

THE

Real Spelce

AUSTIN LETTER

www.AustinLetter.com

P.O. Box 1905 / Austin, Texas 78767-1905 / 512-498-9495 / Fax 512-327-1976 / e-mail News@AustinLetter.com

Volume 31, Number 26

September 25, 2009

Dear Client:

Panhandling in downtown Austin is now more frequent and more aggressive than ever before. This is a claim by downtown businesses that want panhandling banned at all times in the central downtown area.

Scruffy characters begging for money have been a part of the downtown scene for years. Back when downtown boasted a number of shuttered stores and there was slight activity in the area south of the State Capitol down to Lady Bird Lake, the panhandlers were few and far between.

Now that retail activity has picked up, more businesses are operating downtown and residents are moving in to fill a glut of residential living units, the panhandlers are increasing in number. Why now? Remember when notorious bank robber **Willie Sutton** was asked why he robbed banks, he replied that was where the money was! The same “logic” applies as there are more opportunities for the panhandlers to confront people.

This increase in panhandling activity has resulted in a concerted effort to get the Austin City Council to strengthen the City’s Solicitation Ordinance to ban panhandling at all times in the central downtown area. **The Downtown Austin Alliance and the Austin Hotel and Lodging Association**, as well as other groups representing residents’ groups and social service agency directors, have formally endorsed this proposed strengthening of the ordinance.

The General Manager of the Radisson Hotel and Suites Town Lake – Downtown Austin, **Tom Schurr**, this week wrote the Mayor and the City Council to say that **“panhandling is damaging to the success of our downtown, detrimental to our highly competitive convention and visitor industry and disruptive to our efforts to effectively provide essential services to people in need.”**

Citing **serious safety concerns**, Schurr asked the city leaders to **“make it illegal to panhandle at any time** within the boundaries of 11th Street, West Frontage road of IH35, Cesar Chavez Street and San Antonio Street.”

By doing so, Schurr said “we believe this action will help to protect our critical convention, historic and social service assets – as well as those who live, work, visit and access services downtown – from this **threatening and potentially unsafe behavior.**” Stay tuned.

Another organization concerned with the historic character of downtown Austin has weighed in on the development of the Warehouse District, that area west of Congress Avenue and south of West 6th Street.

The Heritage Society of Austin has long been in the forefront of restoring, preserving and protecting the various iconic, older buildings in downtown Austin – especially those that contribute to the historic character of Austin. It maintains that in doing so, it also is **contributing to the underpinning for the economic vitality of Downtown Austin.**

As a result, the Heritage Society is urging the Austin City Council “to protect the key blocks of this irreplaceable Austin asset (Warehouse District). **Our city must direct development of these few blocks in a way that preserves the very essence of what makes Austin such a popular destination.**”

This movement is coming at a time when **major Warehouse District construction projects have been completed**, are coming out of the ground and have been announced for the immediate future.

“The Warehouse District is one of the most thriving areas of downtown and its **success is based largely on the successful adaptive use of its historic building stock.** The Heritage Society of Austin supports the city’s goal of urban revitalization and applauds efforts to infuse a strong residential component to downtown,” observed the Society. But then it added: **“No great American City has revitalized its downtown by sacrificing its most cherished and significant historic features.”**

So, what is the Heritage Society seeking? “We ask City Council to implement the Density Bonus proposal’s mechanism to offer a Transfer of Development Rights for this specially zoned district.” What would this do? “The utilization of the Transfer of Development Rights as proposed would **preserve the buildings, while allowing the property owners to reap the development potential of their properties.**”

“This historic core of Austin should grow as Austin does. A more residentially populated and visited downtown will offer the most viable future for **adaptive use of historic buildings,**” noted the Society’s Executive Director **Jacqui Schraad.** “Also, maximizing the use of an already developed area is aligned with historic preservation’s assertion that **the most sustainable model is the use of existing resources.** Toward that end, we salute any efforts to encourage development in appropriate areas of downtown.”

Founded in 1953, the **Heritage Society of Austin is Austin’s oldest and largest preservation non-profit group.** It has made grants and loans of more than \$2.8 million for restoration, education and other projects. It has muscle.

For four consecutive months through August 2009, the Austin metro has lost jobs on a year-over-year comparison. And for the first time, it gave up its designation as the nation's best Top 50 metro job performer — barely.

Even though the Austin metro has been losing jobs, so has every other major metro area in the nation. **Austin's job loss has been less severe.** As a result, we have been reporting (as recently as our 9/11/09 edition) that Austin continued to lead the nation in a weakened US economy. That designation has now changed. But not by much.

Austin's "best performing" position has slipped slightly to #2 in the nation. By the thinnest of margins, our neighbor to the south, San Antonio, moved into the #1 ranking among the Top 50 Metro Areas. The Alamo City's percentage change from August 08 to August 09 was -0.8%, compared to Austin's -0.9%. Dallas fell out of the Top Ten to 13th place, while Houston was ranked 21st.

Here's another interesting facet of the nation's job situation. **None of the 100 largest metros in the US added jobs over the last 12 months,** according to **Beverly Kerr**, the Austin Chamber's VP/Research. In fact, when you expand the Top 50 to the Top 100, only one additional metro – Bethesda with a -0.7% loss – outperformed the Austin 5-county metro.

Unemployment numbers for August show Austin's performance relative to the state and other major metros being sustained, Kerr observed. San Antonio has been seeing a slightly lower unemployment rate and this was true once again in August with its rate being 7.0% compared to Austin's 7.2%. Dallas' rate was 8.2%, Fort Worth's was 8.3% and Houston's was 8.4%. The statewide rate was 8.1% and the national rate was 9.6%.

San Antonio's move ahead of Austin in the job category may not be related to the fact that Alamo City residents support expansion of nuclear power for its electricity. But one SA leader is pointing in that direction.

A recent poll found **59% of all San Antonio residents "strongly or somewhat strongly" supported adding two new nuclear generating units** to the South Texas Project (STP) nuclear power plant in Matagorda County. The Austin City Council turned down this opportunity.

The Executive Director of Secure Energy & Economy for San Antonio (SEE SA), **Joe Krier**, was quoted as saying the STP is a "big part of the reason San Antonio continues enjoying some of the lowest utility bills in the country. That fact has **enabled San Antonio to not only retain thousands of good jobs, but to recruit many more over the past 25 years.**" **The cost per kilowatt hour for nuclear energy is cheaper** than other conventional forms of electricity, including coal and natural gas as well as solar and wind – all currently used by Austin.

Have you noticed more UTAustin students buzzing around the city? Well, the preliminary count has been released and, yep, there are more UTAustin students enrolled this fall than last year, and more than in almost any other single campus in the nation.

For years now, the UTAustin campus has been home to one of the largest student bodies in the nation. The enrollment tallies hovered on the south side of 50,000 for years, then bounced around the 50,000 mark and now, **the preliminary count for fall 2009 has zipped past 51,000 students – to 51,032, as a matter of fact.** This is an increase of 2.1% over the previous fall.

The official enrollment count will not be labeled as “final” for several weeks, but the preliminary figures generally hold true. **While the 51,032 UTAustin total is huge, it is not the largest in the nation.** The Ohio State University’s campus in Columbus absorbed 53,715 students last fall and a Google search didn’t turn up the numbers for this fall’s enrollment.

Undergrads at UTAustin increased by 810 students over last year and the graduate student enrollment went up by 227 students. Interestingly **the enrollment in the Law School declined by 39 students** (insert your favorite “lawyer” joke here).

One of the UTAustin goals has been to increase enrollment for all ethnic groups. **Asian American students increased by 5%, Hispanic students increased by 4.3%, African American students increased by 4%** — all above the 2.1% norm for overall enrollment. White students grew by 0.2%.

As you may be aware, enrollment standards are high at UTAustin. In fact, after legislative action this year, **UTAustin will now grant automatic admission to only the top 8% of 2011 high school graduates** – not the 10% as has been the case in recent years.

Dr. Louis Overholster, noted for partying during college, says he barely made good enough grades to get into med school: “The closest I ever got to a 4.0 in college was my blood alcohol content!”

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher