

OCTOBER 12, 2016 5:22 PM

Hurst, Eules, Bedford join cities that restrict payday lenders



Hurst, Eules and Bedford are among the latest cities in Texas to adopt ordinances regulating some of the practices of payday and car title lenders. Lenny Ignelzi Star-Telegram archives

BY ELIZABETH CAMPBELL

liz@star-telegram.com

HURST

Hurst, Eules and Bedford are cracking down on what many see as predatory practices of businesses that offer payday and auto title loans to people who find themselves in a financial jam.

Recently, the three Northeast Tarrant cities joined Arlington, Dallas and Denton in adopting ordinances that require credit access businesses to register annually, keep records of loans for three years, provide a list of nonprofit consumer credit-counseling agencies and to clearly explain the terms of the loans to the consumers who apply.

The ordinances also restrict the companies from allowing customers to borrow more than 20 percent of their gross income and limiting repayment terms to four installments.

The auto title loans can't exceed 3 percent of the borrower's gross income or 70 percent of the car's value.

The ordinances will take effect Jan. 1, giving the businesses enough time to train employees about the new regulations and to prepare the loan explanations for those who apply.

Hurst, Euless and Bedford officials met with representatives from faith-based organizations that oppose the lending practices, which can lead to a vicious cycle of debt. Borrowers are at risk of having their car get repossessed or having to refinance their loans multiple times if they can't keep up with the escalating payments.

"We were approached by members of various churches who told stories of how these practices were affecting their church members who get into a vicious cycle and cannot recover without substantial support of either the church or other charitable organizations," Euless City Manager Loretta Getchell wrote in an email.

Getchell added that the Texas Legislature has been discussing payday lending practices but there are no statewide regulations in place.

Cities have stepped up to try and protect people from what many consider to be predatory lending practices.

The ordinances were written based on a model ordinance from the Texas Municipal League.

In Hurst, there are four credit access businesses where consumers can apply for the payday loans, said Steve Bowden, executive director of economic development.

"We hope this will protect consumers more so than in the past, which was basically nothing," he said.

Bowden said when he approached the businesses, one was receptive toward the new rules, while the others had more questions.

Hurst City Manager Clay Caruthers said the cities decided to work together because payday lenders could move to areas without the regulations.

"We are trying to put a protective arm around our citizens," he said.

Bedford has nine payday loan businesses, while Euless has eight.

THE DEBT TRAP: TEXANS TAKEN FOR A RIDE BY AUTO-TITLE LOANS

Hurst council members heard about the ordinance restricting payday lenders during a Texas Municipal League conference and asked city staff to explore getting an ordinance in place, Bowden said.

According to the Texas Municipal League's website, approximately 38 cities across the state have put restrictions in place, and some cities, including Arlington, Watauga and Saginaw, have zoning restrictions to limit where the payday lenders can locate.

And in June, the U.S. Consumer Finance Protection Bureau proposed rules to help protect consumers from the predatory practices.

PAYDAY LOANS ARE DEBT TRAPS THAT NEED CONSTRAINTS

Bishop Michael Olson of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth helped lead the effort in Arlington where restrictions took effect in January, and the bishop has also asked the Fort Worth City Council to consider a similar ordinance, but there are no plans to adopt such an ordinance at this time.

BISHOP'S PLEA PUSHES CITY ON PREDATORY LENDING

Paula Jernigan, executive director of Mission Central in Hurst, said she is glad that the cities are taking steps to limit the businesses.

"People should recognize there are risks. Banks have regulations; why shouldn't this industry?" she said.

"People do what they have to do to keep the rent paid, food on the table and clothes on the kids."

THIS REPORT INCLUDES MATERIAL FROM THE STAR-TELEGRAM ARCHIVES.

Read more here: http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/hurst-eules-bedford_news/article107827757.html#storylink=cpy

OCTOBER 13, 2016 5:41 PM

H-E-B happenings: Greek fest, closed dog parks and fabulous Thunderbirds



GREEK FESTIVAL IS THIS WEEKEND AT EULESS CHURCH

One of the most popular festivals in Northeast Tarrant County is Friday through Sunday in Euless.

The 25th Mid-Cities Greek Fest, featuring tasty treats (we love the baklava), live entertainment and more, is held at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, 303 Cullum Drive, Euless.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday.

Admission and parking are free.

BEDFORD, EULESS DOG PARKS CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE

The Bedford dog park, called the Bark Park, at 3200 Meadow Park Drive, was closed Monday and will be closed for an undetermined period of time.

The city's Parks Department is doing general maintenance on the park as well as putting down grass seed.

The Euless Dog Park, 1951 Bear Creek Parkway, is also close for maintenance and reseeding through Oct. 21 and will reopen Oct. 22.

Also on the dog front, the Bedford Animal Shelter will have a Pet Fair Adopt-A-Thon from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 22 at the shelter, 1809 Reliance Parkway, Bedford. The event will feature food, a service dog demonstration, local veterinarians, vendors and more.

The orange barrels and lane switches and sometimes excruciatingly long lines have become a way of life along Airport Freeway and many of the roads leading to it.

ALLIANCE AIR SHOW WILL FILL THE SKIES THIS WEEKEND

Keep your eyes to the sky this weekend and you'll likely see some fast-flying jets.

The annual Bell Helicopter Fort Worth Alliance Air Show is Saturday and Sunday at Alliance Airport, 2221 Alliance Blvd., (west of Interstate 35W in far north Fort Worth.

Features performers include the Shockwave Jet Truck, Bell 429 Global Ranger, Greg Shelton and Wing Walker Ashley Key, U.S. Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet TAC Demo Team, David Martin Aerobatics and, as a grand finale, the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds.

Gates open both days at 9 a.m. for the free event, but note that parking prices start at \$30 per car. Parking discounts are available at allianceairshow.com

Shows both days will begin about 11 a.m., with the Thunderbirds flying about 3 p.m. Times are subject to change.

Read more here: http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/hurst-eules-bedford_news/article108090522.html#storylink=cpy

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Mid-Cities GreekFest at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Eules



Olympian Dancers members Demi Pursley, left, and Elizabeth Seals dance at the 25th annual Mid-Cities GreekFest, held at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Eules on Saturday. The free, three-day event included performances by Greek dancers; all manner of Greek food and drink; Greek clothing, jewelry and other products; tours of the church building; cooking demonstrations, and more.



Festivalgoers dine, listen to Greek music and watch Greek dancing at the 25th annual Mid-Cities GreekFest, held at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Eules on Saturday.



The 25th annual Mid-Cities GreekFest was held at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Eules last weekend.

http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/hurst-eules-bedford_news/article108710932.html

OCTOBER 18, 2016 2:22 PM

What's that gonna be ... off Highway 121?



24 Hour Fitness is the latest addition to the fast-growing Glade Parks development in Euless, on the west side of State Highway 121. Steve Kaskovich

BY STEVE KASKOVICH

skaskovich@star-telegram.com

The blue awnings on this building under construction catch our eye every time we drive southbound on State Highway 121 in Euless. So we had to know, what's that gonna be?

Where is it? West side of State Highway 121, just north of Cheek-Sparger in Euless

What's it going to be? 24 Hour Fitness will be the newest addition to the fast-growing Glade Parks retail development.

The California-based health club chain already has a number of locations in Tarrant County, including Arlington, Fort Worth, Bedford, Southlake, Keller and North Richland Hills. The new club will is expected to open around the first of next year.

Glade Parks,, which stretches from just south of Glade Road almost all the way to Cheek Sparger Road, already has a Belk department store, Dick's Sporting Goods and multiple other retailers, as well as a Dave and Buster's.

Ground work has started on the town center area in the middle of the project that will be anchored by a 12-screen Cinapolis movie theater with automated recliners, a bar and gourmet snacks. A cluster of restaurants is planned to sit in front of the theater.

Steve Kaskovich: 817-390-7773, @stevekasko

Read more here: <http://www.star-telegram.com/news/business/article108977542.html#storylink=cpy>

OCTOBER 21, 2016 8:53 AM

TEA rejects Turkey's complaint against Harmony Public Schools



Harmony Science Academy in Euless was mentioned in the complaint filed by Turkey to the Texas Education Agency. Bob Booth Special to the Star-Telegram

BY TERI WEBSTER

Special to the Star-Telegram

A complaint against Harmony Public Schools, including one of its academies in Euless, has been rejected by the Texas Education Agency.

The complaint, filed by an international law firm representing the Republic of Turkey, accused the charter school system of misusing millions of taxpayer dollars by using federal grants to pay its own vendors and contractors and discriminating against women.

Harmony Science Academy in Euless was mentioned in an addendum to the 32-page complaint the law firm filed in May.

The TEA reviewed the complaint and found the allegations to be unfounded, according to a [letter sent this month to the law firm Amsterdam & Partners](#).

Harmony, which is based in Houston, has 48 campuses in Texas, including 12 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Harmony officials have long denied any wrongdoing.

“Harmony Public Schools has a strong record of success in educating students who graduate and often become the first in their family to attend college,” David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association, said in a statement. “We continue to support and share in their commitment to delivering a high performing college preparatory education to Texas students.”

State Rep. Dan Flynn, R-Austin, said in a news release that said he was disappointed with the TEA’s decision “considering the multitude of evidence and clear conflict with our public schools.” Flynn said he is asking the TEA to turn over its notes and investigative files to the state attorney general and Texas Rangers for review.

‘Pure international politics’

A land deal and a leasing arrangement were at the root of Tarrant County’s connection to the complaint.

Charter School Solutions, a realty arm of Harmony, owns the Euless campus and leases the property back to Harmony at an inflated rate, according to the complaint. Combined with lease arrangements at other Harmony properties, the inflated lease rates resulted in overpayments of more than \$18 million, according to the complaint.

“Harmony routinely creates financial schemes to benefit itself or its affiliated entities, to the detriment of Texas taxpayers,” John Martin, senior counsel for Amsterdam, stated in an email. “The average Texas taxpayer should be very concerned that they are overpaying for basic school facilities. These are not extras. Significantly more Texas taxpayer money is being drained to work through the CSS arrangement than if Harmony were simply purchasing or leasing the buildings directly.”

Harmony claims the allegations are nothing more than a witch hunt.

“The false allegations filed in a complaint against Harmony Public Schools concerning its finances, purchases and operations are all based on innuendo, fallacy, and a total lack of understanding regarding how charter schools operate,” Robert Schulman, general counsel for Harmony Public Schools, stated in an email response.

“This ridiculous complaint to TEA is pure international politics at its worst,” Schulman said. “Harmony’s financial records, that the foreign agent Amsterdam law firm attacks, are regularly audited by third-party CPA firms and are publicly available for anyone to examine.”

Charter schools receive state funding, and they are required by law to follow a fair and open process for awarding contracts. Regulations also apply to how state and federal education funding is spent.

According to the complaint, Turkish-owned and operated vendors receive preferential treatment from Harmony. And some of the vendors are led by former Harmony employees, the complaint stated.

Additionally, the complaint says that career paths for some key administrators can be traced to Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish-Muslim cleric and activist. Turkish leaders accused Gulen of masterminding a failed coup in that country in July, something Gulen has publicly denied.

Harmony administrators have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, as well as any connection to Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania.

High-performing schools

Staffers at the Euless campus, at the corner of Texas 10 and Industrial Boulevard, said they are focused on student achievement.

Harmony defines itself as a K-12 college preparatory program, and it consistently earns state accolades for high academic performance. This year, six Harmony campuses earned seven academic distinctions — the highest number available — from the TEA.

The schools stress academic achievement in math and science to prepare students for high-demand careers in STEM fields — science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

During a recent tour of the Harmony Science Academy in Euless, Principal Maksat Altiyev beamed with pride as he talked about student academic achievements, competitions and visits to major colleges on both the east and west coasts. All students are required to apply for college.

Harmony Public Schools have a 100 percent college acceptance rate, and a 98 percent senior graduation rate.

Altiyev said some of his students have gone on to the U.S. Naval Academy, Rice University, Stanford University and Ivy League schools.

And twice in the past five years, students from Harmony have won the regional spelling bee in Fort Worth and advanced to the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C.

THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS INFORMATION FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS.

Read more here: <http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/northeast-tarrant/article109607482.html#storylink=cpy>