

West University • Examiner

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The news stories that got your attention in 2007

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This list of top 10 stories within our West University Examiner readership area is purely subjective and certainly not intended to rank anyone's accomplishments or hardships as any greater (or lesser) than anyone else's.

It was approached in a serious way, but is intended to be a little fun as well — the two needn't be mutually exclusive.

10 **Train derailment** — In a lucky break, of sorts, the evacuation of homes along Community Drive was called off in two hours the night of

July 2 after a pair of Liquefied Petroleum Gas storage cars pulled by a derailed train turned out to be empty.

Still, a spilled cargo of wheat seed from one of the cars that overturned near Judson Street mixed with rain to give off what one resident described as "a smell that's part fermentation, part sewage" until early August.

Two residents told the City Council on July 9 they had heard louder than usual noises coming from the rail in the days leading up to the derailment. A Union Pacific official on hand for the meeting downplayed those comments. The railroad later reported the derailment was "track related," the result of a defective joint.



Submitted photo

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9 **Decline of the Shrine** — The Arabia Shrine Center — the venerable showcase for everything from social galas to flat-track roller derby events — was sold to make way for a high-density residential development.

With 2007 barely under way, an officer with the organization told the Examiner the membership of the local Shriners temple that owned the land voted in November to clear the way for the sale. The reason: property taxes that "will eventually get

to be more than the Shrine can pay."

No deal could be made final until Feb. 1, Jerry Gantt said, because an affiliated group — the Scottish Rite — owned its building on the same property and had a 90-day right of first refusal.

The tract of land listed by the Harris County Appraisal District as 2900 N. Braeswood Blvd. covered 252,300 square feet and was valued at more than \$2.5 million. Another almost \$1 million is added to the Shrine's taxable value for buildings and improvements.

Both organizations have until the end of February to move, according to the terms of the sale.

8 **A Shakespeare parking tragedy?** — Amid on-again, off-again, at best lukewarm support from the Morningside Place Civic Association and allegations of "bullying" from some residents, Rice University finally got the parking decision it wanted.

By withdrawing its proposed parking variance for graduate housing in the 2400 block of Shakespeare Street, Rice bypassed the Public Parking Commission, which had stalled the plan by asking the university for more traffic-related information.

Planning Director Marlene Gafrick then determined Houston's existing ordinances did not cover student housing and ruled 100 parking spaces could accommodate 238 students living in the four-story complex.

This came after the civic association withdrew its support for the plan based on a poll of its residents. Morningside had claimed neutrality on the issue prior to receiving an e-mail from Rice cautioning, "Without the support of the neighborhood in which the project is located, I suspect we will be forced to construct a much larger building.."

Confusing? Yes, but unfortunately this would not be the only time a lack of coherent policy by the city of Houston would be at the center of an unpleasant item in our Top 10. (Nos. 1 and 2 come immediately to mind.)

7 **Swan song on Marlowe Street** — Although far less contentious than when it and the related marathon Zoning Board of Adjustment meetings first got our attention (checking in at No. 2 on our list in 2005), the end of an era rates a mention.

Under terms of an agreement still awaiting a few dotted Is and crossed Ts, the house that was at the center of three years of legal infighting will be leveled.

A brief recap for anyone (at least, anyone local) who has been in a cave: Most of the dispute centered on the city ordinance requiring the space a home occupies to be no more than 80 percent of its lot size. Some of it involved a dispute over whether the building's top level constituted an attic or an additional floor.

Coincidence? An approved building permit was withdrawn March 3, 2005 due to a recalculation by a city building official, who left shortly afterward.

As of late July, property owner Thomas Peden placed his legal expenses at \$285,375. The city was even more specific, placing its cost to that point at \$232,418.83.

The city is expected to leave the lot as green space until it is sold.

6 **Southside's municipal move (maybe)** — In November, Southside Place voters comfortably passed two referendums, one of which would allow the city to build a \$4.5 million City Hall complex at the corner of Edloe Street and University Boulevard.

Still, with two councilmen on record as vehemently opposing the project and approval of a final plan requiring three of five members' votes, the project is anything but a done deal.

Just two weeks before the election, Councilman Charles Evans said the current buildings were in better shape than city literature claimed.

Meanwhile, Councilman Champ Warren said an independent appraiser placed the value of the two lots to be vacated and sold at \$650,000 each, not the \$2 million total cited by the city.

Mayor Richard Rothfelder and others argued a successful referendum would take advantage of "a historic low bond rate" to finance a needed project.

It's the third straight year proposed land use at the site has made our list. The decision to build a pedestrian-friendly Town Center area was No. 5 in 2005. The decision not to build said project checked in at No. 2 last year.

5 The JMH era comes to an end — By the time you read this, West University Place landmark JMH Market, 3636 Rice Blvd., may have already closed its doors for the last time, depending on how quickly the remaining inventory sold.

Small fliers alerted customers of the store's demise last week with owner Michael Freeman saying he and his wife, Eveta, were "saddened" by what was a business decision "not made in haste."

Rumors of the store's demise that began in 2006 (our No. 10) had hardly been put to rest by Freeman's assumption of the store's reins when they began again.

In February, Freeman told the Examiner that a sagging profit margin, 100-hour work weeks and a large mortgage had prompted him to talk with an unnamed West University Place official about possibly selling part of the property as park land.

Those talks died, as did an offer from the former face of JMH, Jim Reid, to buy the store back with a group of local investors.

Wulfe & Co. currently carries a listing for the property, calling its location the intersection of "Main and Main." The asking price is \$5.1 million.

4 All those other park sites — West University Place spent about \$420,000 of the \$2 million authorized by voters for the acquisition of park land, purchasing a site at the corner of Coronado Court and Sewanee Street as the year drew to a close.

The cleared land, which will likely be used as an investment or in a trade with a builder, drew few protests from residents. This was in sharp contrast to two other properties considered during the year.

First, the closing date for bids on a property at the corner of Tanglely Road and Rutgers Street passed April 30 with the city's earlier request for the chance to match the best offer received having been spurned by the owner and criticized by some neighbors.

Then in mid-August, it took all of about 24 hours for a once-anxious property owner to decide giving the city right-of-first-refusal on his lot at Nottingham and Rutgers streets wasn't such a good idea.

In fact, George Mickelis, the owner of Cleburne Cafeteria, was apparently so convinced by potential patrons that he needed to go another route that he sold the proposed park site at 3304 Nottingham St. to another buyer.

This took place before the deal could come before council that same week. The sale went through for \$1.6 million, according to a real estate source.

On a happy and somewhat-related note, the Rice Pocket Park had officially become Friends Park by midyear and was dedicated just before the year ended.

3 Referendum of another kind — In what could be interpreted as a further referendum on two referendums defeated in November 2006 (No. 1 last year), voters on May 11 denied two incumbents' bids for office, while returning the 2005 election's top voter-getter with only a third-place finish.

In the race for mayor, former Mayor Pro Tem Bob Kelly defeated Councilman Mike Woods in stunning fashion, garnering about 70 percent of the more than 1,700 ballots cast.

"There seemed to be a groundswell against the parks proposal and how much money might be spent at City Hall," Kelly said the day after his victory.

While considerably closer, the City Council contest wasn't much kinder to incumbents. Councilman Dick Yehle lost, finishing a close fifth in his bid for re-election to one of the four at-large positions available.

Faring better was Councilwoman Phyllis Cohen, who was returned for a second term, but with only 15.4 percent of the vote as compared to 22.6 percent in her previous effort.

2 Stealth tower at Ashby — It came to prominence in September with an angry crowd packed in an elementary school gym asking — often quite loudly — how plans for a 23-story high-rise could have gotten so far without anyone knowing it.

It ended, for this year anyway, bogged down as part of a 90-day moratorium during which time the Houston City Council and a group of developers will try to reach an agreement on how best to limit such large projects and the traffic they bring to already congested streets.

Along the way, there was a large-scale protest march and the display of a lot of signs, mostly by people who couldn't help but feel they had somehow been kept in the dark. Maybe even swindled. After all, this was Southhampton. This was Boulevard Oaks.

Then an Examiner Open Records request revealed things hadn't been quite as secretive as they seemed. An application for storm drainage use at the location was received by the city of Houston on Nov. 21, 2006 — it pertaining to a project that would include 210 apartments, 10,000 square-feet of office space, a full-service restaurant and much more.

And, for those not privy to Southhampton Civic Club newsletters, it was revealed ranking officials within the group had, as far back as Sept. 7, 2005, discussed the threat of "the potential high-rise that may be proposed on the site of the present Maryland Manor apartments...."



Photo by MICHAEL REED/The Examiner
The proposed high-rise at Ashby and Bissonnet streets had residents seeing red and showing yellow (placards).



Photo by ERIKA McDONALD/The Exam

A description of the pending high-rise drew gasps at Poe Elementary.

1 The Bolsover brouhaha — Barely edging out No. 2, mostly for its longevity — eight months on the front page,

more or less — and occasional weirdness.

(It was hailed as “home to bohemians, attorneys and hippies,” and described as part of zoning restricted West University Place by an obviously geographically challenged appraiser).

Last year’s No. 2 was, indeed, trying harder this year. Among its lowlights were a pair of appraisals on the property the city of Houston at first refused to release, then said it would release, then refused to release again.

Eventually, amid a flurry of Open Records requests, the two documents appeared, someone managing to be 60 percent apart in their fair market values for the one-block of property between Kelvin and Morningside drives.

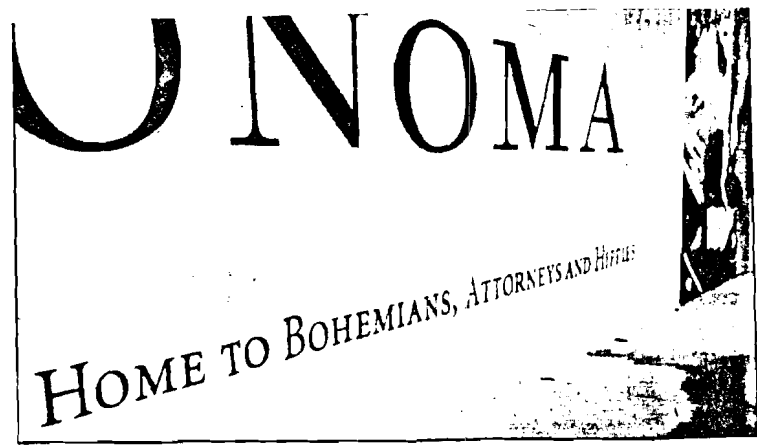


Photo by MICHAEL REED/The Examiner

Sign of the times for a “reimagined” Rice Village.

By way of clarification, the Legal Department told The Examiner “there are no official written policies and procedures,” concerning the selection of real estate appraisers used in the city’s purchases and sales of property.

In August, the Public Works Department set a price of \$1.74 million, or a little more than \$60 a square foot.

That was \$280,000 more than the higher appraisal and based on prices paid along Kirby Drive. (One appraiser had used purchase prices near Sharpstown in citing comparable values.

The City Council approved the deal. Mayor Bill White vowed the process for selling city rights of way would be reviewed.