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BUDGETS

Sales tax revenue in Texas down sharply

The drop in Tarrant County puts more pressure on government entities.

By AMAN BATHEJA
 abatheja@star-telegram.com

Texas sales tax revenue took its biggest tumble of the year this summer, according to a report released Friday by the comptroller's office.

The state collected \$1.75 billion in revenue in August, 12.5 percent less than in August 2008. The revenue comes from sales made in July, according to the comptroller's office. Sales tax revenue has dropped in Texas every month this year except January and by a larger amount every month since May.

In Tarrant County, total sales tax revenue fell 11.8 percent, putting added pressure on government entities trying to keep city programs and services afloat. Sales taxes make up more than half the tax revenue collected in Texas.

State Comptroller Susan Combs attributed the lower

sales to continued weakness in major sectors of the economy, including oil and gas, construction and retail trade.

Results of a survey of businesses nationwide released by the Federal Reserve this week suggest that the recession may have recently ended.

Nearly every city in Tarrant County saw a drop in sales tax revenue, ranging from 2.9 percent in River Oaks to 57.2 percent in Westlake. A few smaller cities, such as Blue Mound, Edgcliff Village and Pelican Bay, saw a boost in revenue.

Mansfield's sales tax collections were down 12.1 percent, continuing its double-digit decline.

Fort Worth Budget Director Horatio Porter said the city's 15.2 percent drop in sales tax revenue was "a little bit worse than we thought."

"We feel pretty comfortable that for the rest of the year we can absorb this shortfall," he said.

The City Council just got through a bruising series of discussions on how to cut \$10 million from next year's budget. Much of that was driven by declines in sales tax reve-

Sales tax revenues

The amounts, collected in August, are based on retail sales in July.

City	2009	2008	% decrease
Arlington	\$6.4 million	\$6.8 million	5.4
Eules	\$831,700	\$1.05 million	20.8
Fort Worth	\$7.121 million	\$8.4 million	15.2
Grapevine	\$2.46 million	\$2.801 million	12.2
Hurst	\$953,800	\$1.131 million	15.7
Keller	\$560,700	\$597,000	6.1
Mansfield	\$994,440	\$1.131 million	12.1
North Richland Hills	\$885,670	\$981,920	9.8
Southlake	\$932,370	\$1.12 million	16.8
Westlake	\$141,110	\$329,900	57.2

Source: Texas comptroller's office

nue.

Porter said that if revenue continues to fall next fiscal year, the city is prepared to revise its budget and cut even further.

Though Arlington's sales tax collections were down 5.4 percent from the previous September, it still fared better than nearly all the other 20 biggest cities in the state. Only Lubbock and Round Rock had lower drops in sales tax collections compared with September 2008.

Arlington's budget manager, Mike Finley, said the decrease was expected and will not affect the projected budget for next fiscal year. "We

budgeted pretty conservatively," Finley said.

People appear to still be shopping, but more may be taking advantage of coupons and discounts, driving down their bills and the sales taxes they pay, Finley said.

He said he can't predict whether sales tax revenue will start improving by the holiday shopping season.

"Eventually, it won't decrease any more, because people have to spend money," Finley said.

Staff writers Mike Lee and Susan Schrock contributed to this report.

AMAN BATHEJA, 817-390-7695

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REAL ESTATE

Areas of Tarrant showing increase in home sales

First-time buyers are attracted by an \$8,000 tax credit; the south Fort Worth area sees the biggest increase.

By SANDRA BAKER sbakera@star-telegram.com

Nearly a dozen areas of Tarrant County saw an increase in home sales in August from July, likely by first-time buyers taking advantage of the \$8,000 tax credit offer.

The south Fort Worth area, including Everman and Forest Hill, saw the largest increase in sales. In August, there were 31 sales, up from 13 sales in July, a 139 percent increase. The number of sales in August for that area is also up 7 percent from August 2008, according to the Texas A&M Real Estate Center.

"We're seeing the impact primarily in relatively lower-priced markets or in new subdivisions, where the builders cater to first-time buyers," said Jim Gaines, research economist at the real estate center. "Sales increases could also be occurring where there are a lot of foreclosures or other distressed sales, again, first-time buyers and even some investors buying to acquire rental properties."

The center compiles home sales for 24 counties in North Texas. In August, 6,338 homes were sold in the region, down 15 percent from the same month a year ago and down 11 percent from July. The \$150,000 median sales price in August remained unchanged from last year.

Other areas seeing increases compared with July were in central west Arlington, 3 percent; far southwest Arlington, 37 percent; Fort Worth, south of Interstate 20/Crowley, 3 percent; Bedford, 28 percent; Euless, 8 percent; Colleyville, 3 percent; Southlake, 22 percent; Watauga, 14 percent; and Trophy Club/Westlake, 21 percent.

Sales of condos and town houses in downtown Fort Worth took the largest hit, dropping 75 percent in August from July. However, that area's percentage changes are exaggerated because there are so few sales as a rule.

In August, there was one sale, while in July there were four.

The August number is also down 86 percent from August 2008, figures show.

The real estate center compiles data from the North Texas Real Estate Information Systems, an information and technology provider for the real estate community.

Area	Sales	Percent change year ago	Median price	Percent change year ago
82 NE Arlington	21	-16%	\$177,000	-1%
83 Central west Arlington	38	3%	\$109,500	-19%
84 Central east Arlington	21	-19%	\$51,000	-33%
85 Arlington, Pantego, Dalworthington Gardens	51	11%	\$145,450	4%
86 SE Arlington	16	-27%	\$105,450	39%
87 Far SW Arlington	67	-7%	\$162,950	12%
88 Far SE Arlington	88	-26%	\$119,500	1%
89 Mansfield	80	-18%	\$175,200	11%
90 Kennedale	3	-40%	\$112,500	-2%
101 FW, downtown	1	-86%	\$258,000	23%
102 Saginaw/north side	114	-21%	\$120,000	-11%
104 FW, east	50	-17%	\$115,000	26%
105 SE Fort Worth (Rosedale)	19	-34%	\$25,500	24%
106 FW south (Everman/Forest Hill)	31	7%	\$57,500	-12%
107 FW central west & Southwest (TCU)	50	32%	\$217,000	-2%
108 FW central west	58	7%	\$235,500	19%
109 FW NW (Eagle Mtn. Lake/River Oaks/Azle)	104	-13%	\$123,900	0%
111 FW (So. of I-20/Crowley)	125	-23%	\$114,000	-1%
112 FW far west (Benbrook/White Settlement)	69	-17%	\$118,200	4%
120 Bedford	46	-28%	\$158,170	7%
121 Euless	42	-7%	\$156,950	0%
122 Hurst	42	-21%	\$134,500	-8%
123 Colleyville	39	-7%	\$412,500	-12%
124 Grapevine	48	2%	\$222,000	1%
125 Southlake	60	-9%	\$520,000	-8%
126 Keller	68	-17%	\$285,000	-3%
127 N. Richland Hills/Richland Hills	51	-48%	\$149,000	6%
128 Watauga	33	-3%	\$98,950	2%
129 Haltom City/Riverside	17	-35%	\$74,000	25%
130 FW Summerfield/Park Glen	159	-20%	\$150,000	-6%
131 Roanoke	12	20%	\$133,700	-16%
132 Trophy Club/Westlake	17	-19%	\$325,000	27%

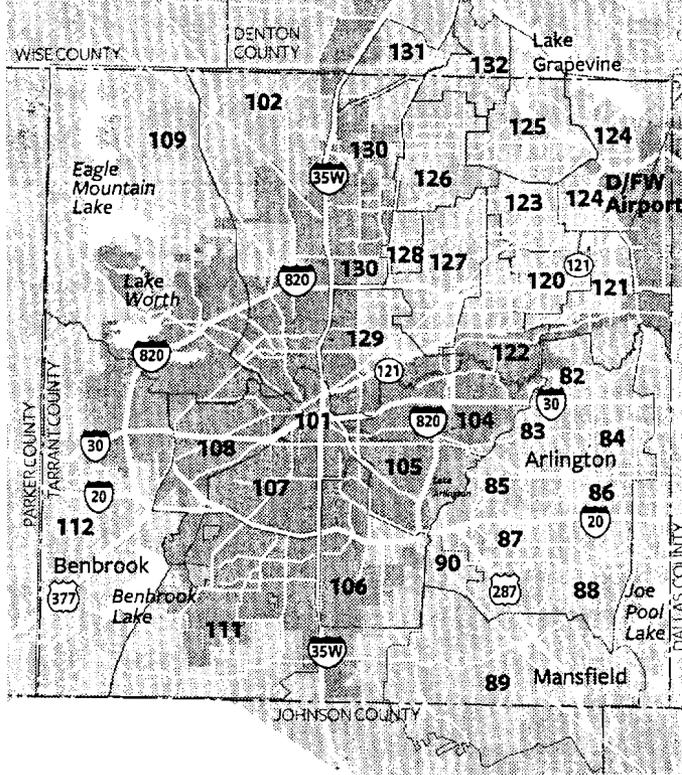
Sources: Real Estate Center, Texas A&M University, North Texas Real Estate Information Systems

STAR-TELEGRAM/JIM MATHERTON, STEVE WILSON

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Single-family home sales for August



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Child 'abduction' drill is set for Thursday

Posted Sunday, Sep. 27, 2009

BY DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR.

ramirez@star-telegram.com

A child will be abducted in Euless on Thursday, but police will know about it.

A regional law enforcement task force consisting of 12 agencies from Tarrant and Denton counties will conduct its first mock child abduction drill to provide additional training for such calls in North Texas. The drill will also be used to earn a national certification in the program for child abduction teams.

The Northeast Tarrant and Denton County Child Abduction Response Team will conduct the drill in Euless and recover a 16-year-old actress in Grapevine.

The need for such a team is borne out by nationwide statistics. Every day, more than 2,000 children nationally are reported missing, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The national center also reports that about 626,000 registered sex offenders live in the United States and that about 100,000 are reported as missing or in noncompliance with local law enforcement agencies.

The local response team consists of officers from Bedford, Colleyville, Euless, Grapevine, Haltom City, Hurst, Keller, North Richland Hills, Richland Hills, Southlake and Watauga and Roanoke police in Denton County.

"Time is critical in solving any crime, but in the case of a missing child, it is especially critical," Colleyville Police Chief Tommy Ingram said. "We need to move quickly and in coordination with each other. The CART program, with its specialized team of trained officers, will allow for faster response times and optimal use of personnel to give us the best chance of bringing a missing child home."

The regional team, among the first in Texas, was established in 2007. It was modeled after the CART program in Florida, which started in 2004 after the abduction and slaying that February of Carlie Brucia in Sarasota.

"The team consists of officers from medium to small departments because we don't have the resources of a Fort Worth or Arlington," said Bedford police Lt. Kirk Roberts, commander of the team.

"An abduction or missing child in one of our cities could really overwhelm a department out here."

The team uses resources such as investigators, dive teams, helicopters, crime intelligence analysts, forensic experts, call center personnel and dog search teams.

Along with the officers, the team also gets assists from the Tarrant County district attorney's office, the Tarrant County Sheriff's Department, Child Protective Services, The Alliance for Children, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Secret Service and the FBI.

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Roberts said that since being established, the team has responded to three abduction calls.

"Abductions by strangers happen, but it's more common with parents taking their own children, and we'll respond to those calls," Roberts said. "We also have the training for those children who turn up missing — whatever is necessary to ensure the safe recovery of a child."

Missing children

Every year, about 800,000 children are reported missing in this country. About 1 of every 10,000 of those ends up dead. Time is of the essence because, of those who die:

- 44 percent are killed in less than an hour.
- 74 percent are killed within three hours.
- 91 percent are killed within 24 hours.
- 99 percent are killed within a week.

Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR., 817-390-7763

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Driver rammed police car twice, reports say

EULESS — Chances are good that ramming a patrol car will not win you any favors with the police.

A 28-year-old Euless woman is accused of doing just that Saturday afternoon — not once, but twice — before her 1996 Honda became disabled.

Her motive? A dislike of police, according to police reports.

The reports state that Rosemarie Adams was not intoxicated or knew the officer whose patrol car she is accused of ramming at about 2 p.m. Saturday on an Airport Freeway service road. The police car's bumper was damaged.

A Euless patrol officer, whom police did not identify, was taken to a hospital and treated for whiplash, a police official said Monday.

The assault happened as the officer exited the freeway. The officer heard a car revving its engine behind him, Euless police Lt. John Williams said Monday.

"He then felt the back of his car go up," Williams said. "He then felt a second impact on his car."

— Domingo Ramirez Jr.

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Court strikes down Euless animal slaughter ban

09/29/2009

Associated Press

A federal judge has barred a North Texas suburb from enforcing a rule to prevent a Santeria priest from sacrificing animals in his home.

In a final judgment this month, U.S. District Judge John McBryde of Fort Worth also ordered Euless to pay for the costs incurred by Santeria priest Jose Merced (mur-SEHD').

His attorney, Eric Rassbach, said Tuesday the ruling means Merced can resume priest ordination ceremonies involving animal sacrifice.

Merced's suit accused Euless of violating his religious rights. The city argued the sacrifices jeopardized public health and violated its slaughterhouse and animal cruelty ordinances.

Earlier this year, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans sided with Merced, ruling the Euless ordinance placed a substantial burden on Merced's free exercise of religion.

A message left for a Euless spokeswoman was not returned Tuesday.

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Eules faces \$400,000 legal bill over animal sacrifice case

Wednesday, September 30, 2009

By CHRIS HAWES / WFAA-TV

ANIMAL SACRIFICE CASE

North Texas taxpayers could be on the hook for a \$400,000 legal bill, all because their city lost its fight, against animal sacrifice in religious ceremonies.

The bill could go higher.

Jose Merced, a Santeria priest, has sometimes sacrificed animals, such as chickens and goats, inside his home, as part of a religious ceremony.

"People have asked me if I drink blood. I don't drink blood at all," he said.

The City of Eules says that what has happened inside his home is a threat to public health.

The city fought Merced in federal court to try and stop the sacrifices.

In July, the court ruled in Merced's favor and ruled the City of Eules must pay his appellate attorneys' fees.

One of his attorneys, Eric Rassbach, estimates the total legal bill at around \$400,000.

"Quite frankly, they should be upset with their elected officials who signed off on this lawsuit," Rassbach said.

Eules's attorney says the city will fight it.

"The city will continue to attempt to protect the rights of its citizens and their public health and, as in every other instance, protect the interests of their taxpayers," Mick McKamie said.

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Dallas-area friends, family await news, ready to help tsunami victims

October 1, 2009

By DIANNE SOLÍS and MARK NORRIS / The Dallas Morning News

Members and friends of the 5,000-strong Tongan and Samoan community in Dallas, Euless and Arlington waited uneasily Wednesday for news about the powerful tsunami that killed more than 100 people in the South Pacific.

Communication was spotty after the earthquake that triggered the tsunami hit off the South Pacific islands of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga.

On Wednesday evening, church services were held, including at First Tongan United Methodist Church in Euless.

"We just have to trust in the Lord, and we need to open our ears and souls to receive and give not only in prayer but whatever we can give in support," senior pastor and Tonga native Alex Latu said.

There are about nine churches of Tongan immigrants in the Euless and Bedford area. St. Michael's Catholic Church in Bedford ordained a Tongan deacon Saturday with a 50-member Tongan acapella choir.

"They are still trying to get through to the island, but they have no details there," said Leonor Thompson, a liturgy and music staffer.

On Wednesday, the deacon, Sangote U'lupano visited Tongan-born parishioners in Bedford and Euless to find out about their loved ones.

More than 50 people attended a candlelight service at First Samoan United Christian Church in Arlington on Wednesday evening. The service was given in the Samoan language.

"We're here to support our people back home," said Seei See Nua, an American Samoan who lives in Arlington.

Nua has been unable to make contact with her brother and other family members.

Barbara Voa of Arlington has been able to speak with her family in Samoa.

Her aunt said there is widespread devastation.

"It's a total loss," Voa said. "There's debris everywhere."

The church is working with the local Red Cross on a clothing and food drive.

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How to help

The Red Cross is accepting financial donations to help residents in American Samoa and Samoa at 1-800-733-2767 or 1-800-257-7575 (Spanish), or at www.redcross.org. Donors have the option of choosing whether to donate to the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund or American Red Cross International Response Fund.

For anyone wanting to check on relatives or friends in American Samoa, the best way to share information about their well-being is to register them with Safe and Well. Register on the Red Cross Safe and Well Web site at www.redcross.org or call 1-800-733-2767 and follow the prompts.

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MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS

Cities raising fees rather than tax rates

Hammered by declines in property and sales tax revenues, they are finding alternate money sources.

By LYN R. PRY lpry@star-telegram.com

Calling an ambulance on Wednesday in North Richland Hills cost residents at least \$500. On Thursday, that fee rose to \$578.

In Fort Worth, library fines for children increased from 15 to 25 cents per day.

And in Euless, home alarm permits for residents increased from a one-time charge of \$50 to \$30 annually.

While many strapped-for-cash cities have resisted raising tax rates, some are using fee increases to bolster their budgets, which have been hammered by decreased property and sales tax revenues and rising water costs.

"For many cities, fees and permits are the easiest items to increase for revenue," said Dr. Rod Hisson, associate dean of the School of Urban/Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington. "Increasing property taxes in a recession is 'sensitive,' and increasing the sales tax is not easy."

Southlake will increase its ambulance charge by adding the cost of supplies used during emergency calls.

Southlake is also increasing fees for community development items such as zoning amendments, permits for home alarms, demolition and tents, and library exam proctors for nonresidents. Construction-related permits are also increasing.

Board of adjustment requests, amended zoning and amended plat charges have all increased from \$200 to \$300, and plat revisions and final plats have increased from \$300 to \$400.

"The increases in fees have been implemented to bring them in line with the actual cost of the service to the city," said Pilar Schank, community relations officer for Southlake.

Haltom City's council passed a slew of fee increases Monday night after tabling them at a previous meeting. The increases include garage sale permits, from \$5 to \$7; boarding fees at the animal shelter, from \$5 to \$10 per day; and drilling permit fees, from \$1,500 to \$10,000.

"We had talked about our fee schedule previously, but we needed to make sure we were in the same boat with the other communities in the area," Mayor Bill Lanford said.

While suburban cities have hit residents with a flurry of fee increases, Fort Worth is going full bore with its own, including:

- Fire Department permits for new sprinkler system installations and new fire alarm systems increase from a range of \$225 to \$375 to a range of \$250 to \$415 for more than 100 sprinklers and more than 40 alarms.

- Parking fines increase by \$5 to \$25 in addition to the current fine total.

- The Fort Worth Library has started charging \$80 to rent meeting rooms. Library fines for children's books go from 15 to 25 cents a day. And there are new fees for people whose fines are overdue and get referred to a collection agency: \$7.50 for fines from \$10 to \$25 and \$15 for fines over \$25.

- For teens who participate in late-night programs at the city's recreation centers, a \$2 drop-in fee is now required Thursday, Friday and Saturday, or teens can buy a \$20 monthly unlimited-use card. Tuesday and Wednesday nights remain free. The change is expected to bring in \$120,000, a little less than 10 percent of the program's cost, Parks Director Richard Zavala said.

Water rates

Cities across the region are raising water rates because they are paying more. Most municipalities get water from the Tarrant Regional Water District and the Trinity River Authority.

In Arlington, water and wastewater rates increased for customers starting Thursday.

According to a staff report, the average residential customer, using 10,000 gallons of water per month, will have a monthly increase of about 1.62 percent, or 84 cents. Customers using 2,000 gallons or less will have a 25 cent monthly fee increase.

Fort Worth water rates increase by a monthly average of 50 cents, sewer rates by a monthly average of 60 cents and storm water rates by a

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monthly average of \$1. Additionally, a late fee will be tacked onto utility bills that equals 5 percent of the bill.

In Mansfield, most customers' water and sewer bills were increased by \$2 each this year, but no additional hikes are planned.

Haltom City estimates it will take in an additional \$160,000 a year under its new rate system for sewer and water.

Grapevine and Trophy Club had both conducted water rate studies last year in anticipation of rising rates.

Eules is moving to a tiered-rate system to encourage water conservation.

Some holdouts

Not everyone is raising fees.

Arlington avoided fee increases — except water rates — by slashing more than \$5.5 million in staff salaries, from administration to the Police and Fire departments. In addition, cuts in programs affecting residents directly — reduced adult league referees, lifeguard training and a one-day pool closure — have been approved.

"We've also taken a one-time dip into our reserve" funds, said Kathleen Depweg, a city budget analyst.

In Bedford, the city raised the tax rate by almost 2 cents, but "because we run a lean budget, we've been able to make cuts and use projected revenue without increasing any recreation fees," city administrative director Tom Ross said.

Grapevine cut its budget and enacted a hiring freeze but avoided fee increases.

"We didn't need to increase fees for our parks and rec programs or library fines or anything else the public uses," said John McGrane, Grapevine's director of administrative services.



The Fort Worth Library has raised its fines for children's books from 15 to 25 cents, among other increases in fees and fines. STAR-TELEGRAM/RON T. ENNIS

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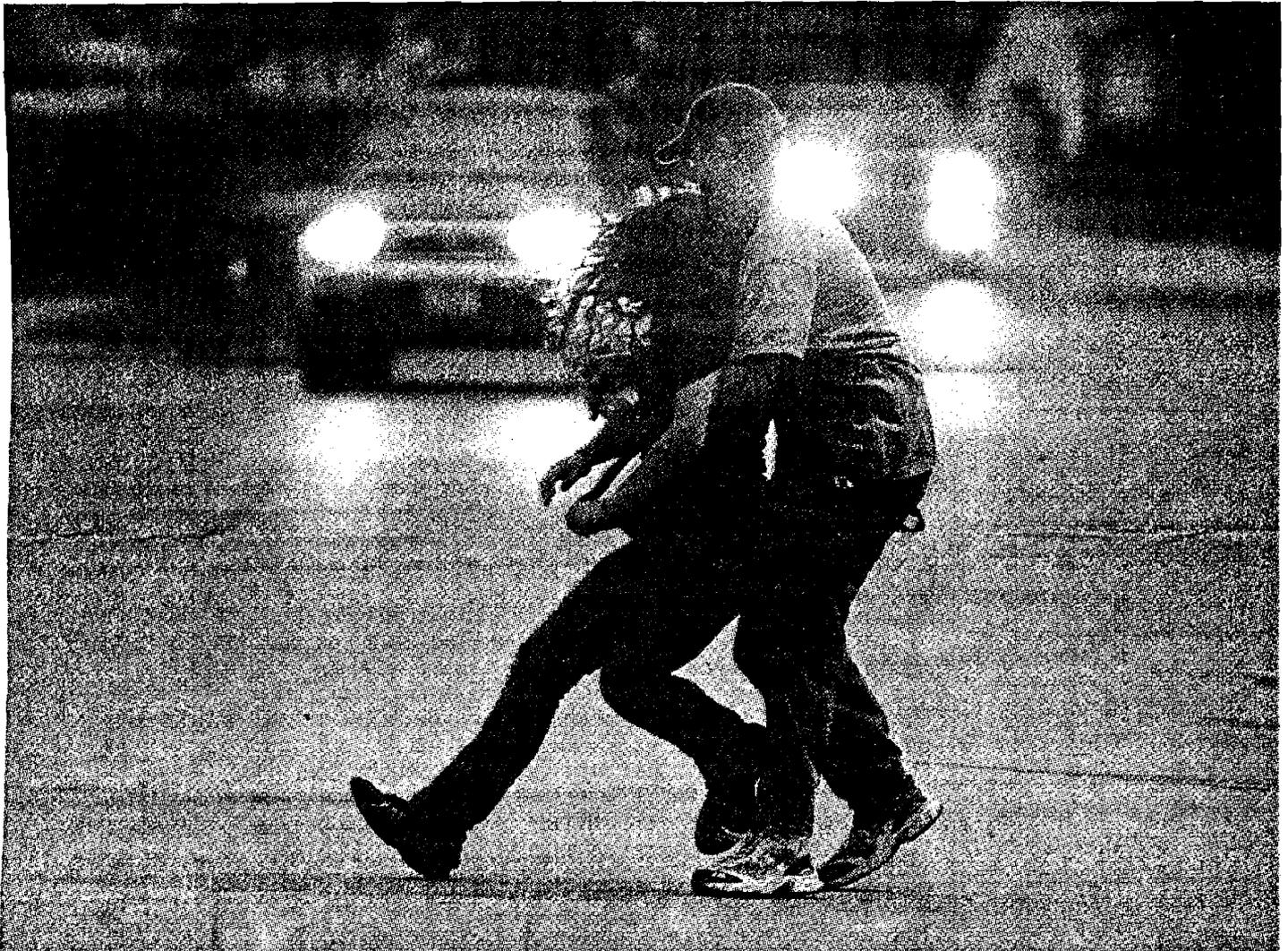
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TRAINING EXERCISE

An investigation with no crime

Abduction investigators spring into action in the first drill of its kind in North Texas



Krysten Tidwell, 16, is "abducted" by a suspect portrayed by Euless police officer Rodney McCrory during the practice exercise. S-T/RON T. ENNIS

An abductor snatched 16-year-old Krysten Tidwell off a sidewalk at Midway Park in Euless early Thursday and within minutes investigators from the Northeast Tarrant and Denton County Child Response Abduction Team were searching for her. But it was only a drill, the first of its kind in North Texas.

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Motorists not involved in the drill may have seen the abduction, but no one tried to intervene.

By **DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR.**
 ramirez@star-telegram.com

Krysten Tidwell walked down a sidewalk at Midway Park in Euless on Thursday just after sunrise, carrying her backpack and a cellphone.

In an instant, a yellow Jeep Wrangler pulled beside Tidwell and a man jumped out, grabbing the screaming teen, throwing her into his vehicle and speeding away.

Shortly thereafter, Euless police Senior Cpl. Scott Peterson arrived at the scene and within minutes a group of investigators from the Northeast Tarrant and Denton County Child Response Abduction Team were there to search for the Birdville High School junior.

As real as it all seemed, it wasn't.

The abduction was part of a mock child-kidnapping drill by the regional child abduction task force, the first of its kind in North Texas.

The local response team consists of officers from Bedford, Colleyville, Euless, Grapevine, Haltom City, Hurst, Keller, North Richland Hills, Richland Hills, Southlake and Watauga in Tarrant County, and Roanoke in Denton County.

Task force officials said the drill was for training and national certification.

The task force worked for four hours Thursday to find Tidwell, 16, who is a member of the Richland Hills Police Department Police Explorer Post. The actor playing the suspect was a North Richland Hills police officer, and witnesses were volunteers from area police departments and civilian volunteer groups.



Senior Cpl. Scott Peterson arrived at the scene of the drill and questioned witness Pat Martinez.

STAR-TELEGRAM/RON T. ENNIS



McCrory was cuffed at the conclusion of the abduction drill. The task force worked for four hours.

STAR-TELEGRAM/RON T. ENNIS

The drill included police talking to eyewitnesses at the Euless park, the rescue of Tidwell at a Grapevine park and, eventually, the arrest of the suspect. The mock abduction even involved rescue dogs, who located Tidwell at the park.

"I was even nervous," Tidwell said of the experience. "But it was a great training experience."

The kidnapping may have been fake, but there were some moments that sounded real.

"When the girl was being put in the vehicle, I thought someone was going to stop and help her," said Larry Granados of Roanoke, one of the volunteer citizen witnesses.

A number of motorists and others not involved in the drill

Online exclusive

View a photo gallery of the mock child abduction at star-telegram.com/extras

may have seen the fake abduction, but no one intervened.

Task force officials emphasized the need for the training because a child can go missing on any day.

That's backed up by national statistics: Every day, more than 2,000 children nationally are reported missing, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Bedford police Lt. Kirk Roberts, who commands the task force, said the drill challenged the team when glitches arose. "We had printers down at both command centers, so we had to adapt," Roberts said. "We wrote everything out."

But Roberts said the mock kidnapping showed that the task force was ready to respond. "I thought the drill showed that we are extremely prepared," Roberts said. "And that we can respond very quickly."

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Eules police officer Rodney McCrory portrayed the abductor in the exercise.

STAR-TELEGRAM/RON T. ENNIS