

# **2011 State of the County Address**

**By Harris County Judge Ed Emmett**

This is my fourth time to deliver a State of the County address. In 2008, after one year as county judge and having not yet been elected, I set forth 10 priorities and recognized six county employees who serve the public in a variety of ways. It was important to convey the purposes of county government and to highlight the quality of county employees who work to serve those purposes.

In 2009, the speech focused on the slowing economy and its impact on Harris County. Plus, it was important to reflect upon the way our community had responded to Hurricane Ike. While it is true that county government did its job in that time of peril, what really set us apart from other places was the neighbor-helping-neighbor attitude!

Last year, I felt it most important to step outside my role as county judge and present the State of the County from the perspectives of several of those who deal with the county. We cannot forget about improving the state of

the county for those who commute to work, use county facilities, or are processed through the county jail.

The common thread that runs through all three previous addresses is that Harris County government exists to meet the needs of those who live in Harris County. Our ability to meet those needs is dependent upon many factors. One of the prime factors is money. Next Tuesday, Harris County Commissioners Court will adopt this year's budget. Because county government depends largely upon ad valorem taxation, and because property values have stagnated or dropped all across Harris County, it should be no surprise that our property tax revenue is projected to be down almost 3 percent from the previous year.

Exacerbating the situation is the fact that the county had to spend nearly all of its reserves to cover costs this past year. There is little margin for error in this year's budgeting. However, Harris County government is far from being broke. Next year's county budget will still be a little more than \$1.2 billion.

For years, Harris County has maintained high bond ratings and has been recognized for its financial approach. The Commissioners and I are committed to continuing that tradition. From the experienced eye of El Franco Lee - the senior member of the court - to the bright, fresh look given by Commissioner Jack Morman, the newest member, Commissioners Court will ensure that county government remains strong and efficient.

What sets county government apart, though, is how it is structured. The vast majority of “department heads” are county-wide elected officials who rely upon Commissioners Court to provide their budget and general guidance. All of us are responsible to the voters who elect us. It is imperative that we not allow partisan politics or petty personal feuds to disrupt the provision of services to the residents of Harris County. County government really is a team effort.

With the county’s financial constraints in mind, I must say a few things about the geographic “state” of the county. That is, the State of Texas.

The Texas Constitution specifically discusses the creation, organization and operation of counties. Counties can only do those things enumerated by the Texas Constitution or by statutes passed by the Legislature. In fact, the Legislature often mandates that counties perform certain services and not always with a defined source of funding. I was pleased to see Gov. Perry name a nine-member task force to analyze the problem of unfunded mandates in Texas. I look forward to sharing my thoughts with Mayor Annise Parker and Houston City Councilman Mike Sullivan, two of the members of that task force.

County government is an arm of state government. As members of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislature meets in Austin, they also are facing budget constraints. I spent the first three days of this week in Austin and was reminded just how hard our legislators work during frenetic sessions. The entire Harris County legislative delegation -from the vastly experienced “Dean of the Senate” John Whitmire and Representative Senfronia Thompson to newcomers Sarah Davis and Dan Huberty - has our interests at heart. Of course, Garnet Coleman’s role as chairman of the

House Committee on County Affairs is critical to Harris County. Sen. Tommy Williams, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, clearly understands what needs to be done, and his expertise serves us well. The key, though, is the leadership of Harris County resident Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst. We are indeed fortunate to have his steady hand at the helm.

Harris County is going to have big changes. Whether those changes are positive or negative depend upon the vision and courage shown by policymakers at all levels. Transportation, health care, particularly mental health, and criminal justice are areas that will require special attention.

Houston, Harris County and this region are perfectly positioned to become the gateway of North America. As ships get larger, more trade comes from places like India, and the widened Panama Canal opens, we are the perfect location for international trade coming to and from North America. The only way we can live up to our potential is to improve our transportation infrastructure – road, rail, water, and air. Just two weeks ago, the final

section of Beltway 8, the Sam Houston Tollway, opened. Where would this community be without the Beltway? Thankfully, the Harris County Toll Road Authority was created through the vision of County Judge Jon Lindsay and a majority on Commissioners Court. The Toll Road Authority will continue to build and operate needed highways – the Hempstead Tollway, the Hardy Extension, and other projects are on the drawing boards. The county will do its part, but it will all be for naught without improving access to the port, designing a more efficient freight rail system, building key sections of the Grand Parkway, and moving forward on other major improvements, all of which will require funding and creativity and vision on the part of legislators.

As important as these projects are to our future viability, they also are vital to the current economy, which is why local firms must be engaged as much as possible. County government stands ready to make it happen!

Harris County is home to the world's greatest medical center, a hospital district that is a model for the nation, and many neighborhood clinics and organizations

supported by thousands of dedicated people. Yet we have far too many residents with no medical home, so they come to our emergency rooms. That is tragic and costly. Fortunately, the Greater Houston Partnership, working with the Houston Galveston Area Council, is working toward a regional concept to provide better care for more people at lower cost. Ultimately, the Legislature and, to a degree, the federal government must provide the framework to make a new system, but Harris County will be a driving force.

Speaking of driving forces, my wife, Gwen, is the strongest advocate for improved health care delivery, so I have a personal interest in seeing things happen.

Now is not the time to cut funding for such efforts. Now is the time to move forward.

While on the subject of health care, mental health issues are a top priority to be addressed. No, let me rephrase that. We have a lot of Harris County residents who suffer from mental health conditions, and we must do a better job of caring for them. Far too many of these people end

up in our county jail – time after time. The cost of incarceration and treatment in a criminal justice setting is staggering compared to proper preventive care and treatment.

Now is not the time to cut funding for mental health programs. Now is the time to move forward - fully funding those programs so that the taxpayer reaps huge benefits in the long run and our residents receive better care.

As for criminal justice, it is no secret that Harris County has a crisis. Our jail is still overcrowded, forcing the taxpayer to foot the bill for sending inmates to jails in other counties and in Louisiana. District Attorney Pat Lykos, Sheriff Adrian Garcia, Commissioners Court, judges and numerous private groups are working to solve this vexing problem. It is killing the county budget. In the meantime, there is some good news. On the juvenile justice side, the Juvenile Board and the Juvenile Probation Department, through an agreement with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, have lowered the population in

the Juvenile Detention Center so much that the need for a new facility is no longer even discussed. However, there is much more work to be done. What are we going to do to steer a course for the next generations of children? I have had lots of positive contact with groups such as Houston Ministers Against Crime. Usually, the contact stems from concerns over the treatment of those accused of a crime. But what are we going to do to actually prevent crime, particularly with young people? We must put more effort into giving our youth better role models and a clearer path toward respect for themselves and others.

In these times of tight budgets and a difficult economy, there will inevitably be other issues that arise. Some will get more attention than others. Frankly, they will not always be the most important, but the most attention grabbing. Catastrophic events grab attention.

Who knows what the upcoming hurricane season holds for our area? The Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management and all of its partners are ready. Their cooperative operation at

TranStar is recognized nationally and is one part of the county budget that must remain strong. The original organization of TranStar might need to be revised, but it needs to stay in the forefront of emergency operations centers.

Since Hurricane Ike, there are many new people in key positions. The State of Texas has a new director of emergency management. Galveston County, Waller County and Liberty County all have new county judges. Houston and Galveston have new mayors. And of course, Jack Morman is our county commissioner whose precinct is most in harm's way. All are working hard to be ready.

Of all the issues to which the public will pay attention, there is one that must be addressed. The Astrodome. What is the future of this iconic symbol of our community? The Commissioners Court, I believe, will work closely with the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation to present a definitive plan to the voters of Harris County for their input. Anything we do to or with the Dome will be expensive, but it is time to make a decision and move on it. Personally, I believe we

owe it to future generations to preserve the Dome as a gathering place for special events, such as festivals. Other interests can be accommodated as they arise, but the first step will be to make the dream of Judge Roy Hofheinz back into a place for all to revel in the creative “can do” spirit that is Houston and Harris County. Every time I drive by the corner of Main and Holcombe, I shake my head in wonder that the Shamrock Hotel is no longer there. I hope not to do the same as an old man at the spot where the Astrodome once stood. The taxpayers have to be engaged early in the process, for it is their Dome.

I have spoken about finances, programs, infrastructure and buildings, but there is more to the State of the County, and that is the perception of the county in people’s minds. People must have confidence in county government. In any organization as large as Harris County (which has more residents than 24 states), there will be hiccups, sometimes with decisions and sometimes with ethics. In every case, it is our duty to be transparent and make corrections as soon as possible. In that regard,

the State of the County is good, but we will strive to be even better.

Finally, I need to discuss the State of the County in terms of people. The decennial Census numbers have been released, and Harris County officially has more than 4 million people. Unfortunately, too many analysts and pundits are focusing on the wrong thing. They are trying to divide us into groups of competitors, instead of uniting us as friends and neighbors with shared interests.

Because Texas is covered by the Voting Rights Act, much attention is focused on the redistricting process for local, state and national offices. For the 14 years I lived in Maryland, I was astonished that there were still multimember legislative districts and other vestiges of discriminatory voting practices, because Maryland is not covered by the Voting Rights Act.

I believe Texas, and particularly Harris County, are way ahead of the curve. Much has been made locally of the rise in the number of Hispanics, yet the Census does not even recognize Hispanic as a racial group. As I've said to many people - including my good friend, Stephen

Klineberg - a generation or two from now, the term "Hispanic" will be meaningless, in my opinion. Two of my grandchildren are one-quarter Hispanic. One needs only to walk through any college campus or shopping mall to see that our community is blessed with a diverse array of ethnic groups. The blending of these groups in future years will so blur the lines as to make ethnic categories largely irrelevant.

The more important aspect of the Census number lies in the tract-by-tract analysis. Harris County still has some racial divides, but overall we are now an integrated community and becoming more so. That will be a curse for those who want to draw election districts to produce their particular desired result, but I think it is a blessing for the long-term strength of our society.

From the county perspective, it is a non-issue. Roads, parks, flood control, libraries, healthcare and all other county services need to follow the needs of our residents. Period. End of story. Let us get about our business with vision and vigor. One example. Spring Creek Park. It's 114 acres of camping, fishing, picnicking

and hiking in northern Harris County. It has been developed through the vision and passion of Commissioner Eversole. Years from now, future generations will find peace with nature there in the heart of an urban area. What a gift!

In conclusion, the current State of the County is financially challenging, but from that challenge can come a clearer focus. We should seize the opportunity to prioritize all that we do.

The State of the County is Texas. As a former legislator, I am confident that our state will live up to the words in our state song. We are the “boldest and grandest.” Now is the time for boldness, so we may, as the song says, “grow in power and worth, throughout the ages long.”

The State of the County is people - people with hopes and dreams and talents and visions. If we create the opportunity for everyone to reach their highest level, then the future State of the County will be secure.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak about the greatest county in America.