



2018 State of the County Address

By Harris County Judge Ed Emmett

Today, September 13, is a great day to talk about the state of Harris County, the nation's third most populous county. Unless September 13 is your birthday, anniversary or some other personally memorable day, you probably gave no thought to the date when you woke up today. The fact that so few took special note of the date is a testament to the current strength of Harris County. Today is the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Ike slamming into our area. Since that deadly, expensive storm, Harris County has gotten stronger, and we have moved on.

Since Hurricane Ike, the Harris County Office of Emergency Management has a new emergency operations center that is arguably the best in the nation. The space and technology are state of the art. But it is the professional staff, led by emergency management coordinator Mark Sloan, that makes the EOC so great. Their constant training keeps them at the top of their profession. In the past 10 years, not only have the emergency facilities and

staff improved, but so have the partnerships and working relationships. The Texas Department of Emergency Management under the leadership of Nim Kidd is a model of efficiency, professionalism and cooperation. Locally, our working relationship with the City of Houston and other jurisdictions has been praised throughout the nation. All the time, I hear amazement at our ability to work together. What the world sees is real. For my part, I cannot imagine a better partner in times of peril than Mayor Sylvester Turner.

With each storm or other challenging event, the working relationships have grown stronger. For example, after too many drownings in underpasses, the Harris County Toll Road Authority, Texas Department of Transportation, METRO and the City of Houston quickly developed and implemented a plan to prevent such tragedies in the future.

But, the little known fact is that the emergency operations center and all of those positive relationships and results would not have been

possible had it not been for the original vision and cooperation that created the TranStar building. Owned by the Texas Department of Transportation, but managed jointly by TxDOT, Harris County, the City of Houston and METRO, TranStar keeps all of us better informed and safer. I wish we could see more such cooperative, innovative approaches in the future.

Now that I mention it, maybe we are farther along in cooperation than most realize. The torrential rains and flooding of Harvey made Harris County work together with an array of different partners.

After spending years of watching the federal government and members of Congress be vilified, I saw elected representatives, appointed officials, and yes, even those dreaded bureaucrats, come to our aid. Our two senators, John Cornyn and Ted Cruz, along with our local congressional delegation worked hard to help us recover. Maybe all of this effort can help remind us that we are one country. Earlier, I jokingly mentioned “those dreaded

bureaucrats”. Social media, talk radio and other outlets have done a disservice by demonizing people who choose to work for government. I have worked with such people at all levels of government. As in any line of work, you can find some who are less than stellar, but as a group, government employees are like anyone else. They have families and live among us and want to make our world a better place.

Since Harris County is an arm of state government, we are tied closely to it. As I mentioned, the Texas Department of Emergency Management is a tremendous partner during crises. That partnership is the result of a continuous sharing of information and training throughout the year, so we are ready in times of crisis. And other offices of state government, particularly the General Land Office, have become trusted partners. Come January and the next regular session of the Legislature, I am hopeful that the voices of reason will prevail and that the working relationship between Harris County and the State of Texas will be strengthened.

When Governor Abbott made the decision to allow Harris County to have a \$2.5 billion bond election in August, he did so for the benefit of Harris County and against the wishes of those who constantly criticize local efforts. During the nearly two dozen public engagement meetings we held prior to the bond vote, area legislators - with a notable exception or two - were actively involved. I look forward to building upon that involvement and upon the 86 percent voter approval of the bond to convince state leaders to not only tap the “rainy day fund” for some of the projects needed to protect Texans who live in Harris County and surrounding counties, but to work with Harris County in many areas.

Rather than spending time concocting revenue cap schemes that will hamper Harris County’s ability to deliver essential services to residents, I believe the Legislature would do better thinking of ways the state and county can be partners. We have a highly praised model for just such a partnership in the pilot project created by Senator Joan Huffman and

Representative Senfronia Thompson to divert people with mental health issues from our jail. My office, along with Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, District Attorney Kim Ogg, Commissioners Court, judges and the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD, have moved that pilot project into full-time reality. Not only does caring for those with mental health issues make us all better, doing so actually saves taxpayer dollars.

In recent years, but particularly after Harvey, Harris County has also become stronger through partnerships beyond governmental boundaries.

Private businesses of all types stepped up to assist in the Harvey response and recovery, but cooperative efforts between Harris County and the private sector extend beyond times of peril. One great example is the creation and operation of the Ship Channel Security District, where the ship channel industries tax themselves and work closely with area offices of emergency management and

law enforcement to ensure the security of our vast petrochemical complex.

Of course, any discussion of the strength of Harris County and its partners must include the role played by non-profit organizations, both large and small. The role played by Baker Ripley in setting up the shelter at NRG Center has become legendary and the ongoing coordination efforts by the United Way make all of our lives better. There are literally hundreds of other non-profits that care for the residents of Harris County. Interfaith Ministries' Meals on Wheels, the Houston Food Bank, and the Dawoodi Bohra are three examples of groups providing nourishment to those who might otherwise go hungry. While Harvey and other crises make us aware of people in need, we must never forget that there are people among us who face their own crisis every day. In the not-too-distant future, there will be an oasis of help in the Third Ward because of the dedication of Chairman Coleman, the generosity of the Houston Endowment, the vision of Dr. Bill Schnapp, and the

get-it-done attitude of Bill Jackson, Harris County's chief budget officer. The historic Riverside Hospital location will become a model for delivery of healthcare, including mental health. Commissioner Ellis has taken a personal interest in this project since he was born there last century.

There are also numerous organizations and individuals toiling constantly to address our need to care for the stray animal population. The county is making progress through spay and neuter programs and an expanded animal shelter, but we rely heavily upon volunteer rescue groups.

Although the past year has seen Harris County focus on recovery from Harvey, I believe we have turned the corner and are now focused on the future.

Harris County does not have to face the future alone. All of us at the county realize that there are lots of people and institutions with ideas that can make us better.

Educational institutions such as Rice University, with its Kinder Institute and SSPEED Center is one

example. There are some in government and politics who have a narrow-minded, anti-intellectual attitude that causes policy makers to ignore and even mock academics and scientists. We have seen it in people who are anti-vaccine, unwilling to believe satellite photos of melting ice caps, and who argue that the Earth is less than 10,000 years old. They are welcome to their own opinions, but policy needs to be based on facts. Harris County is blessed with great universities - Rice, the University of Houston, Texas Southern, Houston Baptist and St. Thomas are all potential sources of good ideas. Texas A&M, under the leadership of Chancellor John Sharp, shepherded us through tumultuous times following Harvey, so I know the Aggies are ready, and I bet the University of Texas has much to offer. So because the overriding theme of this speech has been partnerships and cooperation, some obvious strategic partners should be educational institutions.

And while discussing academics and scientists, there was a positive aspect of Harvey. The coverage of

our travails brought the Houston area to the world's attention. We should leverage that attention.

Mayor Turner has already announced plans to work with the Rockefeller Foundation to make Houston a resilient city. I am already a participant in the Global Resilience Research Network. Harris County will be stronger if we reach out globally.

A slightly different partner has emerged to help Harris County. A partner that was here before there was a Harris County and a partner that is impossible to ignore – nature itself. The phrase I use now is to let nature be nature as much as possible. If we preserve the Katy Prairie and do not encroach on waterways and work with nature, Harris County will be more resilient and more attractive. County commissioners are great stewards of parks and open space, so I expect future generations to be awed by their partnership with nature.

Speaking of future generations, let me conclude by talking about the most outstanding partnership in Harris County – the reinvigorated partnership

between Harris County government and the residents of Harris County. From the trusted voices and images of Jeff Lindner, Francisco Sanchez and others who keep the public informed to the heroic rescue operations of the sheriff and constables, residents have seen county government at work, but this past summer galvanized the relationship. When Commissioners Court decided to ask the voters for \$2.5 billion in bonding capacity, we also promised to involve the public in developing the bond proposal by having open meetings in every watershed. Russ Poppe, the director of the Harris County Flood Control District, Matt Zeve and others took that promise seriously and put together a plan involving several county departments. It was an amazing sight to behold. At every meeting, county residents of all types met face to face with county employees, many of whom spend most of their time behind desks. Suddenly, a human element came into focus instead of abstract numbers and plans. County employees were energized, and the public believed and trusted them. On August 25th,

the one year anniversary of Harvey, Harris County voters approved the flood mitigation bond with 86% voting yes. On that day, Harris County became truly Harris County Strong.

So, on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Ike, a storm we thought was one for the ages, Harris County has now endured a worse storm, but we have emerged with unshakeable partnerships and a belief in each other that we can, and must, carry forward into all of our endeavors.

Harris County is not just strong. Harris County is together and ready to face the future.