un servicio público cortesía de su distrito de tasaciones local.

## Marfa girls golf team claims championship title

### Marfa Junior High tracksters shine at Bear Relays



Photos courtesy of Linda Ojeda

Marfa girls golf team claimed the Van Horn Championship Title this week.

By Linda Ojeda

MARFA — The Marfa girls golf team was crowned champions at this week's tournament, with standout performances from the team's top players, Maryfer Martinez and Loretta Rivera. Martinez, Marfa's number one golfer, carded a score of 97, while Rivera,

the number two golfer, finished with a score of 100. Their impressive efforts helped secure the Van Horn Championship Title in the women's division. The team now shifts its focus to the upcoming district competition, which will take place in Marfa on Monday, April 7.

Meanwhile, the Marfa Junior High track team had a successful outing at the Bear Relays in Balmorhea on Tuesday, bringing home several first-place

medals. The varsity track team will compete in Alpine this Saturday, with schedules available on the Marfa ISD website. Under the leadership of first-year head coach Arron Luna, both teams are training hard in preparation for next week's district championships.

## AROUND THE BIG BEND

Thur  
Mar  
27

### Hike with Homeless Dogs

10am - 11am at Davis Mountains State Park  
*Help a homeless dog have a great time on the trail!*

### Calamity Creek

7pm - 9pm at The Ritchey  
*Come watch Calamity Creek play at The Ritchey, no cover!*

### Paint & Sip

6pm - 9pm at Alcove Social  
*Alcove Social hosts Paint and Sip night. Every Thursday at 6pm. No experience necessary – just relax, create, and enjoy some drinks while we guide you through a featured painting!*

Fri  
Mar  
28

### Desert Spring Blooms

2pm - 3pm at Davis Mountains State Park  
*By late March, desert plants start popping out some color. Let's talk a hike and see what's blooming.*

### SRSU Music Recital

4pm - 6pm at St. James Episcopal Church  
*SRSU Music Student Recital Hour at Marshall Auditorium*

### Janet Feder

7pm - 9pm at The Ritchey  
*Come watch Janet Feder play at The Ritchey, no cover!*

Sat  
Mar  
29

### Bend & Brunch

10am - 12am at Alcove Social  
*Come join us with yoga with Bailey, \$10. 60 minute session, yoga mat provided and free beer/ mimosa after!*

### Janet Feder

7pm - 9pm at The Ritchey  
*Come watch Janet Feder play at The Ritchey, no cover!*

### Miles & Miles of Stars

9pm - 10pm at Davis Mountains State Park  
*Come join us as we appreciate some of the darkest skies in the U.S.*

### Dancing with the Stars

6pm - 8:30pm at Alpine Civic Center  
*Alpine Public Library's Dancing with Big Bend's Stars returns March 29th!*

Sun  
Mar  
30

### Open Mic Night

4pm - 7pm at Alcove Social

### Janet Feder / Cow House

6pm - 8pm at The Ritchey  
*Come watch Janet Feder & Cow House play at The Ritchey, no cover!*

Looking to  
submit an  
event?

Scan our QR  
code here:



Ongoing  
Weekly  
Events &  
Classes

### Free Zumba Classes

Monday & Wednesday at 6:30pm at Marfa Public Library

### Yin Yoga

Tuesdays at 12pm at Marfa Public Library

### Free Meditation Classes

Tuesday & Thursday at 6:00pm at Marfa Public Library

### AA (online & sometimes in-person)

Saturday at 12:00pm at <https://tinyurl.com/y686nnw2> & sometimes in-person at Marfa Public Library

### AA (in-person)

Monday & Wednesday at 6:00 p.m. at St. Paul's Episcopal Church

### The Alpine Farmers Market

Saturday at 9:00am - 12:00pm at Alpine Visitor Center

*Note: Schedules are subject to change. Please call or visit business websites to confirm that event is happening.*

## PRESIDIO COUNTY UNDERGROUND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

### NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING TO CONSIDER ADOPTION OF PROPOSED GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR 2025-2030

April 10, 2025 at 4:00 p.m.  
Presidio Municipal Development District Office  
608 W O'Reilly Street, Suite D,

Presidio, Texas 79845

Notice is hereby given that the Presidio County Underground Water Conservation District (District) will hold a public hearing to receive public input on the District's proposed Groundwater Management Plan for 2025-2030. All interested parties may present oral comments at the hearing or submit written comments by mail at P.O. Box 1123, Marfa, Texas, 79843, or by email to [info@pcuwcd.org](mailto:info@pcuwcd.org), as long as they are received before the hearing. The proposed management plan incorporates the Desired Future Conditions and Modeled Available Groundwater information developed from the work of the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), groundwater conservation districts and other stakeholders within Groundwater Management Area 4 and adopts certain management objectives and performance standards. Following this hearing, the District will complete and adopt the management plan to address the management goals statutorily required in Texas Water Code § 36.1071 and TWDB's rules, in coordination with surface water management entities on a regional basis.

The proposed Groundwater Management Plan for 2025-2030 is available at the County Clerk's office; at the Marfa and Presidio Public Libraries; and on the PCUWCD's website at <https://pcuwcd.org/public-notice> under *Proposed Groundwater Management Plan 2025-2030*.

For additional information about the proposed Groundwater Management Plan for 2025-2030, contact General Manager Trey Gerfers at 432-295-2568, by mail at P.O. Box 1123, Marfa, Texas, 79843, by email at [info@pcuwcd.org](mailto:info@pcuwcd.org), or in person at 300 North Highland Avenue, 2 nd Fl, Marfa, Texas. The District is committed to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you require special assistance to participate in this hearing, please contact General Manager Trey Gerfers at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting to make arrangements.

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[info@wonderschoolmarfa.org](mailto:info@wonderschoolmarfa.org)

# Classifieds & public notices

## Dallas business files appeal in dispute over Esequiel Hernandez memorial

By Sam Karas  
sam@bigbendsentinel.com

REDFORD — Last month, the Dallas-based Local Chapter, LLC filed an appeal in El Paso’s Eighth Circuit in a dispute over a two-acre tract of land in Redford where a Presidio teen was shot by a soldier on a drug interdiction mission patrolling the border in 1997.

The company had sued to gain access to land purchased under its name, but Pecos attorney Bill Weinacht maintained it belonged to him and was used jointly with the family of Esequiel Hernandez, Jr. as a memorial.

The tract at issue doesn’t have much on it, save for a few creosote bushes, a crumbling ruin from the Mexican Revolution and a wrought iron cross. That cross marks the spot where Esequiel Hernandez Jr. was shot and killed by a Marine patrolling the border in May of 1997. Hernandez’s killer — Corporal Clemente Bañuelos — was never convicted, but his family received a \$2 million payout from the federal government in a wrongful death suit.

That wasn’t the last time the teenager’s name would be invoked in a courtroom. The simple white cross has become the crux of a complex suit over the property it sits on, begging the question of whether its quiet vigil over the valley is enough to legally claim that the property has been actively used over the past 20 years.

The Local Chapter is owned by Baxter and Amber Box, who use the company as a vehicle to purchase and pass down land to their kids. In 2011, the couple launched RewardStyle, a website that helped creators monetize blog posts — a concept that has since spiraled into the multi-billion dollar “influencer” industry that fuels brand deals around the world.

In the fall of 2019, the Local Chapter purchased a property just over 474 acres on the far eastern fringe of Redford that spans from the river to the edge of Big Bend Ranch State Park. Southern Presidio County is notorious for dodgy surveys and messy chains of title, and this property is no exception — the Boxes quickly realized that other people thought they owned pieces of the land they’d just bought.

The two acres marked by the cross were among the contested areas of overlap. In December 2019, legal counsel for the Boxes reached out to Weinacht, offering cash if all parties involved could skirt around potential legal issues.

Weinacht didn’t bite, and in August of 2023, the couple filed suit.

In court filings, Weinacht maintains that he only visits the property a few times a year, but

that his own life’s story is deeply intertwined with the land — he represented the Hernandez family in court when they won their case against the government, and later purchased the property so that they could maintain it as a memorial.

The two parties maintain roughly the same timeline for about 50 years. In 1905, the State of Texas granted the land to early settler F.J. Alvarado, and it passed on to his son, C.J., in 1937. Alvarado then sold the property to a W.A. Glasscock in 1943. In 1949, Glasscock transferred the deed to a portion of the property — which includes the two acres at the center of the suit — to Trinidad Grado Sr.

The trouble began when Glasscock used the land to back a debt from a man named George Pugh. Glasscock defaulted on his debt, and in 1954, Pugh called on the county to foreclose on the property, dragging Glasscock, Grado and other parties that had been sold pieces of the contested land into court. The county clerk issued an order of sale, and in November of that year the Presidio County sheriff transferred the deed to Pugh.

“The tract at issue doesn’t have much on it, save for a few creosote bushes, a crumbling ruin from the Mexican Revolution and a wrought iron cross”

In November 1954, the timeline split. Pugh sold the land to a man named J.T. Paulsel, who died in 1960 and transferred the title to his heirs — who would go on to sell the land to the Local Chapter decades later.

Meanwhile, Grado Sr. — who could not speak or read English — continued paying taxes on the property, and later transferred it to his son, Trinidad Grado Jr.

Grado Jr. did not live on the property, but by all accounts was upset after Hernandez’s death in 1997, when his land was swarmed by lawyers, journalists and mourners. “There was literally a storm of activity on the property and extensive publicity about the property in Redford and not one person ever showed up or claimed they owned the property except Trinidad Grado, Jr.” Weinacht explains in his motion for summary

judgment, filed in September 2024.

Tensions over the use of the property festered for years, and in 2005, Weinacht purchased the two-acre tract from Grado Jr. and authorized the Hernandez family to watch over and maintain the space as a memorial.

Weinacht says that’s how he’s always viewed the property — as a memorial. In 2017, he even argued before the Presidio County Appraisal District that the property’s value of \$1800 shouldn’t be raised because it is solely intended to serve as a place for contemplation and commemoration.

Filings suggest that the Boxes share Weinacht’s sentiment that that’s the “highest and best use” of the land. “I think it’s an important moment to commemorate,” Baxter Box said on the stand.

In an interview with the *The Sentinel* in November 2023, Box said that he has a deep appreciation for the history of the area and was drawn to the Redford property because of its small role in the Mexican Revolution. The ruins of U.S. Cavalry barracks sit on one side of the road, and the ruin on the contested two acres served as officers quarters — it’s rumored that General Pershing once stayed there.

Throughout the course of the suit, Weinacht has claimed that the land is his via adverse possession. In Texas, folks can claim adverse possession of land they pay taxes on and “cultivate, use or enjoy” under “a duly registered deed.” Adverse possession laws carry 5, 10 and 25-year statutes of limitations — each with requirements Weinacht argues that he’s met several times over.

Counsel for the Local Chapter disagrees that the presence of the cross is enough to satisfy “open and notorious” use of the property. “The cross serves a discrete — albeit symbolic and significant — purpose, once a year, on a small, discrete portion of the property to a limited number of people,” Attorney Robert Soza wrote in a motion for summary judgment filed on the same day as Weinacht’s.

Apart from that, they countered that hardly anybody — let alone Weinacht — ever used the property. A neighbor testified that he’d only ever seen “sunset chasers and pitaya hunters” hop the fence.

Time will tell if the appeals court agrees with Judge Wright’s interpretation of adverse possession law. Until then, Weinacht said he’s prepared to continue fighting. “It’s not for the money,” he said of the suit, which could net up to a quarter million — a figure he maintains would hardly cover another attorney’s time and effort. “It’s for the principle.”

*Representatives for the Local Chapter did not respond to a request for comment by press time.*

## Jeff Davis library to highlight paper conservation

JEFF DAVIS COUNTY — An old yearbook, family correspondences, a nostalgic diploma — many people have antique books and paper documents that they cherish and want to better protect.

Find out simple steps you can take to preserve them during a free program at the Jeff Davis County Library on Saturday, April 12, at 9:30 a.m. Professional

conservator April Smith will discuss and demonstrate basic steps to prolong the life span of your heirlooms.

She will show tips for book repair and conservation techniques. Those attending are welcome to bring some family treasures. Presentation sponsored by Friends of the Library; for further details, phone the library at (432) 426-3802.

### Looking for a full time medical receptionist

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Marfa TX. 79843.  
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or www.pchsmmedclinic.org

Call 4328374812 ask for Cindy or Sarah

### NOTICE TO CREDITORS

Notice is given that original Letters Testamentary for the Estate of Armando O. Garcia were issued on March 18, 2025, in Docket No. 2055, pending in the County Court of Presidio County, Texas, to Deborah M. Falknor. All persons having claims against the estate, which is presently being administered, are required to submit them, within the time and manner prescribed by law, and before the estate is closed, addressed as follows:

c/o John Fowlkes  
Attorney for Executor of the Estate of Armando O. Garcia.  
PO Box 1470  
Marfa, TX 79843

The Marfa Parks and Recreation Board meets every third Thursday of the month at 6:00pm in the Casner Room at City Hall. The public is invited to attend.

### House For Rent

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The City Council of the City of Marfa will hold one Public Hearings on Thursday, March 27, 2025 at 6:00pm in the Casner Room, located inside City Hall, 113 S. Highland Ave, Marfa, Tx. 79843, in regards to:

AN ORDINANCE CREATING THE MUNICIPAL OFFICE OF CITY SECRETARY IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 22.071 OF THE TEXAS LOCAL GOVERNMENT CODE

The City Council of the City of Marfa will hold two Public Hearings on Thursday, March 27, 2025 at 6:00pm and April 8, 2025 at 6:00pm in the Casner Room, located inside City Hall, 113 S. Highland Ave, Marfa, Tx. 79843, in regards to:

AN ORDINANCE AMENDING ORDINANCE NO. 96-15 FOR THE PURPOSE OF EXTENDING THE SCHOOL ZONE HOURS FROM 7:30 AM TO 5:00PM

The City Council of the City of Marfa will hold two Public Hearings on Thursday, March 27, 2025 at 6:00pm and April 8, 2025 at 6:00pm in the Casner Room, located inside City Hall, 113 S. Highland Ave, Marfa, Tx. 79843, in regards to:

AN ORDINANCE CLOSING, VACATING AND TRANSFERRING A 0.41 ACRE TRACT OF LAND BEING THAT PART OF DALLAS STREET LYING BETWEEN PLATEAU STREET ON THE WEST, SUMMER STREET ON THE EAST, BLOCK 109 ON THE NORTH AND BLOCK 110 ON THE SOUTH, QUARTERMASTER ADDITION TO THE CITY OF MARFA, ACCORDING TO THE MAP AND PLAT THEREOF RECORDED IN VOLUME 44, PAGE 199, MAP AND PLAT RECORDS OF PRESIDIO COUNTY, TEXAS AND MORE FULLY DESCRIBED ON EXHIBIT “A” ATTACHED HERETO, TO BEK STONE, SUCCESSOR IN INTEREST TO TEXAS PRODUCTION CREDIT ASSOCIATION; PROVIDING FOR A PUBLIC HEARING; FINDING IT IS IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC TO CLOSE AND TRANSFER THE PROPERTY IN ORDER TO RESOLVE THE TITLE ISSUES RESULTING FROM THE CITY’S FAILURE TO PROPERLY VACATE THE STREET.



## BIG BEND HEALTH

### REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS

Big Bend Regional Hospital District is requesting submissions to select a firm with demonstrated experience in providing professional architectural services for constructing a new facility in Presidio, TX to provide a multi-purpose office space for BBRHD employees, non-medical client services, classroom for educational and fitness purposes, telehealth rooms, and public use space. The facility will be located on approximately one-acre of land owned by the District. The selected firm must be licensed, have experience in buildings of a similar nature, must be able to complete work on time and within budget. **Submissions are due by April 17, 2025 at 3:00 PM CST.** For full details visit [BigBendHealth.org](http://BigBendHealth.org).



### BBT AWARDED \$4.89 MILLION IN GRANTS FOR RURAL FIBER EXPANSION

BBT IS EXCITED TO ANNOUNCE OVER \$4.89 MILLION IN GRANTS TO EXPAND FIBER OPTIC INFRASTRUCTURE ACROSS, FORT DAVIS, LIMPIA CROSSING, IRAAN, MARATHON, AND ALPINE.

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### GOVERNMENT CONTACTS

#### PRESIDIO COUNTY

Judge Jose Portillo:  
(432) 729-4452

#### Presidio Mayor John Ferguson:

City Hall: (432) 229-3517  
Email: [jferguson@presidiotx.us](mailto:jferguson@presidiotx.us)

#### CITY OF MARFA

Manny Baeza, City of Marfa Mayor  
[mayor@cityofmarfa.com](mailto:mayor@cityofmarfa.com)  
(432) 295-0048

#### BREWSTER COUNTY

Judge Greg Henington:  
(432) 837-2412

#### Alpine Mayor Catherine Eaves:

City Hall: (432) 837-3301  
Email: [mayor.eaves@ci.alpine.tx.us](mailto:mayor.eaves@ci.alpine.tx.us)

#### JEFF DAVIS COUNTY

Judge Curtis Evans: (432) 426-3968

#### FEDERAL:

##### U.S. Sen. John Cornyn:

(202) 224-2934 (D.C. office)

##### U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz:

(202) 224-5922 (D.C. office)

la fundación  
the CHINATI  
foundation

Chinati is an art foundation created by Donald Judd and opened to the public in 1986.

Chinati is open Wednesday through Sunday. Office hours and guided tour times are seasonal. For details and reservations, please come to the Visitor Center (1 Cavalry Row) or go to [chinati.org/visit](http://chinati.org/visit).

Free entrance is available for residents of Presidio, Brewster, and Jeff Davis counties.



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Editor-in-Chief  
Publisher  
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Distribution

Office: 209 1/2 W. El Paso St., Marfa, Texas  
Mail: Drawer P, Marfa, TX 79843

Telephone: 432.729.4342

Contact: [editor@bigbendsentinel.com](mailto:editor@bigbendsentinel.com)

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