

Carolina jessamine offers gardeners a visual beauty, sweet fragrance

HOME AND GARDEN A4

VICTORIA ADVOCATE

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INVENTORS

HANDLE WITH CARE



DUY VU/DVU@VICAD.COM

Ernie Byrd, right, and his son Chad Byrd, left, pose for a portrait behind their Shopping Cart Armrest Handles on Feb. 7 in Victoria.

Victoria father-son duo's invention supports mobility-impaired shoppers

BY DUY VU
DVU@VICAD.COM

When Hurricane Harvey tore through Ernie Byrd's home, decimating his shop and flooding his house, the 69-year-old said he went through a stage of depression and put on about 70 pounds. Eight months later with the extra weight, Byrd noticed he had more difficulty grocery shopping while resting his arms over the handles of his shopping cart.

"I looked around and about a third of the other people were doing the same thing," Byrd said. "And I got to thinking, 'Boy, we need some handles or something.'"

A welder for most of his life, Byrd was then off to the drawing board to create an invention.

His invention, the Shopping Cart Armrest Handles, which was issued a U.S. patent last year, is a tool that has the potential to assist millions of partially disabled people across the country as they do their grocery shopping, Byrd said. So far, the handles are not for sale to the general public, but Byrd and his son said they hope the invention will one day be widely available.

Even though people can opt for an electric scooter, they would still have to lean over and hold onto the basket, he said.

"These handles here will support about 30% of their body weight and take it off their ankles and their knees," Ernie said. "And it helps with their balance."

His first attempt to solve the issue was simple. He placed an exercise roll on a shopping cart for extra comfort. The idea, however, was elementary and didn't solve the problem of people slouching over their shopping cart, instead of standing up straight, he said.

"This is about the tenth style that we've had, and this is by far the best. They adjust so easily.

SEE INVENTION, A8



CONTRIBUTED BY CHAD BYRD

Dana Wright tests out a prototype of the Shopping Cart Armrest Handles.

ELECTION

Voters will decide whether to lower some property tax bills in May election

BY BROOKE PARK AND JOSHUA FECHTER
THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Texas voters will decide whether to lower some property taxes that fund schools in a May 7 special election.

Two propositions will be on the state-wide ballot. Gov. Greg Abbott officially set the upcoming election date Wednesday.

The first proposition would draw down property taxes for elderly and disabled Texans by reducing the amount they pay to public schools, which typically makes up most of a homeowner's tax bill. The state would then cover that reduced revenue for school districts. The measure would cost the state more than \$744 million from 2024 to 2026.

The second measure would raise Texas' homestead exemption from \$25,000 to \$40,000 for school district property taxes, which would save the average homeowner about \$176 on their annual property tax bill. If approved, this measure would cost the state \$600 million annually. The state will use a \$4.4 billion surplus to pay for the measure's first-year cost, but as of October, it was unclear where future funding would come from.

Both measures passed during special legislative sessions last year with bipartisan support from lawmakers.

Partisan tactic by Lt. Gov. Patrick's campaign delays thousands of requests for mail-in ballots from voters

BY ALEXA URA
THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Thousands of applications for mail-in ballots submitted by Texas voters have been delayed — and some voters may ultimately not receive ballots — because Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick's campaign instructed eligible voters to send requests for absentee ballots to the Texas secretary of state's office instead of their local elections offices.



Patrick

A mass mailing by Patrick went out to Republican voters across the state in January, ahead of the March primary, and included a two-page letter emblazoned with the seal of his office encouraging voters to submit the requests following "three easy steps." The problem was the third step, which instructed voters to return the applications in an enclosed reply envelope that was addressed to the state.

The lieutenant governor's campaign said it used the secretary of state's address because "many Republican voters are rightly suspicious of Blue County election officials."

"The decision to direct return mail to the Secretary of State (SOS), someone who is trusted and respected, gave voters an added layer of comfort," Allen

SEE PATRICK, A8

COVID-19

Estimated 73% of US now immune to omicron: Is that enough?



ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

People wait in line to test for COVID-19 on Jan. 12 in Long Beach, Calif. The coronavirus — the current variant or future ones that are sure to pop up — remains a dangerous germ.

BY CARLA K. JOHNSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The omicron wave that assaulted the United States this winter also bolstered its defenses, leaving enough protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less — if any — dramatic disruption to society.

Millions of individual Americans' immune systems now recognize the virus and are primed to fight it off if they encounter omicron, or even another variant.

About half of eligible Amer-

icans have received booster shots, there have been nearly 80 million confirmed infections overall and many more infections have never been reported. One influential model uses those factors and others to estimate that 73% of Americans are, for now, immune to omicron, the dominant variant, and that could rise to 80% by mid-March.

This will prevent or shorten new illnesses in protected people and reduce the amount of virus circulating overall, likely tamping down new waves. Hospitals will get

a break from overwhelmed ICUs, experts agree.

"We have changed," said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. "We have been exposed to this virus and we know how to deal with it."

The coronavirus — the current variant or future ones that are sure to pop up — remains a dangerous germ. It is still infecting more than 130,000 Americans and killing more than 2,000 every day.

SEE OMICRON, A8

INSIDE

Texas voters, political candidates aren't on same page

VIEWPOINTS A5

WEATHER

TODAY

Cooler with times of clouds and sun



61

TONIGHT

Clear to partly cloudy and chilly



38

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COVER STORIES/WEATHER

OMICRON

CONTINUED FROM A1

Tens of millions of people remain vulnerable.

And there will be future outbreaks. The notion of a “herd immunity” that could stop the virus has slipped away under the harsh reality of new variants, and the rejection of vaccines by some Americans.

But the coronavirus is no longer new. Two years ago it arrived in a nation where nobody’s immune system had seen it before. The entire population — 330 million people — were immunologically naive, that is, susceptible to infection.

“I am optimistic even if we have a surge in summer, cases will go up, but hospitalizations and deaths will not,” said Mokdad, who works on the Institute for Health Metrics and Eval-

uation model, which calculated the 73% figure for The Associated Press.

With varying degrees of relief and caution, many Americans are starting to return to their pre-pandemic lifestyles.

Sarah Rixen, 41, of Bismarck, North Dakota, started singing again with a civic chorus after taking a year off. Now, with omicron winding down, she said she feels more confident than at any time since the crisis began.

“But I am still a little leery that there could be another variant around the corner,” said Rixen, noting that her family and most of her relatives are fully vaccinated. “I am still going to wear a mask.”

As mask mandates ease, workers return to offices and flights fill up, experts are trying to understand whether this return to normal can last, or if another setback is looming.

PATRICK

CONTINUED FROM A1

Blakemore, a campaign consultant for Patrick, wrote in an email.

But the campaign’s approach forced the secretary of state, which had a stated policy of rejecting applications erroneously sent its way, to sort and forward the Patrick-inspired forms to the counties where they should have been sent originally.

The delayed delivery could put voters’ requests for mail-in ballots at risk as counties continue to see higher-than-normal rejection rates of applications under new ID requirements enacted by Republicans last year. Any issues with defective applications must be resolved by Friday so voters can receive a mail-in ballot.

State workers have been forwarding the waylaid applications to respective counties, which this week were still receiving pack-

ages containing hundreds of misdirected applications.

The fiasco has further muddled the first election held since Patrick, as head of the state Senate, presided over last year’s passage of new laws tightening voting processes, including a measure making it a crime for local election officials to send out applications for mail-in ballots to people who did not request them.

“Everyone age 65 and older has earned the right to vote early by mail. As Republicans, we have fought to make it easier to vote while protecting election integrity, so we need to make sure we increase our turnout by taking full advantage of this convenient and secure voting option,” Patrick wrote in a letter dated Jan. 20 that was attached with the applications.

Though the letter contains the official state seal for the lieutenant governor, as allowed by law, the materials were labeled as being sent out by Patrick’s campaign and not at taxpayer expense.

5-DAY FORECAST FOR VICTORIA

AccuWeather | Go to AccuWeather.com

TODAY	TONIGHT	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
High 61	Low 38	High 65 Low 44	High 70 Low 59	High 81 Low 65	High 87 Low 61
Cooler with times of clouds and sun Precip chance: 5%	Clear to partly cloudy and chilly Precip chance: 10%	Times of clouds and sun Precip chance: 10%	Mostly cloudy Precip chance: 20%	Becoming windier with a stray t-storm Precip chance: 40%	Very warm Precip chance: 20%

LOCAL ALMANAC

Statistics for Victoria through 4 p.m. Thursday

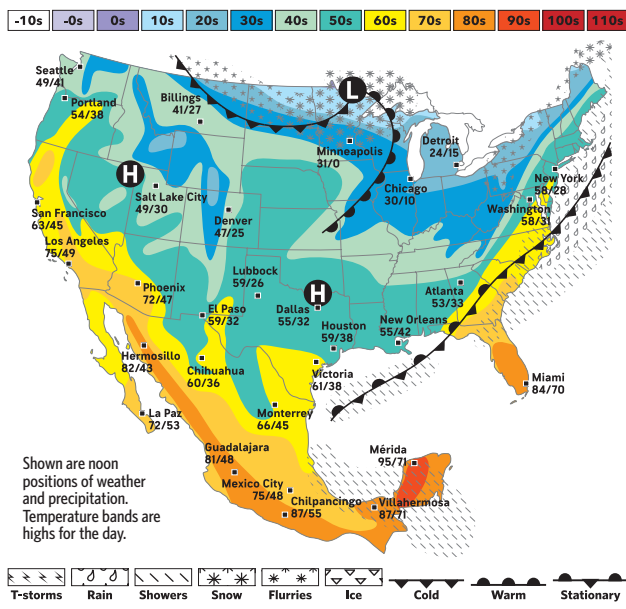
Temperatures	Value
High/low	86/67
Normal high/low	70/48
Record high	86 in 2022
Record low	20 in 1903
Precipitation	Value
Thursday ending 4 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	0.21"
Normal month to date	1.16"
Year to date	3.24"
Normal year to date	3.83"

SUN & MOON

Sunrise today	7:04 a.m.
Sunset today	6:20 p.m.
Moonrise today	8:27 p.m.
Moonsset today	8:29 a.m.
Sunrise Saturday	7:03 a.m.
Sunset Saturday	6:21 p.m.
Moonrise Saturday	9:27 p.m.
Moonsset Saturday	9:01 a.m.



NATIONAL WEATHER



MARINE STATISTICS

Offshore (Port Arthur to Port O'Connor)
Inner Waters Wind north 8-16 knots today. Seas 4-7 feet. Visibility clear. Water temperature: 60.
Outer Waters Wind from the north at 10-20 knots today. Seas 5-9 feet. Visibility generally clear. Water temperature: 61.
(Port O'Connor to Port Brownsville)
Inner Waters Wind north 8-16 knots today. Seas 4-7 feet. Visibility clear. Water temperature: 65.
Outer Waters Wind north 10-20 knots today. Seas 5-9 feet. Visibility clear. Water temperature: 68.

Port O'Connor Tides

	High	Ht.(ft)	Low	Ht.(ft)
Today	2:50 a.m.	0.7 ft.	12:45 p.m.	0.0 ft.
	9:48 p.m.	0.5 ft.		
Sat.	4:34 a.m.	0.6 ft.	12:34 a.m.	0.5 ft.
	8:53 p.m.	0.4 ft.	1:19 p.m.	0.2 ft.

ALLERGEN COUNT

TREE..... Moderate
 GRASS..... Low
 RAGWEED..... Low
 MOLD..... High

SOURCE: ACCUWEATHER.COM

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LAKE LEVELS

	Normal Level	Actual Level	Release (cfs)
Canyon	909.0	908.27	82
Texana	44.0	44.04	0
Coletto	98.5	97.47	3
Travis	681.0	661.00	0
Medina	1064.2	1016.56	—
Georgetown	791.0	784.67	0
Austin	492.8	492.01	0
Marble Falls	737.0	736.32	0
LBJ	825.4	824.77	0
Somerville	238.0	239.45	96

RIVER STAGES

	Flood Stage	Thu.	24-hr Change
Guadalupe			
Gonzales	31.0	12.19	-0.31
Cuero	24.0	8.74	+0.08
New Braunfels	13.0	9.72	+0.02
Victoria	21.0	6.87	-0.18
Near Bloomington	20.0	13.55	-0.28
San Antonio			
Falls City	12.0	1.22	-0.01
Goliad	25.0	4.46	-0.12
Loop 410	12.0	3.82	none

TEXAS WEATHER FORECAST

City	THURSDAY			TODAY			SATURDAY			City	THURSDAY			TODAY			SATURDAY		
	Hi	Lo	Prec	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi	Lo	Prec		Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi	Lo	Prec	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W
Abilene	63	32	0.32	57/35/s	68/43/s		Del Rio	76	60		67/41/s	73/50/s	Marfa	54	32		58/22/s	62/27/s	
Alice	85	63		64/42/pc	69/47/pc		El Paso	55	41		59/32/s	67/38/s	McAllen	87	63		64/47/pc	71/55/pc	
Amarillo	37	21	T	57/29/s	63/37/s		Galveston	82	66	0.03	56/46/pc	60/51/pc	Midland	55	35		58/30/pc	66/38/s	
Austin	72	51	T	59/30/s	66/37/s		Houston	80	69	0.45	59/38/pc	66/43/pc	Orange	78	66	0.35	60/35/pc	67/40/pc	
Beaumont	81	65	0.17	60/37/pc	66/42/pc		Kerrville	67	53	0.01	61/26/s	66/33/s	Port Arthur	76	65	0.21	60/40/pc	66/46/s	
Brownsville	84	69		61/49/pc	68/57/c		Kingsville	87	66		65/44/pc	70/48/pc	Presidio	66	41		66/30/s	70/37/s	
Bryan/C.S.	72	50	0.04	58/34/s	66/39/s		Laredo	82	58		66/45/pc	72/50/pc	San Angelo	64	41	0.02	59/28/pc	69/42/s	
Corpus Christi	87	61		62/44/pc	66/49/pc		Longview	69	45	0.44	54/27/s	65/35/s	San Antonio	76	63		62/36/s	68/42/pc	
Dallas/FW	68	37	0.08	55/32/s	66/42/s		Lubbock	60	29		59/26/s	66/34/s	Waco	69	41	0.03	57/27/s	66/38/s	
Dalhart	33	19	T	55/23/s	63/32/s		Lufkin	74	59	0.28	57/29/s	66/36/s	Wichita Falls	63	31	0.26	54/31/s	68/39/s	

VICTORIA RAIN LOG

Mon.	2022	2021	Avg.	Rec.
Jan.	3.03	1.16	2.67	11.87 (1934)
Feb.	0.21	0.86	2.05	9.08 (1992)
Mar.	---	0.83	2.99	11.61 (1997)
Apr.	---	4.39	3.01	11.70 (1997)
May	---	20.28	5.23	20.28 (2021)
June	---	6.70	4.21	13.50 (2004)
July	---	10.39	3.46	20.34 (2007)
Aug.	---	2.45	3.11	14.50 (2017)
Sept.	---	2.86	4.53	19.05 (1978)
Oct.	---	2.84	3.97	17.25 (1960)
Nov.	---	2.34	2.93	16.14 (2004)
Dec.	---	0.56	2.34	8.67 (1923)
Year	3.24	55.66	40.50	73.70 (2004)

Forecasts and graphics provided by AccuWeather.com ©2022

NATIONAL CITIES

City	THURSDAY			TODAY			SATURDAY			City	THURSDAY			TODAY			SATURDAY		
	Hi	Lo	Prec	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi	Lo	Prec		Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi	Lo	Prec	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W	Hi/Lo/W
Albuquerque	40	28	0.16	52/28/s	57/29/s		Los Angeles	70	47		75/49/s	76/46/s	Phoenix	65	48		72/47/s	77/49/s	
Anchorage	37	32	T	36/32/sn	35/28/pc		Miami	81	72	0.01	84/70/sh	82/69/pc	Pittsburgh	55	48	0.62	31/23/pc	29/13/sf	
Atlanta	71	56	0.01	53/33/pc	59/36/s		Minneapolis	15	-2		31/0/sf	20/17/c	Raleigh	74	53		66/31/pc	59/27/s	
Baltimore	70	37		58/25/c	49/17/s		Nashville	70	56	2.28	43/29/s	51/25/s	St. Louis	59	26	1.42	42/23/s	35/28/s	
Baton Rouge	75	69	0.43	56/33/c	64/38/pc		New Orleans	78	69	0.01	55/42/c	59/44/s	San Diego	68	46		70/46/s	67/47/s	
Birmingham	74	59	0.15	50/28/pc	58/32/pc		New York	68	49		58/28/c	43/22/sf	San Francisco	66	48		63/45/pc	63/48/s	
Boston	61	43		55/22/r	40/21/sf		Oklahoma City	62	26	0.58	51/29/s	62/39/s	Seattle	47	36	T	49/41/c	47/39/r	
Chicago	41	22	0.24	30/10/s	25/19/s		Omaha	27	13		56/15/s	40/31/s	Tampa	84	67		78/64/c	74/56/pc	
Cincinnati	59	53	2.26	36/27/s	33/17/s		Philadelphia	68	40		58/28/c	46/21/s	Wash., D.C.	70	45		58/31/c	49/24/s	

Weather (W): s-sunny, pc-partly cloudy, c-cloudy, r-rain, sh-showers, t-thunderstorms, sf-snow flurries, sn-snow, i-ice, prcp-precipitation, T-trace.



PHOTOS BY DUY VU/DVU@VICAD.COM

Ernie Byrd rests his arms on the Shopping Cart Armrest Handles on Feb. 7 in Victoria.

INVENTION

CONTINUED FROM A1

They’re strong, so you can put all your weight on it, and it won’t tip the basket back,” Byrd said. “It also restores people’s dignity, so they can stand up straight and be eye level with other people instead of looking down at the basket.”

The invention is especially useful for people who have bad ankles, knees and backs or people who are suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, Byrd said.

Byrd then enlisted the help of his son, Chad Byrd, of Victoria, to build on the model using his knowledge of 3D modeling. In a room that was converted into a workshop, the father-son duo began thinking about ways to improve on the armrest handles.

“He was asking for my opinion, and I was trying it out, and I think these really need to be adjustable because it was kind of fixed in place,” the younger Byrd said. “And so we started brainstorming ideas.”

Approved as a U.S. patent on July 13, the current prototype uses auxiliary handles attached to a shopping cart in pairs. Each handle consists of a telescopically extend-



Chad Byrd looks at a 3D rendering of the Shopping Cart Armrest Handles on Feb. 7 in Victoria.

able vertical tube connected to a horizontal tube that can serve as an armrest. A locking mechanism then secures the upper tube to compensate for a person’s height.

With a solid prototype in place, the two hope to license the rights to a shopping cart manufacturer to start the process of getting the shopping cart handles to be mass produced all across the nation. Or they could sell the patent outright, depending on the terms.

Already, the invention has received about \$25,000 from 70 investors who include friends, acquaintances and business people in Victoria.

But for the father-son duo, the motivation for the invention is ultimately to help people get back on their feet and

be able to return to in-store shopping.

“Many people want to get back in the stores and shop that are unable to because their knees won’t hold up. (As for) me, in two minutes I’m out, but with this I can walk around the whole store,” Ernie Byrd said.

“You can imagine somebody, let’s say they’re getting old, getting arthritic knees, it doesn’t take much to automatically have a sedentary lifestyle. Things can run away from you. If you start sitting around, you’re going to gain weight, and you’re going to have heart conditions. If we can get people out of the house and walking around the store — that’s going to change your lifestyle pretty drastically,” said Byrd’s son.

Hallettsville MARKET DAYS



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