

THE MONITOR

B VALLEY&STATE

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‘Free now’ Eagle feathers back with McAllen tribe after 9-year battle

BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER
STAFF WRITER

More than a dozen members of the Lipan Apache tribe wept quietly as smoke from white sage and sweet grass wafted over Pastor Robert Soto's bustle, a woven fan of eagle feathers worn during ceremonies that were confiscated by the federal government almost nine years ago.

“These feathers have been locked up in that box for a long time; they need to be blessed,” said Soto, who then opened the lid of the tin with burning incense. “I want my people to be able to worship like they’ve done for thousands of years.”

Photos by Nathan Lambrecht | nlambrecht@themonitor.com

At top, Robert Soto moves a hug Tuesday in McAllen from Magorine Hingpaa as he looks over eagle feathers that were returned to him from the federal government. Above, Soto examines the returned feathers.

Read the court opinion.

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More than 40 apply for vacant Sharyland super job

Finalists should be selected by end of March, school board president says

BY DANYA PEREZ-HERNANDEZ
STAFF WRITER

MISSION — Sharyland school board trustees hope to begin interviewing superintendent finalists by the end of the month, with a new leader hired by June.

More than 40 people have applied for the job, which opened when former Superintendent Virginia Richter resigned after employee surveys revealed dissatisfaction with her leadership.

Board President Noel Garza said the district hired Austin-based Waterford School Services to conduct the search.

“Hiring a school superintendent is probably the single most important decision that a school board can make,” Garza said. “Traditionally, Sharyland has (used) search consultants to help attain the most qualified and progressive individuals.”

The agency began advertising the position in December and received more than 40 applications by its application deadline last month.

Waterford associate Felipe Alanis met with the board last week to discuss applicants’ qualifications and go over interview guidelines that the board is expected to follow.

The next step is to identify qualifying semifinalists, Garza said, to begin conducting interviews and select finalists by the end of the month. He said these are tentative dates, but the board is expecting to move as quickly as possible to fill the position.

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Hidalgo City Council exploring eight-liners

City manager: Granting permits one of several revenue opportunities explored

BY EMILY SIDES
AND SKY CHADDE
STAFF WRITERS

HIDALGO — The City Council unanimously approved an ordinance for the city to issue permits for video gaming machines — commonly known as eight-liners — at its Monday meeting.

Calling the approval one step in a process, City Manager Julian Gonzalez said the city has not yet decided if it will actually grant permits. But he said it's one of several opportunities the city has explored to generate more revenue.

Mayor Martin Cepeda said the council gave Gonzalez permission to look for the approval.

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New CBP officers to handle complaints

Managers to hold others accountable for treatment of border crossers

BY EMILY SIDES
STAFF WRITER

HIDALGO — U.S. Customs and Border Protection has appointed 11 “professionalism service managers” to take complaints — or complaints — from travelers passing through eight South Texas ports of entry.

CBP's Laredo Field Office announced Tuesday the PRIDE — professionalism, respect, integrity, diversity and excellence — initiative, which started this month as the agency reviews its training after President Barack Obama signed legislation that ended a

Eric Gay | The Associated Press

A U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine agent's patch is seen as he patrols Feb. 24 near the U.S.-Mexico border in Rio Grande City. New CBP managers will handle border complaints.

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GAS WATCH

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Weslaco's Open Meetings Act case reset

Act stipulates any gathering of quorum of elected officials must be open to public

BY MICHAEL RODRIGUEZ
STAFF WRITER

EDINBURG — Yet another delay has occurred in the case of Weslaco city commissioners, past and present, accused of violating the Texas Open Meetings Act.

A January pre-trial hearing set in Judge Hobby Flores' 139th state District Court in Edinburg was rescheduled from Monday to Thursday.

Court officials indicated that all criminal cases set for Monday were reset since Flores was ill.

The plaintiffs in the case — City Commissioners David Fox, Lupe Rivera and Jerry Telford as well as former Commissioner Joe Martinez and es-Mayer Pro Tem John Cuello — face accusations of violating the Open Meetings Act for allegedly removing members of the audience, with the exception of city employees and city-created development corporation staff, from a November 2013 commission meeting and blocking the meeting room's door from entry.

The Open Meetings Act holds that any gathering of a quorum of elected officials to discuss business must be open to the general public. A grand jury in February 2014 indicted the officials in question, who at that time were processed at the Hidalgo County Jail and given a \$2,500 personal recognizance bond.

A pre-trial hearing was originally set for May 12, 2014, inside Flores' court room, but several continuances have delayed further progress in the case. The plaintiffs, meanwhile, have pleaded not guilty to Class B misdemeanor charges punishable up to six months in county jail and a \$500 fine.

At previously reported, Javier Peña, an attorney representing the current and former commissioners charged, has argued that city leaders did not intend to clear the entire room when audience members became disorderly. Peña has further contended that it was Frank Garza, the attorney for Benita Valdez who filed the original complaint against the commissioners, who had told then-Police Chief Michael Kelly to remove the audience members.

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FEATHERS
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The beat of a drum and singing filled a tiny conference room inside the Cisneros Law Firm in McAllen after a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official returned 50 feathers from both bald and golden eagles on Tuesday morning.

The feathers from the protected birds were intercepted by a wildlife service agent during a powwow at the Lark Community Center in McAllen in 2006.

But now the spirits of those eagles are set loose again, said tribal council member Rudy Ramirez.

"Those eagles that those feathers came from are soaring up in the heavens," he said. "Their spirits are free now."

A nearly decade-long court case was decided by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in late August when judges found the Department of the Interior "did not provide sufficient evidence that the policy limiting permits for the possession of eagle feathers to members of federally recognized tribes survives the scrutiny required by RFRA," or the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

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"We have developed a superintendent profile that identifies the qualifications, knowledge and skills," he said. "A lot of these are fiscal and academic high standards that we are expecting."

A former San Benito school district superintendent, Alanis has conducted several interviews, focus groups and workshops with the board, residents and district staff since December, hoping to make the hiring process transparent.

The board didn't set a number of candidates to be interviewed, but Garza said trustees hope to interview at least seven finalists.

"Our priority is to find the most qualified and progressive individual to continue the proud traditions of Sharyland ISD and help the district move forward," he said.

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PRIDE
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parishian standoff over funding the Homeland Security Department.

U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, pushed for the agency to review officer training and provide Congress an update within 60 days.

"People who are familiar with border crossing will tell you they do a good job but the part on how they treat people they need to do a much better job," he said. "We're going to provide them the funding, all we ask you is treat our visitors with the respect, dignity and professionalism they deserve."

The number of complaints either at a national or local level were not immediately available.

Arnolfo Sanchez, PHDIH initiative field manager, said there are 11 professional service managers for eight ports of entry who will meet four times a year.

Sanchez said the managers will hold officers accountable for how they treat border crossers.

The appointed managers will begin a database of the local complaints and compliments to better track how management responds. Currently, only a national database is kept. Employees will also be able to submit feedback to a manager's mailbox or directly to an employee.

Port directors in Hidalgo, Mission, Rio Grande City and Roma have appointed professional service managers tasked with mentoring employees on customer service and educating the public on how to file a complaint or a compliment.

Efrain Solis Jr., the port director at the Pharr, Hidalgo and Anzaladas international bridges, said crossers should file complaints when an incident occurs — not afterward.

He said no crossers will be retaliated against if they file a complaint.

"If you violate security requirements you'll get kicked out, but not for filing a complaint," he said.

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into other municipalities' fees to help decide how much Hidalgo may charge.

Businesses can legally operate eight lines if the machines are used for entertainment purposes. Prizes cannot exceed \$5 cash or have a wholesale value of more than \$5.

Hidalgo County District Attorney's investigators raided two La Jara game rooms Friday and another on Feb. 13 to confiscate evidence and investigate cash payouts. No criminal charges have been filed in either case.

Those raids are some of the most recent examples said eight-liners were being used illegally. In July 2013, about 50 people were detained and cited for gambling — a misdemeanor — at a game house at the intersection of 10th Street and Dicker Road in Hidalgo.

Hidalgo Police Chief

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