

Judge Emmett's Statement on the Astrodome

If we were standing here 50 years ago, we would be in the midst of construction – construction of not just a building, but of a vision of the future. Today, there are many of us who believe this unique building can be used to create a new vision of the future.

Roy Hofheinz's vision was based upon meeting a need. If Houston and Harris County were ever to get a major league baseball team, an indoor stadium was necessary. But Judge Hofheinz saw much more than a baseball stadium. He envisioned a venue for a myriad of activities that could be much more enjoyable indoors, under this dome. In developing his vision of a climate-controlled environment, he turned to experts and he endured the taunts of skeptics. In the end, the vision became a reality that changed the world of sports and entertainment.

Today, we have a different need. What should be done with this building now known worldwide as The Astrodome? It is certainly not needed as a professional sports stadium. It sits next to one of America's premier sports venues, NRG Stadium, the home of the Texans and the Rodeo. Whatever decision is made regarding the future of the Dome must meet two criteria. First, the decision must be in the best interest of the owners, the taxpayers of Harris County. And second, the decision must be part of a plan to make the entire NRG complex a better venue for events and recreation.

When I became county judge in 2007, the future of the Astrodome seemed set. A group had been given exclusive rights to develop the Dome into a hotel. When that plan failed to obtain funding, a new plan was needed, so the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation – at the direction of Commissioners Court – set about the task of finding a new approach. Last November, a bond proposal that would have funded the conversion of the Dome into a multipurpose event center failed. Since that time, Harris County has been looking for the right answer. Just leaving the Dome in place to deteriorate has never been an option, which is

why some of the added-on external features have been removed and the first phase of asbestos abatement has been completed.

Some people feel the Dome should be demolished. It is a valid opinion. Others believe that history and nostalgia mandate saving the Dome. That too is a valid opinion.

I view the Dome as an asset belonging to the taxpayers and, as I said earlier, our decision must be in the best interest of the taxpayers, and it must be part of an overall plan to enhance the entire complex for the use of current and future tenants.

Many ideas of what to do with the Dome have been floated. I cannot go through each and every one. It is important, however, for everyone to know the facts about the Dome and its current status. Every day, I hear or read people saying things that are plain wrong. We have passed out a fact sheet for your review, but let me highlight some of the key facts:

- The Astrodome is owned by Harris County.
- It is completely paid for, and the annual cost of maintaining it is approximately \$166,000.
- When the voters rejected the bond proposal last November, it was NOT an affirmative vote to demolish the Dome.
- The Dome is structurally sound.
- Because an application to designate the Astrodome as a State Antiquities Landmark is pending, any plan must be approved by the Texas Historical Commission.
- The Astrodome is part of an overall complex that needs constant attention and updating.

So after several starts and stops – and recognizing that people hold strong opinions about this building – I believe it is time to put forth a new vision for the future of the Dome.

Rather than try to convert the Dome into something it was never intended to be, I think it is time to look back to the original vision of Judge Hofheinz. That vision was to provide a place for traditional outdoor activities in a climate-controlled space. A space like NONE other in the world.

With that in mind, I am suggesting that we explore the concept of creating an indoor park and recreation area inside the Dome for the people of Harris County. The world's largest indoor park.

It has been suggested that I wait until there is a fully detailed plan before discussing this concept. However, I believe it is important to lay out the vision and, like Judge Hofheinz, call upon the experts.

Thus far, I have discussed the park concept with my colleagues on Commissioners Court, who happen to build and maintain outstanding parks.

I have asked the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo to work with the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation to let us know of helpful design features that could best support their needs. As part of the overall complex plan, Harris County is spending \$10.2 million to upgrade NRG Arena for the rodeo, but the opportunity to move some of their activities out of the sometimes hostile Texas weather should be another plus.

I also have met with the Texans to make sure they understand the county's commitment to maintaining a first-class complex. Attractive usable space next door to the stadium will certainly enhance major events such as the Super Bowl and the NCAA Final Four, but I venture to say the regular game fan experience could benefit too.

So, what are the next steps on this road to realizing a new vision that will once again bring life to the Dome and worldwide attention to our county and city? As with any major park, we need to discuss what features will be included. Here are some of my preliminary thoughts, but by no means is this the entire list of possibilities:

- It should be open to the public except when in use by tenants like the Rodeo, Offshore Technology Conference, or others.
- A large open green would be a perfect place for festivals and other community gatherings.
- General exercise facilities, such as hike, bike and fitness trails would allow those who cannot exercise outdoors an attractive indoor option.
- A pavilion for music and other events would become a major draw.
- Special facilities such as a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics center would be a resource for area children.
- The park would be an ideal setting for specialized museums, halls of fame, etc.
- Sporting facilities from archery ranges to horseshoe pits could find a home in the park.

Let me stress again, converting the Dome into the world's largest indoor park is a vision worth pursuing. In order to realize the vision, we must look to the public sector, the private sector and the general public for ideas and support. Let's all begin that task today.