

2010 State of the County Address

By Harris County Judge Ed Emmett

Thank you to the Greater Houston Partnership and the League of Women Voters for once again hosting this “State of the County” address. And, of course, thanks to the sponsors for their generous support. A special thanks to Mayor Parker, not just for the kind introduction, but for the strong working partnership she and I have already forged. Oliver Wendell Holmes described the strength of his generation by saying, “We have shared the incommunicable experience of war.” Well, Annise, you and I have shared the incommunicable experience of Rice University.

Beyond our shared past, we now have a shared future. Our constituents rightly expect Harris County and the City of Houston to work together whenever possible to eliminate duplication and to provide higher levels of efficiency. For Harris County, that spirit of cooperation goes beyond the City of Houston. It extends to the other 33 incorporated municipalities and even to surrounding counties, because so many of the needs and issues transcend city limits and county boundaries. Add to the mix Metro, state agencies, a myriad of municipal utility districts and other special districts, and the possibilities for cooperation are almost endless.

The cooperation most needed, and to which I most look forward, is with our legislative delegation. Because county government is an arm of the state, everything we do is through a grant of power from either the state constitution or the legislature. It is vital for us to collectively recognize that Harris County is unique. Not only is Harris County the most populous in Texas, but we have a vast amount of populated, unincorporated area which – taken by itself – would be the seventh-largest city in the United States. Clearly, our needs as a county are quite different than rural counties, or even the other urban counties in Texas.

And speaking of our population, I must take this opportunity to encourage everyone and every business to participate in the upcoming census. An accurate count of all residents is vital to our future.

This is my third “State of the County” speech, and I am, as always, honored to be the representative of Harris County Commissioners Court.

Given the condition of the economy and its impact on county property values, Harris County is facing a challenging year – nothing like the financial challenges facing counties in other parts of the country, though.

The silver lining of this dark economic cloud is the solid financial foundation of Harris County. Not to carry the metaphors too far, but we will weather this storm because of steady guidance. Obviously, Commissioners Court has managed taxes and spending wisely for a long time, but the steady guidance to which I refer comes from a low-key gentleman by the name of Dick Raycraft, our county budget officer and director of management services. I am no longer surprised when someone tells me how Dr. Raycraft did this or that to bring a program into

reality, or to find a creative way to solve a crisis. No discussion of the state of Harris County would be complete without recognizing the 42-year contribution of Dick Raycraft.

As I stand here today, Harris County Commissioners Court and the various departments and offices are in the midst of preparing the coming year's budget. There will likely be more changes than usual this year because county government will be taking the same approach to the economy as households and families – we will prioritize our spending.

Frankly, I view these times as providing county officials with the incentive to move closer to “zero-based budgeting,” whereby spending programs have to be justified every year, not merely continued through inertia.

But the state of Harris County is more than its budget.

Almost every spiritual tradition encourages some form of meditation, contemplation or introspection. A key practice in many such traditions is to ask “Who am I?” over and over to realize how many different answers there are. In thinking about this address during an early-morning walk, I came to a similar realization about Harris County as an entity.

What is the state of Harris County? As the county judge, I can rattle off a long list of initiatives, programs and projects, all of which tie back to matters of finance . . . transportation, flood control, criminal justice, health care, emergency management. The list is long and, from my perspective, puts Harris County among the national leaders in local government. Despite some challenges, I think the present state of the county is quite good and healthy.

For me, though, the focus must be on the future, and the key to that future is continued economic development. That is why organizations like the Greater Houston Partnership must truly be our partners.

Few residents, though, have a broad, sweeping view of the county. They know about taxes, and they see signs of flood control or other improvements, but how would some of them describe the state of the county?

A 35-year-old secretary is stuck in traffic on U.S. Highway 290 and is going to be late for her job. Every morning, she gets angry. Why can't somebody do something about this mess? That is her state of the county, city and state, and all levels of government. Solve her traffic problem, and life is good. She is not alone. That is why Harris County commissioners and the Harris County Toll Road Authority are completing as many projects as fast as possible with the resources available. And – in that specific corridor – funding has been approved for the steps that will improve the 290/610 interchange and begin to develop commuter rail between Houston and Hempstead and, perhaps, go all the way to Austin. To the woman stuck in traffic, though, I would say, “Join with us, and support state legislators who in next year's legislative session will have to make some wise decisions about transportation funding.”

On a warm spring day, a family strolls the trails of Mercer Arboretum. To them, the state of the county is exhilarating and a foundation for learning and memories. Commissioner Jerry Eversole and his employees are building a legacy for future generations.

On almost any Sunday afternoon in far northwest Harris County, Paul Rushing Park is the site of cricket matches in which the diversity of our community is on display. For the thousands of

people who play or follow cricket in Harris County and surrounding counties, the state of Harris County is welcoming and cooperative, due to the efforts of Commissioner Steve Radack and his staff.

Along Galveston Bay, lives are still disrupted by Hurricane Ike. Those folks' view of all levels of government is colored entirely by their desire to regain normalcy. Their state of the county is focused on such things as the rebuilding of the Seabrook-Evelyn Meador Library, clearing up FEMA funding issues and preparing for future storms, all of which is being led by Commissioner Sylvia Garcia and her staff.

Somewhere in Harris County, a group of 10-year-olds are pretty much alone after school and during the summer. If asked about their state of the county, they would probably just stare at you. Commissioner El Franco Lee's support of numerous after-school programs and his innovative Street Olympics have, in many uncounted instances, prevented them from falling into the other jurisdictions of the county, such as juvenile probation.

Of course, I could also cite someone who uses the toll road system, sometimes grumbling about why he has to pay a toll, but not necessarily understanding just how vital that system has been to the mobility and economic development of not just Harris County, but the entire region.

Or next month, when hundreds of thousands of people attend the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in Harris County's Reliant Park, few will comment on those facilities, but my office will receive a new round of calls, e-mails and letters curious about the fate of the Astrodome. The Harris County Domed Stadium is still an icon and symbol of Harris County.

Yes, there are many "states of the county."

Most of those I have mentioned develop their views through daily life and routine experiences. County officials and employees should always listen to those voices, because they largely pay the taxes and use county services and facilities. But there are some other views that we must seek out. In fact, we must speak for them.

A 13-year-old boy who is dared by his buddies to steal from a local store finds himself alone and scared – though he won't admit it – in the Juvenile Detention Center. Those surroundings and how he is treated is his state of the county. And, for the rest of us, how the county deals with him will determine whether he becomes a productive member of the community or ends up in the adult criminal justice system – or even worse. Since September 2007, Harris County has been working with a grant from the Annie Casey Foundation to make sure that our juvenile justice system is the best possible. The county's juvenile judges, District Attorney Pat Lykos, the Juvenile Probation Department and many others, like Reverend Jefferson and Ministers Against Crime, are committed to stemming the tide of youthful crime that leads to a life of crime.

A 40-year-old man with significant mental health issues who cannot function completely on his own, but who can work and live a meaningful life if given proper care. Without that care, he is likely to end up living under a highway overpass from where he becomes part of the revolving door into and out of the Harris County Jail and the Harris County Hospital District. What is the state of the county to that man? Some great work is being done in this area by the Mental Health/Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County and other public and private groups, but

so much more is needed. More coordinated, focused attention to the needs of those with mental health issues is a personal cause for me.

A 25-year-old mother of three children living paycheck to paycheck in a rundown apartment complex. Her youngest, an infant, was awake all night with high fever, but she is afraid to take her to the hospital. She finally arranges for a neighbor to watch the other two children, calls in sick at work, and struggles to find her way by bus to the Ben Taub emergency room, where the infant receives the highest quality care. The young mother herself has not had a routine checkup in years. Eventually, her health will deteriorate, and her children will struggle in many ways. For the state of Harris County to be acceptable, we must do everything we can to give people like her access to a neighborhood clinic as their medical home, so her children can receive proper immunizations and the entire family can receive preventive care instead of crisis care.

Yes, Harris County is in better shape than almost anywhere else in the country, if not the world. Yes, the elected and appointed officials fully understand that we need to constantly improve infrastructure – particularly transportation infrastructure - in order to realize this area's potential to become the Gateway to North America. If goods and people cannot move, our economy will stagnate.

But more and more in the coming years, the final analysis will be that the state of the county is measured in human terms. If we are shortsighted now, future costs associated with health care, criminal justice and other issues will spiral out of control, leaving us unable to meet either social or infrastructure needs. And we will find ourselves with too many unhealthy and uneducated people among us. The cost of that would be staggering.

That is why it is so important today to recognize the state of the county from so many different viewpoints. For my state of the county is a snapshot. Others provide the lens that allows us to look into the future. We are well-positioned to bring that future into focus. County taxpayers cannot foot the entire bill. It will take all of us in the public, private and non-profit sectors working together to do it, but we have a strong foundation from which to start.

All of us working together can use that foundation to make sure that Harris County leads the nation into the future. We are at a pivotal point.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity today.