

by frantic calls from neighbors, police and their security company.

The news was shocking — their home was on fire from what turned out to be a gas explosion.

“Our phones were on do not disturb,” Benavidez said. “We missed most of the notifications. I had to call the (Belton) Fire Department back and the chief told us the whole house was engulfed in flames.”

Benavidez and her husband, Matt, left their two children, ages 7 and 3, with extended



Courtesy

The back of the Benavidez family home is seen after a fire Friday in Belton. Benavidez had just repainted the house her favorite color: green.

family members and rushed out of Austin for the hour-long drive to their home.

“We left the kids because we didn’t know the extent or what we would see coming up to the

house,” Virginia said. “It could have been just a pile of ash by the time we got there.”

The reality was almost as shocking as their imagination of what happened.

happened at 3:22 a.m. in the back part of the house. She described the force of the gas explosion as shattering windows and causing flames to erupt inside the house.

Benavidez, who owns Z&H Old Fashion Candy in downtown Belton, said she was unaware of any gas leaks and started the weekend Friday in a typical family frenzy on the way to visit friends and relatives.

Please see FIRE, 3A

nounced a pause in military aid to Ukraine that is critical to fighting Russia’s invasion.

But later during his nightly address, Zelenskyy indicated that Ukraine didn’t receive direct notification from the U.S. that aid had been cut, and was seeking confirmation.

“I have instructed Ukraine’s Minister of Defense, the heads of our intelligence agencies, and our diplomats to contact their counterparts

Ukraine is ready to sign a lucrative deal on rare-earth minerals and security with Washington. Trump was weighing whether to agree to the signing Tuesday, when he was scheduled to address a joint session of Congress, after Zelenskyy’s sign of contrition, according to a U.S. official familiar with the matter who was not authorized to speak publicly about it.

Please see ZELENSKY, 3A

## CENTRAL TEXAS

# Longtime Bell County employee Vada Sutton dies at age 90

BY ELLIOT HEMSTREET  
TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

BELTON — Vada Sutton, one of the longest-serving employees for Bell County government, died Friday at age 90.

Sutton’s niece Amanda Allen told the Telegram on Tuesday that both of them were almost inseparable throughout her life.

“It’s really hard to (talk about this) because I was with her for almost every single day of my life,” Allen said. “I have so many good memories of her. I remember we had

matching mopeds when ... we went to the (Belton Fourth of July) parade ... for many years with me, her and my mom.”

In addition to her niece, Sutton is survived by her sister, Velva Allen.

Sutton, who was born June 23, 1934, on a ranch in Salado, is best known for being a Bell County employee for 52 years starting as a secretary for the district attorney’s office before retiring as the county clerk in 2005.

Sutton crossed paths with many people throughout her life including current and for-

mer county officials.

Former county commissioner John Fisher recalled a conversation he and Sutton had outside the Bell County Courthouse before her retirement.

“I told (her), ‘Vada, you’re growing long at the tooth. I sure would hope that you share with somebody your institutional knowledge of the county ... (that’s) trapped in your brain. If you leave without sharing that knowledge, our county will be in a huge worry,’” Fisher said. “She just laughed and took it as a compliment.”

Current County Clerk Shelly Coston and Sutton were co-workers for eight years before Sutton’s retirement.

“I worked for the county attorney’s office, which was in the building right next door to where her office was so I was in and out of there a lot,” Coston said. “She was a pillar of this community. She knew everything about everything and one of the smartest people that you could ever meet especially when it came to Bell County.”

County Judge David Blackburn recalled how he first met her.

“I was still working in Killeen ... for the city attorney and I needed some county records,” Blackburn said. “When I came over to research some records and look through them, she was the one who helped me with that and that was my introduction to Vada.”

At a retirement ceremony for Sutton in 2005, former District Judge Jim Clawson said, “Whatever is good in Bell County, we owe it to Vada. I hope she’ll finally write a book and tell the whole story.”

Sutton was one of the first members of the Bell Coun-

ty Historical Commission and played a key role in the county now having more than 200 historical markers. She worked in helping obtain the Carnegie Building for the Bell County Museum.

A visitation will be held 6-8 p.m. March 14 at the Harper-Talasek Funeral Home, 503 N. Main St. in Belton.

Services will be at 10 a.m. March 15 at Belton Church of Christ, 3003 N. Main St., and burial will be in Pleasant Hill Cemetery in Nolanville. Staff writer Jerry Prickett contributed to this article.

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### TODAY'S BIBLE VERSE

“If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”

— John 14:14



### MARKET REPORT

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Dow Jones Industrials

-670.25

42,520.99

Nasdaq composite

-65.03

18,285.16

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