

FEMA releases draft of flood maps

Significant changes mean Harris County could see floodplain boundaries expand

By Yilun Cheng and Caroline Ghisolfi
STAFF WRITERS

After years of delays, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has quietly posted a draft of Harris County's new flood maps online, kick-starting a review process that could lead to the first major update to the county's floodplain boundaries in nearly two decades.

Flood maps are supposed to show where flooding is most likely to happen during major storms. FEMA creates them with help from local governments, using rainfall data, terrain features and models that predict how water moves.

Harris County has not had a comprehensive map update since 2007. After Hurricane Harvey, the county partnered with the federal agency on a major map overhaul. The new

maps were originally expected to be released in 2022, but have since encountered repeated delays.

The draft maps, now viewable on FEMA's website, are intended for floodplain administrators and local elected officials. They show the new 100-year floodplain expanding significantly, roughly aligning with areas currently designated as the 500-year floodplain, according to Emily Woodell, a spokesperson for Harris County Flood Control.

Based on the draft maps, *Maps continues on A6*



Houston Chronicle file photo
A water rescue boat from the Crosby Volunteer Fire Department delivers people to high ground during flooding in 2016.

BOYS OF LATE WINTER



ABOVE: Astros catcher John Garcia, center, and teammates warm up during workouts for pitchers and catchers on Wednesday at CACTI Park of the Palm Beaches in West Palm Beach, Fla.

LEFT: Pitcher Tatsuya Imai throws during workouts Wednesday. Pitchers and catchers took the field Wednesday, and the full squad reports Monday as questions linger about the lineup.

JASON FOCHTMAN/HOUSTON CHRONICLE

City Council approves \$2B bond package

Funds earmarked for expansion of convention center

By Abby Church
STAFF WRITER

Houston officials passed \$2 billion in bonds to move forward with plans to expand the George R. Brown Convention Center.

The bonds — worth \$250 million, \$150 million, \$1.3 billion and \$300 million — were approved unanimously without discussion during the City Council's Wednesday meeting.

Cash for the expansion will not come from Houston taxpayers. It will be fronted by the state's portion of hotel occupancy taxes collected from visitors to the city's hotels under a bill passed by Mayor John Whitmire during his time as a state senator.

The project was pitched as a way to "transform" the city's downtown and East End while driving traffic to the convention center and surrounding businesses.

Officials have also said the expansion could help make the city more competitive as it prepares to host seven games in the FIFA 2026 World Cup and the Republican National Convention in 2028.

George R. Brown will be expanded to include a 700,000-square-foot GRB Houston South building that will house two exhibition halls, retail businesses and restaurants. It will connect the building to the nearby Toyota Center through a 100,000-

Bonds continues on A6

Pentagon-FAA laser dispute led to El Paso airspace closure

By Seung Min Kim, Ben Finley, Mary Clare Jalonick, Morgan Lee and Josh Funk
ASSOCIATED PRESS

EL PASO — The sudden and surprising airspace closure over El Paso on Wednesday — first announced as extending for 10 days but lasting only a few hours — stemmed from the Pentagon's plans to test a laser to shoot down drones used by Mexican drug cartels, according to three people familiar with the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity to share sensitive details.

That caused friction with the Federal Aviation Administration. *Airspace continues on A6*



Christian Chavez/Associated Press
The shutdown of the airspace over El Paso and part of New Mexico came amid the Pentagon's push for more drone systems and tools to defend against their use by adversaries.

Teacher watchdog promises fairness

By Isaac Yu
STAFF WRITER

The Texas Education Agency's decision last week to hire former Republican staffer Levi Fuller to help head teacher conduct investigations drew immediate praise from within GOP circles and blowback from school advocates who worry the agency is being used to police educators' speech.

Fuller, for his part, is keeping his cards close to his chest.

In an interview, the new inspector general declined to comment on recent probes into educators who commented negatively about conservative activist Charlie Kirk after his assassination or those who Republican leaders, including

Gov. Greg Abbott, have accused of helping "facilitate" student walkouts over the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

Fuller, 39, confirmed that his role will include oversight on cases like those, but wouldn't expand on how he plans to approach them, or even how teachers should weigh their professional requirements with First Amendment rights. Educators and school districts should review the code of ethics and relevant state laws, he said.

"Objectivity and fairness — that's going to be at the core," Fuller said. "At the end of the day, what we're looking for are violations of law or statute."

Fuller previously worked as *TEA continues on A6*