

TOP 10 CLASH

UH visits Kansas for first time in 40 years. PAGE B1



MADISON HIGH LOCKED DOWN

Fights feared after students walk out in protest of strict cellphone policy. PAGE A3



BLACK HISTORY

Houston celebrates with month of events. PAGE A8

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Critics: Invasion talk could incite violence

Texas Republican officials ratchet up rhetoric in border battle with Biden administration

By Benjamin Wermund
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick went on Fox News this week and declared that Texas, in its unprecedented border standoff with the Biden administration, is defending its

residents against an "invasion from Third World countries." The asylum seekers who have crossed the border in Eagle Pass by the thousands, Patrick said, using xenophobic language, are "coming here with health issues, they're uneducated, unemployed, and all they do

is commit crime on the streets." He then backpedaled somewhat, clarifying: "Most of them, many of them."

It is the sort of antagonistic rhetoric Texas Republicans have ratcheted up as the state's ongoing dispute with the federal government over immigration enforcement reaches new levels. Once-fringe warnings of an "invasion" are now core to

Border continues on A6



Texas National Guard troops watch over immigrants bowed in prayer after passing through razor wire this week into El Paso. Photo by John Moon/Getty Images



Precinct 1 Commissioner Rodney Ellis and Houston Parks Board member Beth White tour the site for The Hill at Sims. Photos by Jason Fochtman/Staff photographer

Ellis shepherds project creating green space, trails in Sunnyside

The Hill at Sims will transform a dirt mound into a scenic center

By Andrew Dansby
STAFF WRITER

On a bike ride around Sims Bayou eight years ago, former state Sen. Rodney Ellis gazed upon a mound composed of 1.6 million cubic yards of dirt and imagined something beautiful.

Ellis returned later as Harris County Commissioner to scale that hill. There, in the Sunnyside neighborhood where he grew up, he looked upon Houston. Several miles to the west, the Williams Tower. To the east, refineries. Between them, the downtown skyline gleamed.



The 100-acre green space will emerge from a detention basin owned by the Harris County Flood Control District. Hill continues on A6

On a sunny day that followed a rainy week, Ellis treks through the mud to the top of the hill once again. When he reaches the top, he makes a few 360-degree turns, careful not to trip over discarded beer bottles.

"Look at that view," Ellis says. Ellis has grand plans to share that view with his fellow Houstonians. He has shepherded a project managed by the Houston Parks Board that will make the brown artificial mound into a flora-cloaked epicenter of the Hill at Sims, a lush green space with hiking

Hill continues on A6

Jail now closer to meeting guidelines

Harris County cites \$50M it's using on outsourced lockups

By John Wayne Ferguson
STAFF WRITER

Spending \$50 million to send local inmates to facilities outside of Harris County has helped bring the state's largest jail closer to meeting state guidelines, local officials told the Texas Commission on Jail Standards this week.

The county has three active contracts, at a combined value of \$50 million, to house up to 1,722 Harris County prisoners in privately operated jails in Garza and Jefferson counties, as well as in Louisiana and Mississippi. There were about 8,000 inmates being held in Harris County as of Thursday morning and about 1,000 being held in the outsourced facilities, according to the jail's public data dashboard.

A meeting Thursday morning in Austin resulted in no changes to the compliance status of Harris County Jail, which has been deemed out of compliance with state rules since September 2022. Commission inspectors found that jail inmates were waiting too long to be processed and that there were not enough jailers working in comparison to the number of prisoners, among other issues.

Texas law requires a ratio of at least one detention officer for every 48 people being held at a jail.

County officials said they attended Thursday's quarterly meeting knowing that the county's status wouldn't change. Being ruled in compliance could happen only after the jail undergoes a comprehensive inspection, said Jason Spencer, sheriff's office chief of

Jail continues on A2

Bidens grieve three soldiers; retaliatory strikes begin

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Standing solemnly under gray skies, President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden joined grieving families at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Friday to witness the return of three U.S. service members killed in last weekend's drone

attack in Jordan, even as the military was preparing its first retaliatory strikes.

"The United States does not seek conflict in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. But let all those who might seek to do us harm know this: If you harm an American, we will respond," Biden said in a state-

ment. The soldiers were returned to American soil shortly before the United States began a wave of airstrikes targeting dozens of sites in Iraq and Syria used by Iran-backed militias. U.S. officials say the drone attack was carried out by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella

group of Iran-backed militias that includes the group Kataib Hezbollah.

With his gloved right hand over his heart, Biden looked on as the three transfer cases draped with U.S. flags were carried the short distance from a C-5 Galaxy military transport plane to a waiting van. The only

words spoken during the 15-minute dignified transfer, aside from the commands as each case was carried, were from an Air Force chaplain's brief prayer, asking God for "grace and mercy."

The first transfer case held the remains of Sgt. William Je-

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HILL

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and biking paths and a cluster of lakes. The project feels radical, creating splendor from the utilitarian. The 100-acre green space will emerge from a regional detention basin owned by the Harris County Flood Control District.

The Harris County Commissioners Court voted Tuesday to approve the final funding for the \$28.3 million project. The Hill at Sims is projected to be completed in late 2025.

'Something memorable'

Urban parks are frequently framed as a respite from the city: insular spaces where residents can pretend concrete, blacktop and glass are farther away than they are.

The plans for the Hill at Sims take a different approach. The space will be dedicated to nature, without park prerequisites like playgrounds.

But its panoramic view celebrates its connection to the sprawling city. "Parks like this make us connect more as human beings," Ellis says. "It's a good thing for the city. 'The most diverse city in the country.' That's nice to talk about. But that diversity needs ways for us to interact with one another."

A new bridge will link the Hill at Sims' 1.5-mile loop, which encircles an additional 4.5 miles of trails, to the Sims Bayou Greenway, which itself boasts another 20 miles of trails. For those seeking a swing set, Cloverland Park remains across Scott Street.

Beth White, president and

CEO of Houston Parks Board, remarks on its value "as part of a regional complex. There's great synergy here with parks and recreation."

Ellis wants to emphasize a sense of connection, so he pushed for a bridge across Sims Bayou that looks like no other in the city.

"I wanted something unique," he says. "Something memorable."

Renderings for the bridge indicate Ellis got his way. A dramatic rust-colored structure will contrast the green around it as it crosses the bayou before splitting at the Hill at Sims. Part of the bridge will connect with a path to the park's trails, while an offshoot leads to a cantilevered viewing area.

Park equity

Ellis' original bike ride — accompanied by renewable energy entrepreneur Michael Skelly — led to Precinct 1 hiring the Houston Parks Board to do a planning study for the space in 2019.

Ellis calls the expansion of equitable access to green spaces in Houston "a priority for me."

"And this, we are standing in the heart of an underserved community."

The oldest African American community in south central Houston, Sunnyside became the first community south of the city to be developed for Black residents in 1915.

"There's no secret there. Lower-income neighborhoods historically have been deprived of city services," Ellis says. "Inequity was more pronounced if the neighborhood was African American or Hispanic, people who generally didn't have polit-



Jason Fochtman/Staff photographer

The Hill at Sims project will offer views of downtown Houston and hiking and biking trails along Sims Bayou Greenway.

ical clout, and it was exacerbated over time. Once there was some political clout, there might've been more equity, but it doesn't take into account historical inequities."

Ellis sees the park's link to the Bayou Greenways project — a \$220 million public-private endeavor that connects 150 miles of trails along the city's bayous — as a sign of progress. "I've always been an avid cyclist. I like going through different neighborhoods because we have segregated communities," he says. "You see diversity on those trails. Something that pulls us together."

The current cost for the Hill at Sims sits at \$28.3 million, with \$18.8 million contributed by Precinct 1. The Brown Foundation donated \$7.5 million through the Houston Parks Board, and another \$2 million was secured by state Rep. Alma Allen and U.S. Rep. Al Green from public federal and state

funds.

A quick turnaround

In addition to the bridge and two pavilions, the money raised will go toward the shaping of the space: planting trees, paving paths and clearing out a space long left unattended.

Because the property is dedicated to water detention, trespassing abounds. It has been marred by nests of tires, congregations of empty bottles, a pair of waterlogged mattresses, and a vanity that somebody disliked so much they lugged it through the mud to dispose of it instead of leaving it on the street where the city would pick it up.

The muddy paths up and down the hill have become popular with people riding four-wheelers. Ellis thinks a few citations will put an end to the practice.

"I'm reluctant to add dirt to it right now," he says, "because

they'll think we're trying to improve it for them."

Those thick, muddy spaces will become footpaths to a hill-top pavilion that looks out over the city. An open-air nature pavilion will be constructed along Scott Street, the point of entry for the park. Some green space will also be available for active programming.

With Cloverland Park offering recreation across the street, Ellis' constituents, over the course of 20 community meetings, lobbied for a different sort of green space.

The Hill at Sims cinches together a number of initiatives by parties with similar interests: Ellis' desire for park equity, the Houston Parks Board's large-scale efforts to enhance regional parks along the Bayou Greenways system, and the Harris County Flood Control District's efforts to make use of spaces that have specific functionality. Or, as Tina Peterson of the Flood Control District says, "to make what we do one piece of a much bigger thing."

That cooperation helped the project move with uncharacteristic swiftness. Stakes have already been hammered into the ground for the site of the bridge. Permitting and bidding for the park's components — the hill and basin, the nature pavilion, and the greenway along Scott Street — will all take place this year. Full development should be complete before 2026.

"It seems like projects like this can take forever," says Herman Stude, a Brown Foundation board member and part of Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. "This is a real model for how things can happen quickly."