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Accusations fly as Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins faces lively challenge from a newcomer

The race for Dallas County Judge has become contentious, as first-time candidate Lauren Davis uses campaign mailers to accuse Clay Jenkins of lying.





Clay Jenkins and Lauren Davis will face off for the top Dallas County job in the midterm election. (DMN)



By [Josephine Peterson](#)

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Dallas County's top elected post has been largely safe for about a decade, but this year's race is heating up as Judge Clay Jenkins' opponent spends a huge war chest on frequent campaign mailers and uses social media to repeatedly accuse Jenkins of lying about his background.

First-time candidate Lauren Davis, a Republican, alleges in campaign fliers that Jenkins, a Democrat, helped write the high-dollar national infrastructure bill, profited from federal COVID-19 loans as county businesses struggled and helped create a policy that defunded police.

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She also has accused the incumbent judge of lying about being the first in his family to graduate from college.

“It just seems like a pattern of manipulating the truth,” she said.

Jenkins says many of the allegations in the mailers are false. He also denied lying to voters about his family.

“I don’t begrudge anybody having a different opinion than me. But I do expect that they’ll be accurate,” he said in an interview. “They can’t just make stuff up that flies in the face of clear facts.”

Throughout their campaigns, [Davis has slightly outraised Jenkins with \\$573,000 in reported donations to Jenkins’ almost \\$515,000.](#)

From February to June, she received more than \$441,112 in political contributions, while Jenkins reported \$59,375.

Almost all of her reported expenses from February to June — \$100,138 of \$119,062 — went to advertising, [according to the latest finance reports](#).

The candidates

The county judge is not a judicial position, but oversees the Dallas County Commissioners Court, has a vote on the five-body court and is head of emergency and disaster relief.

Jenkins has held the job since 2011, stressing the importance of public health. He oversaw the response to the [2014 Ebola outbreak](#), Dallas County's

response to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine rollout, as well as response to [monkeypox concerns](#).

Before winning the seat, Jenkins, 58, was a personal injury lawyer from Waxahachie. He still oversees the law firm but does not handle individual clients, Jenkins' campaign manager Sean Gregory said.

Davis says she became interested in running for county judge after seeing how much Jenkins' decisions affected her life and her barber shops. Davis, 38, and her husband, Ben Davis, opened their first barber shop in Frisco in 2008. The Gents Place is a membership-based "men's grooming and lifestyle club," according to the company website. The couple have since expanded, with seven shops across Texas and others in Kansas, Arkansas, Nevada and Illinois.

During the pandemic, Davis said her two shops in Dallas County were hit hard. In 2020, Dallas County placed a stay-at-home order on residents. Businesses deemed nonessential, like restaurants, bars and barbershops, were closed for roughly two months.

When they opened, businesses were required to follow social distancing guidelines, reduce capacity and report cases. Davis said she and her husband

had to close their Las Colinas location due to the lack of revenue.

She blames Jenkins, saying her locations in counties with less strict protocols did not struggle as much.

“I don’t think that position has been worked as intended to be worked,” she said. “We got that notion that a governor or a county executive can have that much control over our life and our life experience and ability to build a career.”

Lauren Davis is the Republican candidate for the 2022 Dallas County Judge race. (Courtesy of Lauren Davis)

Her family also struggled with the Dallas Independent School District's mask mandate. One of her sons has a history of heart concerns and received a medical note from his doctor saying he shouldn't be required to wear a mask, Davis said. She said that school staff did not allow her son to take off his mask.

If Davis wins in blue Dallas County, she said she wants to represent all constituents, including those who didn't vote for her.

"This position is administrative," she said. "I don't see where party affiliation comes into this position."

Infrastructure bill

Davis' mailers blame inflation on Congress' [\\$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill](#)

[passed Nov. 6, 2021](#), and allege Jenkins was involved.

“Clay Jenkins went to Washington D.C. to help Joe Biden craft the bill that is directly responsible for the inflation impacting our everyday lives at the gas station and in the grocery store,” one Davis mailer says.

Jenkins said in an interview that he may have been in Washington, D.C., during the congressional vote, but if so, he was there for a conference. Davis notes Jenkins tweeted a picture of himself and others in front of the White House saying they had “productive meetings with White House senior leaders” a month after the infrastructure bill was signed.

Jenkins’ campaign says he attended briefings hosted by senior White House officials to receive updates and information on initiatives impacting local governments.

“That’s objectively false that I had a hand in writing the bill or that I met with President Biden or any of those people on the bill,” Jenkins said.

Davis said the county judge was lying about his involvement in the bill while in Washington, D.C., either to Twitter or *The Dallas Morning News*.

“Which lie is it?” she said.

COVID-19 dollars

One mailer says Jenkins received \$2 million in federal loans “for himself

while letting local businesses suffer.” By June 2022, [Dallas County](#) budgeted \$185 million for negatively impacted households, businesses and nonprofits of its \$511 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds.

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins is seen during the first county commissioners meeting at the newly renovated Dallas County Records Building in Dallas, Tuesday, August 2, 2022. (Brandon Wade / Special Contributor)

The federal government also opened up a program for businesses hit by the pandemic to keep employees, called the Paycheck Protection Program.

[According to a ProPublica database](#), Jenkins' personal injury law firm in Waxahachie received \$72,000 in loans that were ultimately forgiven.

Jenkins said all of those funds were used to pay staff during shutdowns related to the coronavirus pandemic.

Davis said she included other businesses he has a vested interest in as board member or partial owner in her \$2 million assertion.

In his 2020 personal financial statement, Jenkins lists ties to Brown Dental Health Management — a dentist office that received [a PPP loan of \\$84,900](#) and Car Wreck Masters PLLC — an auto crash law firm that received two PPP loans [totaling \\$2.488 million](#).

[The same database](#) shows Davis' barber shop franchise, The Gents Place, received more than \$820,000 in forgivable loans.

Davis said she doesn't believe a law firm can be hit as hard as small businesses like hers.

"It's a little different than a barber shop being taken to zero," she said.

The mailer also says Jenkins received \$50,000 in gifts. Jenkins said the Dallas Mavericks gave him suite tickets to games, and other organizations gave him tickets to an Adele concert and annual passes to the Texas State Fair that he said he passed along to health care workers during the pandemic.

Police policy

Davis' mailers stated that Jenkins has defunded police.

“Clay Jenkins supported the 10 New Directions plan that led to the defunding of the Dallas County police force,” the mailer said. “Clay Jenkins fought to take police officers off the streets. His plan would replace our brave police officers with unequipped social workers to respond to emergency calls.”

The 10 New Directions program was born out of the 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minn., Dallas County Administrator Darryl Martin told *The News*. Dallas County has invested millions of dollars in two-year grants to cities — including Glenn Heights, Cedar Hill, Duncanville and Lancaster — to find alternatives to police for mental health-related calls.

The county hopes that if the cities find the program to be useful, they will pay for it after the two-year grant ends, Martin said. The county has not reallocated funds from police departments to run this program.

“That is not defunding police. This is about addressing the public needs,” he said.

DeSoto officials say the program is helpful.

The county granted DeSoto almost \$1.9 million, which police Chief Joseph Costa said has helped to build a mental health response team. Once an emergency call is received, a police officer responds and the team will be notified if the call requires their assistance. The team includes a Parkland Health & Hospital System social worker and a paramedic, who can provide medical assistance as needed, Costa said.

Costa said DeSoto police funding has not been reduced as a result of this program.

Davis stands by her assertion on the mailer and has garnered an endorsement from the Dallas Police Association for being “tough on crime.” She pointed to the [10 New Directions letter signed by Jenkins and other Dallas officials](#), where the first policy priority outlined is to “divest from the police and invest in the community.”

“Divest is another word for defund. It’s taking away investment,” Davis said. “I am just using their words.”

Family disagreements

Davis also [alleged on Twitter](#) that Jenkins is not the first in his family to graduate from college as he has said.

She pointed to a newspaper article from *The Baylor Lariat* in 1984 that said the Jenkins family was one of a handful of generational families to receive the First Families of Baylor award.

Clay Jenkins’ father, Alvah Clayburn Lewis, graduated from high school and joined the United States Merchant Marines and then the military before working for a telephone company, the county judge said. His mother has a

high school diploma. Lewis died of a heart attack in 1971.

His mother, JoAnn Jenkins, remarried Baylor alumnus Warwick Jenkins. He adopted Clay Jenkins and his sister when the county judge was a teenager, Clay Jenkins told *The News*, and the siblings took the Jenkins name when he was in college.

“When I’m talking about my family, I’m thinking about my mother and father,” Clay Jenkins said.

Clay Jenkins has also referred to Warwick Jenkins as his father on his [personal injury firm’s website, saying the two worked together at his father’s firm.](#)

Davis called the explanation “disingenuous at best.”

Early [voting begins Oct. 24](#) and Election Day is Nov. 8.



[Josephine Peterson](#), Dallas County reporter. Josephine covers Dallas County. She returned to her hometown to join The Dallas Morning News in 2022 after previously working at The Tacoma News Tribune in Washington and The News Journal in Delaware. Josephine is a graduate of University of Missouri and American University. In her free time, Josephine enjoys kayaking with her dog, Dougal.

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