

Gasoline prices fall again in Houston, but savings could end in February

Marissa Luck, Houston Chronicle

Houstonians enjoyed another week of savings at the pump with gasoline prices falling nearly 4 cents in the past week to \$1.87 per a gallon Sunday, according to GasBuddy, a gasoline tracking website.

And the gift of low-gas prices will keep giving, at least for now. Analysts at GasBuddy say the cheap gasoline prices will begin getting more expensive by mid-February.

In Houston, gasoline prices Sunday were 34 cents lower than a year ago and nearly 19 cents lower than a month ago.

The national average dipped nearly 19 cents in the past month and 3 cents in the past week to \$2.22 per a gallon Sunday. That is 26 cents per gallon lower than a year ago.

“After a brief hiccup that saw the nation’s average gas price rise for two days last week, the overall trend remains in

favor of lower gas prices, even as oil prices have rallied,” said Patrick DeHaan, head of petroleum analysis for GasBuddy. “The window for cheap gas prices continues to close, however, and by mid-February will likely be completely closed- so do take advantage of the low prices while they last.”

This compares with the national average that has fallen 3.0 cents per gallon versus last week to \$2.22/g, according to GasBuddy.

But take advantage of those lower prices now: GasBuddy predicts drivers could be paying \$1 a gallon more by May, pushing average prices above \$3 a gallon in most of the nation’s biggest metropolitan areas. GasBuddy analysts expect crude prices to rise as production cuts by OPEC and its allies take effect and refiners switch to higher-cost summer fuel blends in the spring.



Houston area frac sand company buys ceramics plant in Georgia

Houston-area frac sand company U.S. Silica has closed on a \$23 million deal to buy a Georgia plant that was used to make ceramics proppants for the hydraulic fracturing process.

U.S. Silica Holdings Inc. announced on Monday morning that it closed the deal to buy the Carbo Ceramics plant in Millen, Ga.

Headquartered in Katy, U.S. Silica reported that it plans to convert the facility into a manufacturing plant to make high-end products for the company’s industrial and specialties products business.

“‘Extreme’ demand: Permian Basin driving ‘extreme’ demand for frac sand

Traded on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol SLCA, U.S. Silica reported that the Houston-area frac sand company is already in the initial stages of cus-

tomers trials and expects to begin full production at the Georgia plant in the second half of this year.

“Adding this new capability will accelerate new product launches, improve product quality and facilitate important product customizations required by our industrial customers,” U.S. Silica President and CEO Bryan Shinn said in a statement.

Carbo Ceramics CEO Gary Kolstad reported that \$21 million in proceeds from the plant sale will be used to pay down the company’s debt.

Katy-based U.S. Silica has bought the Carbo Ceramics plant in Millen, Georgia facility for \$23 million. The plant makes ceramics used as a proppants in the hydraulic fracturing process.





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2019 Golden Globes



FILE PHOTO: 76th Golden Globe Awards - Photo Room - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 - Rami Malek (C) poses backstage with his award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture Drama for “Bohemian Rhapsody” along with Queen’s Brian May (L) and Roger Taylor. REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni/File Photo



FILE PHOTO: 76th Golden Globe Awards - Photo Room - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 Lady Gaga poses backstage with her Best Original Song - Motion Picture award for “Shallow” from “A Star is Born” REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni/File Photo



76th Golden Globe Awards - Photo Room - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 Patricia Arquette poses backstage with her trophy for Best Performance by an Actress in a Limited Series or Motion Picture Made for Television for “Escape at Dannemora”. REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni



76th Golden Globe Awards - Show - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 - Presenters Justin Hartley, Chrissy Metz and Sterling K. Brown. Paul Drinkwater/NBC Universal/Handout via REUTERS For editorial use only.



76th Golden Globe Awards - Photo Room - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 - Darren Criss poses backstage with his award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Limited Series or a Motion Picture Made for Television for “The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story.”



76th Golden Globe Awards - Show - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 - Jim Beach (R) accepts the award for Bohemian Rhapsody, winner of Best Motion Picture, Drama. Paul Drinkwater/NBC Universal/Handout via REUTERS For editorial use only. Additional clearance required for commercial or promotional use, contact your local office for assistance.



76th Golden Globe Awards - Photo Room - Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 (L-R) Jim Beach, Roger Taylor, Brian May, Rami Malek with his Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture - Drama, Graham King and Mike Meyers pose backstage with their Best Motion Picture - Drama for “Bohemian Rhapsody” REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni



76th Golden Globe Awards – Show – Beverly Hills, California, U.S., January 6, 2019 - Sandra Oh and Andy Samberg host.Paul Drinkwater/NBC Universal/Handout via REUTERS For editorial use only. Additional clearance required for commercial or promotional use, contact your local office for assistance.

Li-Shen Kline remembers the buzz around the attempted robbery in September. How a man broke the passenger window of a car. How he then slammed a woman to the ground. How it all happened just outside Chinatown's 85C Bakery Café.

Before that night, Kline, a real estate broker, knew the bakery would regularly have long lines for the lunch rush. When she stopped by around noon earlier this month, the store and its parking lot were near empty.

"I hate to see people losing business," Kline said.

Though crime statistics along the Bellaire corridor of Houston's Chinatown have gone down within the last year, the predominantly Asian community in the area continues to reel from a spike in robberies and burglaries of motor vehicles over the last few years. Word about local crime continues to spread across social media, and customers are choosing to avoid the area altogether, which hurts eateries and other merchants, Kline said.

In an effort to support law enforcement and get the community involved in crime prevention, the Global Federation of Chinese Business Women in Southern U.S.A. held a community fundraiser earlier this year. Through donations and the group's own contributions, \$3,000 in total was given to three Houston nonprofits: the Houston Police Foundation, The 100 Club, and Assist the Officer. Another \$1,500 has been set aside for Crime Stoppers of Houston.



Shen Kline, a real-estate broker who is working to increase safety and security in the Chinatown area, looks over her shoulder in the parking lot of a bank where her car was previously broken into. (Photo/houstonchronicle.com)

The organization, where Kline serves as chairwoman of the charity committee, is one of the first independent groups to

Chinatown Crime Continues To Worry Residents And Businesses

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



Kevin Khong, who owns Don's Cafe and Sandwiches in the Chinatown area, said some of his customers have been reluctant to contact police after robberies. (Photo/houstonchronicle.com)

contribute funds for safety efforts in Chinatown. Their hope, Kline said, is that it will spur others to strengthen work with law enforcement, an effort that kicked off last year.

Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg, along with Houston Police Department officials and other leaders, met in August 2017 with more than 300 concerned residents at the Chinese Community Center. The residents were seeking a stronger push from law enforcement to address the crime spree.

In 2017, robberies along the Chinatown Bellaire corridor numbered 40, with burglaries of motor vehicles at 93. By the end of November this year, robberies fell 45 percent to 22 and burglaries dropped by 16 percent to 78, according to HPD.

Lock, take, hide

Michael Faulhaber, HPD Commander of the Westside division, said he's happy to see the numbers go down, but that burglaries in particular remain a concern in Chinatown.



Kenneth Li (right), chairman of the Southwest Management District, talks to Ying Lai, a former president of the Global President of Chinese Business Women, after a meeting about security in the Chinatown area, at a restaurant belonging to Dezhong Ding. (Photo/houstonchronicle.com)

"We try to tell people to be aware of their surroundings," Faulhaber said.

He added that residents must ensure they lock their vehicles, not place any valuable belongings in plain view like on the passenger seat, and to stay vigilant and not distracted on their phones.

Signs at businesses across Houston, including in Chinatown, urge drivers to

"Lock your car. Take your keys. Hide your belongings."

Yet, some of the more common prevailing crimes in the area include when someone enters a car through the passenger door and steals a purse or phone while the car owner is pumping gas, or when a team of burglars track when a potential victim goes to the bank and then steals belongings when the person stops at another location.

Past cases have also included men snatching purses from women putting away groceries in broad daylight.

Even as HPD continues to patrol the area and officers work overtime during the holiday season, Faulhaber said he's concerned about burglaries going unreported.

"Generally people don't want to participate in crime prevention until they're a victim," he said.



Kevin Khong, owner of Don's Cafe Sandwich, said he recently had a customer coming in from the airport who left her bags in her parked car. Within a few moments of being inside the store, a vehicle pulled up to her car and passengers made off with her bags.

Kevin Khong (right), who owns Don's Cafe and Sandwiches in the Chinatown area, said some of his customers have been reluctant to contact police after robberies. Khong keeps an eye on his parking lot. (Photo/houstonchronicle.com)

Khong, who saw it happen through his store's large windows offered to call police for the woman. She declined, he said.

The time involved in reporting and following through with a burglary case can dissuade victims from coming forward, Faulhaber said. There's also the concern over what some residents consider to be lenient consequences for burglary cases.

The Texas Legislature changed car burglary from a third degree felony to a Class A misdemeanor in 1994. Where burglars would face two to 10 years in prison, they now could face a fine of no

more than \$4,000 and up to a year of jail time.

Yet both HPD and the Southwest Management District that oversees the Chinatown area urge all victims and bystanders to speak up.

The management district spends about \$350,000 a year on safety issues, said Kenneth Li, chairman of the district. They've hired S.E.A.L. Security Solutions to patrol the Bellaire corridor of Chinatown. They've also invited HPD commanders and other officials to regular community safety meetings.

Yet attendance from residents, and especially from local business owners could improve, Li said.



Businessmen and women who live and work in the Chinatown area arrange for a photo with a large check, for \$3000, which they gave to a police-related organization Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2018. (Photo/houstonchronicle.com)

"The voice has to come from the community," he said.

Karen Hsieh, former president and current adviser to the Chinese women business group, said crime has always been present in Chinatown, though it used to be concentrated near the Chinese Community Center.

"I think we noticed an increase in crime in the Southwest Chinatown area as the Asian community grew," Hsieh said.

She and Kline both lament the damage done to Chinatown's reputation as talk of crime in the area continues online.

"There is a saying that crime has no address but people magnify it," she said.

As HPD works to develop partnerships with local business owners to better tap into their stores' security cameras, Kline and Hsieh are urging groups like theirs to get more residents engaged in crime prevention, even meeting with business owners and police officers themselves.

"We don't want the robbers to take control of the streets," Hsieh said. (Courtesy houstonchronicle.com)

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WASHINGTON — If the federal government remains partially shut down for several more months, as President Donald Trump suggested last Friday, millions of people could lose food assistance. The president signaled that the shutdown of the federal government could last “months or even years.” If that happens, the people who stand to lose the most are America’s poorest families who rely on government assistance to get by.

More than 38 million Americans receive monthly food benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which is often known as food stamps and is arguably the federal government’s most important anti-poverty program. If Trump keeps the government shut down through February, benefits could stop.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture runs the program and is one of the federal agencies that shut down last month as part of Trump’s strategy to force Congress to pay for a giant wall on the Mexican border. It’s just one of dozens of programs — including tax credit refunds for the working poor — that will be disrupted if the shutdown continues.



While the U.S. Department of Agriculture says it has enough funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for the month of January, it does not have sufficient funds to cover all of February. That means some 38 million families who rely on SNAP could go entirely without assistance that month. Additionally, other programs that help feed the elderly as well as mothers and children could be affected.

Its reserve fund amounts to less than the total projected cost of February’s benefits. After February, it’s possible there would be nothing. Other food programs that serve seniors, mothers and children could also be affected.

Spokespeople for the USDA did not respond to requests for comment last Saturday.

It is possible these benefits could continue during a prolonged shutdown because SNAP has been authorized through the

The Trump Administration Has Been Mostly Quiet About The Threat To Food Assistance

Millions Could Lose Food Assistance If Government Shutdown Continues

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



farm bill for the next five years. But the Trump administration doesn’t even want to discuss potential effects on SNAP because, according to a USDA employee who spoke to HuffPost, “doing so would highlight the shutdown’s harm to struggling Americans instead of furloughed government employees.”

But losing SNAP benefits is not the only way America’s working poor are being affected by the shutdown. People who rely on public housing could also suffer because the Department of Housing and Urban Development has suspended routine enforcement activities such as mandatory health and safety inspections of housing for low-income families, seniors, and the disabled, NBC News reports. And rental assistance payments could cease if the shutdown continues into February.



“Some of the money goes to housing for the most vulnerable households in this country,” one California HUD employee told NBC News. “If there is the smallest glitch in the process, there’s going to be a problem. We work day in and day out to resolve these problems.”

With 95 percent of HUD employees furloughed, emergency services, including housing for the homeless are also not functioning. And there has been little guidance from the Trump administration on how the agency should be functioning during the shutdown.

“Previous administrations have had calls with industry stakeholders, saying, ‘Here’s what’s going to happen,’” said Ellen Lurie Hoffman, federal policy director of the nonprofit National Housing Trust, told NBC. “None of that happened before this shutdown.”

Another way the working poor could be hard hit is through their tax refund. During a shutdown, the Wall Street Journal reports, the IRS will accept payments, but refunds are not typically given. Considering a tax refund is many Americans’ biggest financial windfall of the year, that

could mean serious consequences.

The Trump administration has kept relatively quiet about the threat to food assistance.

A shutdown lasting many months or a year would be a massive policy experiment. Yanking food benefits from millions of people would probably result in a lot more hunger. Outright starvation hasn’t been a public health problem in the U.S. since the food stamp program expanded in the 1960s and 1970s — what happens if food stamps suddenly disappear? There is a far more robust network of food banks than in the 1960s, but there’s no way charity could make up the difference between a huge national program and no program at all.



The Trump administration has kept relatively quiet about the threat to food assistance. When a funding lapse approached in 2015, the Obama administration’s USDA warned lawmakers that there wasn’t enough money for the following month’s benefits.

The present situation is slightly different than 2015 since the agency seems to have a larger funding reserve this time around. But a USDA employee who is not authorized to speak publicly told HuffPost some within the agency suspected current leadership didn’t want to talk about the possible negative effect on SNAP because doing so would highlight the shutdown’s harm to struggling Americans instead of furloughed government employees. Trump has vilified federal workers and claimed they’re all Democrats.

One option to prevent the benefit cutoff would be for the USDA to adopt a new legal interpretation and say that SNAP recipients are entitled to benefits even if Congress hasn’t appropriated annual funds for the program, since SNAP has been authorized for the next five years by the farm bill.

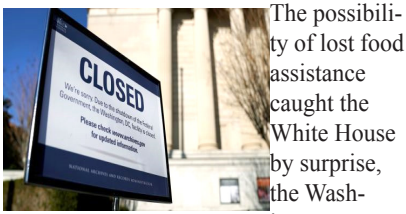


There’s no doubt that even a partial reduction in benefits in February would have a big effect on individual beneficiaries and the economy. When Democrats cut SNAP benefit amounts by about 13 percent in 2013, to pay for improvements to the National School Lunch Program, the impact reverberated through both low-income households and corporate boardrooms.

There’s no doubt that even a partial reduction in benefits in February would have a big effect on individual beneficiaries and the economy.

The way SNAP works is the government distributes food benefits on debit cards that program enrollees then redeem for food items at grocery stores — meaning retailers benefit substantially from the program, which costs more than \$60 billion annually. When the benefit cut occurred in 2013, chains like Walmart and Target cut their earnings forecasts. Dollar General stockholders have claimed in a lawsuit the firm had failed to notify them how badly business would be harmed by other SNAP reductions.

Local media has been covering the shutdown’s possible threat to food assistance since last week. More than a million low-income Georgians could lose their benefits in February, the Atlanta Journal Constitution reported Thursday. An official with Alabama’s food aid program told a local TV station they expected more guidance from the USDA at the end of the month. Arizona food banks are worried about a surge in demand if the government shutdown continues into February.



The possibility of lost food assistance caught the White House by surprise, the Washington Post reported Friday. Administration spokespeople did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Saturday. (Courtesy the huffingtonpost.com and (Courtesy rollingstone.com)

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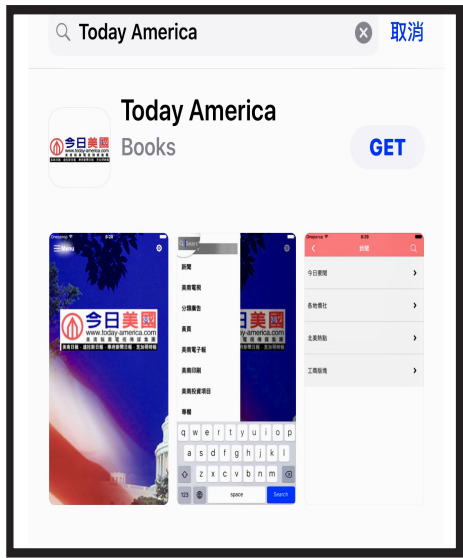
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