

You now have five new ways to engage - Our latest blogs focus on issues most important to us, says Keven Ann Willey

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Savvy readers of The Dallas Morning News' editorial pages know that we have just launched five new blogs online. We're excited about the opportunities these blogs present to more directly engage readers in key policy areas critical to North Texas and to the state's future.

These new sites are part of an explosion of new blogs newspaperwide. What sets these five apart from many is their focus on topical, rather than geographic, communities of interest. And they include points of advocacy. The five topics? Transit, education reform, bridging Dallas' North-South gap, energy/environment and death penalty reform.

Sound familiar? These are the topics we've singled out in recent years for our most concentrated editorial efforts. We call them areas of emphasis, or AOE's for short.

The idea of marrying each AOE to a blog came out of our Digital Retreat in March. Later that month, we teamed with the newsroom to launch a Transportation blog that would include an emphasis on transit, and we started the other four last month.

Our goals for these blogs are similar to our goal for our main Opinion blog, this newspaper's first, launched in 2003. We want to more fully engage readers in a conversation around these topics, we want to be sure we're hearing from a variety of voices, and we want to demystify what we do on the editorial board and be transparent about how we do it.

Here's a quick rundown:

Transit

Editorial's "blog captain" for this one (transportationblog.dallasnews.com) is editorial writer Rodger Jones. He partners with reporter Michael Lindenberger as the blog's main voices.

Rodger and Michael got off to a roaring start just as the Legislature was reaching its midpoint. There were loads of transportation-related issues to comment on, ranging from toll roads to gas taxes to doing away with the Texas Department of Transportation.

In Editorial, we were most interested in a plan we've backed for six years that would authorize North Texas to hold local-option elections asking voters to increase their taxes to fund an expanded rail system. Rodger blogged relentlessly on this as the session wound down. Readers chimed in with scads of comments. We took pains to reference vocal critics from conservative think tanks, whose Web sites published regular responses to events and to Rodger's posts. We know elected officials and transportation experts paid attention, because many e-mailed or called with their thoughts, tips, suggestions or complaints.

Sadly, the local-option measure failed in conference committee, though we believe it would have had a strong chance to pass had it gone to a vote of the full House. Rodger will continue to press this issue - and other hot transportation topics - going forward.

The Education Front

William McKenzie captains this blog (educationfrontblog.dallasnews.com) for us, and his posts appear to have played a key role in shaping public policy during the final weeks of the Legislature.

Bill spent most of May, for example, tracking the school accountability bill, arguing that the bill needed to be rewritten - and that if it wasn't, Gov. Rick Perry should veto it. Perry threatened a veto shortly after Bill's commentary and didn't back off until most of the tougher aspects we sought were included.

When discussions reached an impasse over social promotions, Bill floated a compromise idea. One of the bill's authors, state Rep. Rob Eissler, responded directly to Bill's post, and the entire back-and-forth was picked up by the Quorum Report, an online service focusing on Texas politics.

Scores of readers, including teachers and principals, commented on Bill's posts. So did folks like former Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff; former House Public Education chair Paul Sadler; and Charles Miller, former head of the UT regents. And just last week, Rep. Lon Burnam, Sen. Dan Patrick and several other education advocates traded posts about the death of the session's charter school bill.

Southern Dallas

Tod Robberson, one of several members of the editorial board's "Bridging Dallas' North-South Gap" team, captains this blog effort (gapblog.dallasnews.com). In addition to helping to make southern Dallas a place people want to live, work and play in, we see significant economic development opportunities here that should help spread the city's tax burdens more equitably.

Tod carefully crafted a list of 420 people we knew to be active in southern Dallas or leaders in the effort to enhance its development. He wrote and urged them to participate; response has been uniformly enthusiastic.

Each day, Tod posts a "Gap Rap" entry that includes links to other interesting online commentary about southern Dallas issues, whether on other DMN blogs, Dallas South, FrontBurner - whatever's relevant.

Gap Rap often includes data points from research we've developed uniquely with the Institute for Urban Policy Research at UT-Dallas - and which we will roll out more comprehensively in a special Points section later this summer.

We've had scores of responses from blog participants with sharp - and sharply opposing - views about the best ways to close Dallas' north-south gap. Some suggest southern Dallas residents need to accept responsibility when their children perform poorly in school or get involved in drugs. Others say it's not the residents' fault that city government has neglected this part of town for decades.

Energy and Environment

Colleen McCain Nelson captains this blog (energyandenvironmentblog.dallasnews.com) for us, along with business reporter Elizabeth Souder and other news reporters to keep readers informed about energy and environmental issues of interest to North Texas.

Of longstanding import to the editorial board is air quality and the state's effort (or lack thereof) to improve it. But there's a range of discussion here, from Perry's veto of a TV-recycling bill to the White House's new global warming report to the best "green" cleaners to use at home. There was even a live chat on how to save money on home electricity.

Death Penalty

Our blog captain is Michael Landauer, who was the project manager of our 2007 "Death No More" special editorial report, in which The News reversed its century-old position in favor of the death penalty.

Michael's goal is to facilitate a constructive conversation around capital punishment - the best arguments for and against - that readers will find illuminating, informative and interesting. We've invited reporters who cover death-penalty issues to chime in, and because this subject evokes such strong emotions, Michael plans to ride herd fairly tightly on the tenor of the blog's comments.

We've engaged people like Dudley Sharp, a leading death penalty proponent, and Scott Henson of the Innocence Project and the voice of the popular Grits for Breakfast blog. We hope to engage others, as well, as we work to make this a real forum for informed debate (deathpenaltyblog.dallasnews.com).

So now you know more about our five new AOE blogs than you ever imagined. Check them out and let us know how we can make them better. Most important: Don't be an Internet wallflower; join the debate and make your voice heard.

That's what this is all about.

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• **Caption:** ILLUSTRATION(S): (STUART CARLSON/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel) Cartoon.

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