



Volume 39, Number 46

March 2, 2018

Dear Client:

**So far, nearly 1,300 City of Austin employees during a six month period have earned paid time off from work because they have agreed to cut down on solo driving. They are paid with your tax dollars while they are taking the earned time off. In other words, the City is offering strong incentives to employees if they log a commute using a bicycle, or walk, participate in a carpool or vanpool, take transit, or telework. The goal: get more cars off Austin roadways.**

Implementation of the program is structured in a way that a bureaucrat can love. First of all, for a city employee to participate in the commuter incentives program **each employee is given a demonstration video explaining how to participate in the program.** Here is a brief summary of how it is set up so you can see why a video is needed to bring the city employee up to speed (so to speak).

Participating employees **accrue points when they log a commute using an “approved, sustainable alternative to solo driving”** – bicycle, walk, carpool, vanpool, transit, telework. There is a two point per day maximum.

Then, when employees reach a specified point threshold, **they are rewarded with four hours of paid time off.** But it doesn't stop there.

Participants are permitted to continue accruing points beyond the minimum threshold. This means they can earn **even longer periods of paid leave in four-hour increments.** Yeah, but, how does the City keep track of all this?

Well, hiring an outside contractor to trace each employee's activity, of course. The firm called **RideAmigos is running a special administrative leave commuter program that provides automatic tracking for participants** on what it calls a “transportation demand management platform.” Claiming “success,” it looks as if this program will continue.

While on the topic of non-auto travel on city streets, **the city is now starting to spend about \$20 million on bicycle improvements approved by voters in 2016.** One element under consideration by the Austin Transportation Department is the **installation of “buttons” on city streets to delineate bike lanes.** Also called “tortoise shells,” they are white-cake-pan-shaped and will be attached by adhesives. They cost about \$2 to \$4 per foot. This is obviously a lower cost than precast concrete barriers. But there is still opposition to their usage.

**There's an important election Tuesday, 3/6/18, but only a few skirmishes in the party primaries really deserve your attention prior to voting in the Big Enchilada General Election in November. Let's break them down for you – with an eye on both the Democratic and Republican primaries.**

The two parties will select their candidates Tuesday for face-off in November (except for what may be a runoff or two). On the Republican side of the ledger, Governor **Greg Abbott** and Lt. Gov **Dan Patrick** have no worries about getting the GOP nomination for re-election. The two top candidates for USSenator look to win their primaries and face each other in November. GOP USSenator **Ted Cruz** and Democratic Congressman **Beto O'Rourke** should have no problems gaining their party's nomination Tuesday night.

The only possible statewide GOP election-night drama could occur in the races for Agriculture and Land Commissioners. Ag incumbent **Sid Miller** is facing an aggressive challenge from **Trey Blocker**. Land Commish **George P. Bush**'s primary challenger is former Commissioner **Jerry Patterson**. These are the two statewide Republican races that are drawing the most interest.

As for statewide Democrats, the two top candidates seeking to run against Abbott in the fall are **Lupe Valdez** and **Andrew White**. Former Dallas County Sheriff Valdez is running to the left of White, the son of former governor **Mark White**. Neither has ever run for statewide office. Could be a run-off here due to a crowded field of Dems.

A race for USCongress here in the Central Texas area is providing some interest. GOP Congressman **Lamar Smith** represents a far-flung 10-county 21<sup>st</sup> Congressional district that runs from Austin to San Antonio and spills over into the Hill Country west of Austin. Smith is not seeking re-election.

A vacant Congressional seat is a magnet for anybody and everybody, no matter the political party affiliation. This district is no different. In fact, 18 Republicans are on the ballot. **So look for a GOP runoff. A runoff is also possible for the Democrats** where four candidates are on the ballot. This is a traditionally Republican district. But the national Democratic Congressional Campaign has targeted this as a seat that could swing to the Democrat column.

Possibly the most interesting race to watch is the contest for Austin State Representative from District #46, where 12-term Democrat, embattled **Dawanna Dukes**, is seeking re-election. For almost a year, Dukes faced 15 criminal charges in connection with her legislative position. The charges were later dropped. The top two candidates aggressively challenging Dukes are **former Austin Councilmember Sheryl Cole and immigration attorney/activist Chito Vela**. During the latter weeks of this campaign, Dukes has all but disappeared from public view and Cole and Vela have gained support and financing. The outcome will be fascinating, to say the least.

**As you drive across the low water Emmett Shelton Bridge on Red Bud Trail between Austin and West Lake Hills, be aware that all nine floodgates on Tom Miller Dam holding back water from Lake Austin now need replacement. After all, they've controlled water coming out of the lake for the last eight decades, especially during periods of flooding. But, you needn't be overly concerned, as they are scheduled for replacement in the near future.**

The Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) manages the dams and lakes along the Colorado River that courses from West Texas through Austin to the Gulf of Mexico. **The LCRA board recently allocated \$9.9 million dollars to repair all nine flood gates. It's a 2-year project.** It should be a fascinating construction project. (What will LCRA do about the rubber-neckers who drive across the bridge while looking up to watch the nearby floodgate replacements?)

**The Highland Lakes are not only an important recreational asset for Central Texas, but they control flooding conditions. They are also the drinking water source for Austin and other area cities. But, during serious drought conditions, lakes Travis and Buchanan can be drawn down even further because water must be released downstream for farming and industrial use. A new project may ease future drought impact.**

Water flows downstream from Austin through Colorado County. The city of Columbus is its county seat. **This is a part of the region where rice and grass farmers have contracts to draw down water from lakes Travis and Buchanan.** The South Texas nuclear project also uses downstream water to cool its turbines, as nuclear power generates electricity used by Austin and other cities.

**A new freshwater reservoir may soon be built to ease the drain on our area lakes. It's not a big one, but every little bit helps** when water for a fast-growing region is in short supply. Named the Prairie Conservation Reservoir, it will be off-channel, on almost 2,000 acres (precise location yet to be determined). The land was acquired by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) in 2015. It will further reduce the demand for water from upstream lakes Travis and Buchanan.

Total cost to build the reservoir is estimated at \$16 million. The LCRA has received about \$8 million from the feds for this project. **When will this reservoir be filled with water to handle downstream demands? The target date is 2022.** But no dirt has yet been turned, so view this date with some caution.

This small reservoir is in addition to a much bigger downstream project that is nearing completion. **The Arbuckle Reservoir (formerly Lane City Reservoir) in Wharton County will store more water than lakes Austin, Lady Bird and Marble Falls combined.** It will take advantage of the wetter climate closer to the Gulf Coast. **The LCRA expects the Arbuckle Reservoir to be operational later this year.**

**What would you pay for the *Austin American-Statesman*? The newspaper that is now printed off-site in San Antonio, then trucked to Austin early each morning. Normally the price for such media enterprises, without “hard assets” (like the valuable real estate the Statesman currently sits on), is X-times the annual earnings. Right now a price of about \$50 million is being bandied around as speculation swirls about the possibility of a sale. This would be roughly five times annual earnings. Is a deal imminent?**

As with newspapers around the country in this digital age, **the *Statesman* is a shell of its formal self.** You can tell by the small size of each edition there’s a paucity of daily advertising, except for Sunday when the newspaper is stuffed with pre-printed separate pieces. **The shrunken *Statesman* is also obvious if you walk through the downtown building and see massive, darkened unused spaces.** The staff is dramatically diminished in size.

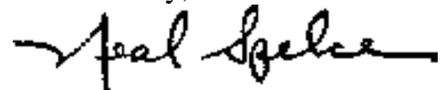
In recent years, the *Statesman*’s news emphasis changed to longer, in-depth investigative reporting. **This change has garnered national attention and a slew of awards.** But according to one report, print subscribers in just three years dropped by almost 25,000 down to about 60,000. Ad revenue is based upon number of readers.

But to the paper’s credit, its digital presence is impressive. And, its online ads are increasing. **There is still value in the enterprise** that dates back to its first issue in 1871.

**What about this talk of a sale of the newspaper itself?** (The physical plant on prime property has been on the market for some time now. Remember, we suggested it would be a great site for Amazon HQ2.) The newspaper principals are not talking. But the national media watchers are buzzing that **there could soon be a new owner of the *Austin American-Statesman*.**

**Dr. Louis Overholster** would hate to see the demise of printed newspapers. Then, he observes, you might not have such actual headlines as: “City Unsure Why the Sewer Smells” or “Man Accused of Killing Lawyer Receives a New Attorney.”

Sincerely,



Editor/Publisher