

2009 State of the County Address
Harris County Judge Ed Emmett

First, some basics. Harris County is an organization created in 1836 to be the arm of Texas government at the local level. That organization now finds itself trying to fulfill its duties and meet the needs of almost 4 million residents in a much more complex environment.

Harris County is home to Houston, the fourth-largest city in the United States. It is also home to 32 other municipalities, ranging in population from a few hundred to 100,000. Included inside Harris County are several hundred special districts - emergency districts, municipal utility districts, water districts and independent school districts. The county also includes a wide range of special authorities – the Port of Houston Authority, METRO, the Harris County/Houston Sports Authority, the Gulf Coast Freight Rail District and the Harris Galveston Subsidence District, just to name a few.

Surrounding Harris County are seven other counties, some largely rural, some fast-growing suburbs, and our unique, historic neighbor to the south.

I go through this description and these lists to make a simple point. Harris County, while itself a complex government organization, is part of a larger whole. No matter what “the state of Harris County” is at this moment, our future condition is inextricably tied to others. We must act cooperatively with the wide range of entities in our region to make sure that the state of all of us remains sound.

With that in mind, here is the current state of Harris County.

Despite the economic downturn, Harris County remains financially solid. Next week, Harris County Commissioners Court will likely adopt a 2009-2010 budget of approximately \$1.7 billion. This budget will be seven percent larger than the previous year. About two-thirds of the revenue will come from ad valorem taxation – taxation based upon last year’s appraisals, which were approximately 10 percent higher than the year before. Who knows what the coming year will bring , but I can guarantee you that Commissioners Court and the county’s financial managers will not allow this county to slip under the waves of economic turmoil. The four commissioners have a combined 68 years of experience. The county’s budget office, headed by Dick Raycraft since its inception 27 years ago, has always taken a fiscally responsible approach, and that approach will no doubt continue.

The good condition of Harris County did not occur in a vacuum, however. As has been noted by Gov. Perry, Mayor White and many others, 71 percent of all new jobs created in the United States in recent years have been created in Texas – and the lion’s share of those jobs were in the greater Houston area. Our congressional delegation, the governor, lieutenant governor, Harris County legislators and tremendous groups like the Greater Houston Partnership have all played a part.

In addition to official and well-known community groups, Harris County’s strength comes from the actions of selfless individuals who every day take it upon themselves to make us better. In fact, that is the name of one organization created to help young people

do better in school and have better lives. Making It Better was founded by Jerry Davis and Jacque Daughtry. Jerry is here today, and I ask him to stand as a representative of the vast number of church, civic and other volunteer groups that strengthen our society every day.

For all the reasons I've mentioned - plus the natural and economic advantages we have as a county, a region and a state - our condition is very healthy, and we are poised to not only maintain our condition, but we should improve in both the near and long term.

However, lest anyone in this room confuse me with Pollyanna, now comes the warning. Our nation is full of local governments and private companies that were riding high one year and sitting on the trash heap the next. We cannot delude ourselves and think we can do things the way they've always been done and all will be right with the world.

Let me mention a few of the issues with which we must wrestle.

As Dr. Klineberg and his students have told us repeatedly, the demographics of Harris County are changing. Not just racial statistics, but living patterns as well. Once affluent suburbs are seeing more and more economically diverse groups move in for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the choice of schools. Meanwhile, inner-city neighborhoods are seeing an influx of new residents and rapid revitalization. Since the City of Houston appears to have suspended its historic aggressive annexation policy, many aging suburbs are in unincorporated Harris County, presenting Commissioners Court and county government with new challenges in transportation and other infrastructure. Likewise, the shifting populations will likely alter the way the county must provide health care, housing, transportation services and law enforcement.

Overriding everything, though, is the position of Harris County in the region. Our area is already described as the future gateway to North America. As more and more international trade comes from the Indian subcontinent, from South America and from Asia through an enlarged Panama Canal, the most logical ports are on the Gulf Coast and, of course, the Port of Houston is preeminent. It is vital that Harris County do everything possible to enhance our region's position.

Just as the Port's proximity to Texas oil fields fueled our growth, the Port's role in international commerce will be our key to greater prosperity. That is why I led a trade mission to India last year and hosted the First Annual Harris County International Trade and Transportation Conference earlier this year. Mayor White and the City of Houston, the consular corps, the Greater Houston Partnership and numerous other organizations are constantly taking steps to promote international trade. It is our future. The name "Harris County" may not be as well-known around the world, but we are ready to do our part to secure that future. That is why we must take all necessary steps, including building connectors to the Port of Houston and improving the flow on the freight rail network.

At the same time, Harris County must find ways to address the mobility needs of the public. Commuter rail must be part of the solution, particularly along the Hempstead Corridor and State Highway 3 toward Galveston. Obviously, Waller and Galveston counties and cities along the routes have key roles to play.

Harris County must take steps to enhance METRO Solutions as the new light rail lines become a reality. Commuter rail and road projects should be done with METRO Solutions in mind.

Transit services to and from areas not served by METRO must be provided in a way that feeds METRO's system and vice versa.

As many of you know, I love transportation and logistics. But transportation alone does not assure our future. Potential residents expect a certain quality of life. Although Harris County has parks and green space and an environmentally friendly approach to flood control, more is needed. Projections show the county's population doubling by the year 2030. With that doubled population comes more pressure on water supply and air quality, trash disposal and a host of other issues. The handling of all these issues will require cooperation among counties, cities, utility districts and the wide range of special districts I mentioned earlier. Cooperation is easy to talk about, and everyone agrees it's a great idea right up to the point where someone's authority is diminished.

I do not have time to delve into every issue facing Harris County and our region, but let me touch upon health care in several of its ramifications. The Harris County Hospital District will face challenges in providing indigent health care. The economic downturn, coupled with demographic changes, will add to the pressure. With all of the medical resources available in Harris County, we should be the nation's model – and we will be, so long as public and private health care providers work together cooperatively.

There must be a more regional approach to health care. Two specifics - our region desperately needs more than two Level One trauma centers, and the state of Texas and surrounding counties must share in the cost of indigent health care when it involves patients from outside Harris County. And public and private health care providers must become an even stronger team.

A related health care issue is the absolute need to separate mental health from the criminal justice system. Too many of our jail inmates should be in mental health facilities, not our jail.

Now, completely unrelated to anything else I have said is my firm belief that the University of Houston must be allowed to achieve Top Tier status. The benefits to Harris County would be enormous. Even a Rice graduate like me understands that.

In all matters, the public wants solutions and services. They are not enamored of lines on a map or political designations. They really detest anything they view as petty partisanship, protecting one's turf or personal feuds. Harris County government should be the proving ground for how a modern urban county should function.

I have made it almost all the way through this speech without mentioning Hurricane Ike or suggesting that you "hunker down." In large measure, that hurricane and the response to it defined us as a community. Make no mistake; I do not want to go through such an event again. We were fortunate that the storm tracked those last few miles to the east. Otherwise, our task would have been much more difficult.

Looking back, though, I do have some observations to share, particularly in light of the public's response. I am humbled and gratified by the kindness expressed regularly by area residents and by those who observed from afar. Government employees and thousands of volunteers made our plans work. A word to the wise, though. We are already taking lessons learned from Ike and preparing for this year's storm. We hope and pray our area won't be hit, but we must prepare as if we know it will.

Residents must be prepared with enough food and water for several days. All providers of water and electricity must take the steps necessary to maintain service to as many customers as possible. The facilities at TranStar must be expanded and modernized. All of us have jobs to do to get ready.

A special word about Houston Mayor Bill White and the City of Houston. The working relationship on display during the storm is always there for numerous other efforts, from meeting veterans' needs to developing international commerce.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the work done by the mayors of the cities along Galveston Bay. There is not a finer group of public servants in the world than these city officials and their staffs.

As I close, I hope you remember these main messages.

First, the current state of Harris County is indeed sound.

Second, Harris County is facing serious challenges – in growth, changing demographics, transportation and mobility, health care and other issues – all in uncertain economic times.

And third, to meet those challenges, Harris County must cooperate with other governmental entities and private organizations on a regional basis. Duplication of effort is a waste, and failure to act is unacceptable. We must identify the problems and solve them, period.

Let me leave you with a Hurricane Ike true story that offers more hope for our future than anything else I could say. It also highlights the overarching need for cooperation between entities that might otherwise find themselves in competition.

In the early morning hours of Sept. 13, with Hurricane Ike literally doing his worst along the Gulf Coast, the Rickmers Seoul, a ship more than two football fields long, broke free from its moorings. This huge ship was drifting down the Houston Ship Channel, threatening to smash into the six-lane bridge that carries the East Loop over the Ship Channel. Now bear in mind, because of the storm surge, water in the Ship Channel was so high that the Rickmers Seoul would not have struck just the bridge supports, but the bridge itself. Imagine having no East Loop 610.

Braving 90 to 100 mph winds, three pushboats from Buffalo Marine – the San Carmen, San Rafael and the San Patricio - pushed the stern of the huge freighter aground, and the captain of the ship was able to drop anchor and temporarily secure the ship in the channel just a few ship lengths from the bridge. About that time, Coast Guard Capt. William Diehl and the Coast Guard staff was contacting the larger harbor tugs in the channel, ordering them to assist. Shortly after the three pushboats had returned to the barges they were tending, the Rickmers Seoul began dragging anchor and drifting down the channel again. About two ship lengths from the bridge, it struck a barge, sending the freighter and three more barges adrift. The three smaller pushboats then re-engaged to round up the loose barges and to prevent the large freighter from striking the 610 bridge.

Meanwhile, the large harbor tug Claxton from G&H Towing headed to the freighter's bow to try to stop the ship. At one point, the force of the wind actually blew the Claxton beneath the bow of the bigger ship, damaging its wheelhouse. Despite the dangers, though, the Claxton and the Haden II, another large harbor tug from G&H Towing, worked with the Buffalo Marine pushboats and used all their force to hold the large freighter against the bank until the danger had passed.

For their heroic efforts, the 24 men on these five boats were nominated for the Certificate of Valor on behalf of the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security.

Here with us today are Capt. Diehl, who led us in the Pledge of Allegiance earlier, and four representatives of the companies that responded so bravely that morning. From G&H Towing, we have president Steve Huffman and director of operations Steve

Huttman. And from Buffalo Marine, we have general counsel Tom Marian and Captain Les Cain. Capt. Cain, by the way, was actually in charge of the San Rafael during the entire incident that morning. Gentlemen, would you stand, please, so that we can thank you?

So, why does their story offer more hope for Harris County's future than anything else? Because it highlights our greatest strength - private individuals with a work ethic and a value system that will see us through good times or bad.

I know I speak for all of Harris County government when I say I am grateful to work for such a great community of people.

Thank you very much.