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County sales tax income rises by 2%

LIVINGSTON — While Polk County's sales tax income in June is expected to sharply decline due to CO-VID-19 pandemic business shutdowns, the May payment was up by almost 2 percent when compared to the May 2019 check.

According to a report issued by Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar, the county's May payment of \$241,576.70 was up by \$4,630.69 or 1.95 percent from the \$236,946.01 received in May 2019.

The latest increase followed a 3.7 percent decline in April and gains of 1.4 percent in March, 22.7 percent in February and 5.7 percent in January.

So far this year, the county treasury has received almost \$1.1 million, which is up by \$70,620.55 or just over 7.2 percent from the same fivemonth period of 2019.

The comptroller collects the sales taxes for all governmental entities and then rebates the local share to counties, cities and other political subdivisions on a monthly basis. The May check is based on sales made in March by businesses that report the tax monthly.

According to Hegar, the May allocations reflect the beginning of pandemic-related business shutdowns, but TWC expects local allocations in June to deteriorate as the full impact of pandemic unemployment and business closures begin to be felt.

"Widespread social distancing requirements were not in place across much of the state until late March, meaning the impact of those measures affected only a portion of allocations for this month," Hegar said. 'The agency expects next month's allocations, based on April sales, will show steeper declines compared to a year

ago."
While the latest payment is the fifth to be received during the calendar year, it represents the eighth payment the county collected under its FY 2020 budget which began on Oct. 1, 2019. Thus far, the county has received almost

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BITE-BY-BITE

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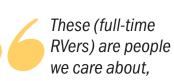
COVID shutdown sparks a race for available RV spots among Escapees

By Valerie Reddell vreddell@polkcounty publishing.com

For the million or so Americans who describe themselves as full-time RVers, a lengthy stay-at-home order can create a problem.

Livingston attorney Shawn Loring, who is CEO of Escapees, Inc. said many of the members of his organization found themselves suddenly competing for half the number of campsites.

As many state and federal officials began enacting social distancing measures, 40-60 percent of the parks with RV sites closed. Many private campgrounds also closed, since most people consider hitting the road



they're our friends, but we have to balance that with another group of people we're also close to, the management staff ..."

Shawn Loring Escapees CEO

in your travel trailer, a recreational adventure. Other parks that are only open seasonal opted to skip this year.

The COVID shutdowns created a nationwide game of musical chairs, Loring said.



Rainbow's End, an RV park south of Livingston, has been operating at near capacity since officials closed public parks in an effort to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

Loring, his law partner K. Susie Adams, and others began contacting state and federal officials, urging them to reopen more sites — either by designating private campgrounds as essential businesses or by keeping public parks open.

Loring said many families living the RV life plan their North American adventures a year in advance.

One group of families found themselves "boondocking" on open land for five weeks. Only a few RVs are equipped for operating so completely off-the-grid, and those have their limits.

Eventually, generators have to be refueled, sewage holding tanks have to be dumped, and the humans

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TDCJ holding 10K offenders approved for parole

Actions expose more to COVID in the slammer

By Valerie Reddell vreddell@polkcounty publishing.com

LIVINGSTON — It's no secret that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is struggling to protect staff and offenders from illness and even death caused by the coronavirus. The mystery is why TDCJ has not released 10,680 offenders that have been approved for parole.

More than 150 appear on a list of offenders who were set to be paroled on a specified date — and those dates are all prior to May 1.

Then there are hundreds of others like Thomas Martin, who was sentenced to 87 years in prison for mur-



infected inmates from those who are healthy. Elected officials have shared their growing concerns about the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's activities as the number of infected staff and offenders continues to climb.

Martin was approved for parole in September 2019, and has had a projected release date of Feb. 29, 2020 for quite a long time. He's still sitting in the Wynne

der with a deadly weapon in Unit in Huntsville. When you search for information on Martin's status, the online offender search indicates he is not scheduled for release at this time.

> Kristin Ricketts, Founder of Restorer of City Streets,

a faith-based program that advocates for criminal justice reform, says an estimated 1,300 of those people simply need to complete CHANGES, a lifeskills

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LISD sets graduation ceremonies

By Brian Besch pcenewsroom@gmail.com

Livingston ISD has set dates for its Class of 2020 high school and academy graduation ceremonies. The school district has selected Friday, May 29 at 7:30 p.m. for the academy and Saturday, May 30 at 9 a.m. for the high school.

Both ceremonies are planned for Lion Stadium and the district has alternate plans in case of rain. The dates were originally to be a week later, but a conference with Texas Education Agency Commissioner of Education Mike Morath allowed for the date to be pushed forward. Guidelines for inperson graduation ceremonies restrict the school to an outdoor event and is subject to change "as underlying health conditions change.'

The district has split the two campus ceremonies in order to comply with Executive Order No. GA-21, district legal guidance, and local code jurisdictions. The total number of participants has also been capped, due to the size of Livingston High School Class of 2020 (212 students) to comply with social distancing both during the event and during entry and exit of the facility. The event will be closed to the public and only the participants and families with their ticket may enter.

"The district is excited for the Class of 2020 to have been afforded this opportunity and while it absolutely is not the best of circumstances, the celebration of 13 years of these young people's lives is one that we will have to abide by the laws and regulations set forth to make the best of this situation for them," Livingston Superintendent Dr. Brent Hawkins wrote in an emailed update Wednesday.

... These young people have made history as being a class that faced tremendous adversity and persevered. This just may have prepared them as much as anything for a successful future."

Prior to attending the ceremony, participating students and attending family members will be questioned during ticket pickup for new or worsening symptoms of possible COVID-19.

Graduates will only be brought together for one event, as rehearsals are not permitted. The six-foot spacing guidelines will be maintained between all participants except members from the same household (five individuals or fewer may sit together from the same household). All must stay six feet away from any family group at all times. Seating will be randomly assigned.

There is only capacity for a family group of five to receive tickets. That number is

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Chance of rain 0%

MON 5/11

Humidity 46%

ESE 7 mph Chance of rain 0%. **TUE 5/12**

81/65 SE 9 mph Chance of rain 50%.

Humidity 59%

WED 5/13

85/68 SSE 9 mph Chance of rain 40%. Humidity 66%.

THU 5/14

Humidity 70%.

87/71 SSE 8 mph Chance of rain 40%.

FRI 5/15

87/70 Scattered storms SSE 8 mph Chance of rain 50%. Humidity 70%

LAKE DATA CURRENT LEVEL 131.14 NORMAL LEVEL 131.00 DISCHARGE......10,000 cfs

RAINFALL

Last 7 days (Inches) 0.08 Last 30 days (Inches) 2.99 All weather data measured at **Lake Livingston Dam**

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INSIDE Bite By Bite 1B Church Directory 3B Classified 5-6B Life Tributes 4A Lion Roar 6A Mother's Day Ads 2A Public Notices 4B

ESCAPEES

Continued from page 1A

on board have to connect with the outside world to access email, glance at their "snail" mail and address personal business matters.

"These are not people who are economically distressed and have no other way to live," Loring added. "About 80 percent of our members are retirees that saved for decades to live this particular iteration of the American dream.

"The others are millienials or gen-Xers who are raising families and working. We felt compelled for our system of eight parks in seven states to find a way to remain open and comply with CDC guidelines.

"So it was heart-wrenching to tell people to get where they are going and stay there,' Loring said.

The organization also had to cancel activities at each of the sites. Laundry facilities and bathrooms remained open.

"These (full-time RVers) are people we care about, they're our friends, but we have to balance that with another group of people we're also close to, the management staff. We went down to extremely limited office functions to minimize the burden and risk to our management staff, but continue to provide essential services that at that moment were hard to obtain," he added.

According to a story by Lana Bortolot published in the New York Times May 1, many of the nomads-bychoice were forced to make a prolonged visit to friends or family, sheltering in place in their driveway.

Others flocked to the location they use as their permanent legal address, the Escapees' Rainbows End park just south of Livingston.

"County Judge Sydney Murphy designated us as an essential business so we could keep the mail forwarding service operational," Loring said.

That mailing service handles everything from birthday cards, to bank statements and medications.

Loring said Escapees also made a policy change that accepted either one-month reservations or a one-night stay for those who were passing through to another site to weather the pandemic.

"Making that move felt strange. For 45 years, we have been encouraging people to

explore North America, visit all the places they wanted to see," Loring said. "Now we are telling them to find somewhere for an extended stay."

The eight parks Escapees owns remained near capacity for several weeks. In recent days, state parks have started reopening, so that has allowed a little movement.

Many fulltime RVers form intentional communities that include several families with similar interests. The mobile "neighborhood" allows children to form meaningful friendships. These groups also lessen the anxiety and hardship of sheltering in place. They can appoint one member to do the shopping and other errands, while the others remain in camp.

Since the groups are somewhat isolated, the risk of contagion goes down.

The COVID experience has forced all RVers to re-

think their backup plans. "When we told this group of one million people to go home, there wasn't an automatic answer for some of them," Adams said. "Some of them decided that since their driver's license says 'Livingston, Texas,' they would just come here.'

SALES TAX

Continued from page 1A

\$1.75 million under its current budget, which is up by \$118,034.42 or more than 7.2 percent from the \$1.63 million collected during the first eight months of FY 2019.

Under the FY 2020 budget, the county projects it will collect \$2.48 million in sales tax income during the fiscal year. The total for the first eight months of the budget year represents over 70.5 percent of the projected total.

Polk County collects a 0.5 percent tax on sales while the cities of Livingston, Onalaska and Corrigan assess a 1.5 percent tax. The cities of Goodrich and Seven Oaks each have a 1 percent sales tax.

Of the five cities that collect the tax, all but one reported gains during April when compared to the totals received one year earlier.

Livingston's latest sales tax rebate of \$358,593.05 was up by \$12,453.21 or 31.6 percent from the \$347,139.84 received in May 2019. So far this year, Livingston has collected over \$1.6 million from the tax, which is up by \$64,280.72 or 4.1 percent compared to the same period of 2019.

With a May rebate of \$67,010.50, Ónalaska's sales tax check was up by \$7,971.53 or 13.5 percent from the \$59,038.97 reported one year earlier. So far this year, Onalaska has collected \$246,849.24 from the tax, which is up by \$20,713.65 or 9.26 percent compared to the same period of 2019.

Corrigan's latest sales tax rebate was \$37,850.83, which was down by \$832.40 or almost 2.2 percent from the \$36,683.23 received in May 2019. So far this year, Corrigan has collected \$147,445.04 from the tax, which is down by \$8,900.03 or almost 5.7 percent compared to the same period of 2019.

During May, Goodrich received \$4,516.58 in sales tax income, which was up by \$1,789.24 or 65.6 percent from the \$2,727.34 received one year earlier. So far this year, Goodrich has collected \$18,729.10 from the tax, which is up by \$4,495.56 or 31.6 percent compared to the same period of 2019.

Seven Oaks received \$2,027.01 in May, which was up by \$702.87 or 53.1 percent from the \$1,324.14 received one year ago. So far this year, Seven Oaks has collected \$8,247.89 from the tax, which is up by \$4,462.86 or 117.9 percent compared to the same period of 2019.

In his May report, Hegar said Texas counties received \$51.6 million in rebate checks, which was down by 2.8 percent compared to one year ago. Cities collected \$532.2 million in rebates, which was down by 5.1 percent from May 2019.

According to the report, Houston received the state's largest check for over \$57.4 million, which was down by 10.3 percent from the \$64 million delivered one year

San Antonio's sales tax allocation was \$30.7 million, which was down by 10.7 percent from the \$34.4 million received one year ago.

The nearly \$26.8 million issued to Dallas reflects a 9.4 percent decrease from the \$29.6 million received one year earlier.

The Austin sales tax allocation for May was \$20.2 million, which was down by 4.5 percent from the \$21.1 million received one year earlier.

Other area counties that received May rebates included:

- **Angelina**, which collected \$568,534.40, down by 7.7 percent from May 2019.
- **Liberty**, which collected \$405,677.20, down by 3.8 percent from one year ago.

- San Jacinto, which collected \$51,713.85, up by 15.1 percent from May 2019.
- Tyler, which collected \$62,951.58, down by 12.8 percent from one year ago.

• Walker, which collected \$357,514.78, down up 0.5 percent from May 2019.

Other East Texas cities that received May rebates

- **Huntsville** received a payment of \$882,734.37, which was up by almost 1 percent from one year ago.
- Lufkin received a payment of \$1.3 million, which was down by 5.1 percent from one
- Diboll received a payment of \$53,209.34, which was down by 9.9 percent from May 2019.
- Cleveland received a payment of \$369,533.04, which was down by 15.5 percent from one year ago.
- **Liberty** received a payment of \$285,653.73, which was up by more than 7.8 percent from May 2019.
- Woodville received a payment of \$111,624.25, which was down by 12.5 percent from May 2019.
- **Chester** received a payment of \$1,813.49, which was up by almost 34.9 percent from the total collected one year ago.
- **Trinity** received a payment of \$103,573.36, which was up by 16.1 percent from one year ago.
- **Groveton** received a payment of \$21,554.90, which was down by 0.5 percent from
- **Shepherd** received a payment of \$19,084.54, which was down by almost 30.2 percent from May 2019.
- Coldspring received a payment of \$31,704.63, which was down by 6.3 percent from one year ago.
- Point Blank received a payment of \$7,363.65, which was up by 38.3 percent from May 2019.

Continued from page 1A program that prepares of-

fenders for release. The acronym stands for Changing Habits and Achieving New Goals to Empower Success. Offenders are allowed to begin the program if release is anticipated

within two years. Several formerly incarcerated individuals who asked that their names not be used, said the class is largely workbook based, and said there's no reason it could not be done at home with parole officers monitoring progress.

Topics covered include anger management, healthy relationships, drug education, and living well. Offenders learn strategies for finding and keeping a job and coping with stressful situations.

"This list of offenders approved for parole does not include sex offenders or classifications that need long term treatment," Ricketts said. "They all have a housing plan, but even if housing was a problem, TDCJ can issue vouchers that can be used for rent while they transition.

"This is especially puzzling, since this is now a public health issue," she added. "Nonviolent offenders who have been approved for release should be paroled quickly to reduce the risk to staff and the community," Ricketts said.

"This is just one more reason our prison system needs independent oversight. As of today, 12 corrections officers have died from COVID-19,' she said. One of the dead is a chaplain, according to re-

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> **KRISTEN RICKETTS Restorer of City Streets**

ports published by the Marshall Project.

transitioning."

Another 535 TDCJ staff members or contractors have tested positive.

"Why are we escalating the risk of exposure to those staff members and their families?" Ricketts added.

Information available on TDCI's website shows that 1,379 offenders have tested positive for the virus; 371 have recovered and 23 have died as of May 6.

Exposure to an offender or staff member who has tested positive has caused 21,585 offenders to be placed in medical isolation.

That exposure risk has elected officials in Brazoria and Anderson County furious.

The Texas Department of State Health Services has not been consistent in its reporting of case counts in rural counties. Employees who test positive are reported where they live, offenders are reported in the county where they usually reside even if decades have passed

since they were last in their "home" county.

Anderson County Judge Robert Johnston demanded that all staff at the Beto Unit be tested. Of the 300 tested, 18 were positive and symptom free.

"They would have gone home and given it to their families and gone to the grocery stores, not knowing that they have the virus," Johnston told the Texas Observer in a report by Michael Barajas, Sophie Novack and Lise

In Coryell County, TDCJ prisoners account for 133 of the county's 180 confirmed cases as of May 5.

Brazoria County Judge Matt Sebesta has blasted TDCJ publicly for continuing to move inmates and staff around the state. Many of those transferred already had COVID-19.

TDCJ blames staffing shortages for continuing to require officers assigned to units with confirmed cases to also pull duty at units with no known infections.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees is continuing to advocate for ongoing testing and adequate supplies of personal protective equipment.

TDCJ spokesman Jeremy Desel denied reports of inadequate protective gear when questioned by Keri Blakinger of the Marshall Project.

Desel said the agency has more than 100,000 N95 masks and 2.5 million pairs of gloves, with more arriving.

Corrections staff say they are not allowed to use PPE that has been designated for medical staff. They have been issued cloth masks instead.

GRADUATION

Continued from page 1A

said to place Lion Stadium at capacity when meeting the standard set by state guidance. The district is contracting with a professional vendor to stream the ceremony for those that cannot attend or are not attending because they are in an at-risk

Hand sanitizer or wash stations will be available at all facility entrances. School personnel and law enforcement will be limited to the minimum number needed to logistically support the

ceremony. Diplomas cannot be

handed from one person to another unless gloves are worn to distribute the diplomas. Students will handle their diploma from a table on stage and proceed to their picture with a school official. It is asked that all par-

ticipants consider wearing non-medical grade facemasks, but it is not mandated. The district has ordered the masks for students if they choose to wear them. The district will also purchase each student's 8x10 photo. They ask that no one approaches the rail in the stands to take pictures.

School personnel and law enforcement will be stationed to ensure compliance with the order and limit the congregation of family groups. There will be information coming to ensure the organization prevents congregation outside of the ceremony, as well, including entering and exiting the facility.

Livingston High School Principal Dr. Paul Drake will reportedly release information in the coming days to detail graduation procedures. Students are urged to turn in assignments by May 15 to participate in the

NURSING Continued from page 2A

as part of her motivation for

her decision to leave home and head for the pandemic's front lines. "I have always enjoyed and

valued the service I have provided to my patients in Lufkin," Lopez said. "I decided I wanted to join the fight because I remembered the oath I recited at my graduation. I also know that there is a level of skill and compassion that I have to offer to others who are in need the most at this time."

Both nurses credited their training and instructors at AC, stating

as "donning PPE (personal protective equipment), tracheostomy care, administering intravenous lines and IV medications, handling emergency protocols and using nursing

specific skills learned such

prudence."

"The skills I acquired at Angelina College are the foundation to my abilities as a nurse," Lopez said. "My instructors taught me how to think clinically and not to second guess myself."



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