The NEAL SPELCE AUSTIN LETTER

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Dear Client:

A commuter rail line to ease congestion on IH35 between Austin and San Antonio was first posed in the late 1990s. Austin, San Marcos and Georgetown have stepped up to kick-start the project, but San Antonio has lagged behind. Within the next few weeks, it will be decision-making time for the Alamo City.

In a few years, the proposed Lone Star Rail District line – the LSTAR – could **connect Georgetown**, **Austin**, **San Marcos**, **New Braunfels and San Antonio**.

> "The passenger rail service would move thousands of students, professionals and academics, tourists, and friends and family up and down the IH35 corridor every year. It would further integrate and energize our regional economy, which means **more jobs**, **and help untangle some of IH35's all too frequent traffic jams, which means shorter drive times and less pollution**."

This is a quote from an Alamo City major mover-and-shaker in a position to make something happen in his city. After serving a lengthy term as President of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, **Joe Krier** is currently on the San Antonio City Council. And his City Council is scheduled to take action sooner, rather than later.

> "**This is not a light-rail project, and it is as far from being another streetcar-style proposal as it can be**," Krier said. "LSTAR would help alleviate a real transportation problem – traffic tie-ups on IH35. **A trip from downtown San Antonio to downtown Austin would take 75 minutes**. That's time to read the newspaper or a book, or use the train's Wi-Fi to get a jump on work."

So, what does San Antonio need to do to climb on board this train proposal? In September, leaders of the Lone Star Rail District will update Council members on the progress they have made and what's at stake for the region. Krier says: "**I strongly urge our city staff to have a funding plan ready to present to the Council by then**."

Regional rail projects are moving ahead around the state. **Dallas and Fort Worth are now linked by Trinity Railway Express,** a commuter rail service. And a private-sector group is advocating a **high-speed rail line between Houston and Dallas** (Check out details in the July 24th and March 27th editions in our "Archives.") Can Austin-San Antonio be far behind?

Some critics of higher education claim the "**Ivory Tower**" **experience does not do a good job of preparing graduates for the working world. The UTSystem is launching a new transformational learning program that will involve students as early as Middle School and carry them through college to graduation. Innovative? And how!**

The UTSystem's new Institute for Transformational Learning is working with campuses and faculty across the system to roll out a series of **competency-based degree programs in areas of high employment and student demand**. Students will advance through courses, certifications and degrees based on their success at **mastering knowledge and skills *rather than time spent in a classroom***.

"It's certainly apt that the inaugural program will debut very shortly at the brand new UT Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)," said UTSystem Chancellor **Bill McRaven**. And the program is in one of today's hottest fields – health care, where jobs abound. How does it work? Okay, stay with me now.

It's called Middle School to Medical School (M2M) and is a collaboration between the UTRGV medical school, the university and K-12 leaders. It will engage students as early as middle school. "This bold initiative will create a realistic career path for **students with an interest in biomedical sciences, while developing a larger pool of health professionals for a region that sorely needs them**," said McRaven.

M2M is a true hybrid program, delivered both in the classroom and online, both in English and Spanish, according to McRaven. "It features a unique core curriculum organized around the medical humanities, the history of medicine and public health, and health care policy," said McRaven. "As with the other competency-based programs we will be introducing, M2M's curriculum will include **clearly-defined learning objectives and competencies that students must master**."

As McRaven indicated, other institutions such as UTAustin, will be adopting similar competency-based programs. And the **on-campus elements will be** "**supplemented by a technology-enabled learning experience that goes far beyond most people's ideas of** '**online learning**,' and includes advanced simulations, sophisticated interactives and virtual laboratories," promised McRaven.

The Chancellor said that "**while our competency-based programs are intentionally designed to prepare students for a career, the learning experience is not narrowly vocational**. When a student graduates from any one of our institutions, we want him or her to have a broad understanding of the world." Or as the late UTAustin professor/administrator **Bill Livingston** liked to say about the broad-based mission of the university: "We would like for our graduates to be able to read and understand a blueprint and a poem."

While on the topic of higher education, do you know the names of three higher institutions in Texas that are ranked among the nation's most *conservative* schools? The ranking is based on an analysis of survey data from more than 136,000 students at 380 colleges in 2015.

The Princeton Review, a test preparation and college rankings website, cobbled together 58 categories covering such topics as "Best College Library" and "Best Health Services." And one of the subjects was "Most Conservative Students." **Ranking #4 in the nation and #1 in Texas with the most conservative students was Texas A&M.**

Using the same metric, the **University of Dallas was #6 and Baylor University ranked #15** as the most conservative universities in the nation. **Baylor's School of Law** was also among the 10 most conservative law schools.

Not surprisingly, those three Texas universities were each ranked highly for "**Most Religious Students**," "**LGBTQ-Unfriendly**" and for its students to be future Rotarians and Daughters of the American Revolution.

Don't let all the bluster surrounding the GOP/Dem presidential contests obscure the fact that other important issues will be on the 2016 ballot across the nation: for instance, the number of states that will vote on legal marijuana is growing.

As we speak, Alaska, Colorado, Washington DC, Oregon and Washington state now allow weed for recreational use and several other states have moved to soften their laws against it. **California**, **Michigan** and **Ohio** will hold ballot initiatives next year on legalizing pot. **Arizona**, **Maine**, **Massachusetts** and **Nevada** might also.

What about Texas? Will you get a chance to vote on legalizing marijuana? Not in the general election in November. That ballot is already set for issues other than candidates and the Texas Legislature will not meet prior to next fall's Election Day to change the ballot items.

But the party primaries are another story. **Each party can place *non-binding* items on its ballot for the March 1, 2016 vote. It's no more than a straw poll.** It simply indicates Republicans feel *this* way and Democrats feel *that* way. But it will have no effect of law.

There is plenty of precedent for placing such items on the party primary ballot. In the past, **some parties have placed particularly incendiary issues on the ballot to generate voter turnout,** even though the issue results are non-binding. On other occasions, a political party simply wanted to reinforce its positions on issues – or maybe provide guidance for its legislators to take action in the next legislative session. So, it's possible some Texans may get a chance to cast a non-binding vote on legalizing marijuana in Texas next spring.

Come on, **El Nino**! **After a wetter-than-normal spring and early summer**, **drought conditions are creeping back into the area. Will El Nino's rain-drenching effect arrive in time to stem this new**, **dry trend**? **Ironically**, **this same El Nino effect that is slated to bring a buncha water to the area this fall and winter**, **may be contributing to the current dry conditions**.

El Nino is real. Forecasting the impact in Austin of the El Nino temperature in the Pacific waters off Latin America is the dicey part. And it's not just the Austin area, much of the southern US is affected as well. **So**, **why would a rain-infused El Nino fall/winter effect cause dryness now**? Good question. Here's what the meteorologists tell us.

El Nino suppresses tropical systems. You know, those systems that spawn tropical storms and hurricanes. (In fact, hurricane watchers recently significantly downgraded the likelihood of an intensive hurricane season.) **So those systems that trigger weather uproars have been minimal so far**. **Hence**, **warmer and drier systems have enveloped us**. And, they may hang around until Halloween.

But the good news is that since the beginning of the year through August 1st, **Lake Travis rose about 47 feet and Lake Buchanan climbed nearly 21 feet**, according to the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) that manages the lakes. As a result, Travis and Buchanan are now about 77% full – quite an improvement from 71% full the previous months. Note: Travis fell about a foot in July due to evaporation and water usage.

Even though you didn't get much rain around Austin in mid-to-late July, the Lake Buchanan watershed northwest of Austin received so much rain that it was the **8**th **highest for the month since 1942**. Put it another way: 235% more than normal.

LCRA's ExecVP/Water **John Hofmann** said "We had good inflows in May, a drier June and good inflows in July. **Now**, **we're looking to the fall to see what El Nino might mean to us**."

Dr. **Louis Overholster** says if you don't like dry weather you can move to Seattle where it rains twice a year – August to April and May to July!

Sincerely,

Editor/Publisher