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SECTION B

CITY & STATE

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Faces on billboards remind motorists of teen-agers' tragedy

By Kerry Haglund and Zeke MacCormack
American-Statesman Staff

Larger-than-life images of four teen-age girls slain on Dec. 6 loomed over Austin motorists Thursday on billboards that asked, "Who killed these girls?"

"Look at those beautiful eyes," said Barbara Suraci, tears streaming down her cheeks, as likenesses of her two daughters killed at a yogurt store appeared above Seventh Street.

"The murderers just have to come forward. They can't look at this and not feel so much guilt and shame. They have to come forward," Suraci said.

Space on 12 billboards is being donated for three months by the Patrick Media Group of Austin to try to help solve the murders of Jennifer and Sarah Harbison, Amy Ayers and Elisa Thomas.

Two of the 12-by-24-foot billboards were completed Thursday, on Seventh Street near Interstate 35 and on Burnet Road near Shoalmont Drive.

> "The murderers just have to come forward. They can't look at this and not feel so much guilt and shame."
> — Barbara Suraci, mother of Jennifer and Sarah Harbison

The other 10 should be up by Monday, said David Garcia, who pasted together the Seventh Street billboard as the teens' family members watched.

"It was kind of disturbing," Garcia said. "I was looking at the young girls and wondering, 'How could someone do that to them?' I have two little girls myself."

The billboards remind motorists of a $25,000 reward offered by Brice Foods, the parent company of I Can't Believe It's Yogurt! They also list an Austin police task force number, 480-5113.

"We just hope this will help," said Lee Vela, a spokesman with Patrick Media Group. The posters were printed by MRSA/National Posters Inc., in Arlington.

Pam Ayers, Amy's mother, thanked contributing companies and said, "Hopefully, this will help.

"It's very painful to look at," she said. "Their lives were so needlessly taken."

Austin police Lt. Andrew Waters said police have no solid leads.

An FBI profile describes the killers as white males between 17 and 28 who are emotionally immature, easily angered and underachievers. It says the killers likely are familiar with the West Anderson Lane area where the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt! shop was located.

"I think it will be solved," Waters said. "We don't feel like this type of information can be covered up forever."

Substance abuse unit faces vote on closing

By Denise Gamino
American-Statesman Staff

The Texas mental health board is expected today to approve closing Austin State Hospital's 24-bed alcohol and substance abuse treatment unit and transfer its patients and funding to community treatment programs.

Mental health officials said the March 1 closing of the 24-bed unit would give people the opportunity to be treated in community programs instead of a large psychiatric institution.

A subcommittee of the Texas Board of Mental Health and Mental Retardation approved the plan Thursday. The full board is scheduled to vote on the plan today.

Closing the unit is part of a MHMR experiment that may close several units at Austin State Hospital and move patients and money to community centers in Travis County and surrounding areas. If the experiment works, patients may be transferred at the seven other state psychiatric hospitals, officials said.

The proposal would "assist the enhancement of local programs so people can be served in the local communities and not have to come to the state hospital for care," said Kenny Dudley, superintendent of the 440-bed Austin State Hospital.

The point "is not that we're closing state hospital beds," he said. "It's that we're providing those resources in a different location."

Plans call for at least $1.8 million to be made available this year to nine community mental health centers, including the Austin-Travis County MHMR Center.

About $1.5 million will come from federal mental health grants. The other $330,000 represents Austin State Hospital money that would have been used to run the rehabilitation unit for the rest of this fiscal year, officials said.

The money will be divided according to the centers' needs. Each funding transfer to a community mental health center must be approved by MHMR Commissioner Denny Jones, who will review all the proposals for new community substance abuse treatment programs.

The community mental health centers are expected to use the money to open new in-patient

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Staff photos by Ralph Barrera

Short lobs

Steven Polchinski, 5, left, reaches to return a volley from his instructor, Steve Johnston, at Caswell Tennis Center on West 24th Street. Steven is in the 'Advanced Munchkins' tennis program. After his efforts, Steven must pick up all the stray tennis balls, above.

Efforts to spare killer draw fire in Amarillo

By Chip Brown
Associated Press

AMARILLO — Forgive him and spare him, says Bishop Leroy Matthiesen.

No, let him die, says the Rev. Jim Smith, reflecting the overwhelming feeling of Amarillo residents over whether Johnny Frank Garrett should be executed for killing a nun.

Matthiesen of the Catholic Diocese of Amarillo has been working for several weeks to spare Garrett from death by injection for the 1981 Halloween rape and murder of 76-year-old Sister Tadea Benz.

His efforts on Garrett's behalf drew the attention of human rights group Amnesty International, which then solicited an appeal from Pope John Paul II.

Acting on the pontiff's recommendation, Gov. Ann Richards granted a 30-day stay of execution for Garrett, who is now scheduled to die early on Feb. 11.

The bishop's outspokenness and subsequent reactions by the pope and governor have angered residents and caused some local church leaders to charge that politics have tried to interrupt justice.

"I think the bishop has a right to stand up for his convictions, but I think he has been too outspoken in this case," said Smith, senior pastor of St. Stephen United Methodist Church in Amarillo.

"Because this affected a person in his diocese, he must show love and forgiveness. But the way of the Lord is to treat all people equally under the law, and this cannot be an exception."

An informal poll taken by the local newspaper showed residents were 10 to 1 in favor of executing Garrett, now 28, who broke into the St. Francis Convent near his home and stabbed Sister Benz, a Franciscan nun, before raping her and leaving her to die.

Garrett has said the victim recited the Lord's Pray-

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Lawmaker asks freeze on lottery contract bidding

By David Elliot
American-Statesman Capitol Staff

A state lawmaker Thursday demanded that lottery director Nora Linares suspend talks with Scientific Games and GTECH, the reported winners of two multimillion-dollar lottery contracts.

State Rep. John Carona, R-Dallas, said a new lottery consultant should be hired and that all bids submitted for two lottery contracts should be reviewed. He suggested that an oversight committee of legislators be appointed to "avoid even the remote appearance of future improprieties."

And he warned that if his recommendations are not heeded, he will ask District Attorney Ronnie Earle to look into the bidding process and "the political involvement of special interests which may be inappropriately influencing this entire matter."

Carona's remarks came two days after a state lottery consultant, John Pittman, resigned because of his failure to disclose that the vice president of Scientific Games is his father-in-law. State law requires contractors to advise the state of potential conflicts of interest.

A committee in the state comptroller's office reportedly has recommended that Scientific Games be awarded a contract worth $5 million to $10 million to manufacture instant, scratch-off lottery tickets.

Linares responded that recent allegations surrounding the lottery and the companies seeking lottery contracts are the result of a clandestine campaign waged by consultants.

"Lottery industry fights are notoriously nasty, and this nastiness has clearly broken out here in Texas," she said. "Industry lobbyists are doing nothing but harming themselves, their clients and the state with their Scud attacks by fax, phone and press release."

Linares did not agree to suspend negotiations and said Carona's comments are based on "rumor and speculation, which I believe can be dispelled." She offered to meet with Carona to discuss his concerns.

Meanwhile, the reported decision to hire Scientific Games apparently remains firm. But Carona said Pittman's involvement in the lottery process "lacks the objectivity necessary to ensure fair bidding for all concerned."

"Regrettably," Carona wrote, "the entire process has now been tainted."

Carona, who voted against the

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GTECH official has misdemeanor conviction. B3

State may forward question of school funding to voters

By Laylan Copelin
American-Statesman Capitol Staff

Frustrated state leaders are looking for a final authority on the never-ending saga of school finance: the voters.

Gov. Ann Richards and Lt. Gov. Bob Bullock are echoing the need for Texans to stamp their approval on any legislative plan to finance public education. It's the only way to get the controversy out of the courts, their aides say.

In this election year, however, Republican political consultant Karl Rove sees some 20-20 hindsight at work.

"Bob Bullock understands the Democrats are about to be tattooed with this property tax," Rove said of the new county education district tax. "Even the people supposedly benefiting are not running wild in the streets. Taxpayers are madder than hell."

That sentiment, Rove said, is fueling talk of a special legislative session to address the issue and put it to the voters in the November general election.

For the third time, the Texas Supreme Court has declared unconstitutional the state's system of funding public education, which mixes state aid with local property tax dollars.

This time there's an added twist. Though the new county education districts and the taxes they levy were declared illegal, Texans must continue paying the tax until the Legislature has a chance to resolve the issue. The court gave lawmakers until June 1993.

Richards said it is very likely she will call the Legislature into special session instead of waiting until the next regular session in January 1993.

"I'm saying you've got to come up with a proposal that not only passes the Legislature but will pass the voters of Texas," Richards said. "And that's not easy."

She said the lawsuits challenging the illegal tax are not the driving force behind her thinking.

"In the long haul, I think the Supreme Court decision (to force payment of the illegal tax) will stand," she said.

But her desire for voters to approve the next school plan is forcing the issue to the front burner.

"The problem is timing," she said.

Or, the Legislature approves a

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Gov. Ann Richards says she wants the voters of Texas to approve the next school-funding plan.

Police charge 3 men in connection with string of jewelry robberies

By Kerry Haglund
American-Statesman Staff

Police displayed a $25,000 diamond-and-gold Presidential Rolex watch Thursday that they confiscated from a man believed to belong to a robbery ring in Austin and Houston.

Three men have been charged in connection with 13 robberies of expensive watches in Austin, and authorities said they expect more indictments in the case next week.

The Austin cases are linked to at least nine Houston cases, including one in which a man was shot and wounded for his watch, Austin robbery Sgt. William Beechinor said.

Police said as many as eight people worked for Steven Armendariz, 30, of Lakeway, whom police called the robbery ring leader. Armendariz has been charged with aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon in connection with a Jan. 16 Austin robbery, according to court records.

The robbers followed people home from bars, restaurants or grocery stores and robbed them of their jewelry at gunpoint. The robberies took place between April 1991 and Jan. 16. The victims usually were followed for several days. A man armed with a gun would run up to the victim as soon as the victim pulled into a driveway.

The stolen watches were passed to another person who sold them to unsuspecting jewelers, police said.

Robert Hernandez, 38, of 2709 Wilcrest Drive is described by police as a jewelry broker who is suspected of using connections to the jewelry business to sell stolen Rolex watches to jewelers. Hernandez is charged with engaging in an organized criminal activity.

No one else in the jewelry business is believed to be involved in the robberies, police said.

On Jan. 24, more than $100,000 in stolen jewelry was recovered from Hernandez, police said. Police do not know who owns the Rolex they confiscated. No other Rolexes have been located, Beechinor said.

The other man charged in the case is Malcolm Dean Harris, 25, of 501 E. Eighth St. Harris is charged with aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon and has been identified as a suspected gunman in several robberies, Beechinor said.

Billy Porterfield ... is on vacation

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