

Chapter 313 'Vampire Fund' opponents rally in Austin



Ev Lunning, a Central Texas Interfaith leader from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Austin, dressed as Dracula. | Provided

By T.H. Lawrence

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The rain fell, but their spirits soared.

More than 50 Central Texas Interfaith leaders joined nearly 200 clergy and leaders from across the **Texas IAF network** to **participate in a statewide Legislative Advocacy Day** on March 21.

They addressed several issues important to them, but focused on one, opposing the reauthorization of the Chapter 313 “Vampire Fund” and what they termed any “school-based corporate tax giveaway program.”

Edie Clark of the **Unitarian Universalist Wildflower Church** in Austin, a Central Texas Interfaith leader, told *Austin Journal* they strongly disagree with the idea of reviving 313.

“We want economic development but we draw the line when it comes at the expense of schoolchildren and education,” Clark said. “We know real economic development is the result of strong schools and an educated and healthy workforce. Companies primarily choose a location because of skilled workers, and educational investments create better long-term health of the economy.”

Chapter 313 is **Texas’ “largest corporate welfare program,”** in the view of Central Texas Interfaith members, draining more than \$1 billion a year in potential school funding and giving it to major oil, gas, and manufacturing corporations that make millions and, in some cases, billions of dollars in profit. The Texas Senate rejected a bill to continue the two-decade-old program during the 2021 session.

Central Texas Interfaith and allies stopped the reauthorization of the failed Chapter 313 program in 2021 by working with a bipartisan group of legislators and allies, Clark said. But they have another battle on their hands.

“We urge community members to **call or e-mail their state representatives and state senator** and ask them to vote against HB5, SB1926 and any legislation that takes money from schoolchildren to line the pockets of wealthy corporations,” she said. “We are a coalition of institutions, including congregations, schools, nonprofits and unions. We encourage institutions across the state to join us by contacting their local Texas IAF organization.”

The Network of Texas IAF Organizations are non-partisan, institutionally based community organizations whose purpose is to train leaders to organize families around issues which affect their quality of life.

The network includes Communities Organized for Public Service and The Metro Alliance and ICAN in San Antonio, The Border Organization, Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley, TMO in Houston, EPISO and Border Interfaith In El Paso, Austin Interfaith, ACT in Fort Worth, Dallas Area Interfaith, AMOS - Arlington, The West Texas Organizing Strategy, and Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange.

“We know real economic development is the result of strong schools and an educated and healthy workforce,” said Jose Guerrero, Central Texas Interfaith leader with St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Austin. “Companies choose a location because of skilled workers: first, second and third.

Everything else is icing on the cake. Texas legislators should be focusing on the long-term health of the economy and educational investments, not short-term bragging rights, like putting notches on a belt."

"The choice is clear: either we invest our hard-earned tax dollars in our children and our families' economic future, or we throw those dollars at multinational corporations in a dead and failed Chapter 313 program," said Bishop John Ogletree, a leader with the Metropolitan Organization in Houston from First Metropolitan Church. "Industry groups keep trying to bring back Chapter 313 from the grave, like Dracula, under different names and disguises. Let's keep it dead."

The Dracula reference was a takeoff from an analogy used in a **January Austin Journal article** that compared the proposed resurrection of Chapter 313 to the legendary vampire rising from the grave in movie after movie.

"The metaphor fit perfectly as CTI with the Texas IAF and allies killed the failed Chapter 313 program last session, but like Dracula from the grave it threatened to emerge back from the dead," Clark said. "We see the program coming back under new names like House Bill 5 and Senate Bill 1926 and are vigilant that it may try to reappear within other bills with the same effect of draining our state of potential school funding and to give it to multinational corporations with billion-dollar profits."

"Also like Dracula, Chapter 313 drains the lifeblood in potential funding for schools, health care, workforce development and key programs that promote a healthy economy and promote well-being for Texans," he added.

A **skit involving Dracula** was staged during the news conference, complete with Ev Lunning, a Central Texas Interfaith leader from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Austin, dressed as the infamous vampire.

Lobbyists for major multinational corporations are trying to resurrect the program and have asked local chambers of commerce and economic development agencies to join with them. Clark said that is "shameful."

They have found support at high levels. Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan have publicly called for a revival of Chapter 313 in a somewhat revised and renamed format.

“Chapter 313 is gone and, that said, there is a desire in the Capitol to make sure Texas does remain No. 1 for economic development, and we’re working to ensure that we will have economic development tools going forward that may not exactly replicate 313” but will continue to promote economic development,” **Abbott said in a February speech.**

He also showed support for it in **his State of the State Address.** Two bills to revive 313, in spirit, if not in name, have been introduced during this session, **one by Phelan.**

“Currently we see Chapter 313 trying to reappear as House Bill 5 and Senate Bill 1926. The proposed bill would have even less regulation than Chapter 313, including the exclusion of minimum job requirements as a key factor in a project’s eligibility for approval,” Clark said. “They are so thin they look like they were written on the back of a napkin. It is hard to imagine that they would propose a program with even less accountability, fewer specifics [like no job requirements], and more leeway for companies to take taxpayer dollars from schoolchildren to line their pockets.”

Foes of the law quote Comptroller Glenn Hegar, who said 313 has been an expensive error in state policy.

“Despite receiving billions of dollars in property tax abatements over the life of the program and potentially billions more in approved incentives just this year, these companies and their attorneys are asking Texas taxpayers to shoulder even more despite the legislature’s decision to discontinue the program,” **Hegar said in December.**

Clark said programs like 313 take **hard-earned tax dollars from individuals and small businesses and give them to large corporations** with billion-dollar profits in the fund of school tax breaks.

She went onto say that CTI clergy and leaders, along with the **Texas IAF,** will have a continuous presence at the legislature this session and will continue to work with allies and legislators of both parties to stop any attempts at resurrecting Chapter 313.

“We have already had a strong presence at the legislature since this session began, and will continue to meet with our elected officials and take action on critical votes on any bill that attempts to revive Chapter 313,” she said.

In addition to trying to drive a stake through the heart of 313, Central Texas Interfaith members made cases for other issues during the afternoon news conference and while lobbying legislators.

They included increasing the basic allotment to schools and increasing teacher/staff pay, restoring the state's investment in the effective Adult Career Education (ACE) Fund for adult workforce development to \$10 million, expanding Medicaid for new mothers to 12 months, enacting sensible school safety and gun safety measures; and opposing predatory "payday lending" practices.

Clark said their positions make good sense, which is why they wanted lawmakers to hear from them personally.

"The best route to economic development is investing in strong schools, an educated workforce, and safe communities," she said. "Most evidence shows companies don't make relocation decisions based on tax abatements."