

Commissioners races awash in cash

Conservative PACs among those providing massive boosts in funding for candidates

By Jen Rice
STAFF WRITER

Traditionally, vendors and contractors have filled the election campaign coffers for Harris County Commissioners Court members and candidates, but that story is changing with an influx of money from more politically driven contributions.

County races, typically low-profile affairs, are seeing major

funding boosts this year, notably from a strong stream of Republican and conservative political action committee funding, including hundreds of thousands of in-kind donations and ad support in the last month for Jack Morman's bid to unseat Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia.

The largest source of that committee funding is the Stop Houston Murders PAC, which

formed this year and has spent more than \$2 million in this year's county elections. Its objective is voting out Democratic judges, though its impact likely has extended to the county judge race, in which Republican Alexandra del Moral Mealer is challenging Democratic incumbent Lina Hidalgo.

With three out of five seats on Commissioners Court in competitive races Nov. 8, the balance of the court is up for grabs. The current 3-2 Democratic majority could switch to a Republican-led court depending on the win-

ners of the races for county judge and two commissioner seats.

Much like the rest of the country, the Harris County political climate has grown increasingly divisive, with Republican and Democratic campaigns hoping to sink their opponents on emotionally charged themes that are playing out nationally, including crime and reproductive rights.

The Stop Houston Murders PAC largely is funded by other PACs, including \$750,000 from the Judicial Fairness PAC and

\$150,000 from the Coalition For Texas PAC, along with other major donations including \$500,000 from Don McGill of Katy LTD, \$210,000 from Richard Weekley and \$250,000 each from OTA Holdings and Texas Transeastern.

The largest contributor to Stop Houston Murders, the Judicial Fairness PAC, started in 2020 to support GOP candidates for the Texas Supreme Court. Its \$1.9 million fundraising haul between July and the end of September

came from
Campaigns continues on A8



Early vote turnout lower than in 2018, '20

By John Wayne Ferguson
STAFF WRITER

Fewer Harris County voters cast ballots during this year's early voting period than in the 2020 and 2018 elections, according to unofficial voter counts released after polls closed on Friday night.

From Oct. 24 to Nov. 4, about 736,000 people had voted at Harris County's 99 early voting locations. They accounted for about 28 percent of Harris County's 2.6 million registered voters.

Local voters are taking to the polls to elect dozens of local offices, including Harris County judge, as well as to vote on \$1.2 billion in bond proposals and on statewide races for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and others.

But so far, the number of voters has lagged behind the turnout in recent November elections.

In 2020, which was a presidential election year, more than 1.4 million people, about 57 percent of registered voters in Harris County, voted early. In 2018, early voting turnout was 855,711 people or 36.6 percent of registered voters.

Turnout continues on A9

DOUBLETREE DROP



ELIZABETH CONLEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Olivia Pfannenstiel, above, rappels down the DoubleTree Hotel Galleria in Houston on Friday for "Rappel for a Reason." Sixty United Way supporters participated; each person had to raise at least \$1,500 to guarantee a spot to rappel down the building. At left, James Crandall prepares to rappel down the hotel. The event raised over \$120,000.

Businesses involved in bribery probe

By Yilun Cheng and Mike Morris
STAFF WRITERS

A federal bribery investigation that resulted in a former Houston Health Department employee pleading guilty earlier this week to taking kickbacks is ongoing and could spawn charges against local business owners, according to court documents.

A former administrative and community outreach coordinator for the city health department, Barry Barnes, pleaded guilty to a single bribery charge, admitting to pocketing at least \$24,200 in kickbacks — ranging from \$900 to \$5,500 — for helping three businesses win contracts with the city and to get paid.

Barnes' sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 26, 2023, court records show. However, his attorney, Michael Wynne, said Friday that the court and federal prosecutor have indicated they would continue Barnes' sentencing past that date to allow

Bribery continues on A10

Cuellar receives boost from former president

By Benjamin Wermund
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar is getting some last-minute help from former President Bill Clinton as he enters the final days of one of the toughest re-election fights of his 17-year career, against Republican challenger Cassy Garcia.

Clinton is on robocalls going out Friday in which he says Cuellar has "always been a fighter for South Texas fami-

lies."
"He's been a champion for education, bringing back millions to South Texas schools so that every child has a shot at the American dream, just like he did," Clinton says on the recording. "He fought to lower health care costs because no one in South Texas should have to choose between refilling a prescription and putting food on the table."

The race between Cuellar
Cuellar continues on A10



Marvin Pfeiffer/Staff Photographer

U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar faces off against GOP challenger Cassy Garcia in South Texas in one of Texas' closest-watched contests.

CORONAVIRUS AT A GLANCE

632,183,034
Confirmed cases worldwide

97,729,653
Confirmed cases in U.S.

7,932,071
Confirmed cases in Texas

6,599,354
Deaths worldwide

1,072,561
Deaths in U.S.

89,635
Deaths in Texas

974
Confirmed patients in Texas hospitals

63.06%
Texans 6 months+ fully vaccinated

Source: WHO, CDC, Texas DSHS, Johns Hopkins University