

Experts say Travis County appears to have made right calls during July 5 disaster; some residents felt they were abandoned



Mikala Compton/Austin American-Statesman

A road outside Lago Vista is left damaged on July 6 by flooding from the previous day.

# In flood, questions of perception

On July 31, almost a month after sudden floodwaters tore through her Big Sandy Creek home near Leander, Ashlee Willis sat at a long table at the Hill Country Youth Event Center outside Kerrville before a bipartisan panel of Texas lawmakers.

She told them the July 5 flooding killed her neighbors, destroyed bridges and forever changed the place she'd called home. Compounding her fears was a feeling among residents that they were on their own, Willis told lawmakers. She found two detached body parts on her property, and she worried she'd find more.

"We did that," Willis said about the initial search for the

By Lily Kepner and Keri Heath  
STAFF WRITERS



Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Ashlee Willis of Travis County, second from right, listens during a hearing last month near Kerrville about the flooding.

missing, her voice wavering. "Volunteers in the community. Not Travis County."

Hours later, Travis County Judge Andy Brown sat before the same panel that was looking into disaster preparedness and said the county had used "every resource possible" at its disposal to rescue residents and search for the missing.

The contrast bewildered lawmakers of both parties, some of whom asked the county to investigate the claims. Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, said simply, "Residents shouldn't be finding body parts on their own."

Documents obtained by the Austin American-Statesman

**Flooding continues on A6**

# Looking to past floods to plan for next ones

Hill Country offers lessons on preventing new tragedies

By Dylan McGuinness  
STAFF WRITER

When disaster strikes in the Texas Hill Country river basins known as "Flash Flood Alley," history often repeats itself: A reeling community picks up the pieces to recover, and then, with renewed urgency, considers how they can be more prepared in the future.

Wimberley faced that reckoning after a massive surge of the Blanco River swept through town in 2015, killing 13. A broad swath of counties in the Hill Country faced similar decisions after the Great October Flood of 1998 killed 31 people, and in 2002, when floodwaters raged again in many of the same communities.

Kerr County and regional officials there considered changes after a river surge killed 10 teenagers at a summer camp in 1987. And much of the state dealt with flooding from Tropical Storm Amelia in 1978, with river surges wiping out dude ranches and other facilities along the Medina, Pedernales and Guadalupe rivers.

Given the sheer scale of the July 4 tragedy, when more than 100 people died, there is likely to be more urgency to find — and fund — solutions. A select committee of state lawmakers is reviewing the response to the flood, and four flood response priorities were the first items listed on Gov. Greg Abbott's special session agenda.

A Houston Chronicle review of 50 years of historic Central Texas flash floods reveals there is almost always an immediate focus on upgrading and modernizing systems that detect flooding and warn residents about it. There is usually a contentious debate about updating flood plain maps, balancing the needs for accuracy with homeowners' insurance costs and building restrictions. And there are discussions — but rarely action — about larger infrastructure projects like reservoirs, dams or tunnels that could hold back or divert future floodwaters.

Tom Hornseth, a longtime county engineer and now administrator in Comal County, has lived and worked through two of those major flood events, in 1998 and 2002. He said a sound flood system comprises

**Floods continues on A8**

# Trump Burger's untold origin story — with subplots

By Sarah Smith  
STAFF WRITER

The thing about Trump Burger is that it was always irresistible, even for those who would rather eat just about anywhere else. The restaurant is what its name suggests: A burger joint devoted to President Donald Trump, which began in Bellville, about 100 miles east of Austin, and has spawned several other locations in Texas that opened to great fanfare.

What Trump Burger

really sells isn't burgers or chicken fingers or fries. And it's also not the "Trump revenge tour" baseball caps or the "fake news" T-shirts on the shelves. Trump Burger is a curated experience for like-minded people. It's a place where Trump voters flock to enjoy life the way they think the country should be. Americana on the walls, politics on the menu, Woke left at the door. The more the libs rage, the better the burgers taste.

Part of the allure, aside



Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle

At Trump Burger in Bellville, like-minded supporters can enjoy a curated experience.

from the brash political persona that mirrors Trump's own, has been the man behind the bun. Trump Burger, according to reports, was opened by a 28-year-old named Roland Beainy. In 2022, the Houston Chronicle wrote he was born in Boston, moved to Lebanon as a child and returned to the United States in 2019 to find the country governed by a president he admired. Other outlets referred to him as a Lebanese immigrant; Fox Business called him a sec-

ond-generation Lebanese American.

"Being an immigrant from a place where everything is bad ... you see somebody like him to support the country and get the economy doing better," Beainy told the Chronicle in 2022. "Me being an entrepreneur, I appreciate what he did."

Even as Beainy built a business in tribute to that vision of America, lawsuits filed earlier this month punched holes through the Trump Bur-

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