

Star-Telegram

Year in review: 2011 DFW newsmakers

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Mother Nature greeted North Texas with a cold slap in the face in 2011, and no one felt the sting harder than Super Bowl XLV.

An ice and snow storm, accompanied by frigid temperatures and gusty winds, brought the Metroplex to a standstill during the week before the Super Bowl.

Once the Green Bay Packers and Pittsburgh Steelers took the field in Cowboys Stadium, about 400 fans found themselves without seats because of safety concerns.

The weather continued to dominate the news throughout the year as spring wildfires fueled by drought and steady winds burned thousands of acres and destroyed more than 150 homes at Possum Kingdom Lake. Firefighters spent countless hours battling the blazes.

Road projects created major traffic headaches in Northeast Tarrant County, but once the North Tarrant Express and DFW Connector are finished, commuters will find wider, easier-to-navigate freeways.

Fort Worth elected a new mayor, local school districts were hit hard with state budget cuts and gas drilling in the Barnett Shale remained a hot topic.

Toward year's end, American Airlines filed for bankruptcy, and troops returned home from the war in Iraq.

All were among the top local news stories of 2011. Here are 11 people who had roles in those and other events.

Gerard Arpey

Taking over as chief executive at American Airlines in April 2003, with the company on the brink of bankruptcy, Arpey had one goal: to return the Fort Worth-based airline to profitability and avoid a Chapter 11 reorganization.

For a time, he succeeded. After winning \$1.6 billion in annual employee wage and work-rule concessions, the company rebounded, making money in 2006 and 2007. But the resurrection was short-lived.

As the economy crumbled and oil prices soared above \$140 a barrel, the airline slid back into the red. Arpey led the industry in launching fees for baggage and ticket changes, generating billions in new revenue, and employees responded to his call for ideas to trim fuel expenses and boost productivity. But all that wasn't nearly enough. Most important, Arpey could not win new contracts from labor unions after relations were strained by about \$100 million in management bonuses handed out during the good years.

By the time American's parent, AMR Corp., filed for bankruptcy Nov. 29, the airline had lost money in eight of the last 10 years -- more than \$12 billion in all -- and six of Arpey's eight years at the helm. The CEO quit.

Now it's up to his longtime colleague Tom Horton to re-engineer the airline in bankruptcy and attempt a comeback. With American as the region's biggest employer and the dominant carrier at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, a lot is riding on the outcome. -- **Bob Cox**

Betsy Price

There's a new mayor in Fort Worth.

Price -- who campaigned as a fiscal conservative who would get the city's finances in order -- took office in July, replacing longtime Mayor Mike Moncrief, who did not seek re-election.

"We will be open and responsive to all of our citizens," said Price, the city's 44th mayor and a former Tarrant County tax assessor-collector.

She has worked to make City Hall more accessible through social media and new technologies, encouraged young leaders to be involved with the city and pushed to strengthen the city's partnership with public education.

Price quickly became known as a fan of social media and cycling, even taking daily bike rides, dubbed the Tour de Fort Worth, each day of the Tour de France.

Since taking office, she has presided over controversial issues such as redistricting, extending the moratorium on saltwater disposal wells and approving a \$1.4 billion budget. -- **Anna M. Tinsley**

Bill Bunting

Bunting, meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office in Fort Worth, has a standard line when asked about the weather in North Texas: "Episodes of drought punctuated by periods of catastrophic flooding."

But that wasn't the half of it in 2011, the hottest and driest year on record in Texas. It got rolling with a frigid blast of snow and ice that blanketed the Metroplex in February.

As the withering drought grabbed hold of Texas, depleting water supplies and killing up to 500 million trees, the state also endured an epic wildfire season that burned nearly 4 million acres and 2,909 homes and killed 10 people, including four firefighters.

But the record heat wave will go down as the most memorable and uncomfortable segment of the year's wild weather. The Metroplex endured 71 100-degree days, including 40 consecutive days of century-mark heat as well as 19 days of highs above 105.

And it didn't cool off much at night: There were 35 record-high lows between May 30 and Sept. 2, helping set a record average summer temperature of 90.6 degrees.

"For a meteorologist this is a fascinating place to work," Bunting said.

-- **Steve Campbell**

Maribel Chavez

The DFW Connector -- a \$1 billion makeover of the Texas 114/121 corridor -- in the Grapevine-Southlake area reached its halfway point this year. Just a few miles away, work on the \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express hit full stride. In southwest Fort Worth, ground was finally broken on the \$1.6 billion Chisholm Trail Parkway, a toll road planned from Fort Worth to Cleburne.

It was a banner year for transportation, and no one person can take credit -- or blame -- for it all.

But a common denominator in those projects is Chavez.

On Sunday, she celebrates 10 years as district engineer of the Texas Transportation Department's Fort Worth office, which covers Tarrant, Parker, Johnson and six other counties on the western side of North Texas.

Her name wasn't always in the lead of news stories about those projects, but behind the scenes she has gained a reputation as a tough negotiator.

"These were all major projects on the drawing board for decades," she said. "With local and state leadership, we've made these billion dollar investments a reality, and the public sees the progress with the turning of dirt and pouring of concrete."

-- **Gordon Dickson**

Wendy Davis

When state Sen. Davis, D-Fort Worth, began her filibuster in May, pundits described her as a woman with nothing left to lose. The Republican-led Legislature had just redrawn the Senate districts, and key Democratic-leaning communities had been cut out of Davis' district.

Less than two hours later, a key budget bill was essentially dead, forcing Gov. Rick Perry to call a special session. Davis' move drew attention to concerns that the Legislature was cutting per-pupil school funding while leaving billions in a rainy-day fund.

"Fighting against the cuts was most certainly worth it because even if the Republican majority believed that protecting rainy-day funds and existing corporate tax loopholes ... were more important than funding public education, I know that the people we represent back home feel otherwise," Davis said.

Her filibuster and role in redistricting lawsuits kept Davis in the spotlight during the second half of the year. State Rep. Mark Shelton, R-Fort Worth, has filed to run against her. -- **Aman Batheja**

Wes Bloxham

When enormous wildfires erupted around Possum Kingdom Lake in April, the first line of defense was schoolteachers, ranch hands and carpenters who moonlight as volunteer firefighters.

Bloxham, of Graford, a supermarket refrigerator repairman, worked 10- to 12-hour days and then scrambled home for a bite to eat before fighting fires until 3 a.m.

The final toll around the lake was staggering: 148,000 acres scorched and 167 structures burned, including a number of million-dollar homes in the Sportsman's World and Gaines Bend subdivisions.

First Baptist Church of Possum Kingdom, which Bloxham attends, was one of two churches that burned down.

Bloxham, like hundreds of other firefighters at Possum Kingdom -- both volunteer and professional -- rarely saw his wife or children for those 27 surreal days.

"Some parts of it, like when you found yourself in a dicey situation, are kind of a blur now," Bloxham said. "Other times, you actually had a few minutes to stand there and just take it all in. But I don't think many people could ever forget." -- **Alex Branch**

Don Crowson

The Super Bowl made 2011 superbusy for Arlington public safety officials. Crowson, named fire chief just six months earlier, dealt with safety issues for temporary seating and a dangerous ice buildup on Cowboys Stadium's domed roof shortly before the game.

North Texas was experiencing its worst ice storm in two decades, and as workers prepared the stadium Feb. 4, large chunks of snow and ice that had accumulated on the retractable roof began to fall. Six people were hurt before Arlington firefighters established a perimeter to keep people away. Crowson sent firefighters with shovels onto the roof, where they worked for hours to scrape off as much ice and snow as possible.

"I had to ask them to do some things that were not standard. It was a stressful time," Crowson said.

He was also one of the top city leaders who had to make the call to close 1,250 of the 13,000 temporary bleacher-style seats at the stadium because of safety concerns. Most fans were accommodated, but at least 400 got no seats. A class-action lawsuit on the seating fiasco is still pending in federal court.

-- **Susan Schrock**

Dewanye Washington

As tensions over a police shooting inflamed many residents in Fort Worth's African-American community, Washington worked to strengthen youths in those communities by instilling a few simple rules.

Washington founded the Gentlemen's Society, a platform designed to show young men everything that a good father would teach his son before he turns 18.

In 2011 he furthered his efforts to bring his program to more families beset by violence, apathy and a diminished social service safety net.

The Ladies Society, headed by Zerita Hall, a Tarrant County parole officer, was launched this year. Washington said that when young women are taught how to be independent and productive, they no longer accept drug-addicted, chronically unemployed or abusive partners.

"The frustrating thing is that we know what works," Washington said. "We teach kids how not to get angry so quickly, how to dress appropriately, how to talk to a lady and how to make a little money." -- **Mitch Mitchell**

Nizam Peerwani

Dr. Peerwani, chief medical examiner of Tarrant County, became the first medical examiner to be appointed chairman of the Texas Forensic Science Commission, the state's top forensic oversight body, tasked with rooting out bad science and determining negligence in forensic investigations.

Peerwani was first appointed as a member to the commission in December 2009. At that time, the commission was drawing national attention as a result of its review of the arson-murder case of Corsicana mechanic Cameron Todd Willingham.

Willingham was executed in 2004 for setting the house fire that killed his three young daughters. Based on testimony from outside fire experts, the commission came close to ruling that state fire investigators had botched the arson investigation, leading capital punishment opponents to say that Texas had executed an innocent man. -- **Yamil Berard**

Zach Briseno

The last U.S. troops drove out of Iraq in the middle of December, more than eight years after the U.S. invaded over fears of weapons of mass destruction, captured Saddam Hussein and promised a better life for Iraqis. Whether the war was worth it in blood and treasure will be debated for years. Whether Iraq is better off can't be determined yet.

Through it all, deployment after deployment, the U.S. armed forces soldiered on, even when their leaders failed to give them any strategy or enough proper equipment. Almost 4,500 military men and women died there, 31,000 were wounded and many thousands live with lingering mental effects.

Briseno, a graduate of Castleberry High School, was one of those wounded. The Marine had both legs blown off in Fallujah in 2007 when a bomb buried in a road detonated under his vehicle. This year, a nonprofit group built Briseno a handicapped-accessible home in north Fort Worth. -- **Chris Vaughn**

Gordon Aalund

When XTO Energy wanted to drill 18 gas wells near Aalund's Southlake home, the physician and father took it personally.

Gas drilling in the Barnett Shale continued to be a major economic force in North Texas in 2011, but concerns about groundwater contamination and air quality became more prevalent.

And nowhere was the anti-drilling sentiment stronger than in Southlake.

Aalund started attending City Council meetings regularly, pushed for tougher drilling regulations, created southlakedrillingfacts.com and joined others in suing Southlake.

Catchy signs that read "Get the frack out of Southlake" began popping up across the city. The group Southlake Taxpayers Against Neighborhood Drilling was formed, and Aalund was named a director.

The result: XTO cut its losses and pulled out of Southlake.

In October, city leaders toughened the ordinance on gas drilling, prompting Chesapeake Energy to let its natural gas leases in the city expire. -- **Nicholas Sakelaris**

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