

Volume 27, Number 9

May 27, 2005

Dear Client:

With retail behemoth Wal-Mart building bigger boxes and expanding its operations (while at the same time creating controversy in Austin and elsewhere), what happens to its vacant and abandoned properties?

Wal-Mart's trend is toward setting up 200,000 sq.ft. Supercenters – boxes that are about twice as big as its earlier stores. Some of the older properties can be expanded, but **what about the older buildings Wal-Mart is simply abandoning?** Do they become eyesores with grass growing in the parking lot cracks? (Some have complained Wal-Mart behaves like a prospector who mines a patch of dirt for all its worth, then moves on to new territory.) Who needs a big old ugly, plain, concrete stand-alone building?

Ahhh, good ole entrepreneurial ingenuity is coming into play. Turns out there *is* a market for those discarded boxes. And, believe it or not, the Wal-Mart move to “bigger and better” is a widespread problem in Texas and it could get bigger. For instance, **at least 107 Wal-Mart stores closed in 103 different Texas cities** between 1987 and the end of 2004, according to a survey conducted by The Texas Real Estate Center.

But, as you know, Wal-Mart ain't going out of business, they are building bigger boxes. So we're not just examining an esoteric situation. It could happen in a neighborhood near you. Because Supercenters require approximately 20 acres, **many older store sites are too small to allow expansion of the existing stores.**

To better understand the answer to our original question, we need to point out those “**big ole ugly box buildings**” are attractive – **to other businesses**, because Wal-Mart minimized original construction costs. In other words, the next user can usually get a bargain.

So, who needs these abandoned buildings? **Hobby Lobby** has converted six of the boxes and **Tractor Supply** has taken over three of them. Because their cost is so reasonable, some new users tear them down for the land mass and access. We're talking **car dealerships** here. But at least 44 of the abandoned boxes were retrofitted by developers and turned into **multi-tenant facilities** where retailers like Bealls and a variety of dollar stores moved into the spaces.

So, these big boxes are attractive financially and also because **Wal-Mart has already fought all the environmental and local ordinance battles** to build the original big, ugly box.

Have you noticed the difference, especially as you drive around the city? Almost overnight, the population of Austin has dropped by as much as, oh, maybe 40,000.

Yes, most of the UTAustin students have bailed out of the Capitol City following Saturday's commencement exercises. This means **less traffic** around areas where you find the college crowd and **fewer people in the restaurants** that are favorites of the students. If you really focus on it, you may notice a **general calm settling over the area** – until the first Texas Longhorn football game during Labor Day weekend that signals the *real* beginning of fall's frenzy, no matter what the calendar proclaims.

Some of these students will return for summer classes, but the majority will spend the summer in other places doing, well, what you probably did during your summer break from classes (this is not the time for True Confessions so you can rest easy!). **But while most UTAustin undergraduates are taking a break from their books, their books – 90,000 of them – are going to disappear from their view.** Those volumes currently housed in the Undergraduate Library in the Flawn Academic Center at the base of the UT Tower will be a relic of the past.

There will be no book burnings. Those treasured volumes – part of one of the world's great university libraries – will be carted off to other library areas on the campus. But if you remember your times as an undergrad, you probably recall gathering to **study, read and research** (in between your partying!) **in the musty smelling, “shhh-be-quiet” library rooms** surrounded by magnificent books.

No more, at UTAustin. Oh, the undergrads will still be able to seek out other, out-of-the-way book-laden areas, but UT Austin will be **among the first major universities to signal the importance and relevance of digital learning** as it undertakes a major redesign of the central Flawn Academic Center this summer.

The removal of the 90,000 books will open a space about the size of a basketball court that will soon become a **cutting-edge 24-hour electronic information commons study facility**, featuring software suites. It will offer a full range of expanded computer labs, online study texts, multimedia and work spaces, as well as learning professionals to help the students.

Dan Updegrove, the university's VP/Information Technology, says **“this is the perfect solution for our libraries and for the students we serve** – partnering to foster creativity and collaboration.” It's a sign of the times. Rarely do undergrads go “searching the stacks” these days when they can switch on the computer. Now when the UTAustin students return to campus this fall, they'll hear the clickety-click of a keyboard, instead of “shhhh, be quiet.”

Back to the impact of the student population drop: This will be enhanced even more when the Texas Legislature adjourns sine die at midnight, Monday, 5/30/05, and the **legislators and lobbyists quit hogging all the tables in your favorite restaurants.** Ahhh, summertime.

The 6/11/05 Austin City Council runoff election is generating a bit of heat with aggressive campaigning and charges and countercharges, even from those not in the contest. But let's look past that to the key to winning this race.

First, a quick background. The only runoff on the ballot is for Place 4. **Margot Clarke** pulled down 23,922 votes, or 40.36% of the total, to lead all vote-getters. Gaining a spot in the runoff was **Jennifer Kim**, who garnered 16,151 votes or 27.25%. The other two contestants who didn't make the cut were **Gregg Knaupe** (12,557 votes, 21.19%) and **Mandy Dealey** (6,637 votes, 11.20%). Obviously Clarke is the favorite because she was the top vote-getter. But she was a long way from getting a majority percentage of 50.01%. So how do you handicap the outcome of the runoff election in two weeks?

At *first* glance, you would say **if Kim can get the votes of Knaupe and Dealey's supporters in the runoff, Kim could win in a runaway.** This would be true, *except* it is very difficult to motivate someone who voted for someone else just a few weeks ago to make an effort to go to the polls to vote for their 2nd choice.

At *second* glance, you would say that former council candidates **John Wickham** and **Wes Benedict's** potshots in the last few days at Clarke (when they filed ethics complaints against Clarke) would have an impact. This would be true, but you need to *discount it* because it can appear as sour grapes and, also, because Wickham and Benedict didn't even run against Clarke, they ran against **Betty Dunkerley**, who won by a landslide margin of 63.5%, with 36,335 votes! Benedict and Wickham together had the support of less than 14,000 votes.

At *third* glance, you would say that – forget the above and all other extracurricular candidate activity – the candidate who can do the **best job of motivating their original voters to go to the polls** will have the greatest chance of winning. This would be true. *Period.*

Even with more than 7,000 votes separating Clark and Kim, Kim could upset Clarke by doing the best job of turning out her votes? Yep. Consider this one important fact. The major reason for the size of the turnout in the 5/7/05 election was that the Smoking Ban was on the ballot.

Consider that 34,199 voted for the ban and another big number, 31,777, voted against the ban while Clarke got less than 24,000 votes. Many of her votes, as well as Kim's, came from folks who were in the voting booth primarily because they felt strongly about the smoking ban. So, **the Clarke and Kim vote totals are a bit squishy.** And turnout could make the difference.

A few past city runoffs have generated a **higher turnout than the original election.** **But don't look for it to happen this time,** especially since there is no hot-button smoking ban issue on the runoff ballot. Early voting is currently underway and ends 6/7/05.

Because there are so many complaints these days about the “tabloid-ization” and celebrity focus by the media, here is a tongue-in-cheek primer on how to read/watch today’s news.

News stories carry many of the same old phrases day after day. These phrases are becoming a crutch for reporters. So four enterprising, and irreverent, reporters, decided to dissect these phrases to tell you what they *really* mean. While these are **intended to be a satire on journalism**, you might notice a kernel of truth in some of their definitions.

Controversial (*He did something bad but we’re not sure what*). **Informed source** (*Reads the newspaper*). **War-torn** (*We can’t find it on the map*). **Knowledgeable observer** (*The reporter*). **Knowledgeable observers** (*The reporter and the person at the next desk*). **Screen legend** (*The reporter is too young to remember his movies*). **Teen idol** (*The reporter is too old to have heard of him*).

There’s more. **According to published reports** (*We got scooped*). **Recently** (*We lost the press release*). **Source who spoke on the condition of anonymity** (*Public relations flack*). **Highly placed source** (*Only one who would talk to the reporter*). **Reportedly** (*We stole this bit of information*). **Couldn’t be reached for comment** (*The reporter didn’t call until after 5 p.m.*).

Or how about these. **Scandal-plagued** (*Guilty*). **High brow** (*Boring*). **Exclusive neighborhood/school/club** (*The reporter can’t get in*). **Prestigious neighborhood** (*Has indoor plumbing*). **Socialite** (*A woman without a job who lives in the tony part of town*). **Tony neighborhood** (*Has no McDonald’s*). **Celebrity** (*He has a publicist*).

As we said, these were written in jest. But looking back over the list leads us to remember the most appropriate jokes are those that are built on truisms.

Dr. Louis Overholster cringed when a reporter referred to him in an article as “the legendary Dr. Overholster,” because he knew the reporter thought he was so old he was about to die!

NEAL SPELCE AUSTIN LETTER (ISSN 1071-0612) is published weekly, except last two weeks of the year, for \$150 (plus tax) per year or \$249 (plus tax) for two years. To subscribe, call 512-498-9495. Periodical Postage Paid at Austin, TX 78767 by Austin Letter, Inc., 1407 Wild Cat Hollow, Austin, TX 78746. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Neal Spelce Austin Letter, P.O. Box 1905, Austin, TX 78767-1905.

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher