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LEGISLATURE '23

No turning page on book debate

Lawmakers, school officials discuss rating system, library rules

By TALIA RICHMAN
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A fierce debate over how to regulate what Texas children can read at school stretched for hours Tuesday night, as the House Public Education committee took up a bill targeting library rules.

Education Lab

Rep. Jared Patterson's READER Act would require book vendors to "rate" titles with sexual content before selling them to school districts. The Frisco Republican said the legislation is an attempt to rid school libraries of books inappropriate for children.

But those opposed to his legislation said they fear its

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INSIDE Plan would hurt energy-only market

Experts are calling a Texas Senate plan to back up the state's power grid with state-financed fossil fuel power plants the end of the free market in the state's electricity economy. 6A

Hefty price tag with school voucher bill

A school voucher-like bill prioritized by Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick that could funnel state money to private schools would cost an estimated \$1 billion a year by 2028 while draining funds from public schools, according to a newly released fiscal analysis. 5A

Tax cut bills sail through Senate

Measures could save Texas homeowners hundreds of dollars

By PHILIP JANKOWSKI
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AUSTIN — The Texas Senate passed a slate of property tax cut bills Wednesday that back-

ers say will save homeowners hundreds on their tax bills.

The bills sailed to approval with a series of unanimous votes in the Legislature's upper chamber. They will now head to the House, where competing property tax relief proposals continue to be debated.

The Senate passed Senate Bills 3, 4, and 5 as well as Senate

Joint Resolution 3, a proposed amendment to the Texas Constitution that voters will need to approve to enact increases to homestead exemptions. In total, they amount to \$16.5 billion in tax cuts over the next two years.

The tax cuts would provide

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COURTS

'Terrible injustice' set right

Man free after 25 years in prison for murder he didn't commit



Photos by Shafkat Anwar/Staff Photographer

Surrounded by family members, Martin Santillan (center) embraced his friend Andrea Alvarado after he was formally exonerated of a 1997 capital murder on Wednesday at the Frank Crowley Courts Building in Dallas. DNA evidence showed Santillan was wrongfully convicted.

DNA evidence and perseverance result in release decades after conviction in Deep Ellum killing

By KRISTA TORRALVA
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Martin Santillan quickly wiped a tear from his face so people in the packed courtroom wouldn't see him cry.

But he couldn't suppress his emotions as Dallas County prosecutor Cynthia Garza apologized for the more than 25 years he spent jailed for a murder he didn't commit.



Santillan wore a shirt reading "I didn't do it" as he was exonerated Wednesday. With the help of Centurion Ministries, Santillan repeatedly petitioned for DNA from the crime to be retested.

"That's what I've been waiting to hear since July of 1997," Santillan, 49, told *The Dallas Morning News* on Wednesday at the Hyatt Regency, where his family and lawyers gathered for a celebratory lunch afterward.

Santillan was released from jail Dec. 14 while the state's Court of Criminal Appeals reviewed his case. In February, the high court agreed with prosecutors and defense lawyers that Santillan was innocent in the slaying of Diamond Wittman, 21, outside a Deep Ellum nightclub.

The appeals court issued a mandate Tues-

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ECONOMY

Rate hike adds to worries

Powell says banking system is sound; Fed indicates inflation could require another increase

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve extended its yearlong fight against high inflation Wednesday by raising its key interest rate by a quarter-point despite concerns that higher borrowing rates could worsen the turmoil that has gripped the banking system.

At a news conference, Fed Chair Jerome Powell sought to reassure Americans that it is safe to leave money in their banks, two weeks after a rush of depositors pulled funds from Silicon Valley Bank, which collapsed in the second-biggest bank failure in U.S. history. Signature Bank fell soon afterward.

"We have the tools to protect depositors when there's a threat of serious harm to the economy or to the financial system," Powell said.

The Fed chair also underscored that the central bank remains focused on fighting high inflation, which could require additional rate hikes. Yet he also signaled that the Fed might not need to impose many more increases if more banks were to reduce their lending to conserve cash. This could lead to slower growth, hiring and inflation, Powell said.

The Fed "is trying to have its cake and eat it too," said Subadra Rajappa, head of rates strategy at the investment bank Societe Generale. "They wanted to show a bias towards hiking but didn't want to actually commit to more hikes."

In fact, the Fed also signaled it could be nearing the end of its aggressive streak of rate increases. In its policy statement, it removed language that had previously said it would keep raising rates at future meetings. The statement now says "some additional policy firm-

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A shower, breezy, humid

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NATION & WORLD

What ailed Beethoven?

DNA strands pulled from Ludwig van Beethoven's hair reveal he had a bout with hepatitis B and was at risk for liver disease. 7A

BUSINESS

European-style village planned

Carillon Parc in Southlake will bring a slice of Europe to North Texas. Developers will break ground this spring. 3B

Gen Z workers want flexibility

The latest snapshot of the job market shows that the youngest workers came out of the pandemic wanting bigger paychecks — and then "an extremely

TRUMP INVESTIGATION

Cornyn chides House GOP for targeting DA

Republicans should stick to agenda they ran on, senator says

By JOSEPH MORTON
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WASHINGTON — With an indictment of former President Donald Trump expected at any time over hush money paid to an adult film

producer himself.

"There's more than enough to do, and I would hope they'd stick to the agenda that they ran on when they got elected to the majority," he told reporters Tuesday evening at the Capitol.

His comments represent a break from many Republi-

can Trump with varying degrees of enthusiasm ahead of the expected indictment by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg.

Texas' other Republican senator, Ted Cruz, downplayed allegations against Trump, in part by suggesting it's common for politicians in both parties to cover up affairs with hush money.

"Paying an adulterous

thing an awful lot of Democrats, an awful lot of Republicans, have done," Cruz said on his podcast this week. "It's not good or right or moral. It is typically not illegal to do."

During the 2016 presidential primaries, Cruz denounced Trump as an adulterous liar.

Although Trump indicated he expects to be arrested

After 25 years in prison, 'It's over with'

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day that allowed for an exoneration hearing to take place Wednesday in state District Judge Audra Riley's court, lawyers said.

Recent DNA testing led investigators to a man in Colorado who they believe shot Wittman in the early morning of July 14, 1997.

In a news conference after Wednesday's hearing, Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot said that man was a juvenile at the time of the crime and state law prevents the release of his name. The suspect was detained this year in Colorado and will face court proceedings in Dallas County, Creuzot said.

He could be certified to stand trial as an adult, at which point his case would become public, the DA added.

Eyewitness

The case against Santillan rested on a sole eyewitness who picked him out of a six-person photo lineup on his second time viewing the photos with Dallas police, according to court records.

DNA results from evidence collected before Santillan's trial did not link him to the crime, according to court records. An anonymous tipster admitted recently to the DA's Conviction Integrity Unit that he received reward money for naming Santillan, according to court records.

Santillan insisted he was innocent and provided an alibi, but a jury found him guilty of capital murder on March 5, 1998. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Five witnesses testified at trial that they were with Santillan at a different nightclub about 12 miles away on the night of the shooting, according to court records. One of the witnesses was a security guard, according to *The News* archives.

Prosecutors were wrong to take the case all the way to trial, Creuzot said.

"Today we not have taken it to trial," he said.

Santillan, with the help of the legal team at Centurion Ministries Inc., petitioned the Conviction Integrity Unit several times to retest DNA.

In 2021, DNA found on the cuffs of the sleeves of a bloody Dallas Stars jersey believed to have been worn by the shooter excluded Santillan. Those results revealed profiles of another man and a woman, according to court records.

"Some juries convict on the trust of police and prosecutors and not on the evidence, and I think this was one of them," said Paul Casteleiro, legal director of Centurion who re-



Defense lawyers Gary Udashen (left), and Paul Casteleiro (right), put their arms around Martin Santillan at the moment he was formally exonerated of a 1997 murder on Wednesday. DNA evidence eventually proved Santillan's innocence.



Santillan (left) talked with other exonerated men (from right) Johnny Pinchback, Charles Chatman and Victor Thomas outside of the courtroom on Wednesday.



Santillan had lunch at Hyatt Regency Dallas with friends and family after his exoneration Wednesday. "Today was the first day that everything was actually right," he said.

presented Santillan.

Dallas Police Chief Eddie Garcia, who was not with the department at the time, issued a statement saying that what happened to Santillan was a "terrible injustice."

"I am grateful for the hard work and dedication of our partners involved to clear this man's name and make sure the true person responsible for this heinous crime is behind bars," the statement read. "The exoneration and the arrest of the person responsible is the justice Mr. Santillan deserves, while providing true justice for Mr. Wittman and his loved ones."

Friends of Wittman sat in the back of the courtroom. A woman cried softly as the judge apologized to Santillan.

The friends declined to comment to *The News*. Santillan said one of them approached and congratulated him. The two exchanged phone numbers, Santillan said.

Santillan shared that he doesn't harbor anger and asked the friend to express his condolences to Wittman's family.

The crime

Wittman was smoking with two others in a parking lot outside a Deep Ellum club when a Hispanic man approached and asked for a cigarette. Wittman obliged, and the group engaged in small talk. Brian Mackin testified in the 1998 trial, according to *The News* archives.

The man then pointed a gun and demanded money, Mackin said then. Wittman kicked him, and the two got into a scuffle. Wittman was shot multiple times in his torso before the gunman fled, according to court records.

Witnesses said the shooter was a Hispanic man who looked to be in his late teens, was about 6-feet tall and weighed about 180 pounds. He

wore a black Dallas Stars jersey, according to court records. Dallas police found a jersey matching the description in a street a few blocks away, according to court records.

Mackin did not pick anyone out of a photo lineup the first time he was shown the pictures with Dallas police, according to court records. He asked to view them again, and then picked Santillan. At trial, Mackin was the only witness who identified Santillan. Three other witnesses said they could not positively identify him.

Mackin's reliability was questioned during the trial. Mackin said he had been awake 14-15 hours prior to the shooting and had been drinking all day, according to court records.

'They believed in me'

Santillan spent the first 11 years in prison "upset with everybody," he said. In 2002, Santillan asked a judge to ap-

prove DNA testing. That request was denied, court records state.

He came across a 2007 article in *The News* about another man who was exonerated with the help of Centurion, so he reached out to the New Jersey-based nonprofit.

"They believed in me," he said. "They kept fighting."

In 2008, the DA's Conviction Integrity Unit agreed to DNA testing of the Stars jersey. A DNA profile was not obtained, according to court records. Testing was done again in 2014 with a partial DNA profile collected, but conclusions could not be made, according to court records.

Each time the defense team got a chance at testing, Santillan was amped up only to be shot down when they didn't yield results.

"There were a lot of disappointments, and it takes a toll on you," he said.

They tried again in 2021. This time, DNA profiles of a

man and woman were revealed, court records state.

Investigators identified the woman, and a Dallas police detective got in touch with her, court records show. The woman gave police the name of the suspect who she said she dated when he was 16 or 17 years old.

The man "used to wear a lot of Star jerseys" but came home one night without one and his hands were bloodied, the woman told police. He told her he'd gotten into a fight and left the jersey behind.

Santillan was transferred from prison to the Dallas County Jail last year while his case was under review. In December, Judge Riley signed an order agreeing with prosecutors and defense lawyers that DNA results prove Santillan's innocence.

Let go of anger

A few years ago, Santillan determined that he would let go of any anger or hatred he still carried.

"I didn't want to come out with any type of hatred in my heart," he said.

Santillan was released from jail Dec. 14, but his case still hinged on the Court of Criminal Appeals granting relief. Fear welled in the pit of his stomach that he could still be hauled back off to jail at any time.

"I was out, but I wasn't free," he said.

Even after the high court issued its opinion in February, it didn't feel real, he said. It finally sunk in when Riley added her apology in court as well on Wednesday.

"Now it's real," he said. "Now I can take a deep breath."

Santillan walked out of the courthouse wearing a white T-shirt with the words "I didn't do it."

He laughed with his family and lawyers over lunch. His phone buzzed with texts from relatives. They sent video recordings of local news reports showing him leaving the courtroom. Santillan showed the videos to his aunt and lawyer.

Santillan has goals to get a job, his drivers license, a car and eventually his own home. For now, he lives with his aunt, uncle and two cousins in Oak Cliff.

His cousins, Isaiah and James Aguilar, said he still sticks to a structured routine he grew accustomed to in prison. He wakes up at 6 a.m. and is particular about when he drinks his coffee and takes a shower.

"It's a lot to take in right now," Santillan said. "Today was the first day that everything was actually right. It's over with. Now I can start."

Twitter: @KMTorralva

Interest rate hike fuels fears amid banking system turmoil

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ing may be appropriate" — a weaker commitment to tightening credit.

And in their latest quarterly economic projections, the policymakers forecast that they expect to raise their key rate just once more — from its new level of about 4.9% to 5.1%, the same peak they had projected in December.

Still, the Fed's statement included some language that indicated that its inflation fight remains far from complete. It noted that "inflation remains elevated," and it removed a phrase, "inflation has eased somewhat," that was in its February statement.

"The process of getting inflation back down to 2% has a long way to go and is likely to be bumpy," Powell said.

Too soon to tell

Despite the Fed's projection that it will impose only one

the central bank could still carry out additional hikes if inflation remained chronically high. Inflation was 6% in February compared with a year ago, far above the Fed's 2% target.

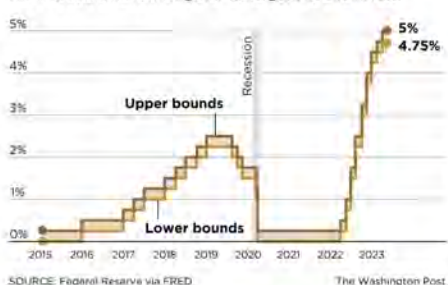
If banks do pull back on lending in the coming months, that could slow the economy and possibly act as the equivalent of an additional quarter-point rate hike, Powell said. In other words, the problems in the banking sector could do some of the Fed's work for it by slowing the economy and cooling inflation.

"Events in the banking system over the past two weeks are likely to result in tighter credit conditions for households and businesses," the Fed chair said. "It is too soon to determine the extent of these effects and therefore too soon" for the Fed to know how or whether its plans for interest rates might be affected.

Wednesday's rate hike, the Fed's ninth since last March,

Federal Reserve raises rates again

The Fed sets a narrow range for its target short-term rate.



dent the Fed can manage a dual challenge: Cool still-high inflation through higher loan rates while defusing turmoil in the banking sector through emergency lending programs and the Biden administration's decision to cover uninsured deposits at the two failed banks.

Pressed at his news conference about the Fed's missing what observers say were clear signs that Silicon Valley Bank

into the second-largest bank failure in U.S. history, Powell acknowledged that "we do need to strengthen supervision and regulation."

Powell promised he would not involve himself in the Fed's investigation into its supervisory and regulatory failures regarding Silicon Valley, which was announced last week. It will be led by the central bank's vice chair for supervision, Mi-

Impact of high rates

With Wednesday's hike, the Fed's benchmark short-term rate has reached its highest level in 16 years. The new level will likely lead to higher costs for many loans, from mortgages and auto purchases to credit cards and corporate borrowing. The succession of Fed rate hikes has also heightened the risk of a recession.

The Fed's latest policy decision reflects an abrupt shift. Early this month, Powell had told a Senate panel that the Fed was considering raising its rate by a substantial half-point. At the time, hiring and consumer spending had strengthened more than expected. Inflation data had also been revised higher.

The troubles that suddenly erupted in the banking sector two weeks ago likely led to the Fed's decision to raise its benchmark rate by a quarter-point rather than a half-point.

Silicon Valley Bank and Sig-

brought down, indirectly, by higher rates, which pummeled the value of the Treasury and other bonds they owned. As depositors withdrew money en masse, the banks had to sell the bonds at a loss to pay the depositors. They couldn't raise enough cash to do so.

After the fall of the two banks, Credit Suisse was taken over by UBS. Another struggling bank, First Republic, has received large deposits from its rivals in a show of support, though its share price plunged Monday before stabilizing.

In the United States, most recent data still points to a solid economy and strong hiring. Employers added a robust 311,000 jobs in February.

And while the unemployment rate rose, from 3.4% to a still-low 3.6%, that mostly reflected an influx of new job-seekers who were not immediately hired. In its latest quarterly projections, the Fed predicts the unemployment rate will rise from its current 3.6% to