

BUSINESS

Oil closes at highest price in over two years as demand hope grows.

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Corporate tax break program may be doomed

State lawmakers haven't passed legislation that would renew the Chapter 313 incentives

By Mike Morris and John Tedesco
STAFF WRITERS

Texas' largest corporate tax incentive program is at risk of expiring after state lawmakers missed a critical deadline and failed to ad-

vance a bill that would have extended the \$10 billion program for another two years.

The Legislature must renew the state's Chapter 313 program before the session ends on Monday or it will expire in December 2022.

Named for its place in the Texas

Tax Code, Chapter 313 lets manufacturing and energy companies – including some of the world's largest oil and gas firms – save millions in property taxes by slashing the value of their properties on the tax rolls of school districts for 10 years. Supporters say it's a crucial economic incentive to attract new business to Texas.

But the primary piece of legislation that sought to renew Chapter

Online

Read the Houston Chronicle's investigation into the largest corporate tax incentive in Texas at www.houstonchronicle.com/unfairburden.

313 – House Bill 4242 – never came up for a vote in the Senate. Some lawmakers questioned the cost and effectiveness of the program,

and a coalition of critics from across the political spectrum lobbied against the bill and similar legislation.

A Houston Chronicle investigation published this month also revealed how Chapter 313 is giving companies billions in tax breaks to lure them to Texas – despite firms announcing dozens of projects or even starting construction before

Tax break continues on A11

A shift to green



Photos by Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

A runner jogs last week at the Brays Bayou Greenway Trail on the East End, part of Bayou Greenways 2020.

New park opens as part of master plan for paths along bayous

By Andrew Dansby
STAFF WRITER

A paper boat bobs eerily along White Oak Bayou while joggers, cyclists and walkers move with more determined purpose along a path at the top of its banks. The scene is quintessentially Houston: flowing green landscape punctuated by the yellow of black-eyed Susans and the white of other wildflowers and plenty of concrete. Barn swallows swoop past within sight of a freeway where cars move less freely. The chirp of birds is audible, though they compete with the unavoidable



Bayou Greenways Park serves as a hub of sorts for Bayou Greenways 2020, a 172-mile project.

low grumble of Interstate 10 traffic. Looming over the lush scene are a few billboards, visual reminders of one's location.

Finding natural sweet spots in a city so long committed to moving cars from one place to another was long a challenge in Houston. But years of greener urban development led to this week's opening of Bayou Greenways Park. Just under 1.5 acres to the north of Interstate 10 and to the west of Studewood, Bayou Greenways Park is the latest addition to and namesake of a larger, more ambitious project that has spanned nearly 10 years and

Greenways continues on A10

Legislators sparring as clock ticks on session

By Jeremy Wallace
AUSTIN BUREAU

With the future of the power grid and voting laws in Texas hanging in the balance, tensions among the top political leaders in the Legislature are fueling a round of political gamesmanship that has even the future of the Texas Holocaust & Genocide Commission caught in the crossfire, one of many pawns in a larger battle over GOP priorities.

There are just four days left in the legislative session, which must end by midnight Monday. Yet with so much still unresolved, top Republican leaders in the Texas House and Senate are publicly accusing one another of torpedoing important legislation.

At one point Wednesday night, House Speaker Dade Phelan was denied entry to the Texas Senate. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who oversees the Senate, later blamed Phelan, saying he wasn't let into the chamber because he refused to put on a wristband that shows he doesn't have COVID-19.

Gov. Greg Abbott addressed the Republican infighting during

GOP continues on A11

Biden wants spending at highest level since WWII

By Jim Tankersley
NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON – President Joe Biden will propose a \$6 trillion budget Friday that would take the United States to its highest sustained levels of federal spending since World War II as he looks to fund a sweeping economic agenda that includes large new investments in education, transportation and fighting climate change.

The budget request, the first of Biden's presidency, calls for total spending to rise to \$8.2 trillion by 2031, with annual deficits running above \$1.3 trillion throughout the next decade. The growth is driven by Biden's two-part agenda to upgrade the nation's infrastructure and substantially expand the social safety net, contained in his American Jobs Plan and American Families Plan, along with other planned increases in discretionary spending.

The proposal for fiscal 2022 and the ensuing decade shows the sweep of Biden's ambitions to wield government power to help more Americans move into the middle class and to help U.S. industry better compete globally.

Biden continues on A10

Man pleads guilty in 4-year-old's 2019 death

By Nicole Hensley
STAFF WRITER

Brittany Bowens – the mother of slain 4-year-old Maleah Davis – took her time to say how Derion Vence was at the root of her grief.

She looked at him, clad in an orange Harris County Jail jumpsuit, and cried in silence Thursday as a bailiff in the 180th District Court fetched her a box of tissues. And then, for the first time in public since her daughter's heart-wrenching 2019 disappearance, she spoke. Destroyed were future memories of prom nights, dates and weddings, Bowens said.

"I will never forgive you," Bowens told her former fiancé. "You have taken away the purest love I have ever known."

Bowens begged of him one thing: to know the truth of what

happened to her child.

"I deserve to know," she continued.

Vence said nothing.

The mother read her victim impact statement after Vence pleaded guilty to two charges – injury to a child and tampering with evidence – in lieu of a trial. The plea agreement brought an end to a two-year saga that started with a fabricated tale of abduction and led weeks later to the grim reality that Vence ferried her remains to Arkansas, dumped alongside a highway in a trash bag.

The plea deal sentenced Vence, a former mail carrier, to 40 years. The 28-year-old will be eligible for parole in 18 years, having already spent two years jailed and unable to make bond. A life sentence was a possibility had the

Maleah continues on A14



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Derion Vence pleaded guilty to two charges in the death of Maleah Davis, the daughter of his former fiancé.

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FROM THE COVER

GREENWAYS

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is gradually nearing completion.

Last week the park remained behind a chain-link fence, and its grand opening was washed out by rain. But now it welcomes visitors with little metal signs posted along its path: “The bayou doesn’t move the way lightning can,” reads the first. Follow the path and the signs form a bayou-centric poem by University of Houston professor Martha Serpas.

Bayou Greenways Park serves as a hub of sorts for Bayou Greenways 2020, a much larger, more ambitious 172-mile project that is roughly 122 miles into completion, with parks and paths around Brays, Buffalo, Greens, Halls, Hunting, Sims and White Oak bayous, as well as the West Fork of the San Jacinto River.

Launched with public and private funding, Bayou Greenways 2020 is a logistical marvel – an attempt to connect a substantial portion of Houston through a series of paths and green spaces. The project was designed to provide equitable access to park space across different parts of the city. In doing so it connects neighborhoods via passageways that don’t require automobiles.

“Each trail offers a special spin on what Houston is,” said Barron Wallace, Houston Parks Board chairman. “There are different trees and wildlife. Some areas are built up. Some haven’t been touched in years. You see the tapestries of different neighborhoods. You see Houston.”

Connecting city’s trails

Beth White, president and CEO of Houston Parks Board, moved to Houston from Chicago five years ago as the Bayou Greenways project was in motion. In Chicago she heard similar complaints that she heard here, just with the seasonal concerns flipped.

“We always heard, ‘No body uses parks in the winter, so why are you building this?’” White said. “But people do want to be outside. And in particular, they want to be near water. It’s one of those strong attractions for human beings on a molecular level. I’d hear about people in Chicago who would cut through fences and make their own trail to be near the water. I think there’s a similar thing with the bayous. They’re a lifeblood of this city, and people want access to them.”

But creation of these spaces is a labored process. White likens it to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. Future plans will seek to provide more north-south connections between these paths. But the goal of Bayou Greenways 2020 was to find ways to cinch together these east-west paths.

Wallace recalls parts of trail that were as close as 200 yards from being connected.

“But that 200 yards could involve a railroad or multiple



Photos by Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Cyclists ride on the White Oak Bayou Greenway Trail. The trails are meant to be accessible to all Houstonians.

property owners,” he said.

Wallace isn’t the only one involved with the project who suggests getting a city to execute a plan such as Bayou Greenways 2020 is like turning an aircraft carrier. A fuller consideration of Houston’s history with green spaces, the project feels more akin to changing the rotation of a planet.

The land for Bayou Greenways Park was purchased 13 years ago from a private developer. That the park opened this month speaks to the project organizer’s long view. It is among nearly 800 acres of land that has been acquired for the project.

Naturally such a grand undertaking requires long-range planning and money. The earliest conception preceded the money. Those involved in the project looked back a century for an ambitious and grand idea that they then expanded significantly.

White speaks of her admiration for Daniel Burnham, the famed Chicago architect and city planner. He said, “Make no little plans.”

Part of the plan

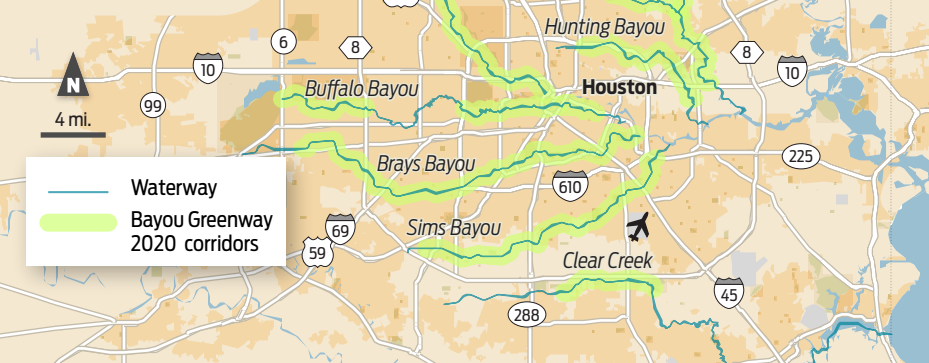
Arthur Comey was a successor to Burnham’s work. Born in Massachusetts in 1866, Comey studied landscape architecture at Harvard and worked as a park planner in Utica, N.Y., before he began consulting as a city planner. He conceived a plan for Houston’s parks that was adopted by voters in 1912.

The Comey plan must have seemed radical a century ago, nurturing green space along White Oak, Buffalo and Brays bayous, three bayous that, today, almost neatly fit inside Loop 610 in the shape of the toes of a chicken foot. They’re essentially a seed that took nearly a century to sprout.

Guy Hagstette, vice president of parks and civic projects of the Kinder Foundation, says the city’s efforts after Comey’s plan was introduced were laudable – the creation of Memorial Park, Hermann Park and MacGre-

Expanding access to nature

Bayou Greenways 2020 builds on a park system conceived by Arthur Comey in 1913. Voters and donors wanted to create more connected green space in Houston, and following Comey’s plans about connecting the city’s bayou system, did so but on a larger scale. Nearing completion, Bayou Greenways 2020 will place 1.5 million Houstonians within 1.5 miles of green space, and cover a span of nearly 180 miles of connected trails.



Source: Houston Parks Board

Staff graphic

gor Park in the 1910s and 1920s – until World War II, at which point the city ceased securing green space. He also says that “buying land doesn’t get easier over time.” Instead, Houston gradually and fully leaned into a reputation as city with indoor spaces connected by freeways. He mentions a former elected official who thought parks were unnecessary because, Hagstette says, “he thought everyone had a backyard.” The Astrodome wasn’t a just an architectural marvel, it was a bellwether.

If Houston’s green progress seems sharply upward, it was still built on a foundation created by those who fought the good fight during tougher times. A confluence of public and private players helped make Bayou Greenways 2020 a reality. Houston voters in 2012 overwhelmingly approved a bond for \$100 million that would go to the initiative, with the Houston Parks Board approved by the City Council to create standards and handle maintenance.

The Kinder Foundation

led the private effort with a \$50 million gift, with additional funding by the Hildebrand Foundation, the Houston Endowment and the Brown Foundation Inc., among others. The Houston Parks Board then had more than \$225 million to dramatically update and expand Comey’s vision.

Even the Harris County Flood Control District was involved. “Living with water is crucial,” White said. “And

there was a mandate for the city to do better.”

A crucial condition of the plan is allowing for upkeep.

“Once these spaces are in place, you have to steward them,” White said. “So we’ve already considered best practices and worked those into design and construction. And we’re already seeing communities involved. After Harvey, it was moving to seeing communities out there helping with the clean-



When the Bayou Greenways project is complete, it will bring an estimated 1.5 million Houstonians within 1.5 miles of green space.

up.”

Park equity

Serpas’ park-posted poem concludes beautifully: “Water fills our low places/joining every here to every there.”

The breadth of Bayou Greenways 2020 speaks to the sharp evolution of the city. Houston was home to between 500,000 and 600,000 people after World War II. Census figures from two years ago put the city at 2.3 million.

When the Bayou Greenways project is complete, it will bring an estimated 1.5 million Houstonians within 1.5 miles of green space. The three-toed design of the Comey plan has been updated to look less like a rendering of a foot and more like a circulatory system, a series of tendrils that run east to west. Its reach fits a city known for sprawl, only this sprawling system does not involve automobiles.

White would love to see the iconic map of the city’s freeways – a tangle of fishing line – replaced with a map of the bayous and their corresponding trails.

Most remarkable about the project is how its skeletal structure was always there. It just needed some signs of life.

White said she recently happened upon a celebration at Tidwell Park on Hall’s Bayou.

“Somebody there told me their parents would never let them play around there when she was a kid,” she said. “Now she was there with her grandchildren.”

The greenways are meant to touch all Houstonians. “Equity drove this as much as the ambition of the idea,” Wallace said. “If you’re going to issue public bonds in the amount of \$100 million, it’s important to impact different communities.”

So those involved in the project wanted to cover as much of the city as possible. They already buzz about the possibilities of an ambitious future north-south project years from now.

“With these trails, you see parts of the city that are off the radar for Houstonians who don’t live there,” said Hagstette, an avid cyclist. “They’ve transformed my idea of what Houston is – how beautiful it can be.”

He hopes the trails will burst the bubbles some Houstonians create for themselves at home.

“Twice along two different bayous I came across goat herds grazing,” he said.

All involved in the project cite the health benefits of green space. An added benefit is moving Houston away from its past, relegated to lists of the ugliest cities.

“I think this changes people’s ... not just their perception but a fundamental understanding of Houston and what it is,” Hagstette said. “It suggests that the story is never fully written.”

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BIDEN

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“Now is the time to build (upon) the foundation that we’ve laid to make bold investments in our families and our communities and our nation,” Biden said Thursday at an appearance in Cleveland to tout his budget plan. “We know from history that these kinds of investments raise both the floor and the ceiling over the economy for everybody.”

The levels of taxation and spending in Biden’s plans would expand the federal fiscal footprint to levels rarely seen in the postwar era to fund investments that his administration says are crucial to keeping the U.S. competitive. That includes money for roads, water pipes, broadband internet, electric vehicle charging stations and advanced manufacturing research.

It also envisions funding for affordable child care, universal prekindergarten and a national paid leave program. Spending on na-

tional defense also would grow.

Biden plans to fund his agenda by raising taxes on corporations and high earners, and the administration projects that budget deficits will shrink in the 2030s.

Administration officials have said the jobs and families plans would be fully offset by tax increases over the course of 15 years, which the budget request backs up.

Expiration of tax cuts

Perhaps most notably, the administration forecasts that Biden and Congress will allow tax cuts for low- and middle-income Americans, signed into law by President Donald Trump in 2017, to expire as scheduled in 2025.

Biden, who has said he won’t raise taxes on people earning less than \$400,000 a year, could propose to extend the Trump tax cuts for those earners in a future budget.

While his plan estimates additional tax revenue down the line, the U.S. would run significant deficits as it borrows money to

finance his plans.

Under Biden’s proposal, the federal budget deficit would hit \$1.8 trillion in 2022, even as the economy rebounds from the pandemic recession to grow at what the administration predicts would be its fastest annual pace since the early 1980s. The deficit would recede slightly in the following years before growing again to nearly \$1.6 trillion by 2031.

Total debt held by the public would more than exceed the annual value of economic output, rising to 117 percent of the size of the economy in 2031. By 2024, debt as a share of the economy would rise to its highest level in U.S. history, eclipsing a World War II-era record.

The budget is simply a request to Congress, which must approve federal spending. But with Democrats in control of the House and Senate, Biden faces some of the best odds of any president in recent history in getting much of his agenda approved, particularly if he can reach agreement

with lawmakers on parts of his infrastructure agenda.

Those talks appear unlikely to produce bipartisan agreement, with Republicans offering a new proposal Thursday that left a wide gap between their ambitions and Biden’s. But the White House remains convinced it can enact significant parts of its agenda with just Democratic support.

Conservative estimates

Republicans warned Thursday that Biden’s spending and tax plans would saddle the economy with dangerous levels of debt.

“Biden’s budget has the highest debt/GDP ratio in American history,” tweeted Sen. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo. “Congress needs to wake up. We can’t continue spending future generations into oblivion.”

Biden’s budget, like those proposed by his predecessors, includes assumptions about how the economy will perform if his policies are enacted. But in a break from the recent past, the Biden

team is conservative in its forecasts, predicting small gains in economic growth even if Congress approves trillions of dollars in new spending.

Biden’s aides predict that even if his full agenda is enacted, the economy would grow at just under 2 percent per year for most of the decade, after accounting for inflation. That rate is similar to the historically sluggish pace of growth that the nation has averaged over the past 20 years. Unemployment would fall to 4.1 percent by next year – from 6.1 percent today – and remain below 4 percent in the years thereafter.

The forecasts continue to show his administration has little fear of rapid inflation breaking out across the economy, despite recent data showing a quick jump in prices as the economy reopens after a year of suppressed activity. Consumer prices never rise faster than 2.3 percent per year in the projections, and the Federal Reserve only gradually raises interest rates from their

current rock-bottom levels in the coming years.

Biden has pitched the idea that now is the time, with interest rates low and the nation still rebuilding from recession, to make large upfront investments that will be paid for over a longer time horizon. His budget shows interest costs for the federal government remaining below historical averages for the course of the decade.

Biden’s spending requests don’t include money for a so-called public option for health care, which would allow Americans to choose to enroll in a public health insurance plan such as Medicare instead of a private plan.

Biden also will express support for Congress allowing Americans as young as 60 to enroll in Medicare and for efforts in Congress to reduce federal spending on prescription drugs, including allowing Medicare to negotiate prices with pharmaceutical companies.

This report contains material from the Associated Press.