

Dome-tastic future

The historic structure, now with a landmark designation, could become a must-see site.

An Austin radio talk-show host spent about an hour last Friday ridiculing the recent decision by the Texas Historical Commission to designate the Astrodome as a State Antiquities Landmark. The designation bestows on the world's first multi-purpose domed stadium the same distinction as the state Capitol, the Alamo and the Cotton Bowl.

KLBJ-AM's Jeff Ward recalled the sorry state of the "Eighth Wonder of the World!" as far back as the 1980s, when he was a placekicker for the Texas Longhorns. He recalled the dingy dressy rooms and the threadbare Astroturf playing field and questioned who would want to slog through a tour of the down-at-the-heels Dome in the literal shadows of a modern, much-larger domed stadium. It's not as if it's the only domed stadium in existence, he pointed out to a succession of callers. Few came to the aging Dome's defense.

A little knowledge may be a dangerous thing for talk-show hosts — they need straw men to whack between commercial breaks — but a mere Google search would have provided the old kicker the information he needed to perhaps understand why the landmark designation makes sense and why the historic structure, opened to great acclaim in 1965 and shuttered since 2008, actually has a bright future.

Maybe. A bright and prosperous future depends on whether we Houstonians exercise a little historic-preservation imagination, an attribute that has rarely been part of the Bayou City ethos.

First, to clear up a few misconceptions on the part of talk-show hosts and Dome skeptics, the commission granted antiquities status primarily to honor the structure's architectural distinction. "Architecturally, it is one of the most significant sports and entertainment venues in history, setting the standard for modern facilities around the world," Mark Wolfe, executive director of the Texas Historical Commission, told the Chronicle.

The landmark designation will serve as a bulwark against demolition, preventing the structure from being "removed, altered, damaged, salvaged or excavated" without permission from the commission. It won't hinder Harris

County's \$105 million plan to renovate the facility.

The plan involves raising the floor to ground level, thereby opening up more than 550,000 square feet to festivals and conferences, and adding two floors of parking underneath with slots for 1,400 vehicles. Plans also are being considered for developing seven floors of covered space with concentric walkways.

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett and the Harris County Commissioners Court deserve credit for sticking with the Dome, even after voters rejected a \$217 million bond package designed to save it. Of course, as Emmett reminded the Chronicle recently, a bit of practicality buttressed the decision.

"It still is very structurally sound and it is historic. ... It also turns out it is fully paid for," he said. "And then the fourth piece that comes in is, it would cost in excess of \$30 million to tear it down, after which you have nothing."

So, we have something, and something's better than nothing, but we still don't know exactly what that something's going to be. Only \$10.5 million of the initial \$105 million project has been fully approved. The remaining \$94.5 million likely will require another vote by county commissioners. That's one of several challenges.

Emmett and county officials also need to make sure a renovated and re-purposed Astrodome complements its larger neighbors, the Texans and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. They're the economic engines that drive the facilities that now engulf the Dome. With Bob McNair's football team making noises about NRG Stadium needing major upgrades, the county must make sure the Astrodome isn't a stumbling block. (We also need to figure out who's going to pay for those upgrades, but that's another editorial.)

Finally, we need to make sure that a new and improved Astrodome carves out a reason for being, something far beyond serving as a venerable geodesic host for tractor pulls and flea markets. That's where imagination comes into play — imagination to match the vision of flamboyant former Mayor Fred Hofheinz, the man who dreamed up the Dome more than a half century ago and saw it though to fruition.



LETTERS

Astrodome pride

Preservation

Regarding "Astrodome joins Alamo as state antiquities landmark" (Page A1, Saturday), the naming of the Astrodome as a State Antiquities Landmark by the Texas Historical Commission is truly a monumental and momentous occasion. Yes, the Astrodome has finally received the formal historical recognition that it merits acknowledgment as an iconic and historic structure. It is a true architectural marvel and engineering feat.

And for those fortunate enough to have actually "experienced" the Astrodome, this recognition carries with it a deeply personal celebration of its significant past and the treasured memories held of Astros baseball games, Oilers football games, historic events, and outstanding performances that shaped Houston and often rocked the world.

Indeed, the Astrodome is to Houston what the Alamo is to San Antonio and the state Capitol is to Austin. And should you question this, please explain how, after all of these years, even with the Astrodome padlocked and darkened, most in this city still refer to the

Astrodome as a central point of location and distance when relating the positioning of nearly every other major point in this city. And if you are still not convinced of the feelings that Houstonians and those beyond have for the Astrodome, how do you explain the crowd of more than 40,000 that turned out to celebrate its 50th birthday, waiting in line for hours hoping to get a glimpse inside, take a stroll around the behemoth structure and cast their eyes upon its breathtaking ceiling.

The Astrodome is, and thankfully will continue to be, the structure by which the residents of Houston and the world

identify, ascribe and equate to Houston. And the preservation of this great structure will send a message within our city and beyond that significant structures merit preservation for their historic and intrinsic value and for the new potential life that great visionaries may give them.

For all of us who treasure the Astrodome, how wonderful that Houston will not be remembered for the "Eighth Wonder of the World" that it neglected to save — but rather — as a city that fought relentlessly to preserve its grand, magnificent, and historic stadium.

Regina Pappas Seale, Houston



Houston Chronicle file

Fans walk past the Astrodome before the start of last year's Final Four championship game.

Hunger games

Economic engines fight for scraps in Austin while fearmongering grows fat.

Howdy, y'all. Welcome to your dystopian future. This week's theme: The Hunger Games.

At least that's what Texas political observers are calling the fight for funding in higher education.

State colleges and universities have about \$1 billion worth of needs that they want Austin to fund in the state budget being debated right now. These are listed as "special items," a purposefully vague label that only legislative experts seem to understand. Right now it looks like the schools will be shorted \$700 million. As in any dystopia, this suffering is absolutely avoidable. There's more

than enough money in the rainy day fund to leave our schools satiated. Politics, not finances, is what stands in the way. Unless our elected officials change their minds, someone is going to starve.

Let's hope it isn't the University of Houston.

"All the progress we've made in the past nine years, our push to continue to build a research university, which I believe Houston deserves, I think could be in jeopardy," University of Houston President Renu Khator told the Houston Chronicle editorial board.

During the last legislative session, she could have relied on Gov. Greg Abbott to put higher education funding on the emergency fast-track list. Not this year.

If you don't like the weather in Texas, just wait five minutes. If you don't like the governor just wait two years. Greg Abbott's policy weathervane did a 180-degree spin in his State of the State address on Tuesday, and we're not surprised.

His emergency action agenda for the 2015 Legislature could have been copied and pasted from the Texas Association of Business website: early education, higher education and transportation, alongside border security and ethics reform. Consider those priorities an investment in the future.

This year the governor followed the political currents off into the deep end and put a federal Constitutional Convention on his emergency list, which would recklessly rewrite the makeup of

the United States. Consider this priority a bizarre fantasy that should never go anywhere.

Texas faces serious policy challenges, from the special education cap to maternal mortality, and Abbott is acting like a role-play revolutionary for the entertainment of a radical wing of the Republican Party.

To his credit, Abbott did put Child Protective Services and pre-K education on the emergency action agenda.

However, the audience reserved its real applause for Abbott elevating "sanctuary cities" to the emergency list.

So far Abbott has only taken aim at Travis County Sheriff Sally Hernandez, who runs the single true "sanctuary city" in Texas because she refuses to hold inmates following requests from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The

governor responded to this policy by denying \$1.5 million in criminal justice dollars to Travis County. It should end here. Abbott made his point. These sorts of political tiffs have a way of spiraling out of control as each legislator desperate for attention just throws more fuel on the fire. That fear-mongering flame consumes all the oxygen in the room, leaving precious little for pre-K, CPS and, yes, higher education.

The University of Houston provides the jobs training and industry innovation that keep our city moving forward — one of many cores that power the region's economy. Despite their importance, there's little political upside in fighting for our universities, ports, hospitals and other institutions.

Primary voters don't turn out because a legislator funded jobs training programs. Donors don't dole out cash because a representative helped the University of Houston become nationally competitive.

Our city's economic future has become severed from the incentives of political decision-making in Austin. Fantasies and fears receive a feast of attention while the real issues fight for scraps.

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Scouting makes strides

Regarding "Boy Scouts will accept transgender children" (Page A1, Tuesday), as an Eagle Scout, I wish to congratulate the Boy Scouts of America for their decision to begin accepting transgender youths.

I stepped away from scouting 20 years ago after having attained the rank of Eagle Scout. Over the years, I started to question whether BSA had the best interests of children, families and communities at heart.

A decade ago, I would not have recommended that youths join Scouts. However, BSA's decisions over the last several years to allow openly gay Scouts, Scout Leaders and now transgender Scouts demonstrate today's BSA commitment to its mission to serve all of America's youth.

Robert Hallenbeck, Houston

Companies speak out

Regarding "CEOs push back against Trump on temporary immigration ban" (Page B2, Tuesday) on these companies' stand against the new immigration ban I admire their positions as a human being and a proud, naturalized American citizen. I was already a happy customer of both Apple and Starbucks, but now I am definitely more enthusiastic about both companies.

Toy Halsey, Houston

Mythical illegal voters

Regarding "Man who claimed voter fraud was registered in multiple states" (Page A13, Monday), only President Trump and his supporters could suspend judgment in order to believe that just because a voter is registered in multiple places or the name of a deceased person appears on the voting rolls, this is proof of fraud or illegal voting.

If I move my residence several times over the course of my lifetime, there is no requirement that I inform election officials of each move. I may end up registered to vote in several different places,

but that doesn't mean that I am going to vote more than once in an election.

When I die, there is no requirement that anyone inform the election officials in the county where I am currently registered. My name may remain on the voting rolls, but I guarantee you that doesn't mean that I will be voting in the next election.

And just because the name of a person who voted is the same as the name of someone registered in the same or another county or state or a deceased person doesn't prove that voter fraud occurred.

Tom Moore, Katy

Expand voter choices

Regarding "Our new age of contempt is on full display" (Page A29, Sunday), Karen Stohr's essay accurately portrays the sad state of our nation's politics. The political royalty of the Republican and Democratic parties have utilized contempt as a workhorse for political advantage. Over decades of use, contempt finally resulted in a choice of which candidate could appeal to the largest voting blocks of citizens whose primary motivation was contempt of the other side.

It is time that we citizens stop holding each other in contempt and direct our contempt and indignation toward the political parties that gave us a choice of either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton.

Thomas Temple, Houston

LETTERS POLICY

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BIBLE VERSE

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.

Proverbs 12:15