

Texas Dem insiders list candidates to watch

By Edward McKinley
AUSTIN BUREAU

Like Charlie Brown trying to kick a football, it's become a tradition for Texas Democrats to tell their voters the state will turn blue and elect a Democrat to statewide office, only for Republicans to sweep the top of the ticket as they have for the last 30 years.

At the Texas Democratic Convention in El Paso earlier this summer, Hearst Newspapers asked more than 20 elected officials, staffers, political consultants, delegates and other attendees to name the Democrat they believe will break the party's losing streak.

Although many said that they believed U.S. Rep. Colin Allred, a Dallas Democrat, would oust U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz in November, others also acknowledged privately Allred faces serious political headwinds with turmoil at the top of the ticket.

(After the state convention Democrat Joe Biden dropped his presidential bid and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris, which has the potential to reshape the race.)

Many Democrats said they were already peeking around the corner to the 2026 election and specifically eyeing the race for attorney general. Republican Ken Paxton, now in his third term as the state's top lawyer, was recently acquitted of corruption charges in a Senate impeachment trial.

The names that came up most frequently were often younger, up-and-coming politicians, including state representatives, former statewide candidates and county officials. One elected official named themselves. Most picks were people of color or women. And many are from the Houston area.

"I mean, you've got just an amazing bench in Texas," former U.S. Rep. and gubernatorial candidate Beto O'Rourke said in an interview last month. "The fact that (Allred) is leaving what I think would otherwise have been a very safe reelection in the United States House of Representatives to take on Ted Cruz for the Senate is saying something about the opportunities that the Democrats see right



Justin Hamel/Texas Tribune contributor

While Texas has not elected a Democrat to statewide office since 1994, a handful of candidates are giving party insiders hope.

now."

Christian Menefee

Five Democrats at the convention told Hearst Newspapers that Menefee is the most promising candidate for statewide office on the party's roster. Menefee, who was elected as Harris County attorney in 2020, had a speaking role at the state party convention in June where he touted his work suing GOP officials.

"I have a very simple job, one job," Menefee said in a speech at the convention hall in June, before remixing a line that Greg Abbott used as Texas attorney general shortly before he ran for his first term as governor.

"I sue Greg Abbott. I sue Ken Paxton. I sue Republican officials to defend our voting rights, to push for environmental justice and to protect Texans across our great state," Menefee said. "I fight back."

O'Rourke described Menefee as "absolutely outstanding and I fully expect to see him in bigger and bigger roles."

James Talarico

Talarico, an Austin Democrat, has accumulated 270,000 followers on TikTok where he often posts videos of screeds against Republican education policies in

House committee hearings.

An aspiring preacher, the state representative frequently invokes his faith to describe how he believes Republican policies are actually un-Christian, and several at the convention said they appreciated his efforts to couch Democratic ideologies in religious terms.

Other Democrats around the state have identified Talarico as someone harboring statewide ambitions, including the governor's mansion.

Ann Johnson

In perhaps her most high-profile role to date, state Rep. Johnson served on the team of state House members who made the case to impeach Paxton on corruption charges. He was eventually acquitted by the state Senate.

"You may remember me as vice chair of your board of managers at the Ken Paxton impeachment," Johnson, a two-term Houston Democrat, said to delegates in June as she introduced herself.

"I'm talking about Republican corruption and government and it's pretty damn pervasive," Johnson said. "It is on all of us to remind all Texans that it is actually Democrats defending your freedoms and your rights."

Paxton is up for reelection in 2026. Although Johnson attacked him, she didn't say whether she was considering a challenge.

Chris Hollins

City Controller Hollins has served as Houston's chief financial officer since January. Before that, he was county clerk in Harris County.

At the convention, he trumpeted his role in expanding drive-thru voting and other innovative voter access methods for the 2020 election, receiving widespread applause.

Lina Hidalgo

Hidalgo is serving her second term leading the state's biggest county. The Harris County judge faced turmoil in 2022 when three of her staff were indicted for allegedly steering an \$11 million county contract promoting COVID-19 vaccination efforts to a Democratic political consulting firm. The staffers have denied wrongdoing and Paxton's office took over the investigation earlier this year.

Hidalgo narrowly won reelection in 2022, defeating a Republican challenger by less than 20,000 votes, less than 2%. "The Republicans though,

they are quite literally shaking in their boots at a 5-foot-2-on-a-good-day Hispanic woman," Hidalgo said in a speech at the convention. "It makes me so excited that I scare them so much."

Jasmine Crockett

The Dallas Democrat, who is serving her first term in Congress, recently went viral for attacking U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, in a committee hearing as a "bleach blonde bad built butch body."

In El Paso, the crowd greeted her with loud cheers when she walked on stage wearing a T-shirt with her new catchphrase.

"Now I know that former first lady Michelle Obama, who we all love, said 'When they go low, we go high,'" she said. "However, as a member of Congress, and even when I served in the state House, I've resorted to 'when they go low, we deliver straight facts and gather them accordingly.'"

Christine Weems

Former Air Force undersecretary and congressional candidate Gina Ortiz Jones said she believes Harris County District Judge Christine Vinh Weems, who is running against Texas Supreme Court Justice John Devine this election cycle, has the best shot of winning statewide.

Jones recently started a new political group called the Find Out PAC to raise money to unseat Republican state Supreme Court justices, particularly around the issue of abortion access, modeled on a similar advocacy push in Wisconsin.

Jones described Devine as politically vulnerable because he's a former anti-abortion activist who has faced ethical questions. In 2022, Weems issued an opinion blocking the state from enforcing a 1925 abortion ban that allowed clinics to stay open for two extra weeks after Roe v. Wade was overturned.

"I've spent my career fighting to protect the rights of Texans, but right now our justice system is on the line," Weems wrote on social media. "The highest court in the state is of one political mind. That needs to change. I'm running to bring impartiality, fairness, and balance to the court."

FM 1097 reopens in Montgomery County after heavy rains

By Catherine Dominguez
STAFF WRITER

The Texas Department of Transportation has reopened FM 1097 in Montgomery County after heavy rains in July washed out the road where it crosses Atkins Creek.

"I'm amazed at the work that TxDOT and the contractors have been able to complete in such a short period of time," County Judge Mark Keough said.

Keough said while the road was open, some work still needed to be done.

"The workers are taking a much needed day off, and will return this week to complete shoring up the surrounding

areas with concrete to prevent any further erosion to the bridge area," Keough said. "Please continue to be cautious in the area as the workers return to finish their work."

Keough along with Precinct 1 Commissioner Robert Walker worked with state officials to prioritize the repairs. The roadway is one of the major thoroughfares from Montgomery to Interstate 45.

Walker was alerted to the bridge failure by a Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife game warden.

"Thank goodness it was still daylight at the time," Walker said. "The road was just sloughing off and the guardrail was just hanging there."

State officials closed the roadway July 24 over concerns the road would completely collapse.

According to the San Jacinto River Authority, more than 4 inches of rain fell in the FM 1097 area causing the ground to give way.

The creek has eroded about 1,700 feet since 2016. Located between Terra Vista Circle and Buffalo Springs Drive, the erosion started to threaten FM 1097 in December 2018, where about 4,500 cars travel daily, according to TxDOT data.

In 2020, the state and the city of Montgomery worked to repair areas just south of the bridge.

The new repairs have stabilized the area and the state has replaced the roadway.



Montgomery County OEM

Crews with the Texas Department of Transportation worked to repair FM 1097 over Atkins Creek. TxDOT has reopened FM 1097.

PARKING

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at just the start of a potential multi-year rise in transportation costs for an overwhelmingly commuter population. Students sat on a committee that formulated the increases for 2024-25, yet parking woes remain top of mind for many of the 48% of students, or 22,000 people, who hold permits.

The desire for more safe and affordable parking was so strong last semester that it became a key platform point for the winning student government presidential ticket — just in time for the UH System Board of Regents to approve new rates in May. Costs are tiered and paid by semester, but amount to \$500 a year for the most surface lots, \$550 for the two most popular lots, \$700 for two less popular garages, and \$850 for the most convenient garages.

It isn't uncommon for students to carpool, Uber or Metro to save on parking, many of them coming from far-flung suburbs with long commute times. Others use hourly me-

ters or risk parking tickets to avoid the upfront expense of a permit.

"College students are not rich," said junior Madelyn Haisley from Baytown.

UH parking is a \$24.6 million revenue operation, although 61% of expenses last year went to paying construction costs on parking garages. (UH constructed six garages on campus since 2006 to accommodate growing needs.) Most of the rest goes to salaries and maintenance, all touched by inflation, school officials said.

University parking is an auxiliary service which, by state law, must be self-sufficient. Rising operational costs and a need for additional safety and security measures, including new parking gates, are behind the price hike, school officials said. For the year, rate increases range from \$22 to \$41 higher, with the exception of two less popular and farther garages that dropped \$54 overall.

Most faculty and staff options also increased in price, between \$22 and \$90 higher. Their garage rates decreased by \$37 and \$187, however, according to board documents.



Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer
UH parking is a \$24.6 million revenue operation, although 61% of expenses last year went to construction costs.

For students, the rates are expected to rise more through the 2027-2028 school year, if proposed and approved as drafted: The least expensive option would cost \$546, a middle tier would cost \$756 and the highest would cost \$929. The committee that formed the rate schedule hoped to increase pricing flexibility and decrease the gap in pricing between surface and garage parking lots, members said in a spring town hall. Only this year's increases have been formally proposed and adopted, and future increases would similarly need to be approved by the system's board of re-

gents.

UH provides more parking than most urban universities, and enrolls far more students who use the service: About 20,000 vehicles can park at one time, whereas other campuses have 8,100 spots and 6,553 student parking permits, according to the National Association of College Auxiliary Services.

Permits on campus are first-come, first-serve and fill up fast, according to the university. With the exception of one lot, the cheapest permits are sold out. And the two most popular lots, which are slightly more expensive than the others, had a waitlist of 2,700 people last year, a Transportation and Parking Advisory Committee member said at the town hall.

Junior Han Nguyen said he feels his cost increase is negligible, though he has heard many others complain. For freshman Simon Olivares Cruz, the problem still would have existed without the rise in prices. He filled out an application on Wednesday for a Houston Metro pass, discounted for University of Houston students.

He and his family ran his fi-

nancial aid on Tuesday and realized it wasn't enough to cover housing, he said. He's canceling his dorm reservation and continuing to live with his parents in Katy, where he'll drive 30 minutes each day to a park-and-ride and then take the bus into the city. It's less expensive than parking on campus.

"It's going to be way cheaper," he said.

Student Catalina Campos is returning to UH after several years away and was surprised to see how much parking had skyrocketed. But even in the mid-2010s, she often saw students racing for spots in the most crowded lots, following others to their cars so they could take their spaces.

Aymen Syed, a senior who commutes from Spring, doesn't think she'll have to worry about that this semester. She purchased a permit for the East Garage, which was one of the two options to drop in price for students this year. Her friend chastised her on Wednesday for choosing parking that will surely be a hike to some of her classes.

Syed shrugged.

"I'm saving money," she said.