

The Courier's top 10 headlines for 2018

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Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer / Houston Chronicle

Construction continues on the Texas 249 toll road through Montgomery County after the Montgomery County Toll Road Authority approved a construction contract for about three miles between Decker Prairie and Pinehurst.



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer / Houston Chronicle

After many years working for Montgomery County, County Judge Craig Doyal lost his bid to be the Republican party pick against Democrat Jay Stittleburg. Mark Keough ousted Doyal and went on to win the election against Stittleburg in November.



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer / Houston Chronicle

Onlookers watch as a Union Pacific train led by a locomotive dubbed "Bush 4141" carries the body of the late President George H.W. Bush through Magnolia, Thursday, Dec. 6, 2018. The 2005 commissioned train carried Bush from the Union Pacific's Westfield Auto Facility in Spring to College Station where he will be buried, alongside his late wife and daughter, on the site of his presidential library on the campus of Texas A&M University.



Keough



Photo: Montgomery Police Dept

Father Manuel La Rosa-Lopez sexually abused children while working at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Conroe in the late 1990s to early 2000s. La Rosa-Lopez is charged with four counts of indecency with a child. He turned himself in to authorities at the Montgomery County Jail on Tuesday.



Photo: Montgomery County Sheriff's Office

Montgomery County residents were stunned by video of a woman seeking help in the middle of the night seen wearing restraints on her arms. The woman was eventually found safe and the man accused of holding her captive was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

As the new year begins, The Courier is looking back on the top headlines from some of the biggest news of 2018 in Montgomery County.

It's no doubt the county's political scene saw plenty of shake-ups, a growing Democratic party and the seating of a first ever elected board for the Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District. However, Montgomery County residents had the honor to take part in paying their respects to former President George H.W. Bush in December as the Union Pacific train carrying his body to its final resting place passed through Magnolia.

Law enforcement also had a busy year, netting more than 70 people in sting to combat human trafficking and prostitution, closing a girl's home following allegation of abuse and the scandal of a priest accused of sexually assaulting two young children years ago in Conroe.

Below are more details about these big stories and several other news makers.

Top 10 Montgomery County headlines

Political hotbed — While politics have remained a large part of the county culture, the March Republican Primary was no exception. After a controversial first term as county judge, Craig Doyal could not overcome an aggressive campaign from challenger Mark Keough, who upset the incumbent to win the Republican bid for the county's top elected position. Keough went on to face Democrat Jay Stittleburg in the November general election and easily pulled in the win with 139,352 (74.70 percent) votes compared to Stittleburg's 47,187 (25.30 percent) votes.

But while the Republican party continues to have a stronghold on the county, for the first time in 25 years the Democrats had a full slate of opponents for the general election. Local party chairs Republican Dr. Wally Wilkerson and Democrat Marc Meyers agreed residents were "energized" with one of the highest voter turnout in years.

However, turmoil in the Republican party led to the party's executive committee adopting new bylaws and forming a seven-member steering committee to make major decisions for the local GOP. Wilkerson would be just one member of that committee.

The move to strip Wilkerson of power came four months after the 87-year-old staved off a tea party challenger, Terrance Boggs, in the March 6 Republican primary. Wilkerson believes the effort to wrest control of the party from him was driven by the outcome of that election.

LSGCD new board — The first ever elected board of directors for the Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District took their oath of office Nov. 16. Board members include Stuart Traylor, Jon Bouche, Jonathan Prykryl, Harry Hardman, Webb Melder, Larry Rogers and Jim Spigener

State Rep. Will Metcalf, R-Conroe, who authored HB 1982 establishing the elected board, said the elected board will help ensure transparency for residents. The bill was signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott on May 18, 2017.

Before the passage of HB 1982, the seven members of the board were appointed including two from the Montgomery County Commissioner's Court, one from the city of Conroe, one from the smaller incorporated cities in Montgomery County, one from the Woodlands Joint Powers Agency, one from the Municipal Utility Districts east of Interstate

45, one from the Municipal Utility Districts west of I-45, one from the soil conservation district and one from the San Jacinto River Authority.

Texas 249 toll road — Just over two months after a county-commissioned study indicated the controversial Texas 249 toll road would generate millions of dollars a year, in April the Montgomery County Toll Road Authority awarded a \$56 million contract to Houston-based SpawGlass Construction Corp. for the construction of the 3.6 miles that will connect two sections of the tollway funded and constructed by Harris County to the south and the Texas Department of Transportation to the north.

MCTRA, which consists of the five members of the Montgomery County Commissioners Court. The county's 3.6-mile toll road, a \$73 million project, is expected to open to traffic on Jan. 1, 2020, and net about \$4.4 million that first year.

However, Precinct 3 Commissioner James Noack, who remain vocal about his opposition, pushed to delay the project in light of changes on the Commissioners Court, including Doyal and Precinct 4 Commissioner Jim Clark losing their bids for re-election.

Doyal has pushed for revenue bonds to fund the Texas 249 project, which means revenue from the tolls would be pay the debt on the bonds sold. Revenue bonds, unlike general obligation bonds which are paid back through property tax revenue, do not require voter approval in most cases.

Doyal said the county will have a 20-year payout on the project. However, if the road generates more revenue than expected, a future court could use that revenue to pay off the Texas 249 toll road debt early, or put those funds to another project in the county.

According to the study, tolls will be \$1.25 at the main lane toll gantry and 50 cents at the ramps. The toll will be escalated annually by 2 percent per year. The first toll increase would be .025 cents.

MCTRA will construct the four-lane stretch of the Texas 249 toll road that will extend from the Spring Creek Bridge to Pinehurst. Currently there are three feeder lanes in each direction. The tolled section will be between the feeders. Motorists who do not want to pay the toll will continue to have the option to use the feeders that will remain free.

In June 2017, the MCTRA agreed in a 3-2 vote to move forward with the project. Noack and Clark were the nay votes. The entirety of the project is referred to as the "Aggie Expressway" and will connect Houston to College Station.

Bush funeral train — Thousands of well-wishers braved the chilly, wet morning Dec. 6 and gathered along the railroad tracks in Magnolia to pay their final respects to the nation's 41st president, George H. W. Bush. His journey northwest in Locomotive 4141 through the rural towns peppered north of Houston was the last leg in a journey that took Bush and his family to Washington D.C. for the last time, then back to Houston for a final day of mourning.

After a private funeral at St. Martin's Episcopal Church early Thursday, the presidential motorcade made its way to the Union Pacific Railroad Westfield Auto Facility in Spring, where the train, bound for the president's final resting place in College Station, departed at 1 p.m. Those standing along the tracks remembered Bush for his statesmanship, his ethics, his humor and his fierce devotion to his family.

The entire route passing through Montgomery County fell into Commissioner Charlie Riley's Precinct 2. The planning was a whirlwind, he said, but coordinating efforts between the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office, the Magnolia Police Department, the

Commissioner's Office and the Secret Service went smoothly as they planned the event, which drew more visitors than officials could have imagined. "He was a great man," Riley said. "I am incredibly honored."

Bush was buried in College Station on the grounds of his presidential library alongside his wife, Barbara and the couple's daughter, Robin, who died of leukemia at the age of 3 in 1953.

Priest arrested — A former Conroe priest was charged in September with sexually abusing two people when they were teenagers some two decades ago and was released on bond. The priest, Manuel La Rosa-Lopez, turned himself into the Montgomery County Jail Sept. 11. He is charged with four counts of indecency with a child, each of which carries a maximum possible sentence of 20 years in prison. The abuse is alleged to have occurred during the years 1998 to 2000.

The two accusers said they were sexually abused when La Rosa-Lopez was based at Conroe's Sacred Heart Catholic Church. He was released from the Montgomery County Jail after paying for a \$225,000 bond amount, according to Lt. Scott Spencer of the county sheriff's office.

The Archdiocese of Houston-Galveston said in a written statement that La Rosa-Lopez has denied the allegations of sexual abuse. The case is still pending.

Prostitution sting — A human trafficking and prostitution sting in The Woodlands area in October netted 75 arrests and the recovery of five trafficked individuals, one of which was a juvenile. During a press conference Nov. 5, the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office released the details of Operation Cross County where officials work with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies to address the growing problem of human trafficking in Montgomery County. Several non-governmental organizations were also involved in the operation.

Agencies working with sheriff's office were the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, Houston Police Department, Conroe Police Department, Montgomery County Precinct 3 Constable's Office, the Department of Public Safety, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Attorney General's Office, the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, Homeland Security Investigations and the U.S. State Department.

According to sheriff's Lt. Tim Cannon, the sting ran from Oct. 15-30. Undercover agents, Cannon added, posed as sex workers and Johns, using the Internet to find individuals who were seeking sexual favors for money.

Of the 75 arrests, Cannon said 32 were men, 11 of which were pimps. He added 28 were woman, with some of the women in possession of controlled substances and/or handguns.

Sheriff Rand Henderson said he was "so proud" of the work that was done. He said when he took office in 2017, his department recognized different growing crime trends including human trafficking with a goal to address them aggressively. Cases are still pending.

Care Cottage — Five staff members were fired from two residential treatment facilities for girls before Montgomery County law officials raided the facility in May, part of an ongoing criminal investigation into complaints of neglect, improper supervision, physical and sexual abuse, according to state officials and law enforcement.

Troubling living conditions — including broken windows, moldy bathrooms and holes in the wall — and a lack of employee background investigations at the Care Cottage treatment facility for girls in Willis have been documented in state inspections.

The Care Cottage facilities, which are licensed for 65 girls ages 6 to 17, are operated by the private HTK Care Foundation Inc, which is registered to Harold Taylor and his wife, Tabitha.

In July, Child Protective Services remove girls from Care Cottage North. County Attorney J.D. Lambright said the last girl from the north facility was moved July 13. Care Cottage South remained open with about 25 girls still residing at the facility. “This is not the result of any court order,” Lambright said adding CPS officials made the decision following the raid. “CPS started seeing the (extent) of the problems there.”

The investigation started after officials with the Willis Independent School District contacted Lambright to report numerous incidents involving girls who lived at the facility and attended classes in the district. The case is still pending.

Lawsuit dismissed — A federal judge has dismissed a lawsuit against Montgomery County that claimed Precinct 1 Judge Wayne Mack’s courtroom prayer by volunteer chaplains violated part of the First Amendment. The lawsuit was filed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation in March 2017. The judgment was filed Sept. 27. The FFRF does have the option to appeal the court’s decision.

In January, Mack was dismissed from the suit after the plaintiffs with the FFRF clarified their intentions stating they were suing Mack in his official capacity as a justice of the peace. According to First Assistant County Attorney B.D. Griffin, by suing Mack in his official capacity, the plaintiffs effectively sue the county.

In the suit, two attorneys and another person who were in Mack's courtroom on official business claim they felt prejudiced by Mack during separate dockets in 2014. The Freedom from Religion Foundation believes the religious prayer practice Mack initiated in his court violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, one of the plaintiffs was dismissed because there was no standing.

In his courtroom, Mack allows for voluntary chaplains to open ceremonies with an invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance. The volunteer chaplaincy program includes leaders from multiple faiths, such as Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Mormon religious leaders.

Ghost girl — A shocking video captured by a door bell camera showing a disheveled woman with restraints on her arms left the community stunned in August and ultimately one man dead. Dennis Ray Collins, 49, committed suicide after video surfaced of the girl, who was his girlfriend, seeking help door-to-door. The woman told police Collins had tied her up.

Following the release of the video, police say Collins’ ex-wife received several text messages and believed he may hurt himself. They also said the ex-wife had met the girlfriend several times and believed that she was the woman seen in the doorbell videos. The ex-wife arrived at the house worried about Collins and contacted law enforcement who made entry into the home.

Collins was pronounced dead on the scene. The case is closed.

Man sentenced in officer, boy's death — Garrett William Nee was sentenced to 15 years in prison Jan. 30 after he was found guilty of four felony charges stemming from the deaths of Patton Village Police Sgt. Stacey Baumgartner and 11-year-old Adan Hilario Jr. in the wreck.

Two charges were for evading arrest/detention causing death, and the other two for evading arrest/detention causing serious bodily injury due to the injuries of two other Hilario family members.

Baumgartner, 39, responded to the original call that a man was urinating in public and reportedly exposed himself to passersby at a gas station near the intersection of Texas 242 and U.S. 59. After speaking with the Nee, Nee returned to his vehicle. Nee reversed and almost hit Baumgartner's patrol car and left the parking lot with Baumgartner in pursuit.

They traveled west at a high rate of speed approaching the intersection of Texas 242 and FM 1485. The Scion driven by Nee cleared the intersection. At the time the officer entered the intersection, a 1998 Chevrolet Suburban occupied by the Hilario family entered as well, and the two vehicles collided at the middle of the intersection at Texas 242 and FM 1485. The force of the collision pushed the officer's vehicle to the immediate right, into a traffic light pole.

Baumgartner was trapped inside his vehicle and was transported to Memorial Hermann The Woodlands Hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Adan Hilario Jr. was pronounced dead at the scene of the wreck.