

# Letter to the Editor

## Show you care; vote for Proposition 9

Like many Texans of his generation, my dad favored old expressions. I once remember hearing him tell my mom the story of a neighbor who was down on his luck. "Poor old guy, worked like a mule all his life, and now forced to go hat in hand to care for his family." The saying, hat in hand, refers to someone who doffs their hat as an act of humility when asking for something, usually money. Oddly, this expression came to mind when thinking about an issue that will come before the voters of Texas on Election Day, November 7.

On November 7, the voters of Texas are going to be asked to approve Proposition 9 which authorizes a COLA or Cost of Living Adjustment for some, not all, retired school employees. This group includes teachers, nurses, counselors, secretaries, librarians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, administrators, anyone who paid into the TRS system long enough to be eligible for benefits. Note, TRS benefits are earned benefits, contributions are deducted from salaries. They are not a handout, but in today's inflationary market, those earned benefits are far from a free ride. To create context and bring my hat in hand reference to life, consider these realities. Most public-school retirees have not received a cost-of-living adjustment to their earned benefits in 20 years. Some 130,000 retired school employees make \$1,000 a month or less, hardly a gravy train, and the average TRS benefit of \$2,174 before taxes does not sound much better. To make matters worse, most retired school employees are not eligible to collect social security, not their own benefits or their spouse's benefits. That makes their TRS pension a primary source of income for many, and many are hurting.

I give the Texas Legislature due credit, 100% of the members of both houses voted to approve this cost-of-living increase for TRS annuitants. When did you last read that the Texas Legislature had total consensus about any issue? Bottom line, your elected officials, both Republican and Democrat, recognized this as a critical need, and I don't know a TRS annuitant that is not grateful.

In acknowledging this need, the Legislature indicated a willingness to commit an estimated \$3.3 billion from the state budget to cover the costs. Because the Legislature was blessed with an enormous budget surplus this biennium, the commitment required no new taxes, not now and not

ever. Point of fact, with 95% of TRS annuitants living in Texas, the surplus was one they helped to build, and anything they gain goes right back into our economy.

Additionally, while the total package is large, individual cost-of-living adjustments will be quite modest. If passed, Prop 9 provides a 2% increase for 150,000 TRS annuitants (those who retired between September 1, 2013, and August 31, 2020), a 4% increase for 195,000 TRS annuitants (those who retired between September 1, 2001, and August 31, 2013), and a 6% increase for 75,000 TRS annuitants (those who retired on or before August 31, 2001).

Do the math. An annuitant eligible for the 6% COLA is probably one of the oldest in the group. If fortunate enough to receive an earned benefit of \$2,174 a month, which is highly unlikely, they would receive an additional \$130 a month. The increase won't pay for a vacation, but it might pay for medication, groceries, electric bills, and home repairs, all while contributing to the local economy.

Here's where I come hat in hand on behalf of retired educators in Texas. The money for this cost-of-living increase is in the budget. The Legislature has authorized its use for this purpose. However, 45 years ago, the voters of Texas approved a constitutional spending cap that limits growth in appropriations from one biennium to the next, and this budget item is caught in the crosshairs. Unless the voters of Texas approve Prop 9 and signal their support, the initiative will die.

One out of every 20 Texans is a member of TRS - you know a TRS retiree. They are your neighbors, family members, part

of your church community, your friends. They were loyal public servants and deserve support. More importantly, they probably helped to care for and to educate your children. Sadly, many in this inflationary environment are down on their luck, no exaggeration, just facts. You can show that you care by voting yes for Prop 9 on November 7.

Patricia Maurer  
Retired Midland ISD  
Administrator



## Courage of the Parochial, Part Two

By James M. Decker

I recently read a moving essay at Plough titled "Why Are We Lonely?" Author Joey Hiles insightfully addresses a pressing question but has a surprising culprit: democracy.

Fear not, this is no case against democracy. The essay points out that democracy unleashes individual potential like no other form of society. It creates the opportunity for prosperity and upward mobility, regardless of whether a person was born a "have" or a "have not." There is a double-edged sword to this individual focus, though. When those forces set us free from our limitations, they also loosen the ties of good things, like family, home, and community. Democracy unlocks our potential, but it can set us adrift on a sea of success. We are more prosperous than ever, but searching for fulfillment that is elusive, creating a constant sense of loneliness and unhappiness in a society. I would encourage you

to read the full-length treatment.

Hiles has not unlocked a revolutionary theory. This was something observed by Alexis de Tocqueville almost 200 years ago. In his classic "Democracy in America," Tocqueville saw the power of democracy and warned about the consequences of its power. He thought that a democratic society needed to combat those consequences by reinforcing institutions that would create healthy interpersonal ties. He saw local government, churches, and community and civic organizations as important tools of strength.

Tocqueville was correct, but America did not listen to him all that well. Over the last two centuries, the individualizing effects of our society have gotten worse. The Industrial Revolution, automobiles, and the Internet have had profound effects on our opportunities to prosper, but they also reinforce individualistic tendencies in countless ways. When social media arrived, it promised to soothe our need for connection and fulfillment. It encourages us to retreat from the world around us and seek virtual connection online, leaving us even more unfulfilled (and probably angry) than before.

My friend Jay Leeson was proud to be a West Texan, a native of Hale County, and a Christian who studied at Asbury Seminary. Jay was a few years older than me and we disagreed on a few issues. We agreed on many more. We most particularly agreed on the need

to promote affinity to place and the importance of rural America. Jay rose to regional and statewide acclaim for his advocacy on these topics in print and over the radio. He was unafraid to speak up for what was right, even when it created animosity and enmity from some powerful people in Texas. Jay was fond of saying that rural voters should be careful to vote for elected officials who cared about their impact on rural places, because "the more you vote against your place the less you have to come home to."

Jay passed away in September after some health issues. His passing left a large hole in the roster of advocates for West Texas and rural America. Jay had actually met Wendell Berry during his seminary studies in Kentucky and, though I was moderately familiar with Berry before then, it was Jay's encouragement several years back that led me to dive deeply into Berry's writing. My brain has never been the same and I am forever grateful to Jay for that impact.

How do we face the sadness and darkness that seems to pervade the world today? How do we combat the loneliness and lack of fulfillment that human nature creates in an individualistic society? How do we reckon the challenges faced by our rural places and elected officials who seem to care little?

I believe those answers are all the same. They are what Jay Leeson found important. They are what Wendell Berry prioritizes.

(Continued on page 7)



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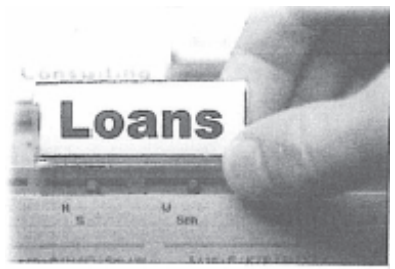
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