

COMING SUNDAY
A Houston entrepreneur's agave farm in Mexico rises with the popularity of tequila.

MARKETS | ENERGY | BANKING | REAL ESTATE | TECHNOLOGY | TRANSPORTATION | RETAIL | CONSTRUCTION | UTILITIES | ECONOMY | HOUSING

TECHNOLOGY

Amazon.com has Orwell offer

Amazon.com is offering free books or \$30 to Kindle customers whose copies of the George Orwell novels *1984* and *Animal Farm* were deleted from their electronic reading devices in July.

When Amazon erased the books from Kindles, citing a problem with the rights to the books, it issued refunds to the buyers. But the episode startled many Kindle customers, who didn't know Amazon had the Orwellian ability to erase content that had already been purchased and downloaded to their devices. It prompted an apology from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

COURT

Judge is out in Chevron case

The Ecuadorian judge presiding over a \$27 billion environmental lawsuit against Chevron resumed his duties Friday amid an investigation into allegations of wrongdoing.

Earlier this week, Chevron released three video recordings in which Judge Juan Evangelista Nunez allegedly told two businessmen he had already made up his mind to rule against the company.

Nunez denies the allegations, saying the tape was "manipulated."

In one video, a man who describes himself as a member of the ruling political party asks one of the men businessmen for \$1 million in exchange for being awarded cleanup contracts. President Rafael Correa's party denies the man is a party member.

ENERGY
Stake bought in PDVSA unit

ConocoPhillips, which left Venezuela after assets were seized in 2007, exercised an option to buy PDVSA's stake in a refinery unit after accusing the state oil company of defaulting on a supply accord. A ConocoPhillips spokesman declined to state the price.

LABOR
EEOC sues

The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed suit against a Houston employer for allegedly discriminating against a Hispanic employee.

LODGING



SWIMMING IN STYLE: The Hotel Sorrelia, in a prime area on the west side of Houston, draws on CityCentre, the mixed-use development that it is part of.

The industry is having a tough time amid the slump, but not all plan to retreat

Hotel group says opportunity knocks

By DAVID KAPLAN
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The Houston-based Valencia Group specializes in luxury hotels, but it didn't have a local property until now. In one Hotel Sorrelia at CityCentre looks chic enough for Milan. The pool flows across at night.

This fall, three restaurants will debut in the Sorrelia two operated by Alex Brennan-Martin, along with Stratus Cafe, a modern Singaporean cuisine concept from San Francisco.

While the hotel industry is getting hammered during the recession, the Valencia Group is eyeing opportunities.

Q&A
YOU ASK - SHE TELLS

By L.M. SIXEL
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

EUROPEANS coming to Houston ask where they can see cowboys and squirrels. Locals entertaining visitors from out of town ask for some help on the way to government distributed remaining two-thirds of the package.

Underemployment
If laid-off workers who are settled for part-time work or given up seeking jobs are included, the so-called underemployment rate is 16.8 percent last month. That's the highest since records dating to 1994.

AT&T: Many jobs still overseas

Continued from page B1
Philippines, according to the CIA. But thousands more jobs are outsourced to India, Argentina and in some cases Libanistan, the CIA says.

"They're sending those jobs to foreign countries, yet we're the people that made happen for AT&T," said Sixel, adding that AT&T was required to bring those 5,000 workers back to the U.S. under the terms of a CWA collective bargaining agreement. "This certainly is a threat to America."

Contract talks
The ramped-up union activity comes as the CWA of Dallas-based AT&T continues to negotiate new con-

ECONOMY

Jobless rate in U.S. climbs to 9.7 percent

Thousands more positions gone, but the losses aren't as bad as before

By PETER S. GOODMAN AND JACK HEALY
NEW YORK TIMES

The U.S. unemployment rate surged to 9.7 percent in August, signaling that joblessness and financial anxiety are likely to endure in millions of American homes for many months.

The Labor Department's latest employment report, released Friday, added weight to a growing belief that — technically — the economy has already escaped the grip of recession. Though another 216,000 net jobs vanished in August, the losses continued to moderate from their worst months of the year.

Yet the report also lent credence to a growing consensus that, even as the economy resumes expansion, the recovery is likely to be weak, with the largest long-term gains in both.

Union presses AT&T on jobs

It wants more outsourced work brought home

By DAVID SALKIN BAUF
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS

SAN ANTONIO — AT&T says it has completed a more than two-year process of restructuring, 4,000 high-tech jobs early this year, among nearly 70,000 jobs a month were disappearing. Yet it also underscored the continued bleakness of the economic landscape.

"It's a good picture compared to where we were, which was just a free fall," said Dean Baker, a director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington. "But compared to anything else, this is just a hor-

UNEMPLOYMENT
The monthly unemployment rate for the year 2009.

25.5%

From the brink of recession, as recent estimates as more the job pulling away from the disaster — when the numbers collapsed, long line throughout the mid-1990s — that a sign of vigorous growth ahead.

One modestly bright side for those with jobs: Earnings ticked up, and the number of hours worked remained above a recent record low.

On Wall Street, stocks rallied. The Dow Jones industrial average added nearly 97 points. Broader indexes also moved up.

reach

HOTELS: Seeking markets that will revive

Continued from page B1
flap hotels, like the Hiltons, which cater to corporate travelers, McCallin said.

"PKF has forecasted that Houston area hotel occupancy will drop below 60 percent over the next two years, which would be the lowest it's been since 2004."

"It's going to take a while for hotel occupancies and room rates to go up," said McCallin, who predicted that "things will look much better" in 2011 and 2012.

How others are doing
Susan Ward Freeman, general manager of Alden Houston downtown, said that while the hotel's corporate business is down, the area is encouraging signs for the fall.

"Our weddings are a huge market for us," she noted. Shawn Graco, general manager of Hotel Ikon, says that while occupancy is still solid, in the mid-70s, the hotel has made considerable rate concessions.

"It's been a soft year, but fall looks strong," said Silvia San Martin, director of sales and marketing at the Omni Houston Hotel, which is completing a \$30 million renovation.

Prime area in west
The 244-unit Sorrelia, which will have its grand opening in November, benefits from being in a prime area in west Houston, which includes Memorial and the Energy Corridor, Graham said, and it can draw on CityCentre's amenities.

The Valencia Group plans to open more Valencia and Sorrelia hotels, said Graham, who noted that both are luxury four-star concepts.

"We are identifying markets that may be down, but will be coming back up," said John Keating, Valencia Group's executive vice president.

"Everybody is down on the hotel industry, but we're excited about it," he said.

Still profitable
The Valentinas are not performing as well this year because of the economy, but are still turning a profit, Graham said.

In general, the Valencia hotels have outperformed their competitors in their markets, said Graham. McCallin, a vice president and practice leader at PKF Consulting, although he hasn't seen recent figures that measure per available hotel room will decline 18.3 percent in 2009, McCallin said.

Luxury hotels, such as the Houstonian and St. Regis Houston, aren't being hit as hard as full-service



UNION PUSH: This sign in San Antonio is part of a drive by AT&T workers to bring jobs back to the U.S.

reach

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