

2016 State of the County Address

By Harris County Judge Ed Emmett

Mayor Turner, thank you for that kind introduction. You and I come from an era that stressed working together even if we are of different political parties and philosophies. You are the third Houston mayor with whom I have served. I look forward to accomplishing much together.

Speaking of working together, I hope the invocation arranged through Interfaith Ministries sends a clear message that Harris County's diversity in race and faith makes us stronger and that we must seek understanding and reject intolerance.

Sheriff Hickman and members of the sheriff's honor guard, you are reminders of those who serve day and night to keep all of us safe. I am honored by your participation today.

As someone who has difficulty carrying a tune, I certainly admire the singing of Nicholas Connors. But even more impressive is the poise of the younger generation.

Thanks, Nicholas.

And special thanks to the talented Bellaire Belles. You might not be aware that when I attended Bellaire High

School, the Belles were a military-style drum and bugle corps. The colonel of the Belles was Gwen O'Brien, now my wife of almost 41 years. And one of the Belles was Sherry Jarrell, now Justice Sherry Radack, wife of Commissioner Steve Radack.

I will save my thanks to the Greater Houston Partnership and the League of Women Voters until the end of my speech.

Two years ago, I was honored to be introduced at the State of the County by a colleague and friend of more than 35 years, Commissioner El Franco Lee. I will miss him. Harris County will miss him. I am thankful that Gene Locke was willing to serve as county commissioner for the remainder of 2016.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I must make an observation about the presidential caucuses and primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire that are drawing so much national attention. More people live in Harris County than live in Iowa and New Hampshire combined. Just an observation.

This is my ninth State of the County address. In years past, I have spoken of Harris County in terms of people and issues. Today, I will talk about Harris County government. Too much rhetoric seems to say that government is inherently bad. I believe Harris County government is an example of government working as it should.

Any discussion of the state of the county must start with finances. At this moment, and for the coming year, the county's financial foundation is solid – perhaps as solid as any local government in the nation. The budget team headed by Bill Jackson has not only maintained our AAA bond rating, they have built a budgetary process that will make sure taxpayer dollars go toward those programs that are most needed to maintain the vitality of this , the nation's third-most populous county.

Speaking of taxpayers, on behalf of all of us who serve in county government, I thank the voters for overwhelmingly approving \$848 million in new bonds. These bonds will allow commissioners Locke, Morman, Radack and Cagle to continue to meet the transportation needs of a rapidly growing population and to provide

improved park space for a county that is becoming ever more urbanized.

Director Mike Talbott and the Harris County Flood Control District face a never-ending battle against flooding as we were starkly reminded last Memorial Day weekend. The additional bonding capacity approved by the voters will provide the county with more resources with which to fight the battle.

When the voters approved \$24 million for expanding and improving the county's animal shelter, they made the daunting task at Veterinary Public Health a bit easier. More importantly, though, there will be countless pets that will be reunited with families. That should make us all smile.

Now that we're smiling, there are quite a few other good news stories regarding Harris County. Following passage of SB1185 by the Legislature in 2013, Regenia Hicks and many others are implementing a pilot program to end the cycle of incarceration that traps far too many of our residents who suffer from mental health issues. On the same front, Sheriff Hickman's officers – along with other area law-enforcement personnel – are focusing more and

more on directing the mentally ill away from the criminal justice system and toward the health care they truly need. A key component of this new approach is an emphasis on helping the homeless population to find the resources they need.

Connected to these activities is a prime example of cooperation between Harris County and the City of Houston. Last year, Mayor Parker and I and other officials broke ground for the construction of the joint processing center, which will streamline criminal justice, save taxpayers money and create an environment more conducive to making sure that those who are arrested are dealt with most appropriately. Hopefully, the joint processing center is a harbinger of things to come in terms of county-city cooperation. In the realm of criminal justice, a regional institute of forensic sciences, or crime lab, makes too much sense to ignore.

Another example of effective government cooperation is the almost completed expansion of the TranStar facility. The building itself is a showcase of the latest technology, particularly in the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Mark Sloan, the

Harris County emergency management coordinator, and his team have the best emergency operations center in the nation. The official opening of the new facility is expected within the next few months.

TranStar is a lot more than a building. It is a concept. It is a cooperative effort between the Texas Department of Transportation, Harris County, the City of Houston and Metro. Each of those levels of government should commit to fully using and maximizing the usefulness of TranStar.

In addition to facilities, infrastructure and major programs to address the needs of Harris County residents, the county engages in a variety of activities that make our community a better place to live. These activities are not necessarily well known, but they contribute to our well-being. For my part, a non-profit called HC Events stages an annual international transportation and logistics conference that keeps us at the cutting edge of international trade.

The late Commissioner El Franco Lee's Street Olympics provide direction and lasting memories for thousands of children. Commissioner Morman's Precinct 2Gether gives

the residents of Precinct 2 opportunities to engage in numerous events for education and enjoyment.

Commissioner Radack's dog parks are legendary, but I have personally witnessed the impact of his providing playing fields for diverse groups such as the Houston Cricket League. And Commissioner Cagle's precinct not only features jewels like the Mercer Botanic Gardens, but he even provides "Shakespeare in the Shade."

Yes, there is much more to Harris County than you might think. I confess that I growl over the fact that too many people focus on the city without understanding they live in the county too. We must all work hard to raise the profile of the county. Over the years, I have seen and heard many references to a city/county rivalry. In fact, there are 34 municipalities in Harris County. Every resident of every municipality is also a resident of the county. Since these residents pay taxes to cities and the county, I want to make sure they know what the county does.

Some challenges facing Harris County need discussion and attention. I will mention three challenges that we cannot ignore in 2016.

First, transportation. Rapid growth has created serious problems in mobility, not just for commuters and passenger vehicles, but for commercial vehicles as well. If the local economy is to continue to grow, freight must be able to move. More and larger ships will not come to the Port of Houston if the freight cannot be moved to its final destination efficiently. Beyond international freight and its critical role in our economy, we must always remember that the so-called “last mile” for freight is nearly always moved by truck. Everything you see on store shelves gets there on a truck.

The Texas Department of Transportation, in anticipation of federal requirements, recognized the need to develop a Texas freight network. For the past two years, I have had the privilege of chairing TxDOT’s Freight Advisory Committee. Last week, the Texas Transportation Commission adopted the recommendations of the committee. I am pleased to say there are many recommendations to improve freight movements in and around Harris County. My personal priority is the I-69 bypass. Currently, no such bypass is even on the drawing boards, but a route to handle traffic from all area ports –

Freeport, Galveston and Houston, as well as traffic flowing to and from Mexico - is the key to avoiding catastrophic congestion. Beyond that specific project, the county, state, surrounding counties, cities and Metro must continue to address the mobility needs on a regional basis. And make no mistake; simply building more roads is not the answer. Rail must be used more to move people and freight. Let me give a clear example. A container ship comes to the Port of Houston carrying 5,000 containers. That, by the way, is not a particularly large ship. If half of its cargo, 2,500 containers, is destined for the Dallas/Ft. Worth area or beyond, that requires 2,500 trucks on I-45 and other roadways. A better solution is to put many of those containers on trains. Wherever possible, we need to move freight by means other than trucks. Railroads, barges and technologies yet to be developed all will have to be used if our area is to live up to its potential as the Gateway of North America. Make no mistake, though, truck traffic in our area will continue to grow. Think back to the aforementioned ship. The other 2,500 containers that are destined to stay in our area will still have to be

hailed by truck, and the cargo in those containers will ultimately be delivered by truck.

The second challenge that cannot be ignored is health care. From indigent health care, provided by Harris Health and private hospitals and clinics, to meeting the mental health needs of the community, to protecting public health through immunizations and other means, Harris County government has a responsibility to its residents. While some at the federal and state levels can play politics with the issue of health care, we cannot.

The county's health care challenge comes in two parts. First is meeting the fundamental needs - providing the facilities and staff necessary to take care of our residents. Harris Health, the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (formerly known as MHMRA) and Harris County Public Health are working mightily to meet those needs, but that is where the second part of the challenge comes into play. How do we pay for the buildings and staff required to meet needs dictated to us by conscience and state law? So long as the county property taxpayer has to bear the cost of health care, we will have trouble meeting the challenge. Refusing to accept federal dollars

available for indigent health care makes no more sense than turning down federal highway funds. When I served in the Legislature, some of my colleagues were willing to reject federal highway dollars because they did not want the federal government mandating the use of seat belts. Not only was their stance ridiculous financially, it would have cost thousands of Texans their lives, since we now know that seat belts really do save lives.

The one person who personally convinced the Legislature to mandate the use of seat belts was Dr. Red Duke, a giant of our community who passed away last year.

Those who now reject federal dollars for health care are not only punishing individuals and families who need access to better care, they are increasing property taxes for all taxpayers.

We need another Dr. Red Duke to bring reason to the issue of indigent health care.

The challenges of transportation and health care affect the daily lives and well-being of the residents of Harris County. The third challenge that must be addressed does not directly impact individuals in such a way, but it is a

challenge that captures the attention, if not the imagination, of many people not only in Harris County but around the world. Of course, that challenge is the Astrodome.

There is no question that the Astrodome is a unique building. The Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects will honor the Astrodome later this month with its 50-year award for buildings of local significance.

Everybody seems to have an opinion about the Dome, but there are six facts that cannot be ignored. One, the Dome is an iconic structure revered by a large majority. Two, the Dome belongs to Harris County, is fully paid for and the current cost of upkeep is minimal. Three, the Dome is a building that is part of the larger NRG complex. It is structurally sound, but major repurposing would be expensive, in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Four, the Texas Historical Commission has a pending application to designate the dome as a state antiquities landmark. While that application is pending, and certainly if the designation is approved, any action taken on the Dome must first be approved by the Texas Historical Commission. Five, the Houston Livestock Show

and Rodeo and the Houston Texans have contractual rights at NRG Park, and those rights must be recognized, including the county's commitment to maintain the other NRG facilities. Six, there is no private interest that has come forward with a viable plan to use the Dome.

Against the background of these facts, and with the realization that the public has little appetite for massive spending on the Dome, I believe the best option is to commit to saving the structure in a manner that provides the most useable indoor space for the current and future tenants of NRG Park, as well as the general public. As I said last year, I believe the Dome floor should be raised to ground level and made into park space that can be used by the Rodeo, OTC, festivals and other gatherings and the general public. The 25,000 people who showed up at the Dome's 50th birthday party last year reinforced my belief. 2016 is the year to make something happen with the Dome. The commissioners, the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation and I have been working to come up with a plan that will breathe life back into the Dome.

It makes no sense to leave the Dome sitting unused. Harris County renovates and updates county buildings all the time, so the Dome should be treated the same way. In addition, there are dedicated community leaders who are eager to work with the county through a conservancy or similar entity to develop and implement a long-term vision for this magnificent structure. I further believe the Dome presents an opportunity for the city and county to form a partnership to preserve this symbol of our community.

Before I leave the topic of the Astrodome, I must address the naysayers. Frankly, the Dome is not an emotional issue for me. It is an asset that belongs to the taxpayers, so the decision is really a matter of asset utilization. Period. It cannot and should not be torn down. Even if demolition were an option, it would cost tens of millions of dollars. And to those who say, "They tore down Yankee Stadium, so we should tear down the Dome," I say: "You just don't get it." Yankee Stadium was not inside a building. The stadium inside the Astrodome will disappear, but the iconic building that housed the stadium needs to be saved. This is the year to do that!

As I prepared this year's speech, I knew from the beginning that Harris County government is in good shape financially and programmatically. Harris County is one of the best run local governments in the country. The commissioners courts before I arrived made it so, and it is my primary goal to work with the current court to maintain that status. That needs to be done not for the sake of those of us in political office, but for the taxpayers and residents.

Much of this speech has centered on cooperation. There is one more area of cooperation to discuss.

I thank the Greater Houston Partnership and the League of Women Voters for providing this annual opportunity to talk to a lot of people. However, to make sure Harris County government remains strong, we will need your help in other ways. There are some ideologues who view government through a lens shaped only by a political agenda. County government is an arm of the state, so I become concerned when state officials propose actions that will work to the detriment of the residents of Harris County. I ask you, as individuals and as members of various organizations, to engage those who would

weaken the strong foundation that has been built in Harris County. When someone says Harris County has a spending problem, remind them of our AAA bond rating and already low tax rates. Or perhaps you can ask them where we should cut spending – criminal justice, health care, flood control or transportation?

I ask you to push back against those who want to play politics with county government.

If they are truly concerned about the taxpayers, they will work with business and civic organizations to design a modern tax system for urban counties – a tax system that does not merely rely on the property tax.

In the world of politics, too many candidates see government as the enemy, yet they want to be part of government. Such people have vilified government employees, yet they expect quality in emergency management, flood control and all other services. We should encourage young, bright, talented individuals to join public service.

I am proud to be a part of Harris County government. I believe in what is being done in Harris County. I believe in the possibilities for the future of Harris County.

If we all work together, those future possibilities will become reality.

Thank you!