

Texarkana Gazette

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'Race Against Time'

Award-winning investigative journalist Jerry "Boo" Mitchell speaks Thursday evening about his work involving unsolved murder cases of the civil rights era during an event at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. For more coverage of the event, see Saturday's Gazette. Mitchell will sign books at 7 p.m. today at Texarkana's Books-A-Million. Gazette reporter Aaron Brand recently interviewed the Texarkana native about his book, "Race Against Time: A Reporter Reopens the Unsolved Murder Cases of the Civil Rights Era." For the interview, see Sunday's edition. Staff photo by Danielle Dupree



Airport board OKs new landing fees

By GREG BISCHOF

TEXARKANA, Ark. — New landing fees for private and commercial aircraft weighing 8,000 or more pounds were approved at Thursday's Texarkana Regional Airport Authority Board meeting. Airport Director Paul Mehrlich believes the new landing fee is expected to generate at least \$30,000 the

first year. For an 8,000-pound plane landing at the airport, a \$16 landing fee will be assessed. For a 9,000-pound aircraft, landing fees would total \$18 and a 10,000-pound plane would be assessed \$20. Mehrlich told board members that such a fee wasn't uncommon. See FEE on Page 2A

Bringing Hotel Grim back to glory

Project manager says tiles, brick in remarkably good shape



Staff photo by Danielle Dupree

■ Tim Minson, Cohen-Esrey Development Group project manager, discusses plans for the Hotel Grim on Thursday afternoon during a tour of the building in downtown Texarkana. The "Palm Court" fountain and columns can be seen in the background.

By LORI DUNN
Texarkana Gazette

TEXARKANA, Texas — After 30 years of standing vacant, the The Hotel Grim is slowly returning to its original 1920s splendor.

COMING SOON
■ More photo coverage coming in Saturday's paper.

Debris is being tossed out "one bag at a time" and reminders of the hotel's one-time elegance are taking its place.

Tile and bricks used in the 1924 construction of the downtown Texarkana hotel are in remarkably good shape and the job of restoring the building into apartment units is underway.

"It's really exceptional. They had a way of getting things done back then," said Tim Minson, Cohen-Esrey Development Group project manager, about the building's structure. "As a whole, the building is extremely strong."

See GRIM on Page 2A



Staff photo by Danielle Dupree

■ Project manager Tim Minson, left, says work on the Hotel Grim's roof will begin soon and should be completed in three to four weeks.

TC has state's highest rate of graduations

FROM STAFF REPORTS

TEXARKANA, Texas — A statewide accountability report released by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shows Texarkana College ranking first in student graduation rates among Texas community colleges.

The preliminary results indicate 49.7% of full-time, first-time college students graduate within three years of beginning their degree or certificate programs at Texarkana College — doubling the state completion rate of 24.2%.

"We knew we would do well, but we did not expect to have a 4 percent increase," said Dr. Jason Smith, Texarkana College president and CEO.

Texarkana College has held the top position for two consecutive years and ranked first in 2017 among Texas community colleges for four-year graduation rates, school officials said.

Smith also said the results are a new institutional record for completion of degrees and certificates.

"We are so proud of our students who have set new records for graduation rates again this year," he said. "Our students complete faster and at a higher rate than students at any other state-funded community college."

Smith attributes this success to the mindset of the faculty and staff and the belief that a college experience is about much more than earning a grade point average.

"It's not me. It's the faculty and staff. Putting people in right places. The culture they've created," he said. "They are doing some wonderful things."

Smith says the college has built a framework for students that helps them overcome barriers that can contribute to high drop-out rates.

He said several things contribute to TC's success including soft-skill training courses, the faculty advising model, a caring staff and "world-class" instruction.

The three-year graduation rates are reflective of the success of the 2016 fall cohort of full-time, first time in college students.

The preliminary Coordinating Board accountability report released earlier this week shows See TC on Page 2A



Man pleads not guilty to sexual-abuse charges

By LYNN LAROWE
Texarkana Gazette

TEXARKANA, Texas — A Texarkana man entered pleas of not guilty this week to multiple charges involving the alleged sexual abuse of two different girls.

Derrick Deshawn Harper, 32, appeared with Assistant Public Defender Clayton Haas for arraignment earlier this week before 202nd District Judge John Tidwell at the Bi-State Justice Building. Haas entered not guilty pleas on Harper's behalf to two counts of continuous sexual abuse of a child under 14 and three counts of aggravated sexual assault of a child.



HARPER

The allegations against Harper began with an outcry of sexual abuse made by a girl to personnel at her school in Tarrant County, Texas, in May 2019, according to a probable cause affidavit. The girl told a forensic interviewer in Hurst, Texas, See HARPER on Page 2A

Librarian retiring after 50 years on job

Patty Robinson did the invaluable work of cataloging each new book

By KARL RICHTER
Texarkana Gazette

TEXARKANA, Texas — After today, the only books Texarkana Public Library cataloger Patricia "Patty" Robinson will handle will be those she chooses to read.

That's a big change for Robinson, who retires today after working more than 50 years for the library and getting about 100,000 books and other items ready to be checked out.

"I won't be processing any books, but I still read," she said, adding that she will not be a stranger to the library and her colleagues there.

Robinson began working at the library, then in its for-

mer location on State Line Avenue, on Saturdays when she was in high school. She started by shelving books and after graduation began working full time as a desk clerk.

Eventually she joined the cataloging department, which is responsible for taking the "raw" books and other materials new to the library's collection and adding labels, bar codes, card pockets, protective bindings and whatever else they need before they can be shelved.

She also entered book descriptions into the library's catalog, a task that changed dramatically with the advent See RETIRE on Page 2A



Staff photo by Karl Richter

■ Texarkana Public Library cataloger Patty Robinson, left, receives a certificate recognizing her 50 years on the job from Texas-side Mayor Bob Bruggeman during a City Council meeting on Monday at City Hall in Texarkana, Texas.



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Texarkana Gazette

Fee

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“This is actually very common — it’s not something new,” he said.

Mehrlich said the landing fee will be assessed on privately owned aircraft, corporate aircraft and commercial airline planes needing to land at Texarkana Regional. He added that such a fee wouldn’t apply to either military or medical aircraft.

Mehrlich said money generated by the fee would help the airport take needed steps toward financial sufficiency and rely less often on municipal operating and maintenance dollars from both cities year after year.

“The airport has had to struggle with its annual budget for many years now, with both cities having to pay for it,” he said. “We need to work more toward self-sufficiency.”

The revenue brought in by the new landing fee is also proposed to help fund a proposed full-time airport property development and marketing manager, a position that Mehrlich would like see filled by July.

Following some additional discussion, board members approved the new landing fee but tabled action on the property development and marketing manager position pending further discussion defining the position’s duties.

Mehrlich said the person hired would improve the airport’s overall air operations traffic counts. He or she would also redevelop former vintage U.S. Air Force personnel buildings and homes, which have existed on the property since at least 1968. He added that the new management position would also be responsible for social media communications and advertising.

TC

Continued from Page 1A

statewide data for publicly funded institutions of higher education including community colleges and universities.

Dr. Donna McDaniel, TC’s vice president of instruction, said the report shows a snapshot of Texas’ progress to meet the state’s educated population goal. That goal is to increase the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds in Texas who hold a certificate or degree by 2030 and ensure all graduates from public institutions of higher education complete programs with identified marketable skills.

“Our students graduate with real-world experience and marketable skills that are valuable in the workforce,” McDaniel said. “With every incoming freshman class, we begin with the end in mind.”

Grim

Continued from Page 1A

On a tour Thursday, he showed off the the first floor where guests once dined at the hotel’s cafe and the eighth-floor ballroom where they would dance into the night.

The first floor also includes the “Palm Court” with a fountain area and white columns. The lobby was billed as the showcase of the hotel and featured a marble floor.

Abatement of asbestos and other dangerous materials from the Hotel Grim began in November 2019, marking the beginning of the iconic downtown building’s long-anticipated rehabilitation.

The priority right now is to continue the demolition and start putting in the roof. That will hopefully be completed in three to four weeks.

The seventh and eighth floors of the hotel have recently been cleared

of debris.

“Debris is going out of the building one bag at a time,” Minson said. Most bags are tossed out the window into a Dumpster below. Debris that includes lead paint can’t be tossed out because it would be hazardous if the bag broke, he said.

“We are still in full demolition right now. We have got to stabilize the roof and get water out of the building,” Minson said. Water has caused the most damage to the building over the years.

“One drop at a time and every year, it just got worse and worse,” he said.

During the demolition, there could easily be between 60 and 100 people working on the building each day, Minson said.

The terrace on the building’s roof where the hotel’s iconic sign is located is also in pretty good shape. Minson said Texarkana’s relatively mild climate has helped keep the bricks in good shape.

“It’s rare to see 100-year-old

brick that looks this good,” he said.

One thing Minson is proud of is how much of the work and materials used in the restoration are from local sources.

“That’s important to me, to use as many local businesses as we can,” he said.

After this phase is finished, a restoration group will work on the details of the tile and other original fixtures inside the hotel.

“There are a couple of groups in Texas that will bid on restoration. It takes a certain type of artisan to come in and do this type of thing,” Minson said.

The project is expected to be completed in the spring of 2021.

Plans are to convert the building into 93 studio, one-and two-bedroom apartments. All apartment units in the Hotel Grim will be affordable-rate housing because the project is partially funded by the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program.

That means tenants can have a household income of no more than 60% of the local median. Rental rates have not been determined.

Cohen-Esrey has launched a website, HotelGrimApartments.com, aimed at potential future tenants of the building. It features floor plans and descriptions of the hotel’s planned amenities.

Named after Texarkana banking, railroad and timber magnate William Rhoads Grim, the hotel opened in 1925. Construction cost for the luxurious 250-room hotel was nearly \$1 million. It closed in 1990.

After significant effort in the last decade, the city and developers secured the multi-layered, \$26 million financing package that will pay for renovating the Grim. The transaction included both housing and historic tax credits, EPA funds, a Neighborhood Stabilization Program loan, conventional debt and local contributions from the city.

Retire

Continued from Page 1A

of computer technology. Before about 1990, for each book, catalogers would type multiple, cross-referenced entries for the library’s card catalog. Robinson still remembers how happy she was with entering each book only once after the library computerized.

At a City Council meeting Monday, Mayor Bob Bruggeman read a declara-

tion honoring Robinson for her service.

“She has been an exemplary employee steadily through the management of four library directors. Her friendliness, compassion and institutional knowledge have made her a favorite among patrons, coworkers and the citizens of Texarkana, USA,” Bruggeman said.

Library Director Jennifer Strayhorn added to the

praise.

“Patty is just a wonderful person. We’re going to miss her smile every morning, her steadfastness. She just knows so much about the library ... and she’s just been an incredible employee and worker and friend,” Strayhorn said.

Robinson is looking forward to spending more time with her four grandsons, two of whom live in the Dallas

area. But looking back brings good memories.

“It’s been a privilege to have been a part of the city and the library for all these years. I’ve worked with a lot of really good directors, and I’ve worked with a lot of good employees, and I’ve met a lot of good people down there through the years. It’s been nice to see kids grow up and come in with their kids,” she said.

Harper

Continued from Page 1A

that Harper, to whom she is distantly related, sexually abused her when she was 4 and 5 years of age in Texarkana, Texas.

The girl allegedly described multiple incidences of sexual abuse by Harper occurring from 2013 to 2017.

“She stated that she would cry and kick at the suspect and he would sit on her legs and continue what he was doing,” the affidavit states. “She stated that he told her that he would kill her family

if she told anyone what happened.”

The girl said the alleged abuse ended when her family moved to the Dallas area.

Based on statements made by the girl in Tarrant County, a second girl was interviewed at the Texarkana Children’s Advocacy Center in August. The second girl, now 12, alleged that she was 7 or 8 years old in 2014 or 2015 when Harper took her and several of her young female relatives into a bedroom and locked the door.

The second girl alleged

Harper pulled her pants down and sexually assaulted her. She alleged she witnessed Harper sexually abuse the other girl after she managed to push him off of her. The second girl alleged Harper sexually assaulted her multiple times.

First Assistant District Attorney Kelley Crisp asked Tidwell to schedule the case for trial during Monday’s hearing.

“There is no way we’re going to work this out,” Crisp said, referring to resolving the case with a plea bargain.

Regulators boost PG&E’s wildfire fine to \$2.1 billion

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO — California power regulators on Thursday slapped Pacific Gas & Electric with a \$2.1 billion fine for igniting a series of deadly wildfires that landed the beleaguered utility in bankruptcy.

The record penalty imposed in an administrative law judge’s decision boosts a previously agreed upon \$1.7 billion settlement announced in December. Several consumer groups had protested the settlement as too lenient in light of PG&E’s destruction, and the California Public Utilities Commission agreed after fur-

ther review.

PG&E officials said they were disappointed by the increased fine after “working diligently over many months with multiple parties” to reach the previous deal.

“We recognize our fundamental obligation is to operate our system safely and we share the same objectives as the Commission and other state leaders — namely in reducing the risk of future wildfires in our communities,” PG&E spokesman James Noonan said in a statement.

The harsher punishment includes a \$200 million payment to California’s

general fund.

The San Francisco company has already set up a \$13.5 billion fund to help those who lost family members, homes and businesses in catastrophic wildfires caused by PG&E’s outdated electrical grid and negligence during 2017 and 2018. The fires killed nearly 130 people and destroyed almost 28,000 homes and other buildings.

More than 81,000 claims have been filed in the bankruptcy case.

The decision will also prevent PG&E from attempting to recover \$1.82 billion from its customers, forcing its shareholders to bear the cost instead.

Loughlin, Giannulli set for October trial in college scam

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER
The Associated Press

BOSTON — TV actress Lori Loughlin and her fashion designer husband, Mossimo Giannulli, will go on trial in October on charges that they bribed their daughters’ way into the University of Southern California, a federal judge said Thursday.

The judge set the trial date a day after defense attorneys claimed that new evidence would exonerate the couple of charges in the college admissions bribery scheme that has embroiled prestigious universities across the country.

The famous couple will be tried starting Oct. 5 in Boston federal court alongside six other prominent parents accused of rigging the college admissions process.

Seven others still fighting the charges will go to trial in January 2021, U.S. District Judge Nathaniel Gorton said.

Loughlin, who played Aunt Becky on the sitcom “Full House,” and Giannulli are accused of paying

\$500,000 to get their daughters into USC as recruits to the rowing team, though neither of them was a rower.

Authorities say Loughlin and Giannulli helped create fake athletic profiles for the teens by sending the consultant at the center of the scheme, Rick Singer, photos of their teens posing on rowing machines.

The money was funneled through a sham charity operated by Singer, who has pleaded guilty to orchestrating the scheme, authorities say.

Loughlin and Giannulli’s lawyers had urged the judge to delay the setting of the trial dates in light of new evidence they received from prosecutors this week.

They say this evidence bolsters the couple’s claim that they believed their payments were legitimate donations, not bribes.

But the judge said the cases need to be resolved expeditiously and instructed defense attorneys to file any motions to dismiss the case by

March 13.

Loughlin and Giannulli’s attorneys said in a filing late Wednesday that prosecutors provided them with notes from Singer’s iPhone.

Singer says in the notes that FBI agents yelled at him and told him to lie to get parents to say things in recorded phone calls that could be used against them.

The lawyers also say Singer’s notes indicate that FBI agents told him to lie by saying he told parents who participated in the so-called “side door” scheme that the payments were bribes, not legitimate donations.

“Loud and abrasive call with agents. They continue to ask me to tell a fib and not restate what I told my clients as to where the money was going — to the program and not the coach and that it was a donation and they want it to be a payment,” Singer wrote, according to the filing.

Singer’s notes weren’t given to the defense until this week because the government believed they

were privileged and didn’t review them further after discovering them in October 2018, prosecutors say.

Sean Berkowitz, a lawyer for the couple, said in a court filing on Thursday that prosecutors’ explanation for not handing over the evidence sooner is “bogus.”

He accused the government of “egregious prosecutorial misconduct.”

“The fact that someone made a donation to USC with the goal of getting their children into USC is not a crime,” BJ Trach, another attorney for Loughlin, told the judge.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Eric Rosen told the judge that it doesn’t matter whether Singer called the payments bribes or donations, because it was still an illegal quid pro quo.

“Just because it was called a donation doesn’t make it legitimate,” Rosen said.

Texarkana Gazette

Statement of core values

Impartiality means reporting, editing and delivering the news honestly, fairly, objectively, and without personal opinion or bias.

Credibility is the greatest asset of any news medium, and impartiality is the greatest source of credibility.

To provide the most complete report, a news organization must not just cover the news, but uncover it. It must follow the story wherever it leads, regardless of

any preconceived ideas on what might be most newsworthy.

The pursuit of truth is a noble goal of journalism. But the truth is not always apparent or known immediately. Journalists’ role is therefore not to determine what they believe at that time to be the truth and reveal only that to their readers, but rather to report as completely and impartially as possible all verifiable facts so that readers can, based

on their own knowledge and experience, determine what they believe to be the truth. When a newspaper delivers both news and opinions, the impartiality and credibility of the news organization can be questioned. To minimize this as much as possible there needs to be a sharp and clear distinction between news and opinion, both to those providing and consuming the news.

—WALTER HUSSMAN JR., PUBLISHER

“A newspaper has five constituencies, including first its readers, then advertisers, then employees, then creditors, then shareholders. As long as the newspaper keeps those constituencies in that order, especially its readers first, all constituencies will be well-served.”

—WALTER HUSSMAN, 1906-1988