

THE

Neal Spelce

AUSTIN LETTER

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Dear Client:

Memo to national Democrats: A Texan could be the savior of your party. Memo to statewide Republican officeholders: Both USSenate seats from Texas could soon be open.

For a month now, national Democrats have been soul-searching, second-guessing, criticizing and, in general, hand-wringing as they try to overcome the loss of the presidency, the USSenate and the USHouse by convincing margins. Part of their concern is trying to find a leader for the divided party. **They could do no better than to turn to a Texan, born in Austin, who has the ability to bring the party together behind a strong, unifying voice.** And he has a track record to back up this claim.

Former Dallas mayor and Democratic USSenate candidate **Ron Kirk** has the credentials to be Chair of the Democratic National Committee. As an African American mayor of a business-oriented big city, Kirk won kudos from all sides during his tenure. Even though he lost in his only statewide race, he acquitted himself well and won admirers — even from those who voted for the other guy.

Kirk is an articulate and witty leader who would present a strong face for the Dems. But, more importantly, he represents the moderate wing of the Democratic Party and has the diplomatic skills to bring differing groups together. Just ask his mother, who raised him in Austin and still lives here.

For all the statewide Republican officeholders who are thinking of moving up the political food chain some day (and this, of course, includes every single statewide elected official since they are all Republicans), both of Texas' USSenate seats could soon be without an incumbent. Well, you say, you knew that **Kay Bailey Hutchison** is thinking of giving up her Senate seat to run for governor, but **John Cornyn** was just elected to a six-year USSenate term – what's with this?

First of all, Cornyn hasn't said anything publicly. But President **George W. Bush** might very well tap him for one of the USSupreme Court vacancies likely to open up. **As a former Texas Attorney General and state Supreme Court Justice, Cornyn has the judicial credentials.** He certainly fits Bush's conservative criteria and, more importantly, he serves on the USSenate Judiciary Committee that must first approve all Bush's nominees. "Senatorial courtesy" could make his approval process a little smoother. Right now this is just speculation. But if it occurs, the political musical chair game could make it interesting for ambitious Rs *and* Ds in Texas.

SH130, that slices through the Austin area, is the biggest highway project under way in the US today. It is used as an example in a *TIME* magazine article headlined: “The Next Wave in Superhighways, or A Big, Fat Texas Boondoggle?”

“To see the future of transportation in Texas, you have to drive out to the prairie north of Austin, past the sprawling plants of Dell and Samsung, to the farthest suburbs, where wild grass and cornfields nuzzle up to McMansions with their perfect green lawns,” writes *TIME* magazine in its 12/6/04 edition. “There, giant earthmovers, their wheels taller than a Texan in his boots, are ripping up the gummy black soil to lay a **49-mile stretch of concrete tollway. State Highway 130, at a cost of \$1.5 billion, is the biggest highway project under way in the U.S. today.** It is also the first test in concrete for the Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC) – a radical rethinking of the nation’s Eisenhower-era roadways.”

“The brainchild of Texas Republican Governor, **Rick Perry**, the TTC would, if built, **completely transform the state’s highways over the next 50 years**, creating a 4,000 mile network of multimodal corridors for transporting goods and people by car, truck, rail and utility line. Each corridor would have six lanes for cars, four additional lanes for 18-wheel trucks, half a dozen rail lines and a utility zone for moving oil and water, gas and electricity, even broadband data. The corridors could measure up to a quarter of a mile across,” the mag noted.

“The project cost, at least \$183 billion, is more than the original price tag for the entire U.S. interstate system. But Texas, going it alone, is seeking private companies to take on the mammoth job of constructing, financing, operating and maintaining the network,” *TIME* reported. “To pay for the roads, developers will rely on a familiar but long-neglected method of financing: tollbooths.”

As you know, we have reported extensively about the TTC since the idea was first floated by the governor (see our 3/15/02 edition in the Archives section on our Web site). So, what *TIME* is writing about is not new to you. But three elements make this important now: 1) for the first time, a national magazine is “discovering” what is going on here, 2) **this national focus is highlighting the Austin debate over tollways as a method of funding for future roadways,** and 3) it emphasizes the growing controversy surrounding the TTC.

“Depending upon whom you talk to, the **Trans-Texas Corridor is either an innovative solution to the U.S.’s overcrowded highway system or a Texas-size boondoggle,**” observed the magazine.

This month, the Texas Transportation Commission may award a **\$24 billion contract to develop proposals for TTC’s first multimodal corridor – a 600-mile stretch through Central Texas** from Mexico to Oklahoma. In the running are three consortiums – one headed by California-based Fluor Corp., another that includes Halliburton’s Kellogg Brown & Root subsidiary, and a third headed by Spanish tollway operator, Cintra, according to *TIME*. So what are the pros and cons for this vast corridor? Let’s look at *TIME*’s recap in the next item.

If/when a \$24 billion contract is let this month, it will kick-start a massive transportation project that includes the Austin area. It will also provide an impetus to bitter battling.

Because it impacts every area of Texas and costs more than the entire US interstate system, and because it involves **always-controversial issues such as land use and transportation**, the proposed Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC) will be cussed as well as discussed. The arguments will be passionate and ongoing, especially now that it has drawn the attention of the national media.

“Backers claim that such corridors are needed to divert road and rail traffic – NAFTA truckers driving up from Mexico, railcars of Chinese goods from Western ports, hazardous cargoes of all kinds – from congested urban areas,” reports *TIME* magazine in its 12/6/04 edition. “Buying land for the system now, decades before it’s needed, would cut acquisition costs and might entice businesses to relocate inside the corridors. **T. Boone Pickens** could ship his West Texas water across the state in pipelines through the corridors; oil and gas could be shipped north from Mexico; even high-speed passenger rail lines could become reality.”

“Opponents of the corridor range from environmentalists (the Sierra Club has called it “evil”) to the Texas Republican Party, which has urged the Legislature to repeal it,” *TIME* notes. “Texas, which is losing more land to sprawl than any other state, would need more than 9,000 sq.mi. of right-of-way for the corridors, affecting critical wetlands and pristine prairie lands. The Big Thicket National Preserve, considered ‘the biological crossroads of North America’ for its mix of habitats, was put on the list of most-endangered parks by the National Parks Conservation Association this year, in part because of the threat” from the plan.

You get the drift. Then *TIME* went into detail about the **Austin tollway debate when it said “the worst ruckus broke out in Austin** last summer when commuters realized that the ‘innovative’ financing authorized by the Trans-Texas legislation meant they would start paying tolls.” The vote on the Austin tollways and subsequent recall petition were re-hashed for a national readership. And it also hit on the statewide political aspects of the proposal.

The article said Gov. **Rick Perry** sees the TTC “as a way to make his mark by tackling the state’s growing congestion,” **pointing out urban rush-hour drivers were stuck in traffic for an average of 46 hours in 2002, nearly triple the time in 1982.** It also said the issue “could come back to haunt the governor” by noting that “since 1997, he has received more than \$1 million from highway interests.”

It further reported “two Republican rivals – Senator **Kay Bailey Hutchison** and State Comptroller **Carole Keeton Strayhorn** – have opposed the tolling of existing roads. Perry now says he, too, is against conversions, but notes that those decisions are up to local authorities.” **Other states, such as California, Missouri and Minnesota, are closely watching this Texas experiment.** And you will be right in the middle of it, as it continues to unfold.

High rankings, wherever they come from, are important for universities. And while most rankings are *subjective*, UTAustin just scored very high in a very *objective* measurement.

You'll recall back on 11/12/04, we reported **UTAustin was ranked as the 15th best university in the world**, according to a new global ranking produced by *The Times of London* newspaper in its 11/5/04 edition. Among US public universities, only Cal-Berkeley, listed 2nd in the world, ranked higher than UTAustin. One of the factors used in the ranking was a survey in which **1,300 academics in 88 countries** were asked to name the best institutions in the fields they felt knowledgeable about – a *subjective* measure.

Now, by a very *objective* yardstick, UTAustin ranked 2nd only to MIT in all-agency **federal research and development expenditures** among universities without a medical school. In other words, only MIT received more federal R&D dollars than UTAustin. In fact, this year, UTAustin surpassed Cal-Berkeley and Illinois – both historic leaders in the list compiled by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Let's break those totals down into disciplines. Other statistics show that in total federal research and development expenditures among *all* universities, **UTAustin ranks 2nd in math, 2nd in chemistry, 5th in physics, 9th in engineering and 10th in computer sciences.** Impressive.

The NSF tally is important because it is one of those “put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is” listings. It counts actual dollars funneled to institutions in the very competitive world of cutting edge research and development. These dollars are not just lying around waiting for some professor to scoop them up. **You have to be among the best, and make compelling presentations, to get the bucks.** These two rankings, coming within weeks of each other, underscore UTAustin's national and worldwide reputation.

Dr. Louis Overholster is convinced the world is passing him by. He was sitting behind a couple at a concert when the orchestra began playing Beethoven's “Ode to Joy.” One leaned over to the other and said, “Listen, dear, they're playing our cell phone!”

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