

2013 State of the County Address

By Harris County Judge Ed Emmett

This is the sixth time I have delivered a State of the County Address to the Greater Houston Partnership and the League of Women Voters. The previous five have featured two recurring themes. First, Harris County government overall has been and is in good condition. Second, and more importantly, the *real* state of the county is best measured by looking at the daily lives of the residents of Harris County.

This year, those two themes still prevail, but government at any level should be about the future as well as the present.

For the daily lives of Harris County residents to continue to improve, the county government must remain vital. Currently, Harris County government is remarkably strong. Harris County has a AAA bond rating, significant reserves in the bank and low taxes. In fact,

Commissioners Court passed the largest tax cut in county history in 2007. Perhaps the best news about the county's financial condition is shown in the Texas Comptroller's awarding Harris County its Leadership Circle Gold Member Award for Financial Transparency for three years in a row.

So Harris County has a solid foundation. However, county government in Texas, by its very nature, faces challenges. As an arm of the state, Harris County can only do those things enumerated in the Texas Constitution, which was written in 1876 and has nearly 500 amendments, or things specifically authorized by the Texas Legislature. And county government is managed by numerous elected officials who answer directly to the voters.

Despite the impediments, Harris County government – working with the Legislature and others – has shown itself to be innovative in meeting the needs of its residents. There are few examples in the world of a governmental body that has managed dramatic change and rapid growth as well as Harris County. Previous and current members of Commissioners Court made smart decisions along the way.

In transportation, the creation and successful implementation of the Harris County Toll Road Authority has put us miles ahead of other urban areas. Nobody likes paying tolls, but imagine the congestion if we had no Beltway 8, Hardy Toll Road, Westpark Tollway or Katy managed lanes.

Living on the Texas Gulf Coast presents some clear dangers. The Harris County Flood Control

District has addressed, and is addressing, the constant threat of flooding while simultaneously creating green space and parks in all parts of the county. Every year, we face the threat of hurricanes, but the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, working out of the TranStar facility, is a model for the nation and was recognized for statewide excellence last week by the Emergency Management Association of Texas.

In a county that has rapidly grown to have more residents than 24 states, maintaining quality of life can get lost in the shuffle. The county commissioners, while making sure that the roads and infrastructure are in place to accommodate growth, have gone to great lengths to provide for many other amenities

that improve the lives of Harris County residents.

Of course, there are many other aspects of Harris County that residents take for granted until something goes awry. The criminal justice system blends the responsibilities of the sheriff, district attorney, judges and lots of others. Vexing issues, such as jail overcrowding, have been dealt with in recent years. The very nature of interactions in the criminal justice system will always create the potential for problems. By and large, those problems are minimal. One key part of the criminal justice system is the basic right to trial by a jury of our peers. In a county of more than 4 million people, that gives rise to the need for a large bureaucracy that the District Clerk's office is managing quite well.

Beyond the basic functions of county government, Harris County finds itself involved in other activities, either directly or indirectly.

The Harris County Hospital District, now known as Harris Health System, is charged with providing indigent health care. Since its creation in 1966, the district has replaced a woefully inadequate charity hospital with a health care system featuring some of the best medical care in the world, provided by Baylor College of Medicine and the University of Texas Health Science Center.

In an increasingly urban area, the Harris County Housing Authority has refocused its mission, cleansed itself of inappropriate activities and is providing subsidized housing to many in need.

Who would have predicted 50 years ago that Harris County would be intimately involved in

the sports and entertainment world? Yet, through the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation, the county is responsible for the Reliant Park complex. As fans pour into Reliant Stadium or Reliant Center for world-class events, many of them have no idea that a strong, stable county government is responsible.

It all started with the Astrodome – the Harris County Domed Stadium. Of course, the Astrodome has shifted from a “Wonder of the World” to a “Wonder What We Should Do With It?” All I can say is that many options have been explored, and the Sports and Convention Corporation is working with many groups to develop a plan that will be presented to Commissioners Court. We are well aware of the mounting pressure to do something with the Dome. I can also say unequivocally that

whatever plan is put forward will not receive unanimous public support. The residents of Harris County have very strong, diverse feelings about the Dome.

One thing the hospital district, the housing authority and the Sports and Convention Corporation have in common is leadership provided by appointed boards made up of county residents who put in many hours and give of themselves for no pay. The same type of leadership exists on numerous other boards and commissions responsible for making Harris County a better place. Those volunteers deserve thanks and praise from all of us.

In my role as county judge, I regularly have the honor of speaking for Harris County. I am always mindful that I represent thousands of dedicated county employees who work

diligently every day. They translate the finances of the county into tangible results. They make the state of the county stronger.

Giving a State of the County speech for a county doing as well as Harris County is certainly easier than explaining away massive problems. However, I started by also mentioning that the real state of the county is best measured by its impact on the daily lives of its residents. If that measure is to remain positive, we must address some looming concerns. When I say “we,” I mean the county and the Greater Houston Partnership.

Tomorrow, we on Commissioners Court will likely adopt a budget for the fiscal year that begins March 1. That budget will total \$1,527,056,000. It is a lean budget with clear

goals. There are no gimmicks or hidden crises in the county budget.

The financial team, led by County Budget Officer Bill Jackson, working with elected officials and the departments, developed this budget using a version of zero-based budgeting to assure that tax dollars are going to the highest priorities. The result is a solid financial base.

However, I have concerns that factors outside of Harris County could cause problems in future years. A major concern is that there are some in advocacy organizations and in the state legislature who are suggesting arbitrarily limiting the annual growth of government budgets at all levels, including counties. That is really a bad idea for Harris County. Of the more than 4 million residents in the county, 1.6

million of them live in unincorporated Harris County. That is more people than live in either Dallas or San Antonio. In fact, if unincorporated Harris County were a city, it would be the fifth-largest in the United States.

Even more telling is the county's growth pattern. Since 2000, more than 75 percent of the county's total population growth has occurred in the unincorporated areas. A continuation of that trend will cause unincorporated Harris County to surpass the City of Houston in population by the next census, unless the city resumes aggressive annexation.

If Harris County is to continue to grow and prosper, our transportation infrastructure must not only keep pace with population growth, it must be in place to attract people and

commerce. Much of that transportation infrastructure should be funded by the State of Texas. If the state fails to invest in the future of transportation, Harris County will suffer. But we are in better shape than many areas. Having the Harris County Toll Road Authority, the Gulf Coast Rail District and METRO gives us some means of addressing future needs.

The Harris County Toll Road Authority, in addition to constantly maintaining and expanding existing toll roads, is providing needed resources for road improvements to improve mobility throughout Harris County. And speaking of mobility, the voters' approval of the continuation of METRO's General Mobility Fund was validation of the cooperative effort put forth by METRO, Harris County, the City of Houston and the other municipalities within the METRO service area.

Unless restricted, Harris County will cooperate with the Texas Department of Transportation and others to improve the U.S. 290 corridor with additional free lanes and a toll way, complete the Grand Parkway, develop a 288 toll way and a 249 toll way. And the Gulf Coast Rail District stands ready to implement commuter rail as soon as it is feasible. All of these transportation improvements will allow the regional economy to continue booming.

Other issues, such as the availability of water, the quality of the education system and environmental regulations could each change the dynamics of Harris and surrounding counties. It is imperative that we work at all levels to secure a statewide water plan, make our public schools and universities first rate, and protect our environment. While the Legislature wrestles with water and education,

as the chairman of the Houston-Galveston Area Council, I have made it a personal project to promote natural gas as the fuel of choice for vehicles of all types in our region. Broader use of natural gas as a fuel will benefit both the environment and the local economy.

While any of those three issues could stall the growth and prosperity of the county and the entire region, there are other issues that need attention because they have the potential to specifically hamper the budgets of the county and the hospital district.

The first of these is immigration reform. We have a lot of people residing here who came here illegally. That is no surprise to any native Texan like me. It is far past time to bring these people out of the shadows through workable immigration reform. Such reform is not within

the scope of county government, but it impacts us tremendously.

The second looming issue is health care. Harris County is home to the Texas Medical Center, arguably the greatest concentration of health care expertise in the entire world. Yet, almost within the shadows of this institution exists a huge uninsured and underinsured population. The Harris County Hospital District has a legal and moral obligation to provide indigent health care. The best value for taxpayers and the best outcome for patients comes from establishing medical homes through neighborhood clinics. I believe we must do a better job of coordinating public and private resources to meet the health care needs of the entire county. This is not just about the health of individuals. It is critical to the health of our entire community.

With the advent of the Section 1115 waiver process, the State of Texas is taking a big step toward creating an indigent health care delivery system that crosses county lines and encourages innovative approaches.

In the debate about health care, it must be remembered that in any delivery system, someone has to pay. The Texas Hospital Association, the Texas Medical Association and even the Legislative Budget Board believe Texas should expand Medicaid coverage in order to take advantage of the federal matching funds. I agree with the health care professionals. While the political debate over the Affordable Care Act continues, poor people will continue to get sick and need care. Harris County taxpayers should not have to foot the bill while our federal tax dollars are sent to other states.

Of course, with the Legislature in session, there is one subject about which I am obsessed. Funding for mental health care must be increased at the state level, and a plan must be implemented to divert those with mental health issues from the criminal justice system. The Harris County Jail should not be the largest mental health facility in the state. The Harris County Psychiatric Center should be fully utilized, and Harris County should take the lead in developing a pilot project that will make the entire nation take notice. State Sen. Joan Huffman and members of the county legislative delegation are working on legislation to create just such a pilot project. It is shameful that Texas ranks 51st in spending for mental health. It is also wasteful of taxpayer dollars. By spending wisely on mental health, we can save much more in the criminal justice arena. Even

more importantly, we can improve lives and do what is right.

Yes, Harris County government is in solid condition because of hard work and wise decisions over a long period of time. Being an arm of the state, Harris County has also benefited from the Texas Economic Miracle.

Really, the Texas Economic Miracle is no miracle. It, too, is the result of hard work and wise decisions over a long period of time.

Government officials, business leaders and taxpayers have all understood the necessity of spending wisely to make a better Texas for future generations.

For better or worse, I have become known for using the phrase “hunker down” when urging area residents not in harm’s way to stay off the

evacuation routes during Hurricane Ike. Now that phrase is used by folks all over.

That phrase should definitely not be used when it comes to addressing the issues facing Harris County. In fact, just the opposite applies. Now, when our county is strong, we are in a position to be bold and creative in addressing our future.

Since I am speaking to a large segment of the business community, let me use an applicable analogy. What business owner would decide that they are doing so well that there is no need to invest in maintaining equipment or upgrading processes? What business owner would think it productive to fail to invest in the well-being of his or her employees? Yet, in the business of government, too many officials are promoting such self-destructive policies. Our

county government, and the state government upon which we rely, must have a process for preparing for the future.

The business community, transcending politics, must help drive the process. Business leaders worked alongside government officials to create the Houston Ship Channel and the best state highways in the nation. Business leaders worked alongside Dr. Khator to make the University of Houston a Tier One university and alongside medical leaders to build the world renowned Texas Medical Center.

In a political world of labels – Republicans, Democrats, conservatives and liberals – business leaders need to step up and work alongside those of us in government to make sure we keep moving forward and that we remain focused on the future.

All of us have a role to play in securing a bright future for our region. For Harris County, the bottom line is this. We are currently quite strong, but we should leverage that strength to secure an even stronger future.

Thank you.