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CITY & STATE

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Suit settled for almost \$3.5 million

■ Plaintiffs blame seat belt for woman's 1992 death

By Jim Phillips
American-Statesman Staff

A lawsuit that alleged defective seat belts in Chrysler automobiles contributed to a woman's death in an Austin wreck was settled Monday for almost \$3.5 million.

Williams, an Arizona woman taking her daughter to look for an apartment in San Marcos.

According to the suit, in "defective" of the then-new seat belt design in January 1991, the belt "was cut by the latch plate in precisely the same manner that led to the death of Williams."

Chrysler and Allied decided to ignore the failed tests and produce and market the latch plate as planned, "the suit charged. "The latch plate in question is now contained in virtually all (new) Chrysler passenger cars, minivans and Jeeps."

Park, Mich., said Monday. "We have a high degree of confidence in the reliability of our seat belt systems, and they have proven themselves over millions and millions of miles in millions of vehicles."

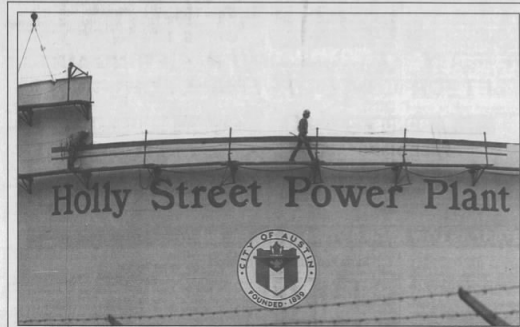
Harris would not comment on the allegation that the seat belts failed in the 1991 case before the new design was approved for Chrysler vehicles.

The same latch plate and basic design of the seat-belt system is used in other vehicles. Harris

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See Wreck, B3
Patricia Gayle Williams



Piece by piece

Workers begin dismantling the first of two fuel tanks at the Holly Street Power Plant in East Austin. The plant uses natural gas to generate electricity, and the fuel oil is stored as an emergency backup. Both tanks are scheduled to be removed by the end of June.

Minority leaders mull state OK for single districts

■ Proposition 1's rejection has groups looking elsewhere for change in elections

By Bob Banta
American-Statesman Staff

Protesters by voter rejection of Proposition 1 on Saturday, Mack and Hispanic leaders said Monday they might ask the Legislature to allow the City Council to change council elections to single-member districts.

They might meet with a cool reception from state Sen. Gonzalo Barrientes.

The dean of the Travis County delegation to the Legislature said Monday that while he will listen to arguments by the minority leaders, he also will consider that Austin has had district council elections five times in the past 20 years.

Despite those failures, Council Member Gus Garcia said he and other minority leaders plan to ask the Legislature to allow the council to create district elections without a public vote.

Details have not been worked out, but I think we will ask for permissive legislation that simply permits the council to implement districts," Garcia said.

Jeff Travillion, head of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said the Legislature is the best venue to wage a campaign for districts.

"We've got to go back to the drawing board," Travillion said. "We will work to see that this is presented as a legislative issue."

Currently, the seven-member council, including the mayor, is elected by a citywide vote.

Single-member districts — defined by 51.9 percent of the vote Saturday — would have created a system under which eight council members would have been elected from geographical areas.

Supporters of the district system say it reduces the cost of running for office and ensures minority candidates get a voice on the council.

Critics say district force council members to think in terms of what is best for their neighborhoods and not for the city as a whole.

Terrill Blodgett, professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and a longtime opponent of district election, said Garcia should not circumvent the voters' decision by appealing to legislators.

"It violates the spirit of what the people voted to do on Saturday," he said.

■ We will work to see that this is presented as a legislative issue. ■
— NAACP's Jeff Travillion

Investigator leaving yogurt shop case

■ Austin police official cites burnout, promotions as reasons for the move

By Alexandra M. Breaud
American-Statesman Staff

The lead investigator of the task force formed after four teen-age girls were found slain at a North Austin yogurt shop on Dec. 6, 1991, soon will be transferred to

another assignment, Austin police Deputy Chief Bruce Mills said Monday.

But while Mills said Sgt. John Jones' upcoming transfer won't affect the case, the victims' parents weren't so sure.

"We want him to stay," said

Pam Ayers, the mother of one of the victims. Amy Ayers, "We're worried about continuing. This is a complex case. It just can't be handed off."

Jones has led the task force since January 1992 — a month after 13-year-old Amy Ayers, Eliza Thomas, 17, Jennifer Harrison, 17, and Sarah Harrison, 15, were found dead in the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt shop at 2848 W. An-

derston Lane. Each of the girls had been shot in the head and severely burned.

"John Jones is not being thrown off the case," said Mills. "It (the transfer) is mainly at his own request."

Mills cited burnout and promotions as two reasons for Jones' pending assignment.

He said the white Jones will be transferred to the north side of the city.

See Investigator, B3

Meno's pay raise proposal 'inadequate,' teachers say

■ Plan to give 5% boost to state minimum 'a nice gesture' but would affect few educators, groups say

By Peggy Fiso
Associated Press

Teacher groups said Monday a pay raise proposed by state Education Commissioner Lionel "Skip" Meno is a good idea but doesn't go far enough.

The same proposal — a 5 percent raise in the state's minimum salary scale for teachers — was blasted last month by leading lawmakers who called it potentially too costly.

Some of Meno's other proposed education reforms also drew fire at a Monday hearing from the Texas Association of School Boards, which said the reforms might take away local residential authority over schools.

Meno, who presided over the hearing, said he expects to make final legislative recommendations next month. The Legislature meets in regular session in January.

Billy Walker, the school board association's executive director, said that under Meno's initial proposal, local boards no longer would have had say in the selection of professional staff, hiring and firing of teachers and suspension or removal of students.

"The school superintendent would make the final decision, Walker said. "This leaves the taxpayer paying the tab with no elected official to hold responsible."

"We see a discouraging trend toward moving authority away from duly elected representatives of the people and placing it in the hands of hired officials," he said. "Authority taken from the local school board is authority taken from the parents and taxpayers of a community."

Meno's teacher salary proposal was called "inadequate" by Richard Kouri, president of the Texas State Teachers Association. Kouri said it would require an increase for

See Meno's, B3



Solar sojourn

Keating Junior High School teacher Linda Brown, right, talks with Kate Suratt, left, and Virginia Roberts as they prepare to leave Robert Mueller Airport on Monday for their flight to El Paso. With the support

of Motorola, Coca-Cola and H.E.B., eight students and Brown flew to El Paso to view today's solar eclipse. Several companies and individuals let them borrow telescopes and other equipment for the project.

Rule could hamper vote on lawyer advertising

By Stuart Eshenard
American-Statesman Capitol Staff

Texas lawyers are voting again whether to restrict the profession's advertising, but a requirement that a majority of lawyers cast ballots on the proposal could spell its doom.

If the proposal fails, some lawyers warn, the longstanding luxury of legislating their own profession might fall with it.

The State Bar of Texas reform, the second in seven months, would ban advertising by lawyers that primarily appeals to emotions, or makes claims of professional superiority that cannot be substantiated. If adopted, the State Bar rule would effectively remove the gifts from lawyer ads and prohibit lawyers from promising to win clients big-dollar settlements if they were hired.

"What we are talking about is accuracy in advertising," said Richard Pena, co-director of the Austin district office of the State Bar. "We are concerned about the issue of public trust."

Although 85 percent of the lawyers who voted in a similar State Bar election in November favored the proposed prohibitions, the referendum failed. That's because

See Majority, B3

Austin board plans hearing on testing of 1st-, 2nd-graders

By Tim Lutz
American-Statesman Staff

The Austin school board, divided over whether first- and second-graders should take standardized tests, decided Monday to hold a public hearing on the issue next month.

Trustees, after 11 p.m., had not begun discussing a proposal on improving the education of at-risk students. They also, as scheduled, had not named a director for the LBJ High School Science Academy.

Under the proposal from a district task force, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills would be eliminated in the first and second grade. Teachers would use a checklist, rather than the standardized tests, to explain to parents the progress of their children.

The board heard arguments supporting and opposing the proposal from the audience.

Some said first- and second-graders are too young to take standardized tests and that testing

waste instruction time.

"Putting a cow on a scale ... does not result in a cow gaining weight," said Kris Anshaber, the parent of a Travis Heights Elementary School student. "The stress may even make it lose weight."

O'Cherry said that if students don't take the tests, parents may

never know whether their children are progressing academically. "We feel that the fall of third grade is too late to find out a kid does not know how to read," said Mike Bink, executive director of the Austin Coalition of Effective Schools.

Board members said they probably would make a decision this

See Teachers, B3