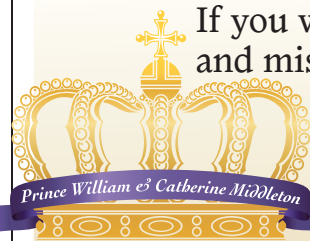


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TEXANS POWER UP WITH WATT

See all the first-round NFL draft picks. PAGE C1

DID YOU OVERSLEEP?



If you were catching some Z's and missed royal wedding bells chime from across the pond, catch up with the big day at

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DUSTY COMPTON: THE TUSCALOOSA NEWS

PEOPLE LIVED HERE: An aerial photo captures just some of the devastation in Tuscaloosa, Ala., on Thursday in the wake of a town-flattening tornado.

Property tax values down for 2nd year

■ That will add to the squeeze on cities and area school districts

By **MIKE MORRIS**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Local governments and school districts this year will suffer a second-straight year of sliding property tax revenues — their main source of revenue — according to data released Thursday by the Harris County Appraisal District.

Harris County will see overall property values decrease about 1.1 percent this year, to a total of \$270.2 billion. The city of Houston will see values fall 1.2 percent. Values within Houston Independent School District are expected to dip 0.9 percent.

"It's not good news for jurisdictions, obviously, and really, it may not be that good

of news for property owners," chief appraiser Jim Robinson said. "For homeowners who are looking for recovery of their investment, you obviously want to see values being up. The recovery, though, has begun to some extent."

About 74 percent of homeowners will see no change in their appraised values. Just 6.7 percent of all residential parcels recorded an increase, Robinson said, and three-quarters of those were because of new construction, not market appreciation.

Foreclosures continued to drive declines in the 19.4 percent of the residential market that lost value, assistant chief appraiser Guy Griscom said. Harris County saw more than 47,600 foreclosures last year, a 16 percent jump over 2009.

The hardest-hit areas were subdivisions of entry-level homes in the Aldine area, Robinson said. Maps prepared by HCAD show many

Please see **TAXES**, Page A17

STORMS SO STRONG THERE WAS NO ESCAPE

DEADLIEST IN 40 YEARS: Toll soars to nearly 300 across six states

WARNINGS FUTILE: Twisters likely mile wide, 200 mph



ROBERT RAY: ASSOCIATED PRESS

NOW WHAT?: Francine Rollins and Rondroka Long emerged unscathed Thursday from the tornado that raked Tuscaloosa, Ala. What once was their neighborhood, though, is now a vast sea of debris.

By **GREG BLUESTEIN**
and **HOLBROOK MOHR**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PLEASANT GROVE, Ala. — Firefighters searched one splintered pile after another for survivors Thursday, digging through the remains of houses and neighborhoods pulverized by the nation's deadliest tornado outbreak in almost four decades. At least 291 people were killed across six states — more than two-thirds of them in Alabama.

The death toll from Wednesday's storms seems like something from a bygone era, before Doppler radar and satellite forecasts were around to warn of severe weather. Residents were given up to 24 minutes notice that the tornadoes were coming, but they were just too wide, too powerful and too locked onto populated areas not to leave a horrifying body count.

"These were the most intense super-cell thunderstorms that I think anybody who was out there forecasting has ever seen," meteorologist Greg Carbin said at the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Okla.

The storms seemed to hug the interstate highways as they barreled along like runaway trucks, obliterating neighborhoods or even entire towns from Tuscaloosa to Bristol, Va. One family rode out the disaster in the basement of a funeral home, another by huddling in a tanning bed.

In Concord, a small town outside Birmingham, a friend called to warn Randy Guyton's family to take cover. They rushed to the basement garage, piled into a Honda Ridgeline and cowered as the twister devoured their house in seconds. Afterward, they scrambled out of the debris.

"The whole house caved in on top of that car," Guyton said. Please see **STORM**, Page A15

MORE ON THE STORMS

- FEMA faces first big test since Hurricane Katrina. **PAGE A13**
- Conditions were ripe for rarely seen type of storm. **PAGE A13**
- Taking stock of the devastation in Alabama. **PAGE A13**

ENDEAVOUR'S FINAL FLIGHT



TOM PENNINGTON: GETTY IMAGES

SIGHTS SET: Photographers prepare remote cameras Thursday to capture Endeavour's launch on Pad-39A in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

MILESTONES FOR ENDEAVOUR

- **25 flights, 103,149,636 miles** traversed in space
- **280 days** and **4,429 orbits** made of Earth
- **Named after a ship** chartered to traverse the South Pacific in 1768 and captained by 18th-century British explorer James Cook
- **First launch**, STS-49 mission, occurred on May 7, 1992.
- **First Hubble Space Telescope servicing mission**, December 1993

In Florida, buzz is bittersweet

■ Thousands flock to see liftoff that brings end to jobs closer

By **ZAIN SHAUK**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Hundreds of campers, RVs and tents began to swarm beaches and causeways here Thursday with hundreds of thousands of observers expected to join them, bringing a surge of excitement about today's space shuttle launch to a region bracing for the end of an era.

Hotels were sold out, restaurants were stocking up on extra supplies and residents were getting ready to be stuck in a sea of cars clamoring for a view of liftoff, the final one for the space

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BLOG: Keep up with the shuttle launch and more at blogs.chron.com/sciguy

shuttle Endeavour and the penultimate of the shuttle program.

As many as 750,000 people will watch the launch around Kennedy Space Center, according to NASA, calling to mind the agency's glory days when missions to the moon drew more than 1 million visitors to nearby beaches, parks and roads.

But even as the excitement has grown, with President Barack Obama and wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords set to attend, the launch will be bittersweet for many in the region whose jobs will be shed as the shuttle program

Please see **SHUTTLE**, Page A17

Son's body 'etched' in mind of dad after wreck

■ Humble parent finds 23-year-old authorities missed

By **ANITA HASSAN**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The fatal wreck had been cleared for hours when Bill Gonzales arrived at the northeast Harris County crash site. He went there looking for his son.

The 54-year-old Humble man walked around debris from the wreck, which had killed his son's friend, and spotted a work boot lying near a barbed wire fence.

"I knew right away that it was his shoe," Gonzales said. He pushed back the wire, jumped the fence and walked 20 to 30 feet through a heavily wooded area before finding what sheriff's deputies and rescue personnel did not:

Please see **WRECK**, Page A17

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