

COMING MONDAY

■ President Obama refuses to accept a reality: compromise requires a partner. When the other party's bottom line is that you fail, then you lack both that partner and any basis for negotiation.

EDITORIALS | COMMENTARY | OPINION | LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | POLITICAL CARTOONS | VOICES

MEMORIAL

Monument to King is a tribute he deserves

■ Civil rights leader worked for the powerless

By LEONARD PITTS JR.

On the National Mall, the nation will soon dedicate a monument to, arguably, the greatest American of the 20th century. It is, as Lincoln said at another dedication, altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

When heroes die, it is human nature to wrap their lives in metal, marble and granite. We do this that we might remember them, but there is in the remembering also a kind of reduction. The rough and jagged lines of a life lived at the forefront, lived in controversy, conflict and trial, become something smooth and safe enough for children. Thus were the cunning, melancholy, white supremacy, courage and genius of Lincoln flattened in popular memory to a single thing: He saved the Union and freed the slaves.

And thus does King's 13-year struggle for the redemption of America shrink to a single brilliant speech and a fight to overturn laws that never should have been laws in the first place. The rough and jagged lines have become smooth. His life has become a bedtime story. Which is why it feels appropriate, necessary, maybe a little seditious, to remember and remind that when he died, Martin Luther King was fighting for the right of workers to form a union and for the dignity of the poor.

That is not a bedtime story from way back when. It is a headline from right now. Unions, after all, are controversial again. Worse, poor people find themselves denigrated and demeaned in ways that shock the conscience.

Former South Carolina Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer once likened them to stray animals one feeds at the back door. Fox "News" pundit John Stossel sees them as the enemy in a battle between "the makers and the takers." Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning compares them to scavenging "raccoons." Ann

Please see **KING**, Page B9



JACQUELYN MARTIN : AP

PHOTO OP: Courtney Ogden, 6, and her brother Conrad Ogden, 2, pose before a statue of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

MUNICIPAL FINANCE

PENSION PANEL LACKS CREDIBILITY

Committee appointed to recommend solutions to city's pension problems is made up of the type of insiders who got us into this mess



PAUL LACHINE

By STEVEN G. CRAIG, JOHN DIAMOND and RAMON FERNANDEZ

MUCH like the federal government, the city of Houston has run up a large debt since fiscal year 2003 — a problem now belatedly recognized by the city as it proposes a committee of mostly City Hall insiders to "examine the situation." It is unclear why a committee needs to identify the problem, since it has been well documented in these pages and in the city's annual Financial Report. The root of the problem started when the city granted its employees new and more generous pension benefits in the early 2000s, but then failed to make the promised contributions into the pension fund. Note that during the period of record tax revenues,

the city accumulated a deficit that is now more than \$2 billion, or about \$4,000 per family of four.

This \$2 billion debt has been accumulated without public approval, since a vote on pension debt is not required as is the case for all other city borrowing. Worse, that is not half the problem. Houston residents are also on the hook for more than \$3 billion in unfunded retiree health benefits. This debt was accumulated with the consent of the leaders of the public employee pension plans. In a recent article by Chris Moran of the Chronicle, Mayor Annise Parker is quoted as saying, "This was our request to the municipal pension: rather than forcing us to [pay] the actuarially determined amount, to accept an amount that was easier on our budget." Translation: Please allow the city to contribute less to pensions than actuarially determined, because we can't afford/choose not to fully

fund the pensions. It is unclear how a committee that is largely made up of pension and political insiders, those mainly responsible for getting us into this mess, is expected to provide a reasonable path to fiscal sustainability.

The unfunded pension liabilities have been accumulated in various degrees in all three of the city's pension funds for police, fire and all other municipal employees. These are the "old fashioned" type of pension funds, called defined benefit plans, where the city undertakes to save money to make guaranteed payments to its retirees. Many firms have now converted their pension plans to be defined contribution plans, such as 401(k) plans, where the only guarantee is what is contributed to the pension fund.

This accumulated deficit threatens the economic prosperity of the city of Houston, and the entire metropolitan region. Please see **CRISIS**, Page B9

DROUGHT

Time to change our views about big, green lawns

■ The average lawn of St. Augustine grass uses more water than all other plant types

By BRENDA BEUST SMITH

I'M not sure who decreed that the most beautiful, most marketable suburban home must have a huge green lawn out front. But these days, someone ought to kick him in the shins.

We homeowners have so bought into this lawn-centric gospel that we're willing to sacrifice so much for a little blade of grass. It makes no sense at all in normal times and even less during periods in which water becomes a precious commodity.

To quote from my Lazy Gardener blog:

It's a proven fact. The average suburban St. Augustine lawn uses more water than all the other typically used landscape plants combined, including trees.

It's also a fact now we have hundreds of beautiful landscape plants available that:

- 1 Love our heat and humidity (even this extreme cycle).
- 2 Require very little water.
- 3 Demand very little maintenance.

4 Are far more beneficial to our overall ecology than are lawn grasses.

I have nothing against lawns. They are pretty, they have a cooling effect. They are soft to walk on, provide great places for children to

play and provide beautiful frames for more colorful or striking plantings.

What is so insane is this notion that the expanse of lawn should far, far outpace all other plantings.

As with almost everything else these days, the real crux of the matter is property values. It all boils down to money. This, in turn, has triggered an unwillingness to

trust one's neighbors. Will their more ecologically sound plantings lower my property value? It's a justified response, a very reasonable fear. And it's one that property owner associations and homeowner associations could and should be addressing.

We have somehow decreed that big beautiful lawns make a house more marketable. HOAs and POAs are reinforcing that unfortunate mindset, rather than helping to change it into a more sane approach.

The Woodlands has proven that natural landscapes can be beautiful, can contribute to, rather than lower, property values.

Unfortunately, in recent years, The Woodlands has capitulated in many sections, allowing and even encouraging massive St. Augustine lawns in some neighborhoods. To its credit, The Woodlands does still encourage natural, more ecologically friendly landscapes in most areas.

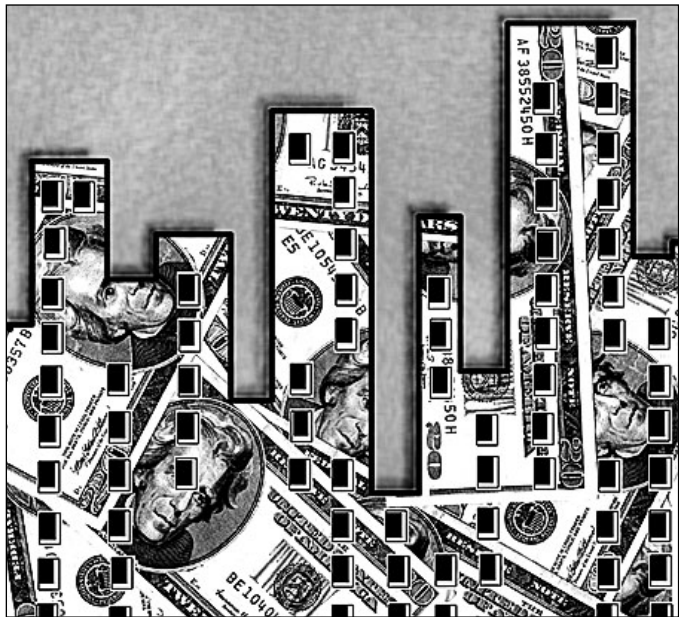
I have for years tried to find another greater Houston area subdivision actively educating homeowners on how to attractively switch to hardier, more drought-tolerant, lower-maintenance plantings so they can reduce lawn expanses. You may be out there, but

Please see **DROUGHT**, Page B9



JULIO CORTEZ : CHRONICLE

SOAKING UP WATER: A sprinkler waters the grass on the front lawn of a fourplex apartment on Reagan Street. Lawns use far more water than other types of landscaping plants, including trees.



CREDIT

CRISIS: Committee is made up of insiders

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B8
gion. When the city begins to address the problem of making its neglected payments, which will require forgoing investment in city infrastructure or other city services, taxpayers in the city will be making payments for which they will not receive public services. A potential result is that residents and businesses flee the city, driving down property values and making it even more difficult to dig our way out of this hole.

What is the solution to this problem? Some have suggested converting the costly pension plans from defined benefit to defined contribution plans. This would immediately stop the build-up of new pension debt as the city would be required to fund the defined contributions as they are earned. This action would not, however, pay off the debt the city has already amassed. Others suggest eliminating the city's retiree health insurance benefits program. If employees want to retire early, before Medicare kicks in, they can do so on their own in terms of health insurance coverage. Still others have suggested cutting operating expenses in all city departments, trimming enough fat (or essential services) to free up money to fully fund the pension plans on an annual basis. These and other solutions should be the focus of the new committee.

Thus, we urge that Mayor Parker and City Council cre-

ate a committee whose sole purpose is to offer a path to a sustainable city fiscal structure. The committee should be composed of respected citizens from the business, government and academic communities who are knowledgeable about the problem and can achieve consensus on realistic solutions. This committee needs to represent the taxpayers who are being presented with this tab, not the people who already decided to saddle the city with this financial burden. The mayor and City Council should take their recommendations seriously, vote on them and implement them as expeditiously as possible. In recent days, we have read about several U.S. cities and counties that have either declared bankruptcy or are contemplating such action as a result of making retirement benefit promises they are unable to keep. We would hate to see Houston on that list. And that is all the more reason to take quick action now in order to avert a similar financial disaster for our beloved city.

Craig is professor of economics at the University of Houston and a research associate of its Center for Public Policy; Diamond is the Edward A. and Hermena Hancock Kelly Fellow in Public Finance at Rice University's Baker Institute; and Fernandez is professor of accounting at the University of St. Thomas.



CHRONICLE FILE

THE ST. AUGUSTINE GRASS IS GREENER: Sandra Matejich of Thomas Bros. Grass demonstrates the correct way to lay sod, in this case "Palmetto," a new variety of St. Augustine grass.

DROUGHT: Let's change our views on lawns

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B8
you're well hidden.

Obviously the fear of lowered property values is simply greater than our concern for dwindling water resources and the damage done to our bayous as a result of lawn chemical runoff. It's easier to do nothing, to simply maintain the status quo until some crisis spurs us into action. Maybe all the dead lawns around town will prove to be that crisis.

POA and HOA participation in any overall mentality change is crucial. They hold the power to force homeowners to landscape in this way, or that way. But POAs and HOAs are elected bodies. They're not going to change until homeowners, those who vote members onto these boards, decide a change is needed.

In the meantime, if you want more information, it is available, free.

Again, quoting from that Lazy Gardener blog post:

We have an incredible resource in the WaterSmart Program promoted by Texas A&M and other resources. Log onto <http://www.urban-nature.org/about/aboutus.htm> for more information. Speakers are free, the information is free.

Consider sponsoring a session with one of these free speakers with your club, church, school or other group. And encourage your HOA/POA to at least investigate having these speakers help educate you and your neighbors.

Smith is the author of The Lazy Gardener blog (blog.chron.com/lazygardener).

KING: Monument a fitting tribute to leader

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B8
Coulter says welfare creates "irresponsible animals."

There are people in this country — working people — who must routinely choose between rent and groceries, prescription drugs and electric lights. But we are encouraged by some on the political right to regard them with contempt and save our empathy for the fabulously wealthy.

You'll have to go some to find a starker example of how morally blinkered this country has become.

Even if you put morality aside, there is still the question of enlightened self-interest. If you are white, you may scorn black people and be reasonably certain you will never become one. If you are straight, you may scorn gay people and be reasonably certain you will never become

one. But any of us can become poor. Ann Coulter could become poor. How do you scorn

what you might someday be? The man we honor could have died wealthy from speaking fees alone. But he gave

that money away and instead died poor, struggling on the side of the poor — garbage workers who came home with maggots in their hair, reeking of other people's waste, having earned maybe \$10, gross, for a 14-hour day.

King died asking America to show a little human compassion for people like those, people the Bible calls "the least of these." The monument to him seems, in photographs, a handsome and imposing thing.

But one suspects that, given his druthers, he would prefer the compassion. One suspects he would consider that the greatest monument of all.



CHRONICLE FILE

AFTER THE SPEECH: Martin Luther King Jr. is congratulated moments after delivering his "I have a dream" speech on Aug. 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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ATHLETICS



SMILEY POOL : CHRONICLE

A CELEBRATION: Cougar wide receiver Patrick Edwards (83) celebrates after scoring a touchdown against Rice last year.



NICK de la TORRE : CHRONICLE

LOOKING: Houston quarterback David Piland looks for an open receiver in a game against the University of Central Florida.



SMILEY POOL : CHRONICLE

MOVING CHAINS: Cougar quarterback David Piland scrambles for a first down during action against the Rice Owls.

Knocking on the door

Joining the Big 12 Conference would be huge step for UH

This is an edited interview of CBS Sports commentator Jim Nantz by Houston Chronicle editorial writer Tim Fleck on the possibility of the Cougars replacing Texas A&M in the Big 12 Conference. Nantz lettered on the UH golf team and graduated in 1981. He was a sportscaster at KTRH Radio before going on to a national television career with CBS.

Q: With A&M likely to depart the Big 12, what do you see as the benefits membership in that conference could bring UH?

A: I think it would be a major step for this university. It's still in many ways a young university, but things have lined up in recent years in such a positive way. Good things are happening there, from Tier 1 status to the

turnaround in our athletic fortunes. We would really be a wonderful complement to the Big 12.

Q: If A&M does leave, what do you see as the path for getting UH selected as a replacement?

A: I don't think anything's a guarantee, including A&M going to the Southeast Conference. I think there's going to be a lot said still from our state legislators and I don't think that's a foregone conclusion. But I think it's such a natural to have Houston in the Big 12. People have to think long-term and big picture. Houston is such an international city that's growing by leaps and bounds in perfect symmetry with

our university. People can look down the line and think Houston's ready to be in that conference with many schools that it shared conference status with before. Obviously, we were very competitive in the Southwest Conference days.

Q: What are the assets that UH could bring to the Big 12?

A: We're the new University of Houston. In 10, 15, 20, 50 years from now we're not even going to recognize our present-day school. It's on such a fast track to fantastic levels. I have total confidence we're going to land in a Bowl Championship Series conference, but the one that would be a natural fit for us is the Big 12. If people could broaden their view a little bit and look for the greater good of athletics in the Big 12 region, University of Houston would be a very, very significant player for that conference. People should not be holding on to old perceptions about UH.

Q: Would UH membership in the Big 12 restore regional rivalries disrupted by the disbanding of the Southwest Conference in 1996?

A: There's no question that people can say "Wait a minute. What's the attendance figures for UH football games?" Consider that we're playing, by and large, schools that we have no history with, like Marshall and Southern Mississippi and East Carolina. That doesn't

exactly stir up long memories or bring out passion in fans. Still, we sold out every home game but one last year. A really important piece is that the UH alumni base is growing. If Houston was in the Big 12, you can just imagine the interest when any one of those Big 12 teams would come to Houston to play.

Q: Will UH's plans to build a new football stadium help attract interest from a BCS conference?

A: The exciting news here is we are in a position now where we are going to be upgrading our facilities, whether we are included in the Big 12 or not. This is how dynamic the university has become and how involved the alumni base has been here in recent years. It gets back to leadership: Chancellor Renu Khator and Athletic Director Mack Rhodes. They've motivated the fan base and it's only going to get bigger and better.

Q: Can state lawmakers help in advocating UH membership in the Big 12?

A: If I were a Texas legislator, I'd have a hard time explaining why you would turn your back and not support a state university in a city the size of Houston. Someday it's really going to feel a little bit odd for Texas and Texas A&M not to be battling in the same conference. If A&M is not there, there's going to be a big void. I'm not sure Texas has figured that out yet. Someday it's going to be really good for the University of Texas to have the University of Houston as a rival. As the years march on it would get bigger and bigger.



COUGAR FAN: CBS Sports broadcaster Jim Nantz, a graduate of the University of Houston, says a move by the school to the Big 12 would benefit UH and other conference members.

JOHNNY HANSON : CHRONICLE