

NEWS

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett's Annual State of the County Speech on January 16, 2008

Good afternoon.

I want to thank the Greater Houston Partnership, the League of Women Voters and the sponsors for having me here this afternoon.

You know, when I returned to the Harris County area back in 2003, one of the first groups I joined was the Greater Houston Partnership. Their economic leadership is a large reason our region is as attractive a place to live as it is.

At last year's State of the County Address, I was in the audience as Robert Eckels announced his decision to resign. Now, I stand before you to discuss the county, its present condition and its future goals. Let me assure you, though, I will make no personal announcement. In fact, if I do this right, this speech will not be about me at all. It is about the best run, most Dynamic County in America.

Before I start, I do want to recognize some people who have given me so much support during this past year. The transition back to public life has had rewards and challenges. My wife, Gwen, and three of our four children are here and I thank them for their love and sacrifice. And, a group that has become almost family – the staff in the County Judge's Office.

Now some perspective. With almost 4 million residents, Harris County is the third most populous county in the country. We have more people living here than in 24 states. Harris County covers almost 1,800 square miles. That means lots of roads, parks, courts, libraries, and other facilities. Harris County is fortunate to have leaders, both elected and appointed, who are dedicated and proficient. My work with Commissioners Lee, Garcia, Radack and Eversole has been the most enjoyable of my career.

Any discussion of Harris County must start with recognition of how dramatically we are changing. Demographics, living patterns, employment centers, are all changing. That means the services provided by the county have to change, too. I would be remiss, though, if I failed to note that Harris County does not operate in a vacuum. Our issues and concerns are shared by the cities and adjacent counties. Working with area mayors and neighboring county judges and commissioners is a must, but it is also pleasant and cooperative.

There are many I have worked with, and I appreciate all of them. But, the working relationship between Harris County and the City of Houston is critical to both entities, the region and, in many ways, the entire nation. I personally thank Mayor Bill White for his friendship and support.

My purpose today is two-fold:

First, I will describe ten priorities for Harris County. In a twenty minute speech, the descriptions of the priorities must be brief.

- 1. Fiscal Responsibility:** Harris County has maintained strong bond ratings and a low tax rate over the years, which has made this an attractive place for companies and families. Any one who has lived here for long, knows there are boom times and downturns. Yet, the main products and services of the county can not be shelved, except at serious peril. Job one will always be to make sure the county can do its job. Due to rapidly escalating property appraisals, the county saw a large revenue stream coming this next year. The Commissioners Court was able to provide the

largest tax rate cut in Harris County history. Every year an evaluation will be made to match county needs to the interests of taxpayers.

2. **Mobility:** The strength of our local economy and the sanity of residents are largely dependent upon a transportation system that allows people and freight to move freely. When the Legislature passed Senate Bill 792, Harris County and our toll road authority were suddenly given an opportunity and a challenge.... to complete the toll road system and use some of the revenue to enhance the “free” road network. The timing is perfect, since both the state and federal governments are seriously cutting back our transportation funding. Harris County will work in partnership with TxDOT, the Houston Galveston Area Council, the newly formed Gulf Coast Freight Rail District, and other local governments to stay in front of transportation needs.
3. **Flood Control:** the County’s responsibility for protecting residents and businesses from flooding will be continuous. After all, this is the Gulf Coast.
4. **Parks:** Closely tied to flood control are parks. While many parks are purely recreational or specific purpose, such as dog parks, others provide much needed green space and retention areas. Harris County is committed to providing parks that are functional and that enhance the quality of life in a major metropolitan area such as ours.
5. **Environment:** Like all levels of government and the vast majority of residents, Harris County views protection of the environment as an overriding concern. County government, however, is limited in what can be done. Recently, Harris County joined in a statewide effort to identify and implement best environment practices. Already, county government has made great strides in becoming energy efficient and environmentally friendly. But, we are facing a looming crisis, particularly in water quality, due to the aging infrastructure of developments and subdivisions in unincorporated parts of the county. We are preparing to work with area legislators to address this issue.
6. **Homeland Security & Emergency Management:** Tropical Storm Allison and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita raised the profile of the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, part of the Harris County Judge’s office. What a tremendous, dedicated group. They never stop preparing and getting better. And, you might not be aware, the office’s efforts are supplemented by many volunteer organizations and the best Citizens Corps in America. More than 12,000 area residents are involved. Nobody wants to endure a national or man – made disaster. If we have to, though, Harris County is prepared.
7. **Public Health:** Moving not far from discussion of disasters, the county’s role in public health will continue to grow. While Dr. Palacio and the department are doing a great job and the hospital district is coping with the pressures presented by growth and a rapidly changing population, they will be required to do more and better. Indigent health care is the most basic caring for our fellow human being. It is also ground zero in the fight against epidemics or pandemics. It must be focused on preventive care and be less about emergency care. We live, in arguably, the most outstanding medical community in the entire world, so it would be a shame if we fail to explore creative approaches utilizing that community, both its facilities and its personnel. However, as in so many things, Harris County is a magnet for those who live elsewhere. We must find a way for other jurisdictions to share the cost of our services. But, I must add, the Harris County Health Department and hospital district have such a major role in protecting the overall public health, we can never allow them to become political footballs.
8. **Criminal Justice:** More residents nearly always means more crime. Like it or not, Harris County will have to expand its criminal justice efforts and facilities. The failure of the jail bond proposal was disappointing, and we will have to address the issue again. I specifically want to mention one aspect of criminal justice, though. As County Judge, I chair the Juvenile Board. In discussing crime, it is far too easy to lapse into numbers and statistics. Through a grant from the

Annie Casey Foundation, Harris County is exploring innovative approaches to dealing with juveniles that might allow us to bring more of them back from the brink of a life of crime.

- 9. International Profile:** With the Port of Houston, the Texas Medical Center, and the headquarters for so many international companies located here, Harris County is a major player on the global stage. While the City of Houston and the convention and visitors bureau have done much to raise the area's profile, Harris County is getting more directly involved. The first week of April, my office, working with the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Houston Partnership, and organizations and companies in both countries, will sponsor a trade mission to Mumbai and Pune, India. In June, Harris County will host an international transportation conference here with speakers and attendees from several countries. I urge the consular corps to view Harris County as a working partner.
- 10. Ethics:** Finally, there is another county effort that must, and will, be undertaken to assure that all the others are successful. I started by saying that Harris County is the best run, and most dynamic county in the country. I came into my job as a complete outsider with no previous dealings with county government other than knowing some of the officials and having participated in some transportation meetings with them. I had not been involved in elective politics in almost 20 years. I was the owner of a small business. Therefore, I have a unique perspective. From my vantage point, I believe firmly that Harris County officials and employees are honest, dedicated and hardworking. But, we now live in a "gotcha" world where every mistake or instance of poor judgment is magnified. Even isolated cases can cause damage to the fabric of government, so we must always act to assure the public that government officials and employees are good stewards of their trust. Toward that end, I have initiated discussions with the Texas Ethics Commission, county officials, and legal ethics experts to develop specific steps that can be taken at the county and state levels to address any perception of unfairness or wrongdoing. I have written to the Ethics Commission and to the state Attorney General's Office this week to come conduct ethics training seminars here in Harris County. Next week, I will lay out plans for a Citizens Advisory Task Force on ethics reform and will offer my own comprehensive proposals as well. Under most laws, Harris County with almost 4 million residents and more than 16,000 employees is treated the same as a small, rural county. We need to know exactly what we can and should do locally and what needs to be done through legislation. One result must be a commitment to a process that allows all businesses, small and large to have full access to county work. Open transparent government is a necessity, so the public will have confidence. We live in sad times where cynicism has replaced respect. Public officials and employees are humans. In fact, the reason I have such confidence in Harris County is because I have gotten to know many of our 16,000 or so employees. You read and hear about the County Judge, Commissioners, and other officials, but seldom do you know the folks who are out there every day making this county work. I am pleased to introduce you to six of them now in a short video.

VIDEO

All six of these fine representatives of Harris County are with us today and I am honored to stand with them in working for you. As long as we have dedicated individuals like Karen, Dave, Brian, David, Gerald and Pete the State of the County is excellent.

Judge Moseley, again, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today.

<http://www.judgeemmett.org/biography.asp>