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CITY & STATE

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Board OKs flexible rates for insurance

Homeowners will have more options next year

By David Elliot
American-Statesman Staff

Consumers could have more options when buying homeowners' insurance next year, but they will need to spend more time shopping for the best deal because of action taken Monday by the State Board of Insurance.

The board unanimously voted to adopt a "benchmark" rate averaging 5 percent less than the current maximum rate for regulated companies. More importantly, the board voted to allow flexible rates intended to encourage competition by allowing companies to charge as much as 25 percent more than the benchmark rate or as much as 20 percent less.

Under a request by State Farm Insurance Co., the benchmark would have increased 16.5 percent, and companies could have deviated as much as 30 percent more or 20 percent less.

A lawyer for State Farm declared the vote a victory. So did the state's consumer advocate for insurance matters.

"What's going to have to happen is consumers are going to have to be willing to shop for insurance," said Amy Johnson of the Office of Public Insurance Council.

For a typical \$100,000 frame house in the Austin area, the benchmark cost for homeowners' insurance would drop from \$641 to about \$609 annually, according to Johnson's office.

But a board spokesman said that exact rates — which take effect March 1 — won't be known for several weeks.

Furthermore, the benchmark rate is less meaningful than in years past because of the fluctuations the board will allow beginning next year. In Austin, insurers could charge from \$45.39 to \$91.25 — compared with the benchmark rate of \$69.

Before lawmakers passed an insurance reform law earlier this year, insurance companies had to get the board's permission if they wanted to charge more than the benchmark rate.

The fact that the state's consumer advocate and the insurance industry drafted victory reflects either a deft compromise on the part of board members or a realization among all parties — insurers, consumers and State Department of Insurance staff — that no one knows exactly what the new rates will be.

"I am still not convinced that we have all the information we need to really know how much companies are making, to really know that the costs are real and to really know what the consumers should pay," said Allison Evans, the board member who made the motions to adopt the new rating system.

Nonetheless, Pieter Schenken, a lawyer representing State Farm, called the vote a "remarkable act of combined wisdom and courage."

"The way the new law works, the benchmark rate is...
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Height of Christmas

Jonathan, 10, stands in comparison to the glittering Christmas tree standing tall in front of the Capitol on Monday.

Jonathan, along with his uncle, Sonny, was waiting to catch a Dillo bus to see the "Trail of Lights" at Zilker Park.

Barnett review turns into look at City Council

By Sylvia Martinez
American-Statesman Staff

What was to be a closed-door review of City Manager Camille Barnett Monday resulted primarily in an evaluation of the Austin City Council.

A full review of Barnett's performance has been scheduled for early February.

"We had a full airing of the issues that have been raised," said Mayor Bruce Todd. "I think that this council is of the mood that we need to pull together."

Council Member Charles Urby said the most significant item resulting from Monday's five-hour session was the council trying to resolve to "work together more."

Barnett's evaluation will be handled "in the proper manner which is in executive session to fully evaluate those personnel issues," Todd said.

But, while Todd and Urby were talking about improving council relations and the necessity of having personnel discussions private-

ly, Council Member Louise Epstein again accused Barnett of trying to bar and to the council and said Monday's session only confirmed her allegations.

"I was surprised that despite the full substantiation of the allegations made by an assistant city manager that wasn't sufficient data for the council to take action," Epstein said.

"Showering a City Council member to a federal agency was proven. The other thing that was clear was that the city manager had to work with the FAA to try to change the funding for the Bergstrom master plan. That's very serious."

Barnett's performance as the city's top executive became an issue last week when Epstein accused her of covering up what Epstein considers the true results in an internal investigation concerning Assistant City Manager Joe Lesnar's comments during a Nov. 1 meeting with Federal Aviation Administration officials.

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Poll: Austinites cite crime as main worry

By Sylvia Martinez
American-Statesman Staff

Austinites are more concerned about crime, particularly violent crime, than about the economy and the environment, according to results of a study released Monday.

The AustinTrends poll also revealed that Gov. Ann Richards and President George Bush get high ratings for their performance, and that if an election were held today, Bush would be re-elected.

The poll, conducted Dec. 12-15, randomly sampled 804 residents in the Austin metropolitan area. The 8th annual AustinTrends poll is a division of IntelliQuest Inc., a local market-

research firm, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent.

When combined with how many

praising that crime overtook the economy as Austin's most significant problem, police and city officials call it's not unexpected given the slayings of four teen-age girls in a Northwest Austin yogurt shop on Dec. 1 — shortly before the poll was taken.

Last year, only 5 percent of those surveyed identified crime as the No. 1 problem in the area, said Tom Joham, director of AustinTrends. In 1989, it was identified less than 2 percent of the time.

This year, crime was identified by 21 percent of the respondents as the "single most important problem facing the Austin area today."

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Officials say they have few leads in yogurt shop killings

Confessions made by 2 prove to be false

By Kerry Haglund
American-Statesman Staff

Two people last week told police they were involved in the Dec. 1 slayings of four teens at a North Austin yogurt shop, but police say the confessions were false.

The two who confessed — a teen-age girl and her boyfriend — had no knowledge of key details in the case, police said Monday.

As the investigation enters its third week, leads have dwindled and frustration has risen.

"We have a few (leads). I wouldn't call them strong. We are not too optimistic," Austin police Lt. Andrew Waters said Monday.

No one has been charged in connection with the deaths of Amy Ayres, 15; Sarah Harrison, 15; her sister, Jennifer Harrison, 17; and Eliza Thomas, 17. The girls were found Dec. 6 after firefighters received a report to a fire at 1 Can't Believe It's A Yogurt shop at 2548 W. Anderson Lane.

All four girls were shot in the head and severely burned. The elder Harrison and Thomas were employees at the shop, and the two younger girls apparently were helping them close that night.

"Confessions sound good, but that's not the standard by which charges are filed," homicide Sgt. John Jones said. "If we have the right person, we will charge them. A confession alone isn't enough to get a conviction on."

"The killers have to tell us certain things that only the killers would know. That didn't happen in this case. They started talking on stuff that wasn't true. They were...
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Holiday closings

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES
City of Austin offices: Closed today, Wednesday and Jan. 1.
Travis County offices: Closed today, Wednesday and Jan. 1.
State offices: Closed today, Wednesday, Thursday and Jan. 1.
Federal offices: Closed Thursday and Jan. 1. Some closed today (call in advance).

POSTAL SERVICES
Today, window service ceases at noon. Package pickup, box service and bulk mail service available. Home delivery special delivery and express mail delivery will be made.

On Wednesday and Jan. 1, there will be no box or bulk mail service or home delivery. All mail facilities will be closed. Express mail, special delivery and perishables will be delivered.

GARAGE
Trash recycling collection/Austin: No collection today, Wednesday and Jan. 1. Recycling centers/Austin: Most will be closed Wednesday and Jan. 1. Call first.

CAPITAL METRO
On Wednesday and Jan. 1, buses will run on regular Sunday schedule.

BANKS, SAVINGS & LOANS
Closed Wednesday and Jan. 1. Some will close early today and Dec. 31. Call first.

Pickle says he is in good health, plans to seek re-election to House

By Bill Callier
American-Statesman Staff

U.S. Rep. Jake Pickle, D-Austin, ended speculation that health problems might prompt his retirement, announcing Monday he will seek re-election to the 10th Congressional District seat he has occupied since 1983.

Pickle, 78, had radiation treatment for prostate cancer during the summer, but said the treatment was "successfully completed with no ill effects."

"Last week my doctors reported to me that I should have no further difficulty and that I can continue to be fully active in my job for years to come," Pickle said.

Despite the illness and 28 years in the post, Pickle said, "I still have the zeal and zest for this office."

Pickle, who has been a national figure in Social Security and Medicare reform, said these issues and others — such as budget, trade and tax changes — all will require important congressional decisions in the next two years.

Noting that each of these issues flows through the House Committee on Ways and Means, where he serves as a senior member, Pickle said, "I believe my experience will enable me to have a direct voice in helping shape the course of these national policies for years to come."

Pickle has a reputation as a hard worker on local issues. Currently he is involved in Austin debates over the future of the airport and a proposed regional conservation plan.

He also was widely credited with playing a key role in bringing the semiconductor research consortium Research to Austin.

Pickle — who often campaigns by handing out squawking plastic pickles — has been an unsuccessful foe at the ballot box.

Republican Carole Keeton Rylander, a former Austin mayor, mounted a well-financed campaign in 1986, but won only 25 percent of the vote to Pickle's 72 percent.

In his last election, Pickle won 63 percent of the vote against Republican David Barham in 1980.

"I haven't heard of anyone wanting to run against Jake since the way he beat Carole Rylander," said Travis County Democratic Chairman Gary Bledsoe. "He's just too strong."



U.S. Rep. Jake Pickle says, "I still have the zeal and zest for this office. The Democrat announced Monday he will seek re-election to Congress."

Pickle cuts across normal political lines because he's willing to listen to either side," Bledsoe said. "People who are conservative like him, and people who are liberal like him."

This will be Pickle's first race in a new, shrunken 10th Congressional District — which now includes just Travis County, with the exception of several voting precincts along the county's western edge near Lakeway and Lago Vista.

Redistricting removed the western part of Travis County, the southern half of Burnet County and all of Hays, Huastrop, Blanco and Caldwell counties from Pickle's district, which will continue to represent them until the end of his current term in 1992.

A University of Texas graduate and former UT student body president, Pickle worked for then-Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson before serving in the Navy during World War II.

After the war, Pickle worked in advertising, public relations and government affairs before winning the 10th District seat in a 1963 special election.