

THE

Real Spelce

AUSTIN LETTER

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Dear Client:

“This has gone beyond minor inconvenience to a major disruption. It’s unfair. And it’s just plain nuts.” The subject: **downtown traffic jams due to street closures around construction projects.** The complainer: Austin’s aggressive gadfly, *Texas Monthly* founder/publisher **Mike Levy**, who has a suggestion for city officials who’ve okayed the shutdown of downtown streets.

“Suggest you go up to the Headliners Club on the 21st floor of the Bank One Tower at 6th and Lavaca around 5 p.m. any day of the week and **look down on the mess you’ve created** by your decisions to shut down so many downtown streets at the same time,” notes Levy

“On top of your prior decisions to shut down 2nd, Lavaca and Guadalupe around the CSC construction project, your recent closure of 3rd has basically been the proverbial straw that results on a daily basis in **total, absolute and unmitigated traffic gridlock** west of Congress Avenue,” Levy added.

Levy, who has headquartered his award-winning and nationally recognized magazine in the downtown area since the publication was founded more than 25 years ago, doesn’t stop there. **“It’s not much better around the Convention Center** construction project with the closure of West Fifth and so many other streets,” he continued.

Levy was particularly incensed by what he witnessed Wednesday. “Despite the Austin Police Department having to commit officers to key intersections in an attempt to provide some relief, it was a **monster traffic jam that looked like, tasted like and smelled like New York City.** Except it was worse,” he added. “And New York City does not shut down streets for the convenience of contractors who are putting up even bigger buildings than the CSC project.”

His pointed message to the city staff. “As you stare down at the mess, please ask yourself if the interests of the good folks out in citizen land have really been served by your staff’s decisions on how best to manage traffic around the CSC project. And you’ll see from the vantage of the Headliners that **most of the closed streets are simply being used as convenient staging areas for the contractors.**”

Of course this is a continuing complaint downtown these days. But, the **gridlock problems are getting worse** as the city may be gearing up for a mayor’s race. Is this a key campaign issue?

If you're worried about high natural gas prices, there could be another spike in rates this summer. It may not be as bad as last winter, but if the summer temps soar to triple-digits, there will likely be higher prices than you've seen in previous summers. There are a couple of reasons for this. First of all, we're seeing **natural gas used more and more to generate the electricity** that is powering air conditioning. And, secondly, natural gas producers **can't expand production quickly enough** to keep up with demand.

Austin: boots, suits, old hippies and computer nerds. That's the title of Mayor **Kirk Watson's** speech today (2/16/01) in Madison, Wisconsin to the 2001 Governor's Conference on Economic Development. This is just another indication of nationwide, even worldwide, interest in "The Austin Story." Delegations from other cities regularly visit Austin to find out "how we did it," and as this example indicates, our business and elected officials are often called to other locations as **experts' on the economic renaissance** we've experienced here in the last couple of decades.

Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA) is less than two years old and expansion of the modern facility is already being discussed. Airport officials are still tweaking and smoothing out operations at the relatively new ABIA. But, they don't have the luxury of time. Soon they will need to start worrying about how to operate during the expansion construction.

Nothing is firmed up yet, but it will happen sooner rather than later. And the job will fall to ABIA's new Executive Director. **Jim Smith**, formerly Director of Planning and Development for the City of Austin and Austin's Assistant City Manager, will take the helm of the airport's operations next month.

"We are down to one open gate and are constructing new parking and cargo (flight services) is maxed out," Smith pointed out. "All this was originally built looking toward expansion. But it was **anticipated 10 years later, not this soon.**"

So, when will the expansion process begin, Jim? "It will be **keyed by the economy as to when we expand,**" he said. "Depending on the economy and growth (of Austin), the airport will expand."

Expansion of ABIA was planned all along. As an example, if you look closely at the Barbara Jordan Terminal, you will notice one wing of the building has more gates than the other. That was intentional, so **additional gates can be added** to the shorter wing.

The problem is that usage of the airport has increased much faster than planners had anticipated, and in order to have new gates on-line at the same time demand dictates, **expansion needs to be on a much faster track** than the original ten-year timeframe.

To reinforce the obvious need for expansion, demand has dictated the addition of new nonstop flights and new airline service for the airport. Effective 5/1/01, American Airlines will once again offer **non-stop flights from Austin to Boston.** Several years ago, AA offered the same service, then dropped it due to low demand.

The new service will depart Austin at 5:10pm, arriving in Boston at 9:50pm. The Boston return flight leaves at 5:30pm and arrives in Austin at 8:58pm. The equipment will be MD80 aircraft. AA is also adding a **third nonstop to Los Angeles** beginning 3/2/01. It will depart AUS for LAX at 4:15pm. AA will offer a **fourth nonstop to San Jose** beginning 5/1/01. The new flight will leave AUS for SJC at 10am and provide timely connection service to and from Taipei.

Summer Mexico charters are returning to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport for the third year. Running from 5/24/01 through 9/2/01, the **FunJet Vacations'** charters will fly twice weekly nonstop to **Cancun** and twice weekly nonstop to **Cozumel.** Three, four and seven night air, air/hotel and full packages are available through Austin area travel agents.

Austin high techsters Steve Papermaster and Laura Groppe are featured in separate articles in the February issue of *FSB Magazine.* *FSB* says of Papermaster: "like the best of serial entrepreneurs, Papermaster excels at finding, attracting and rewarding other big talents." He's quoted as saying "building the right management team is make or break."

Papermaster, 42, has founded 12 companies and says "If you listen, you'll hear the company naturally crying out its needs." He goes on to say "**nobody wants to come into a company run by some control freak entrepreneur.** If you think you're going to operate as a dictator and recruit top talent, forget about it."

Groppe is CEO of Girl Games in Austin. She started out six years ago – at age 29 – "to change the world for girls." In a first-person essay in *FSB*, she says "being flexible is everything and it's learned only through experience. You've got to anticipate and adapt to every shift in the landscape. **You fly by the seat of your pants, while mapping out your next destination.**"

Her example: "One holiday season early on, I was stationed inside FAO Schwarz in Manhattan doing demos of our product, 'Let's Talk About Me,' the first CD-ROM ever produced for teen girls. The product was flying off the shelves. In it was a section where a girl could select a face and try on hundreds of different hairstyles. After dozens of mothers and daughters asked if they could scan in their faces, I replied '**Absolutely – in the sequel.**' I had no agreement with a publisher for a sequel, nor did I have any idea whether the technology would accommodate such an idea. So I crawled under the table, got on my cell phone, and begged the publisher to **commit to another product.** I then called programmers and pleaded with them to **figure out the tech side.**" It worked. There's more to the example, but you get the idea. As she concluded: "the only way to survive is to have a virtually unlimited capacity for flux."

There are a lot of Texas tales about extreme weather conditions. They make for good quoting (such as “The only thing between Amarillo and the North Pole is a stand of barbed wire!”) but, some of those wild stories are true. And one of them happened right here in Central Texas.

We’re talking about rain – a massive amount of rain. **More rain fell on one day in Williamson County than has fallen in a 24-hour period anywhere in the United States** throughout the history of weather record-keeping. The actual spot where the deluge was recorded was in Thrall. The date was 9/9/21. The 24-hour amount – hold on: **38.2 inches.**

To give you an idea of how significant this is all you have to do is look at the previous 30 years to get the average *annual* rainfall for the State of Texas. Normal Texas rainfalls range from **12.5 inches per year in West Texas** to 46.91 inches along the upper Texas Gulf coast – *per year*. Williamson County measure 38.2 inches in one day! And you can verify that with the Office of the State Climatologist at TexasA&M.

Speaking of annual rainfall, Texas – normally thought of as a dry, arid state – also holds the US record for the **most rainfall in one city in a year’s time**. This didn’t happen in Central Texas but it wasn’t all that far away. Way back in 1873, the tiny East Texas town of Clarksville measured in **one year 109.38 inches**. That’s the heaviest annual US rainfall on record.

What gives Texas its dusty, dry image can be found in West Texas towns such as Wink. That tiny town in Winkler County – back in 1956 – **tallied only 1.76 inches of rain in a year’s time** – the driest on record in Texas. About the only safe conclusion you can draw about dry or wet weather in this huge state is that it can extreme.

As we told you last week, **Dr. Louis Overholster** is fascinated by how kids view the wacky world of politics. One elementary school student had this perceptive view of campaigning: “Political strategy is when you don’t let people know you have run out of ideas and keep shouting anyway!”

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Sincerely



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