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STAR

BATFANS

'Dark Knight' debuts with box office record

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Rio Living



True Americans

Bullfrogs have the largest range of any American amphibian and are found in Rio Grande Valley resacas, stock ponds and even backyard fountains.

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Business

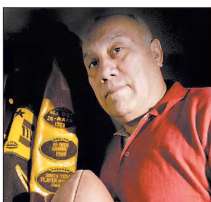


Gas pump relief?

A stunning sell-off dragged oil prices to their biggest weekly drop ever and gas at the pump slipped by the more than it has in months, giving consumers a rare breather in a year of record fuel prices.

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Sports



Amazing Eagles

Thirty-nine years ago it was quarterback Desi Najera, defensive back Ruben Fernandez and the Amazing Brownsville Eagles that captured the Valley's heart.

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Notice to readers: New markets page coming soon

The Valley Morning Star will soon begin publishing Money & Markets, its new financials page.

Money & Markets will deliver a convenient, comprehensive one-page snapshot with an expanded report on the previous day's trading, plus a bonds and T-bill section, commodities and foreign exchange.

Money & Markets will run Tuesday through Saturday. Readers have the opportunity to have their favorite stocks or mutual funds listed every day, space permitting.

To request your favorite stock or mutual fund, call the Star newsroom at 430-6206, or e-mail TellTheStar@valleystar.com

Suspect ID'd in teacher's death

By JEREMY ROEBUCK The Monitor

WESLACO — Police identified a suspect Friday wanted in connection with the fatal stabbing of a drama teacher earlier this week.

Investigators believe Javier "El Gordo" Fernandez killed Eduardo Cruz, 59, of Weslaco, during a robbery attempt at the teacher's home near the intersection of South Oregon

Avenue and East 10th Street. Cruz's sister found him dead Tuesday morning, shirtless and lying in a pool of blood.

What we're theorizing is that Fernandez was working on the yard and the victim befriended him," Weslaco police spokesman David Molina



Fernandez

said. "Fernandez took advantage of that."

Police believe Cruz died sometime between Sunday afternoon and Tuesday morning. Several items had been taken from Cruz's home, including his 2005 silver Pontiac Vibe, which officers found burned north of Donna early Wednesday.

Cruz worked as a part-time drama teacher at the South Texas High School for Health Professions in Mercedes, where

he previously taught English and speech.

Fernandez is described as 5 feet, 10 inches tall, in his mid 20s with a medium complexion. He has multiple tattoos. Anyone with information can contact Weslaco Crime Stoppers at 956-968-8477.

ONLINE To comment on: Suspect ID'd in teacher's death visit www.valleystar.com and scroll to the bottom of the story.

Finally, La Feria's turn



Motorists see some relief in ongoing construction

By FERNANDO DEL VALLE fernandod@valleystar.com 956-430-6278

LA FERIA — Several new sections of smooth, newly rebuilt expressway finally opened up to traffic here earlier this week.

And it must have seemed like heaven to long-suffering motorists and business people in La Feria to see an end in sight to the construction.

So far while trying to drive to her office through the work zone, Laura Ramirez has run over a red barrel, a board and a slab that punctured her tire, she said.

"It's crazy," said Ramirez, manager of the Hearing Aid Co. just west of town. "I've had so many accidents on the expressway because of the debris. I'm always paranoid, like what am I going to hit now?"

Almost two years after work started on rebuilding the overpass at FM 506, crews are nearly a year behind schedule, according to state plans released in October 2006.

"The project is running late," City Manager Sunny Philip said. "I wish it was done in a quicker way."

The Texas Department of Transportation said in October 2006 that it planned to complete work on the overpass by November 2007. Now, TxDOT



Construction crews work along the overpass on FM 506 in La Feria Friday afternoon. Work on the FM 506 overpass is part of a \$1 billion project that officials call the largest public works job in the region's history. The road construction is said to be nearly a year behind schedule.

Theresa Najera Valley Morning Star

spokeswoman Amy Rodriguez said, the agency plans to complete it by November this year.

So far, crews have completed work on 35 percent of the project, she said.

Unlike some of the other pieces of the project, the state did not offer the contractor, Zachry Construction Corp., a bonus to complete the FM 506 overpass ahead of schedule.

See LA FERIA'S TURN ★ A8

Golfers: Course increase minimal

By DAISY MARTINEZ dmartinez@valleystar.com 956-430-6281

HARLINGEN — Golfers at the Tony Butler Golf Course said Friday that a rate increase won't put a slice in their swing.

City commissioners this week approved the first reading of an ordinance that would increase fees at the golf course by as little as \$1 for purchasing extra golf balls to as much as \$25 for annual greens fee.

Golf course superintendent K.C. Lauber said the increase is necessary to keep up with expenses. The rate increases are the first since the 2000-2001 fiscal year, Lauber said.

"This is just the cost of doing business," Lauber said Friday. "We have to match with our expenses."

Golfers agree with Lauber and said that the increase is minimal and necessary to keep up with the current economy.

Harold Fleming of Harlingen has been golfing at TBGC since 2002 and said he hates any kind of increase but understands that there must be an accommodation to the rising prices.

"That's basically not even a raise — it's a give away," Fleming said. "This is still the (least expensive) place in the area. Such a modest increase is just like not having an increase."

Randy Rhoads and Harvey Straight also said that despite the rate increases, they are still getting a good deal at TBGC.

"We can't gripe about the price for sure," Straight said. "It's a great, great buy. There's a great greens keeper."

(The greens) are very well kept," Rhoads said. (The new

See TONY BUTLER ★ A7

6 men accused of soliciting sex from undercover officer

By AMANDA HARRIS amandah@valleystar.com 956-421-9876

HARLINGEN — Police arrested six men accused of soliciting sex from an undercover police officer during a sting operation Thursday at Gutierrez Park.

Police said the men offered a female undercover officer money for sex during the sting between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.

The men are charged with prostitution, according to police reports.

A person commits prostitution if he or she either "offers to engage, agrees to engage, or engages in sexual conduct for a fee," or solicits another in a public place to engage in sexual conduct for hire, according to the Texas Penal Code.

A charge of prostitution is a Class B

See SOLICITING ★ A7



Rodriguez



Juarez



Garcia



Cervantes



Gonzalez



Serrano

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Today's Page 1 Editor: Steve Sinclair



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# McCain, Obama hedge on support for costly Marine One

By GLEN JOHNSON  
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — John McCain and Barack Obama vow to reform the nation's defense procurement if elected president, yet each is unwilling to take a firm stand against the skyrocketing cost of a plump White House perk: the new Marine One helicopter.

Originally carrying a hefty price tag at \$6.1 billion, the fleet of 28 helicopters being built to fly the next president is now projected to cost \$11.2 billion.

At \$400 million apiece, the helicopters far exceed a prime example McCain uses on the campaign trail to rail against congressional pork-barrel spending, a \$230 million "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska. The British have bought the same base model helicopter for \$57 million each.

In separate interviews with The Associated Press, the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates pledged to look at the program but stopped short of saying whether it should be

cancelled. Any review after the next president takes office in January would butt up against the first deliveries of the helicopters, slated for 2010.

McCain labeled the contract growth a "scandal" before asking to revise his assessment "in a more polite way." He said the program is part of "an out-of-control procurement system that has to be fixed."

Obama said, "I haven't taken a close look at it, but, in principle, it is a lot of money, even in Washington."

Asked whether the president needed such a large and expensive fleet of helicopters for his most common trip, a 10-minute flight to and from Andrews Air Force Base, Obama said: "Here's what I know: that we should be spending a lot more money trying to figure out how to get our energy policy right than we should be on helicopters for the president. I have not examined in detail this proposal, and since you brought it up, I'll take a close

look at it."

Congress and the Pentagon are already reviewing the program to determine how to cope with the contract growth. In an audit, the Government Accountability Office has also raised concerns about the helicopter's weight and its new rotor system.

The program has its roots in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After the attacks, President Bush flew on Air Force One, a customized Boeing 747, from Florida to military bases in Louisiana and Nebraska before returning to Washington.

The chaos of that day underscored the need for secure communications and the commander in chief's ability to remain in contact at all times.

Some of the existing fleet of 19 presidential helicopters, any of which is known as "Marine One" when the president is aboard, are more than 30 years old. Several have broken down on presidential trips, a concern that prompted then-White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card to begin the

replacement process in 2002.

In 2005, the Pentagon awarded the contract, itself a subject of controversy. Connecticut-based Sikorsky Aircraft, which had always supplied helicopters for the president, was beaten in the bidding process by Lockheed Martin. The Maryland-based firm proposed a variation of a European helicopter built by Agusta-Westland.

Since then, the contractor has complained the Navy has added 1,900 requirements that have driven up the cost.

A swift development schedule has production starting while design is still underway. Pentagon officials insist the contract has not been changed since it was signed.

The current plan calls for fielding five helicopters, which will then be replaced by a fleet of 23 more once equipment and design issues are resolved.

White House and Pentagon officials say the president needs so many because he can make several stops in a day requiring helicopter travel. Pilots in the elite

HMX-1 Marine division also train constantly in the aircraft and fly other dignitaries, including the vice president, defense secretary and foreign heads of state.

And as can be witnessed by tourists on the National Mall near the White House, several of the identically marked helicopters often accompany Marine One in flight as decoys.

McCain, a former Navy pilot, has promised to review all military programs with the aim of reforming defense procurement. He argues he saved taxpayers \$6.2 billion program by scuttling an Air Force plan to lease aerial refueling planes from Boeing.

Two company executives, one of them a former Air Force procurement official who helped negotiate the tanker lease before being hired by Boeing, went to jail over the deal.

"I'm talking about a broken system in Washington, and the helicopter is a visible manifestation of a very serious problem we have of overspending," McCain said.



## TONY BUTLER

FROM A1

prices) are very well within the parameters."

Straight said that he hopes some of the revenue will be used to fix the cart barn.

Brett Esparza of Harlingen who has been golfing at TBGC for about 15 years, said he doesn't mind paying extra if it means well-kept greens.

"These rate increases are not too drastic or significant," Esparza said. "If that's what they have to do to upkeep (the course), I'm for whatever they need to do. That's the way the economy is going."

Esparza said he's seen significant improvement at the course over the past five years.

Ray Witten of Rio Hondo has been playing at TBGC for more than 10 years, he said, at least a couple times a week.

"(The increase) is not a problem," Witten said. "(The course) is one of the best in the Valley — it's very well kept, fun to play and it's challenging enough. We haven't had an increase in a long time."

Golfing partner Johnny Pearce agreed and said the

**What's your opinion of the rate increases at Tony Butler Golf Course?**

- ★ I think they're reasonable
- ★ It should be done in small increments
- ★ It's too much, but I will pay it
- ★ I will play golf somewhere else
- ★ It doesn't matter to me

Make your answer heard through our online poll on [valleystar.com](http://valleystar.com)

least a couple times during the summer.

"It's like everything else," Albert Esparza said. "The economy is affecting everybody and maintaining these courses is the same."

Gale and Jerry Rollo of Harlingen have been golfing at TBGC for 12 years and also said their game will not be affected by the rate increases. They pay a yearly rate of \$650 that will increase to \$675.

"It's still the cheapest place to play," Jerry Rollo said.

"The course is in good shape and we play year-round," Gale Rollo said.

A round of golf in Kansas City, the couple's previous home, would cost about \$72, Jerry Rollo said.

However, the couple said they would like to see improvements at the executive nine holes that gets a lot of play in the winter.

ONLINE

To comment on:  
**Golfers: Course increase minimal**  
visit [www.valleystar.com](http://www.valleystar.com) and scroll to the bottom of the story.

## SOLICITING

FROM A1

misdeemeanor punishable by up to 180 days in jail, a fine up to \$2,000, or both.

The six men offered the undercover officer between \$20 and \$35 for sex, according to arrest reports.

According to a police department news release, the men charged with prostitution are: Roberto Infante Serrano, 76; Francisco Garcia, 32; Marcos Arturo Cervantes, 37; Antonio Juarez, 29; Abel Rodriguez, 59; and Ricardo Gonzalez, 52.

A seventh man, Thomas Edward Hacker, 52, was arrested during the sting on charges of possession of a controlled substance and

failing to have liability insurance on his car, according to an arrest report.

Hacker parked his car in the 200 block of S. G St., and the undercover officer saw Hacker holding a small plastic bag containing a white, powdery substance, the report states.

Another officer walked toward the car and Hacker hid the bag under the seat, the report states.

The second officer ordered the man out of the vehicle and found the bag under the seat, the report states.

Officials are trying to determine what type of controlled substance the

powder was, police spokesman Sgt. John Parrish said.

An officer said that according to a jail list at the Harlingen Police Department Friday evening, Serrano, Cervantes and Juarez had bonded out of jail. The officer said Garcia, Rodriguez, Gonzalez and Hacker remained at the city jail Friday evening, according to the jail list.

ONLINE

To comment on:  
**6 men accused of soliciting sex from undercover officer**  
visit [www.valleystar.com](http://www.valleystar.com) and scroll to the bottom of the story.

## Pelosi vows to block offshore drilling vote

McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — A plan to lift the ban on coastal drilling is stalled on Capitol Hill, for one simple reason: A Californian who opposes President Bush's proposal is calling the shots in the House of Representatives.

Despite growing public support for ending the ban, even in California, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she won't allow a vote.

"I have no plans to do so," Pelosi said Thursday.

It's an example of the vast power placed in the office of the speaker, who sets the agenda for the 435-member House. Members can force a vote if enough of them sign a petition, but that's a rarity because it

requires rank-and-file Democrats to line up against their boss.

In this case, Pelosi is going against a rising tide of public opinion. Faced with rapidly increasing gasoline prices, 73 percent of Americans now favor offshore drilling, according to a poll conducted by CNN/Opinion Research

Corp.

Support is even growing in California, where a majority of residents have long supported the ban. A new Field Poll survey shows that just 51 percent now favor the ban, compared with 56 percent in 2005.

Pelosi made her remarks in a wide-ranging interview with CNN.

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It is with the greatest appreciation to all of you that continue to support an event as worthwhile as Graduation Celebration! Chairpersons - Gina Traber & Judy Quisenberry, & the 2008 Steering Committee