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| DOW 16,367.88 Up 91.19 (+0.6%) | S&P 500 1,865.62 Up 8.18 (+0.4%) | OIL \$99.19 Down 41¢ (-0.4%) | NATURAL GAS \$4.41 Up 13.5¢ (+3.2%) |
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Evan Vucci / Associated Press file

Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La.: "The last thing Putin and his cronies want is competition from America in the energy race."

Pleas from Europe: Send U.S. natural gas

By Jennifer A. Dlouhy

WASHINGTON — European leaders on Tuesday pleaded for the United States to allow more of its natural gas to be sold overseas, transforming the fuel into a geopolitical weapon against Russia and a tool for bolstering allies abroad.

Lithuania's energy minister, Jaroslav Neverovic, told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee that the promise of more U.S. natural gas on the world market would help free the Baltic nation from Russia's yoke. Lithuania, which depends entirely on Russia for its natural

gas, pays 30 percent more than other European nations for the fuel.

"I am here to plead

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with you to do everything within your power to help us ... by expediting the release of some of your abundant natural gas resources into the world market, especially to those nations beholden to a monopolistic supplier," Neverovic said.

The appeal was **Exports continues on D7**

ECONOMY

Incomes in Texas rank 4th in U.S. for 2013

By L.M. Sixel

Personal income didn't grow as quickly in 2013 as it did the previous year, thanks largely to the end of the payroll tax holiday, but Texans fared better than residents of most other states.

Courtesy of the robust energy industry, average personal income in Texas grew by 3.7 percent in 2013, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported Tuesday.

Personal income is the income received by all residents from all sources, including wages, property rentals, dividends, interest, and government transfer payments such as Social Security and social assistance for low-income residents.

Texas had the nation's fourth-highest personal income growth rate, the bureau said. The nationwide average was 2.6 percent.

"It's a little bit like March Madness," said Patrick Jankowski, vice president of research for the Greater Houston Partnership. "It's always exciting to be in the top four."

Only North Dakota, Utah and Idaho did better

Incomes continues on D8

HOTELS

A sleek, luxurious addition



Aerial view of planned Hotel Alessandra at GreenStreet downtown.

Alessandra hopes to be a big player when the Super Bowl returns

By David Kaplan

An express elevator that whooshes guests to a 25th-floor lobby with skyline views during check-in.

A sleek glass exterior that extends over a rooftop pool and bar.

Room rates that soar among the highest in Houston.

These are a few of the flourishes planned for the Hotel Alessandra, the latest lodging project announced for the eastern side of Houston's downtown ahead of the Super Bowl's return in 2017.

"Looking at downtown, we really felt we needed to differentiate ourselves from hotels that already exist and the ones on the way," Jamie Bryant, executive vice president of Midway, the company that will own the Alessandra, said Tuesday.

The 225-room hotel will be built in the GreenStreet retail-office cluster formerly known as the Houston Pavilions. It will be adjacent to the Forever 21 clothing store, on a block bounded by Main, Dallas, Polk

Hotel continues on D7

DEEPWATER HORIZON

Lab says defects found in tuna larvae exposed to 2010 spill



Monterey Bay Aquarium

A study found heart defects in development of bluefin tuna, above, as well as amberjack and yellowfin.

By Jennifer A. Dlouhy

Oil spilled during the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster caused severe defects in the developing hearts of tuna exposed to the substance in a laboratory, according to a study by government and academic scientists that hints at long-term damage from the accident.

The research, published this week in Proceedings of the National

Academy of Sciences, shows that the crude that gushed out of BP's failed Macondo well for nearly three months could have compromised tuna embryos and larvae, killing off some of the fish and shortening the lives of others.

The research comes 25 years after crude from the tanker Exxon Valdez devastated Alaska's Prince William Sound, and as another, albeit

much smaller, spill threatens Galveston Bay aquatic life in ways that may not appear for years.

"Oil's damage doesn't disappear overnight, nor does it cease after the oil sheen goes away," said Jacqueline Savitz, a vice president at the conservation group Oceana.

The study — along with research published in the Feb. 14 issue of the journal Science — shows that polyaromatic hydrocar-

bons in crude harm heart development in bluefin tuna, amberjack and yellowfin tuna by slowing the heart beat and disrupting its rhythm.

"Crude oil shuts down key cellular processes in fish heart valves," said Barbara Block, a professor of marine science at Stanford University and a co-author of the paper. "We can now say with certainty that oil causes

Study continues on D8

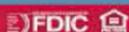


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BUSINESS

Exports debated in capital

Exports from page D1

duplicated on the other side of Capitol Hill, as Hungary's foreign affairs minister, Anita Orban, told a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee that more U.S. natural gas export approvals would be an "elegant" way to combat Russia's influence overseas and challenge aggressive moves by President Vladimir Putin or his successors.

Three congressional committees tackled the issue Tuesday, and another House hearing is planned Wednesday, spurred by Russia's annexation of Crimea and fears it could cut off the flow of gas to Ukraine. Russia also supplies about 30 percent of Europe's gas needs.

The Energy Depart-

ment has approved licenses for six projects to export liquefied natural gas to nations that are not free trade partners with the U.S., with the most recent license delivered Monday. But two dozen more applications await decisions.

Speeding things up

House and Senate bills aim to speed up the permitting process through a variety of means, including granting immediate licenses to all applications in the Energy Department's queue. Others would extend near-automatic approvals beyond exports to U.S. free trade partners so members of the World Trade Organization and North Atlantic Treaty Organization also could qualify for

the expedited review.

Manufacturing worries

Critics warn that the export decisions would have decades-long effects on U.S. natural gas prices, potentially thwarting an American manufacturing renaissance stoked by low-cost power and chemical feedstocks.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., argued Tuesday that the Ukraine crisis should not be used to short-circuit the review process. Instead, she said, the U.S. should maintain "a thoughtful, balanced approach" that protects U.S. manufacturing.

Opponents also argue that big hurdles to exporting American natural gas extend well beyond the federal permitting stage to financing and building

the multibillion-dollar terminals capable of chilling natural gas to a liquid state for transport on specialized tankers.

They say it would take years to build the facilities, and the supplies likely would flow not to European countries but Asian markets willing to pay more. Europe also is ill-equipped to take advantage of more natural gas right now; while there are 22 operating natural gas import facilities in the European Union and another six terminals under construction, pipelines there are poorly integrated.

Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., head of the energy panel, acknowledged that immediate liquefied natural gas export approvals were no "silver bullet."

But "real competition in real open markets drives efficiency and lowers prices for everyone. The last thing Putin and his cronies want is competition from America in the energy race," she said.

Quick effects seen

Energy experts argued that swifter export approvals would have immediate effects overseas, as European buyers factor the availability of gas sold at U.S. benchmark prices into contracts for deliveries years in the future.

"A clear signal from the U.S. that LNG exports would be available for European allies for future purchase would put immediate pressure on Russia's market share," said David Goldwyn, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution.

"It may be true that Asian buyers rather than European buyers want U.S. LNG, but from a

geopolitical perspective, it doesn't make a difference."

More U.S. gas on the international market, he said, would increase the bargaining power of all gas buyers.

Adam Sieminski, head of the government's Energy Information Administration, said some companies already have had better luck negotiating with large suppliers with just one new U.S. natural gas export terminal under construction.

Electoral politics spilled into the debate, as Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., and his likely Republican challenger, Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., jockeyed to be viewed as the bigger gas exports champion. Both have introduced measures to ease export approvals for World Trade Organization nations.

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Hotel from page D1

and Fannin. Midway hopes to position the hotel among such five-star accommodations as the Four Seasons, St. Regis and Hotel Granduca. The company declined to say how much the project will cost or specify what guests will be charged.

But Bryant said rates likely will be on par with the downtown Four Seasons, where rooms for Thursday night were advertised online starting at \$430 for a "city-view room" and rising to \$8,800 for the "presidential suite north."

That level of luxury has been in short supply locally, compared to other cities of its size, hospitality consultants say. Lodging here traditionally is competitive, and the city has had relatively low room rates, said Rich Warnick, president of Warnick + Co., a Phoenix-based advisory and asset management firm for the hospitality industry.

But Houston is evolving, he said, and continues to mature and build on its strong economy.

"Luxury is one of the stronger-performing segments in the industry," Warnick said, "so maybe Houston's time has come."

Will be ready for bowl

The Alessandra will be built on the site of a former Yao Restaurant & Bar. Bryant said demolition work will begin in June and the hotel plans to open in the third quarter of 2016, in time for the Super Bowl crowds expected for the big game.

"The Super Bowl is not going to make us or break us from a financial standpoint," Bryant said. "But you'd hate to miss it for the marketing and exposure, even a global exposure, given the people who will be visiting Houston."

Joins new competitors

The Alessandra joins at least four other planned or recently opened hotel projects within walking distance of the George R. Brown Convention Center that are receiving financial breaks.

The quasipublic Houston First Corp. has agreed to give Midway a rebate of 50 percent of the city's portion of its hotel occupancy tax in exchange for giving priority to convention groups and including ground-floor retail,



Houston First executive Peter McStravick said.

The Alessandra will have 7,000 square feet of retail.

Midway will own the hotel. Co-investor Valencia Group will design and operate it, Bryant said.

Houston-based Valencia also operates the Hotel Sorella at Midway's City-Centre in west Houston. It also has hotels in San Antonio, Austin and San Jose, Calif. The Alessandra will be its first luxury hotel.

Good timing

Randy McCaslin, practice leader at the Houston office of hospitality consulting group PKF, said the project's timing looks right.

"I think there is a need for more luxury hotels in Houston," he said.

McCaslin said the Alessandra will be more modern than the other local luxury hotels, noting that the St. Regis near River Oaks and Four Seasons were built in the 1980s. The Hotel Granduca in the Uptown Park area is newer but smaller than the future Alessandra, he said.

"The Alessandra will likely be a type of hotel we don't have downtown, a very high-end contemporary project," said Bob Eury, president of Central Houston.

Midway CEO Jonathan Brinsden added, "It will step outside the stuffiness of what is traditionally described as luxury." It will meld touches of old Europe with more whimsical elements, he said.

Fit for GreenStreet

GreenStreet opened in 2008, during an economically challenging time, and the developers had difficulty finding a component other than retail and office, Eury said.

"It needed a third use, either residential or hotel, and I think this will be a really great fit," he said.

GreenStreet is 79 percent leased, Bryant said.

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