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Houston votes to spend \$2 million on new rescue boats, highwater rescue vehicles, for fire dept



Inside C2

# Southern DAILY

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## Empty seats, missing names as Florida shooting survivors return to school

PARKLAND, Fla. (Reuters) - Survivors of the second-deadliest U.S. public school shooting were brought to tears on Wednesday by empty seats and missing names at roll call as they returned to their Florida high school two weeks after 17 students and educators were massacred there. Upon emerging from a half-day of classes intended to ease their return after the tragedy, some of the roughly 3,000 teens who attend Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, described their emotional day. Samuel Safaite, a 15-year-old sophomore, said students in his Spanish class broke down when the teacher took attendance and read out the name of Luke Hoyer, a 15-year-old slain in the attack. "A lot of people started crying because we all knew he was gone," Safaite said. "It was difficult for a lot of people." Many of the students carried white flowers when they arrived at the school in the morning and wove through hundreds of uniformed police officers providing security for their return. Emotional-support dogs also were on hand to provide comfort. Nikolas Cruz, 19, who had been kicked out of the school for disciplinary reasons, is accused of carrying out the rampage. The shooting inflamed the nation's long-running debate on gun rights as defined in the Second Amendment of the U.S. Consti-

tution. It also sparked a youth-led gun control movement featuring survivors of the attack, who have already lobbied lawmakers in Florida's capital Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. "We will push for change and our children are going to be the change agents," said Jeannine Gittens, 44, who drove to the school to be there to meet her son Jevon, a 16-year-old junior, when he arrived on the bus. "We see that things have to change and we are not going to stop until they do." The building where most of the victims died was closed, surrounded by a chain-link fence decorated with signs reading "MSD strong" and "Pray for Douglas." Florida lawmakers are contemplating tearing it down and replacing it with a memorial to the victims. Beverly Turner and Michele Brown huddle to pray in front of a chain-link fence decorated with wreaths as students and faculty arrive at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School for the first time since the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, U.S., February 28, 2018. REUTERS/Bernie Woodall As she left the school with her mother and 18-year-old brother, sophomore Marisa Lopez, 16, said some friends were talking about leaving the school. "I don't think that some people are ready to move on," Lopez said, adding that some of her friends had witnessed the shooting



Mourners react during a community prayer vigil at Parkridge Church in Pompano Beach

of Scott Beigel, a 35-year-old social science teacher who was one of the three adults killed in the attack. "I just don't know if some of them are ever going to get over it." Investigators say Cruz used a legally purchased AR-15 assault-style rifle in the attack. The debate over how to

respond to the school shootings pulled in corporate America, with gun retailer Dick's Sporting Goods Inc on Wednesday saying it would no longer sell assault-style rifles, the type of weapon used in four of the five deadliest mass shootings by a single gunman in U.S. history, as well as Parkland.

The Republican leaders of the U.S. Congress on Tuesday rejected new limits on guns after the attack. The powerful National Rifle Association lobbied forcefully against any restrictions on gun sales, saying they infringe on the rights of law-abiding citizens.

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WFS-30037C (03/18)

# Houston votes to spend \$2 million on new rescue boats, highwater rescue vehicles, for fire dept

By St. John Barned-Smith

The Houston city council voted Wednesday to spend \$2 million to purchase dozens of new boats, trucks and other rescue equipment for use by firefighters to help deal with future flooding. The purchase comes six months after Hurricane Harvey's flooding, which exposed glaring inadequacies in the Houston Fire Department's high-water rescue fleet. Under the proposal, the city will spend \$2 million on a package that includes six "deuce-and-a-halves," or high water rescue vehicles capable of driving through flooded areas, at a cost of \$75,000 each. The council also voted to buy four rescue boats suited for use in swift water, and 10 "evacuation boats," meant for moving people through calmer waters. Firefighters will spend at least 8 days providing relief for firefighters and flood victims."The

whole goal is to have more assets available," Mayor Sylvester Turner said. Fire Chief Samuel Peña said the proposal was an investment in Houston's resiliency in the future. "With the acquisition of the requested high water assets and training funds, the HFD will be better prepared to address the normally expected flood evacuation and rescue risk in our community," he said, in advance of the vote. Assistant Chief Ruy Lozano called the vote "a good day for the city of Houston." "We will continue to flood," he said. "We need to have the assets ready, and our members trained (for future floods)." The funding also covers the purchase of boat trailers and 10 pick-up trucks for hauling the boats, along with 100 personal flotation devices, and four "wave runners," a type of Jetski. Representatives for rank-and-file firefighters also cheered the proposal to bulk up HFD's



rescue equipment. "This is welcome news," said Marty Lancton, president of the Houston Professional Fire Fighters Association Local 341, in advance of the vote. "We're relieved this issue is being addressed — for the safety of the people we serve and for firefighters on the job."

A Chronicle investigation found that when Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in August 2017, the fire department had just one high-water rescue vehicle, decrepit rescue boats and decades-old evacuation boats. Firefighters rescued residents using the city's dump trucks or their fire engines, which cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a piece. At the time the department's high-water rescue fleet included 10 shallow-water evacuation boats, six swift-water Zodiac rescue boats, several inflatable dinghies, four functional wave runners. In the wake of the flooding, Peña said Hurricane Harvey had shown how anemic the department's flood rescue resources were.

# County denies permit for Float Fest organizers to host 30,000 on San Marcos River

Plans for the fifth annual Float Fest on the San Marcos River in July hit a snag when Guadalupe County Commissioners' denied a requested permit to host up to 30,000 people — twice last year's attendance. Promoter Marcus Federman of Current Events LLC is expected to appeal the decision to district court. Since 2014, Federman has steadily expanded the scope of the summer music and tubing event

outside Martindale, much to the dismay of nearby residents and businesses upset by the accompanying noise, traffic jams and rowdy tubers. The event is planned for July 20-22. The roughly five-hour hearing on Tuesday concluded with County Judge Kyle Kutscher and Commissioners Judy Cope and Jack Shanafelt voting to reject the permit. Commissioners Jim Wolverton and Greg Seideneberger

dissented. The court's decision was welcomed by those who don't like the event. "I think it's wonderful," Tom Goynes, who owns a riverside campground, said Wednesday of the denial. "We can't operate when the Float Fest is going on. I can't put Boy Scouts and church groups on the river."



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A Snapshot Of The World



Shoes with flowers are pictured during a demonstration against the speech of Seyyed Ali Reza Avai, Minister of Justice of Iran, at the Human Rights Council, in front of the United Nations in Geneva



Reverend Hyung Jin Moon, the church’s pastor and the son of the late Sun Myung Moon, attends a ceremony while people with their AR-15-style rifles in their cases watch the event at the Sanctuary Church in Newfoundland



School students hold paper fans featuring the mascot for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics after Tokyo Olympics organizers unveiled the mascots in Tokyo



Sergey Lavrov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Russia, walks past a statue in an exhibition hall outside the Human Rights Council conference hall, at the United Nations in Geneva



Visitors take photos of the Robot Assistant Pepper by SoftBank Robotics during the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona



Activists from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) demonstrate with slogans in protest of the designers continued use of leather in front of the Eiffel Tower during the Paris Fashion Week, in Paris



An environmental activist protests in front of Germany’s federal administrative court in Leipzig



Greenpeace activists gesture while wearing masks of Mexico City’s mayor Mancera during a protest outside the museum holding the Women4Climate conference in Mexico City



FILE PHOTO: An elephant walks in Amboseli National Park in front of Kilimanjaro Mountain

Houston and Harris County with the fourth most-populous city in the U.S. will decriminalize low-level marijuana possession, with officials saying last Thursday that throwing people in jail for having small amounts of pot has “no tangible public safety benefit.”

The policy, which takes effect March 1, 2018, means in most circumstances there will be no jail, no tickets, no court appearances and no criminal record for possession of an ounce or two of marijuana in the city and its surrounding county, home to about 4.5 million people. More than two dozen U.S. states have legalized some form of marijuana for medical or recreational use, but the drug remains illegal at the federal level and in Texas.

The new “Misdemeanor Marijuana Diversion Program” for Harris County applies to people 17 and older facing no additional charges other than misdemeanor marijuana possession, county and city law enforcement officials said in a statement.

“Harris County has spent more than \$200 million in the past decade on more than 100,000 cases of misdemeanor marijuana possession,” District Attorney Kim Ogg, a Democrat who took office this year, said in a statement.



Officials look at a graph describing the estimated \$26 million Harris County spends on low-level marijuana enforcement every year as district attorney Kim Ogg, not pictured, announced a new policy to decriminalize some possession of marijuana Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017 in Houston. The new policy means that most misdemeanor offenders with less than four ounces of marijuana will not be arrested, ticketed or required to appear in court if they agree to take a four-hour drug education class.

She added that the effort “has deprived neighborhoods of officers’ time that could be spent patrolling communities; jail beds that could be used for violent criminals... and judicial court time that should be spent bringing serious criminals to justice.”

The Texas Attorney General’s office could not immediately be reached for comment.

The move is also aimed at preventing people from being denied education, employment and housing opportunities due to having a criminal record for marijuana possession.

A main provision is for those caught with low-level possession to complete a four-hour course on decision-making at a cost of \$150, which will be waived for the indigent. If people eligible for the program do not want to participate, they will be taken to jail and charged with possession.

The county and Houston will give police officers discretion to bring criminal charges. Individuals under court supervision through bond, probation, or deferred adjudication are not eligible since they have agreements not to violate

## No More Arrests For Marijuana Possession In Harris County, Texas Starting March 1st

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



the law, the county and city said.



Harris County district attorney Kim Ogg announces a new policy to decriminalize low-level possession of marijuana Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017 in Houston. The new policy means that most misdemeanor offenders with less than four ounces of marijuana will not be arrested, ticketed or required to appear in court if they agree to take a four-hour drug education class.

Ogg said the move falls under the Texas Code of Criminal Procedures that says it is the duty of a district attorney “not to convict, but to see that justice is done.”

“With limited resources, we need to be efficient, smart and thoughtful on fighting crime,” Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo said in a statement. (Courtesy <https://thejointblog.com>)

### Related

#### New policy to decriminalize marijuana in Harris County will save time, money, DA’s office says

Houston and Harris County are poised to decriminalize low-level possession of marijuana in a sweeping move that puts the area at the forefront of efforts in Texas to halt minor drug arrests that clog jails and courts.



Mayor Sylvester Turner (center at podium) with District Attorney Kim Ogg to his right, announces the city’s new marijuana policy set to begin March 1. The new policy means that misdemeanor offenders with less than four ounces of marijuana will not be arrested, ticketed or required to appear in court if they agree to take a four-hour drug education class, officials said.

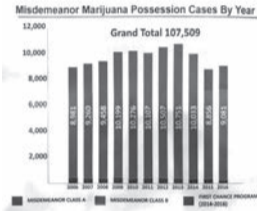
District Attorney Kim Ogg announced the new

policy Thursday with Mayor Sylvester Turner, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo and Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez.

Ogg said the county has spent \$25 million a year for the past 10 years locking up people for having less than 4 ounces of marijuana. She said those resources would be better spent arresting serious criminals such as burglars, robbers and rapists.

“We have spent in excess of \$250 million, over a quarter-billion dollars, prosecuting a crime that has produced no tangible evidence of improved public safety,” she said. “We have disqualified, unnecessarily, thousands of people from greater job, housing and educational opportunities by giving them a criminal record for what is, in effect, a minor law violation.”

Officials have said it could divert an estimated 12,000 people a year out of the criminal justice system and would save officers hours of processing time now spent on low-level cases. More than 107,000 cases of misdemeanor marijuana cases have been handled in the past 10 years, officials said.



Since there is no arrest, there is no arrest record. Since there is no court date, there are no court documents connected to the encounter. The plan calls for officers to seize the marijuana and drop it off at a police station at the end of their shift, along with a record of the encounter in case the suspect does not take the class.

“You do not get charged with anything,” Assistant District Attorney David Mitcham, who heads the DA’s trial bureau, said Wednesday. “You have a pathway where you can avoid going to court.”

Every Harris County law enforcement agency would be affected, since they rely on the district attorney’s office to prosecute their cases.

Ogg, a Democrat who beat incumbent Republican District Attorney Devon Anderson in the November general election, campaigned as a reform candidate who pledged to reduce arrests for low-level drug offenses.



Reaction to the proposal was swift, coming even before details of the program were officially unveiled. Montgomery County District Attorney Brett Ligon sharply criticized the proposal, saying Ogg was trying to legalize marijuana.

“Unlike Harris County, Montgomery County will not become a sanctuary for dope smokers,” Ligon said in a press release. “I swore an oath to follow the law – all the laws, as written by the Texas Legislature. I don’t get to pick and choose which laws I enforce.”

The Houston chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, praised the program.

“Law enforcement should focus on protecting our communities instead of wasting their resources arresting people and ruining their lives over a misdemeanor amount of cannabis,” the organization said in a press release. “Our DA is taking a brave course of action to minimize the detrimental affect that prohibition has on our communities.”



Harris County district attorney Kim Ogg, left, shakes hands with Houston police chief Art Acevedo after she announced a new policy to decriminalize low-level possession of marijuana Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017 in Houston. The new policy means that most misdemeanor offenders with less than four ounces of marijuana will not be arrested, ticketed or required to appear in court if they agree to take a four-hour drug education class.

At the sheriff’s office, the new policy will save up to 12 hours of processing time per month for as many as 1,000 suspects, a move that will ease the workload on administrators and jailers who transfer and process inmates, officials said. “We’re really encouraged by these swift actions by the district attorney,” said sheriff’s spokesman Ryan Sullivan. “And we are looking forward to working with Harris County’s criminal justice leadership identifying common-sense solutions to our broken criminal justice system.”

Sullivan said the move would likely not affect the jail population significantly, since most misdemeanor marijuana offenders move quickly in and out of jail. On Wednesday, just 12 people were jailed on misdemeanor marijuana offenses and unable to make bail, he said.

Elected district attorneys are given wide latitude in their discretion about how to enforce laws in their jurisdictions. Diversion programs,

such as drug courts, have been widely used across Texas, and Austin has launched a “cite and release” program in which low-level drug offenders are given tickets and required to appear in court.



Harris County district attorney Kim Ogg, left, shakes hands with Houston city council member Michael Kubosh, right, after she announced a new policy to decriminalize low-level possession of marijuana Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017 in Houston. The new policy means that most misdemeanor offenders with less than four ounces of marijuana will not be arrested, ticketed or required to appear in court if they agree to take a four-hour drug education class.

Under the new local program, police would identify a suspect to make sure they do not have warrants or other legal issues, then would offer them the option of taking the drug education class. If the suspect takes the class, the drugs are destroyed and the agreement is filed away. A suspect would be able to take the class repeatedly again regardless of past criminal history, officials said.

The new program will keep police on the streets longer each day and reduce costs for lab testing of the drugs, Mitcham said.

If the suspect does not take the class, the contraband will be tested, and prosecutors will file charges and issue an arrest warrant. Offenders could then face up to one year in jail if convicted of the Class A misdemeanor.

In the past, police union officials have supported marijuana diversion programs as long as officers are allowed to drop evidence at police stations, instead of having to take it downtown. Shortly after taking HPD’s top post in December, Acevedo — who previously was chief in Austin — voiced similar sentiments about low-level drug cases, saying police should go after drug dealers rather than users. He could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

“For those that are involved in the violence of the drug trade, that’s who I want to focus on,” he said in December. “I want to focus on the people that are the big movers and shakers that are poisoning young people.”

Mitcham, who is one of Ogg’s top lieutenants, agreed.

“We don’t want people to go through an arrest, and all that entails, over simple possession of marijuana,” he said. “We don’t want the cops spending the hours it takes to book somebody into jail while the burglars conduct their business because there’s no cop on the beat.”

Ogg, who lost the 2014 election for DA before unseating Anderson last year, has long campaigned on a diversion initiative.

Part of Ogg’s platform was adopted by Anderson, who created a diversion program in 2014. Under Anderson’s plan, only first offenders were eligible to take the diversion program and could take it only once.

Under that plan, they were arrested, jailed, had to arrange bail and come to court to apply for a year-long probation. (Courtesy <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news>)



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China will remove the constitutional restriction on the maximum number of terms the president and vice-president can serve, Xinhua reported on Sunday, paving the way for President Xi Jinping to stay on beyond 2023.

The official news agency said the ruling Communist Party had proposed removing the line that the president and vice-president “shall serve no more than two consecutive terms” from the constitution. Xinhua later released the full 4,480-word proposal in Chinese. The document, which will be considered by the legislature next month, was dated January 26 – a week after the party’s 200-strong Central Committee met to discuss revisions to the constitution. Xinhua did not say why it took a month to release the document to the public. Xi, 64, was re-elected as general secretary of the party in October and is expected to be handed a second term as president by the legislature during its annual full session starting on March 5.



China's Constitution Will Be Revised At The Upcoming Parliamentary Session.

The party has in recent decades largely observed an unwritten retirement age of 68 for its top leaders, but its charter does not have any limit on terms. That means there are no restrictions on the general secretary position, but the Chinese constitution does limit presidents to a maximum of two five-year terms. Analysts said ending the two-term limit gives the strongest indication yet that Xi will stay in power longer than his recent predecessors at a time when the leadership was “fixated on stability”. There was intense speculation in the lead-up to the party’s five-yearly congress in October over whether Xi would continue to lead the party beyond two terms, with some questioning whether his ambitious plans to “rejuvenate” China could be achieved within 10 years. First he swept up corrupt officials. Now Xi is tightening party control. Deng Yuwen, former editor of the Study Times newspaper affiliated with the

**Constitution Will Be Revised At Upcoming Parliamentary Session**

**China Will Scrap Presidential Term Limitations Giving Xi Jinping Reins Of Power Beyond 2023**

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



China's revised constitution will pave the way for Xi Jinping to stay on as Chinese president beyond 2023. (Photo/Bloomberg)

Central Party School, said the proposed change was a strong signal that Xi planned to stay on.



Xi Senior and Xi Jinping, Middle, and his brother Xi Yuanning, Left.



Xi Jinping in 1972

“This is a very clear sign that the president will remain in office beyond the existing term limit. We don’t know if it could be life tenure at this stage,” Deng said. Kerry Brown, director of the Lau China Institute at King’s College London, said recent developments in so-called stable democracies in the West may have provided some justification for the party to seek further stability and continuity. “Trump, Brexit, the rise of the extreme right and left again in politics throughout the democratic world ... made domestic Chinese politics even more fixated on stability and on avoiding any kind of uncertainty and risk,” Brown said. “Xi is the

symbolic figure at the centre of this, the person whose leadership everything hangs on.”

State-owned tabloid Global Times said in an editorial that removing the two-term limit could help maintain the system of the party boss, president and military chief roles being held by the same person. “Over the past two decades, a trinity of leadership consisting of the CPC Central Committee general secretary, president of the nation and chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission has taken shape and proven to be effective,” the editorial said.



China's president Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan

“Removing the two-term limit of the Chinese president can help maintain the trinity system and improve the institution of leadership of the [party] and the nation.” But amid concerns that scrapping the limit would mean a president could stay in the role for life, the editorial cited an unnamed

authority as saying: “The change doesn’t mean that the Chinese president will have a lifelong tenure.”

Sunday’s announcement follows a Politburo meeting on Saturday and comes ahead of Monday’s three-day Central Committee plenum to discuss personnel and other proposed institutional changes to be tabled at the upcoming parliamentary gathering in Beijing.

Xinhua also reported that the party proposed to write Xi’s political theory – Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era – into the constitution. It also planned to list the new super anti-graft body, the National Supervisory Commission, as a state agency in the constitution.

While the party is seeking to end the presidential term limit, one sentence will be added to the constitution to highlight the importance of its leadership, Xinhua reported.

“The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the new paragraph reads. A clause could also be added on China “working to build a community with a shared future for humanity”, as well as saying it will “adhere to a peaceful development path and a mutually beneficial and open strategy”. Separately, at a study session attended by



the 25 members of the Politburo on Saturday, Xi talked about the “important role” of the constitution, according to Xinhua. “No organisation or individual has the power to overstep the constitution or the law,” Xinhua quoted Xi as saying. (Courtesy <http://www.scmp.com/news/china>)



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