

**SPORTS**  
Cougars start tournament run with UAB matchup tonight.  
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NTSB: 13-year-old drove pickup that hit van, killing 9 in West Texas.  
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# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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## Appraised property values spike sharply

In Harris County, average increase for homes goes up 21%, with apartments rising by 24%

**By R.A. Schuetz**  
STAFF WRITER

The surging cost of homes is not only hitting the wallets of homebuyers – it’s poised to increase costs for the majority of existing property owners in Harris County.

On Friday, the Harris County Appraisal District will begin sending letters to notify property owners of their new appraised values, off of which taxes are calculated. The average home value increase was a staggering 21 percent. The average apartment value rose 24 percent.

“Value increases this year have been unprecedented,” Roland Altinger, HCAD’s chief appraiser, said in a statement. “In my almost 40 years in the real estate business, I have never, ever seen such large increases in market values.”

While most property owners will see their taxes rise, a number of mitigating factors will limit their taxes from rising in proportion to their market values.

However, data shows that property owners in more affluent areas are much more likely to take steps to lower their taxes.

Real estate experts warn homeowners not to throw away the letter they receive from HCAD in the coming weeks. The letters contain not only the new appraised value, but also directions on how to file a protest if a property owner believes the new value is inaccurate.

The percentage of people who file protests – and the average money they knock off their appraisal – differs dramatically between different neighborhoods, according to a 2019 analysis by Houston-based data science consulting firm January Advisors.

A map of the homeowner protest rates show the county’s protests are concentrated in the *Properties continues on A9*

### Flying through spring break



Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

McKaylee Wilkinson, 10, straightens up as seagulls eye the Goldfish crackers on her head Tuesday along the beach in Galveston. She and her mother also went on a haunted tour during their day trip for spring break.

## Repeat migrant crossings in Texas are rising

**By Benjamin Wermund**  
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON – U.S. Customs and Border Protection is reporting an increase in encounters with migrants on the southern border as recent court rulings reignite debate over President Joe Biden’s use of a Trump-era public health order to expel most of those seeking to enter the United States.

The administration reported slightly fewer than 165,000 encounters with migrants in February, about 10,000 more than it reported in January, when encounters had begun to decline. The increase was driven by more than 126,000 encounters with single adults, the most in a single month since 2006. It came even as encounters with families seeking to enter the U.S. fell for the second straight month, to 26,582, the lowest point in a year.

Experts say the figures offer evidence that the pandemic-era health order, known as Title 42, is leading to more border encounters, not fewer, since single adults who are expelled are simply returning to try and cross again.

Nearly a third of the single adults stopped by Border Patrol – 30 percent – tried to cross at least once in the 12 months prior, CBP reported. That was more than doubled the average rate at which Border Patrol encountered repeat

## Lapses at foster center decried in abuse probe

**By Cayla Harris**  
AUSTIN BUREAU

Two Department of Family and Protective Services staffers have been fired over their handling of sex abuse allegations at

vate allegations that an employee at the Refuge, a Bastrop center for survivors of sex trafficking, sold nude photos of two girls and used the money to provide them with drugs. State officials first received a report of the

But DFPS Commissioner Jaime Masters told lawmakers that she should have been notified two days later, when state officials uncovered that the employee was related to several other people who still worked

where at all times,” Masters said in a hearing. “Everyone depends on everyone up the chain to do what they are tasked with doing, and this is what did not happen here. Policy was not followed. Naked pictures of chil-

## PROPERTIES

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more affluent western side of town, in a wedge stretching from downtown northwest toward Jersey Village and southwest toward Meyerland. In 2019, around 60 percent of homeowners in neighborhoods including Bellaire, River Oaks, West University Place and Bunker Hill Village protested their taxes. Less than 10 percent of homeowners in neighborhoods including Sunnyside, Acres Homes and Gulfgate Riverview — where the median income is below that of the Houston area — protested their taxes.

“A lot of the upper income areas, they protest. A lot of the lower income areas, they don’t,” said Chris Compton, a property tax consultant who protests taxes on homeowners’ behalf. “And a lot of the lower income areas, they get the biggest tax hit” because of the especially rapid rise in property values in certain neighborhoods that had long been affordable.

Often, homeowners who live in areas where protesting taxes is not the norm are unfamiliar with how the process works or are employed at jobs that

make it difficult to take the time to go protest in the middle of a business day, said Erwin McGowan, a State Farm agent who has worked with homeowners in the Fifth Ward area for two decades. There, 4 to 12 percent of homeowners protest their taxes.

Many people are also unaware of homestead and senior exemptions, which limit tax increases, Compton said. A homestead exemption is free to file and limits appraised value increases to 10 percent a year.

A shortage of homes for sale — the culmination of a perfect storm of world events and demographic change — has caused home prices to soar. Years of underbuilding came to a head when millennials began reaching homebuying age at the same time seniors shifted toward aging in place, which kept their homes off the market.

The pandemic caused mortgage rates to fall to historic lows and motivated people to move to more spacious accommodations. It also caused supply chain shortages that increased the cost of new construction.

“Residential properties have gone up about 15 to 30 percent in value, depending on where they are located,” said Altinger,

meaning homestead exemptions will make a big difference in this year’s taxes.

But just because the average home’s appraised value increased 21 percent doesn’t mean the average homeowner’s taxes will go up 21 percent.

In addition to exemptions for those living in their home as their primary residence and owners over the age of 65 and the ability to protest, a recent state law likely will mitigate property taxes.

In 2019, the state Legislature passed a law effectively capping the growth of property tax revenue raised by cities, counties and other taxing entities at 3.5 percent a year. (Houston also has its own city voter-imposed law from 2004 that limits property tax revenue growth through a calculation involving inflation and population increases, so it will be bound by whichever is smaller.)

That means Harris County, Houston and other taxing entities likely would have to lower the rate at which they tax homes to stay within the cap. Tax rates are set in the fall, after most protests have been completed.

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### Proposition Number 1 (SJR 2)

**SJR 2** proposes a constitutional amendment authorizing the legislature to provide for the reduction of the amount of a limitation on the total amount of property taxes that may be imposed for general elementary and secondary public school purposes on the residence homestead of a person who is elderly or disabled in order to reflect any statutory reduction in the maximum compressed rate of the maintenance and operations taxes imposed for those purposes on the person’s homestead from the preceding tax year.

The proposed amendment will appear on the ballot as follows: **“The constitutional amendment authorizing the legislature to provide for the reduction of the amount of a limitation on the total amount of ad valorem taxes that may be imposed for general elementary and secondary public school purposes on the residence homestead of a person who is elderly or disabled to reflect any statutory reduction from the preceding tax year in the maximum compressed rate of the maintenance and operations taxes imposed for those purposes on the homestead.”**

### Proposition Number 2 (SJR 2)

**SJR 2** proposes a constitutional amendment increasing the amount of the residence homestead exemption from property taxes for public school purposes from \$25,000 to \$40,000.

The proposed amendment will appear on the ballot as follows: **“The constitutional amendment increasing the amount of the residence homestead exemption from ad valorem taxation for public school purposes from \$25,000 to \$40,000.”**

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