

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE



## Ups and downs

(Thumbs twiddled) The Texas Department of Transportation, planning a highway near College Station, came to its senses and decided not to bulldoze four glorious live oaks that are older than all of us. TxDOT could do everyone a favor by teaching its engineers something about being environmentally sensitive. That certainly would save us the protest step in the planning phase.

(Thumbs down) As long as we're on a rant, maybe the city of Houston could work with its Public Works Department to embrace a view that an urban space is more than a series of paved strips for motor vehicles. Think about making streets and sidewalks that work seamlessly for pedestrians, people with disabilities and bikes. That means sidewalks that are level and not disrupted with signage poles, trash receptacles or benches.

(Thumbs up) Mayor Annise Parker did her part for safer biking and walking this week when she announced a new program, SundayStreetsHTX. For four hours one Sunday a month, a small section of Inner Loop Houston will be cleared of cars in favor of bikes and pedestrians. In other words, the Thumbs staff won't have to worry about its bike being run off the road by that F-150 with extra-wide mirrors. Studies show that increased pedestrian traffic leads to more business, and we encourage Houstonians to see what the city looks like from ground level instead of from behind a tinted window.

(Thumbs up) The mayor also had a good week at the bargaining table. The city and firefighters union came to a détente, sitting down and working out a deal to prevent service "brownouts" during the rest of the fiscal year. That's one small step in the right direction for taxpayers. The next big step? The parties need to have the same kind of compromise on changing the pension plan for new hires.

(Thumbs up) The State Bar of Texas directed former Burleson County prosecutor Charles Sebesta to answer a disciplinary complaint filed by death row exoneree Anthony Graves, who spent 18 years on death row. Graves, who now lives in Houston, came within days of lethal injection twice before the Fifth Circuit found that Sebesta withheld exculpatory evidence in his death penalty trial. It's about time that Sebesta was required to explain officially just how that occurred.

(Thumbs up) And while we're on legal issues, here's to the Cato Institute and P.J. O'Rourke for filing the funniest amicus brief - ever - in a Supreme Court case about a Ohio law that criminalizes false political speech. We favor truthful political speech as much as anyone, but we agree here with the Cato Institute and Mr. O'Rourke that such laws "chill speech such that spin becomes silence," as well as violate the First Amendment. Plus, we admire any legal writing that doesn't make us fall asleep after the second sentence.

(Thumbs twiddled) HISD listened to communities that didn't want to see schools closed and took three campuses off the "doomed" lists. Instead of reacting to public pressure, we believe an early warning list or a more transparent process would accomplish what Superintendent Terry Grier wants: better schools with less expense.

(Thumbs twiddled) We still think that the SAT is more of a predictor of how much money your parents have rather than true smarts. But that said, we're glad the test is being made more relevant.

(Thumbs down) The owner of the property that is the Midtown Community Garden had almost a million reasons to mow down the neatly planted rows of tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots. The lot was sold to a developer for just what the area needs: another town home development.