

# The Facts

COVERING BRAZORIA COUNTY ★ WHERE TEXAS BEGAN

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## County relaxes COVID limits

Businesses can expand capacity; hospitals can do elective surgeries

By JENNIFER SHRADER  
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Businesses forced to shutter due to last week's deep freeze got good news Monday from, of all things, the daily COVID report.

Brazoria County businesses can resume operating at 75 percent capacity after the number of hospitalizations fell below the threshold established under Gov. Greg Abbott's guidelines.



SEBESTA

County Judge Matt Sebesta, who received the official order Monday from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The county no longer falls in what the state considers a high hospitalization rate. A hospital must have less than 15 percent of its patients designated as COVID patients to meet the requirement.

Hospitals may also resume elective surgeries.

The rate is judged not just for Brazoria County but the health services region to which it belongs, meaning counties adjacent to Brazoria County also meet the requirement. They are Chambers, Galveston, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Liberty, Newton and Orange.

Brazoria County officials also said Monday the testing involved in getting local water systems back up and running did not interfere testing for the COVID-19 virus.

"The county is not in the testing business," Sebesta said.

Both tests are handled by different departments

■ See **CASES**, Page 5A



WES WOLFE/The Facts

Brazoria resident Anastazia Potts discusses Monday the damage done by burst pipes in her home. Part of the ceiling fell away in her first-floor laundry room.

## ASSESSING DAMAGE

Resources limited as people try to repair their homes

By WES WOLFE  
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### SURFSIDE BEACH

The record cold, and the ice and rain that came with it, was too much for a Surfside Beach woman's pipes that run under her aging home.

"Every one of them broke," Laurie Rathkamp said.

She took over the house from her mother, who was no longer able to provide the upkeep the residence needed. And in the condition the house was in before last week's storms, Rathkamp said, she wasn't able to get it insured.

"During Hurricane Harvey, all this on that side got messed up, and the whole side, I have not been able to get it fixed yet," Rathkamp said. "I tried to get help from FEMA, and all they wanted to do was have me get a loan, so I was like, forget that. I've just kind of been doing things a little at a time, as I can."

She had a friend from California supply pipes they hoped would work, but they're the wrong size.

"Another person came over yesterday, but I didn't get a chance to talk to him," Rathkamp said. "We were



WES WOLFE/The Facts

Surfside Beach resident Laurie Rathkamp talks Monday about the damage to her house's water pipes.



NICK IRENE/The Facts

Assistant Manager Sally Burrell has to use panini bread instead of hamburger buns Monday at Sweeney's Dark Roast Co. because of difficulty getting supplies.

Water restrictions making it hard for businesses to operate

By NICK IRENE  
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The weather may have turned sunny without a cloud in the sky but local businesses are still feeling the wrath of last week's winter storm, from repairing busted pipes to recouping lost revenue.

Local favorite, Sharkie's Bar and Grill, was not ready to serve National Margarita Day specials for Monday. Owner Tammy Dading instead helped work crews find busted pipes and leaks throughout her bar.

■ See **BUSINESSES**, Page 7A

## Water orders await results

Cities expect residents can stop boiling in next two days

By JENNIFER SHRADER  
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The ripple from last week's storm that took down electric systems and busted water pipes across Brazoria County continues into this week, as several cities wait on testing to lift boil water notices for residents and businesses.

"The city of Sweeny is still operating under a boil water notice but our system is functioning and stable, maintaining pressures in distribution at roughly 50 psi," said Reese C. Cook, Sweeny city manager. "We have started collecting and sending in our samples for analysis and hope to rescind our boil water notice by the end of the week."

At one point after the Feb. 15 storm, every city served by the Brazosport Water Authority had issued boil water notices. When the power went out, pressure dropped, providing conditions in which bacteria could form. Notices in Clute, Lake Jackson, Freeport, Oyster Creek and Angleton all have since been lifted. Alvin, Manvel and Danbury, which are not part of the authority, reported no issues and never issued boil notices.

In Richwood, City Manager Eric Foerster said the city's boil water notice could be lifted as soon as today.

"We sent samples to the lab this morning and should have our results back tomorrow by noon," he said Monday. "We believe it will be fine. Our pumps are working fine and our water pressures are good."

Foerster said water pressure did drop in one pump Monday night and that pump had to be operated manually; the city is waiting on a part to fix it.

■ See **WATER**, Page 5A

## Massive electric bills during crisis inherent in Texas' deregulated system



SHELBY TAUBER/Texas Tribune

Karen Knox, a special education teacher at L.D. Bell High School in Hurst, received a bill of more than \$7,000 for less than a week of electricity.

Variable-rate plans often bite consumers during emergencies

By SHANNON NAJMABADI  
The Texas Tribune

Gov. Greg Abbott and Texas lawmakers are promising relief for Texans hit with massive electric bills after a winter storm bludgeoned the state's power grid, leaving millions of residents freezing without electricity.

But how they'll accomplish that remains unclear. The state's deregulated electricity market not only allows for staggering price spikes, but effectively compels them for

some customers.

While many Texans are on "fixed rate" electricity plans that insulate them from market swings, others pay rates tied to the spot price of wholesale electricity, which skyrocketed during the storm.

As the bad weather bore down, it froze natural gas production and wind turbines, choking off the supply of electricity as demand skyrocketed. In response, the Public Utility Commission, appointed by Abbott, let the wholesale market price of electricity rise to \$9 per kilowatt hour, a 7,400 percent increase over the average 12 cents per kilowatt hour.

The rate hike was supposed to entice power generators to get more juice into the grid,

but the astounding costs were also passed directly on to some customers, who were suddenly being billed more for electricity each day than they normally pay in a month.

### SHOCKING NUMBER

Karen Knox, a special education teacher in Bedford, was among them. She lost power during the crisis but still owes some \$7,000 to Gridify, an electricity provider located in Houston.

As the cold snap hit early last week, she was horrified to notice \$400 had been withdrawn from her bank account — well above the price her family of three normally pays for electricity

■ See **BILLS**, Page 7A



### BRAZORIA COUNTY GAME CHANGER

OUR PROFILE OF COMMUNITY LEADER THE REV. GERALD HOLLAND WILL BE FEATURED IN THIS WEEKEND'S EDITION OF BRAZOS LIFE



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