



your

COUNTYconnection

HIDALGO COUNTY NEWSLETTER | OCTOBER 2013



Residents of Hidalgo County:

October brings awareness of several key issues in Hidalgo County. As we do each year, Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approved a proclamation declaring Domestic Violence Awareness Month and Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Residents are encouraged to promote awareness and prevention of domestic violence incidents. In addition, early detection of breast cancer can save lives, and we encourage and promote regular screening so that, if detected, the illness can be treated as soon as possible.



Another important health and safety concern this month is the onset of flu season, which lasts through the spring. All residents are encouraged to inoculate themselves and members of their families to help prevent the spread of the flu and keep our families safe and healthy.

Finally, the end of October brings about Election Season. Early voting began Monday, October 21, and Election Day is Tuesday, November 5. Residents are reminded that photo identification is now required to vote in person; election identification certificates can be obtained at the Texas Department of Public Safety Offices.

On the ballot statewide are several constitutional amendments, two of which will directly impact and benefit Hidalgo County. We encourage residents to vote in favor of Proposition 6, which will ensure the water security for our future and finance water plan projects identified as part of a statewide water plan. We further encourage voters to vote for Proposition 8, which will repeal a restrictive 1960 amendment that caps funding for a hospital district at 10%, thus allowing the voters of Hidalgo County to create a hospital district and set our own tax rates in the future. Both propositions will benefit our area, and we ask voters to support these critical measures.

Sincerely,

Ramon Garcia

Ramon Garcia
Hidalgo County Judge

BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Wearing pink shirts and ties to promote breast cancer awareness, Commissioners Court approved a proclamation declaring October 2013 as "Breast Cancer Awareness Month" in Hidalgo County. As one of the most urgent health concerns facing women and men, breast cancer is the most prevalent form of non-skin cancer affecting women today. It is estimated that more than 200,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, and tens of thousands are expected to lose their lives to the disease.

Representatives from Doctors Hospital at Renaissance were present to bring awareness to this critical issue, including Cancer Center Director Anabel Arellano-Rodriguez, Cancer Center Foundation Liaison Gaby Gutierrez, and Director



Representatives from Doctors Hospital at Renaissance

of Corporate Affairs Mario Lizcano. During this month-long observance, Commissioners Court encourages residents to join in related activities and initiatives that help raise support and awareness of this serious health concern and contribute to the global fight against breast cancer. Arellano-Rodriguez also reminded the Court and the public about the upcoming "Love Your Cha-Chas" 5k

scheduled for this weekend in Edinburg, and encouraged them to attend and participate in the event, joining thousands in support of breast cancer awareness.

In addition to the members of Commissioners Court, several Hidalgo County officials and employees were also clad in pink to show their solidarity and support of promoting awareness of this disease.

REMINDER: PHOTO ID REQUIRED TO VOTE

Election season is presently underway, with several local city and school elections, a bond election for South Texas College, and several statewide constitutional elections on the ballot. Registered voters are reminded that photo identification is now required to vote, as per a Supreme Court order handed down earlier this year which upheld the Voter ID law to remain in effect. While some Hidalgo County residents were impacted by the new law in recent elections held in September, this November marks the first statewide election with the requirement in effect. As such, all voters must be prepared for what to expect when they enter their polling locations to cast their ballot.

Before being permitted to vote, registered voters are required to show an acceptable form of photo identification; acceptable forms of photo identification include Texas driver's license, Texas concealed handgun license issued by DPS, United States military identification card containing the person's photograph, United States citizenship certificate containing the person's photograph, and United States passport. Voters who do not possess one of the acceptable forms of photo identification can obtain an Elections Identifica-

tion Certificate from the Texas Department of Transportation, which will provide extended Saturday hours at DPS offices in Hidalgo County. Earlier this month, DPS also partnered with the Texas Secretary of State's Office and the Hidalgo County Elections Department to offer convenient mobile EIC sites at public locations such as city halls, libraries, and community centers. While most voters may already possess an acceptable form of photo identification, the EIC is available at no cost to eligible voters who qualify.

For more information about the new photo identification requirements for voting, and for the November Early Voting and Election Day schedules and locations, please visit www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/elections or call 956.318.2570.

THIS ISSUE:

- Breast Cancer Awareness Month 1
- Reminder: Voter ID Required 1
- Feature: Public Defender's Office 2
- Domestic Violence Awareness Month 2
- Hidalgo County Scholarship Recipients 2
- 9/11 Ceremony 3
- Texas Transportation Commission 3
- Commissioner Spotlight - Pct. 3 4

PUBLIC DEFENDER'S OFFICE SAVES NEARLY \$1 MILLION IN 2012

Through a collaborative effort between Hidalgo County, state district and county court Judges, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission and the Public Defender's Office, Hidalgo County's public defender program is resulting in increased cost savings since its inception in 2005.

In 2002, state legislation created the Public Defenders Act mandating that Hidalgo County and other counties provide legal representation for indigent defendants. However, due to the program being underutilized, Hidalgo County was paying a high cost for services rendered by contracting with private attorneys for indigent defendants. Five years ago, Hidalgo County was averaging approximately \$5.22 million in attorney fees paid per year for indigent defense and representation for misdemeanors and felonies.

In an effort to reduce costs, the Hidalgo County district and county courts began assigning cases to the Public Defender's Office's in-house attorneys to serve as representation for indigent defendants. As a result, the County has experienced a significant cost savings.



Public Defender Jimmy Gonzalez addresses students from UTPA's criminal justice program

In 2012, the Public Defender's Office was appointed a total of 2,977 misdemeanor cases, a significant increase from previous years. That same year, the office was also assigned 351 felony cases, compared to zero cases in previous years.

Hidalgo County also began to fully utilize a grant issued by the Texas Indigent Defense Commission which provides funds needed to pay for the services rendered, thereby providing another cost-saving measure for the county. Overall, using typical voucher payment information for misdemeanor and felony cases, the in-house assignment of the Public Defender's Office represents a projected total savings for the fiscal year 2012 of \$952,970. This amount also includes the savings of an expansion of services which now includes the representation of court-assigned juvenile criminal cases. In 2012, the Public Defender's Office was assigned 94 juvenile criminal court cases and is projected to have 180 cases in 2013.

At this time, Hidalgo County is presently seeking additional grants to improve indigent defense services and to help run the Public Defender's Office. Future projects and aspirations of the Public Defender's Office include the expansion of the Alternative Incarceration and Bond Reduction Program, and the implementation of a Protective Order section, a Child Protective Services section and a Capital Murder section in the office.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approved a proclamation declaring October 2013, as "Domestic Violence Awareness Month". Domestic Violence Awareness Month was first observed in October 1987 and created to connect battered women's advocates across the nation who were working to end violence against women and their children. Almost three women are killed by their husbands or boyfriends in the State of Texas every week.



Jerres Unidas - Women Together," expressed the importance of instilling this awareness not only during this month but always as it is something many women and families face every day. Rodriguez also informed Commissioners Court of the different activities that will be held in October in observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

For more information please visit mujeresunidas.org. If you know of anyone who is a victim of domestic violence please call the 24 hour crisis hotline at 1-800-580-4879.

Due to this alarming number, a coalition of organizations has emerged to directly confront the crises. Law enforcement officials, those involved with shelters and hotline services, healthcare providers, the clergy and other concerned citizens, are helping in the efforts to end domestic violence. Hidalgo County Commissioners Court would like to commend the numerous volunteers and professionals and join the efforts to increase public understanding of this important problem.

Community Education Coordinator Rosalinda Rodriguez, representing "Mu-



Rosalinda Rodriguez, Mujeres Unidas

SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS



Hidalgo County Commissioners Court announced the 2013-2014 Employee and Dependent Scholarship Award Recipients:

South Texas College

\$1,000 scholarship for the 2013-2014 academic year:

- Ms. Ashley Garza, Dependent, Daughter of Ms. Sandra Garza, employee at the Hidalgo County District Clerk's Office
- Ms. Aissa Silva, Dependent, Daughter of Mr. Ruben Silva, employee at the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office

University of Texas - Pan American

\$2,000 scholarship for the 2013-2014 academic school year:

- Mr. Uriel Ramos, Employee at the Hidalgo County Elections Department
- Ms. Abigail Zepeda, Dependent - Daughter of Ms. Patricia Salas, employee at the Hidalgo County WIC Department

Hidalgo County congratulates the scholarship recipients for being selected for this achievement and for their efforts to continue to reach their academic goals.

PRECINCT 1 HOLDS 9/11 CEREMONY

In observance of the solemn anniversary of the 9/11/2001 tragedy, Hidalgo County Precinct 1 Commissioner A. C. Cuellar, Jr. hosted a memorial service at the Catholic War Veterans in Weslaco, Texas. Master of Ceremonies Felix M. Rodriguez of the Hidalgo County Veterans Services Organization began the ceremony with the Flag Half-Mast Ceremony to accommodate the Sgt. Benito Alaniz VFW Post 7473 that had another commitment soon after the memorial service. As he began, Rodriguez recognized the lives of the first responders lost during the 9/11 tragedy, and announced the attendance of various emergency services and law enforcement agencies at the ceremony, including Weslaco Fire Department, Weslaco Police Department, Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office, Constables Office, and the Texas Department of Public Safety who stood in formation outside of the Catholic War Veterans during the half-mast ceremony and moment of silence. After the ceremony, Rodriguez led the participants indoors and continued with the program. Rodriguez expressed the importance of freedom in the United States and stated that it is because of our troops in active duty and veterans that the people of the United States are able to experience freedom today.

Rodriguez then introduced Hidalgo County Precinct 1 Commissioner A.C. Cuellar, Jr. to conduct the welcome. In his welcoming, Commissioner Cuellar thanked everyone in attendance and put an emphasis on thanking the first responders who put their lives on the line each day to protect the citizens of the community they serve.



The presentation of colors was conducted by the Donna Independent School District Marine JROTC and the pledge of the allegiance was led by Hidalgo County Constable Precinct 1 Celestino Avila. Father Juan Manuel Salazar, from Elsa Sacred Heart Church, conducted the invocation and requested a moment of silence for the fallen.

Commissioner Cuellar acknowledged the elected officials who were present at the ceremony, includ-

ing former Weslaco Mayor Miguel D. Wise, former 92nd District Court Judge Ricardo Rodriguez and representing Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia, Chris Trevino.

After the ceremony, first responders, veterans and people in attendance enjoyed refreshments, mingled and shared their own recollections of the events of 9/11, a tragedy that will never be forgotten.

TX TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION TOUR

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approved a resolution honoring the members of the Texas Transportation Commission for their continued emphasis and support of improving the transportation projects. Hidalgo County and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has had a mutually-beneficial relationship that has resulted in many joint transportation projects that have served to promote trade and commerce that benefit the residents of Hidalgo County. Most recently, TxDOT played an instrumental role in achieving federal highway designation for Interstate 69 Central and Interstate 2 in Hidalgo County, as well as in the development of State Highway 68.

The Commission held its September meeting at the McAllen Convention Center last month and toured local transportation projects as well as international ports of entry to view first-hand the needs of our area. As part of the tour, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held to commemorate the opening of the first phase of the FM 396 Overpass, in Mission, Texas. Various state, county, and local officials joined the members of the Commission to celebrate the occasion. This overpass will provide easier access to the Anzalduas International Bridge and will help the Rio Grande Valley facilitate the \$1 billion-per-day trade and commerce industry to and from Mexico.

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court welcomed the Texas Transportation Commission members to South Texas and wished them a productive visit, thanking them for their continued emphasis and support on improving the transportation needs in Hidalgo County, across South Texas, and throughout the State of Texas.



FM 396 Ribbon Cutting Ceremony



Members of the Texas Transportation Commission with state and county officials

STC BOND RESOLUTION

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court unanimously approved a resolution in support of the South Texas College (STC) Bond and Maintenance Election scheduled to be voted upon by Hidalgo County constituents on November 5, 2013. The \$159 million bond includes construction and equipping of college buildings at each of STC's five campuses as well as a 3 cent additional annual tax for the maintenance and operation of STC. The 2013 bond election expands capacity to meet unprecedented student population growth. Since 2001, when STC held its last Bond and Maintenance Election, STC's enrollment numbers have increased by more than 18,000 students. In the fall of 2012, STC had a student enrollment of 30,824. STC's projected student enrollment by fall 2020 is 42,000.



Hidalgo County Commissioners Court with STC President Dr. Shirley Reed and STC Board of Trustees

HIDALGO COUNTY APPLAUSE

HONORING FORMER MCALLEN MAYOR RICHARD CORTEZ

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court recognized Ricardo F. Cortez for his distinguished legacy of service to the City of McAllen and Hidalgo County. Born in Mercedes, Texas and raised in Weslaco, Cortez attended Weslaco High School and graduated in 1962 and continued his education at Pan American College graduating with a Bachelor of Business Administration. After receiving his Certified Public Accountant License in 1974, he practiced public accounting and in 1998 joined his practice with a regional firm named Burton McCumber and Cortez, L.L.P. In June 2005, Cortez was elected the eighteenth Mayor of the City of McAllen and was re-elected for a second term in May of 2009. During his tenure, Cortez created assets and accumulated substantial economic resources by constructing a \$53 million convention center with no borrowed funds, constructing a new international bridge, having various parks built or improved, expanded the McAllen International Airport, creating an Arts and Entertainment District, enacting a Historical Preservation ordinance and played a key role in the City of McAllen's "Going Green" projects, which were initiated to clean and beautify McAllen neighborhoods. In January 2013, Cortez announced he would not seek mayoral re-election in order to spend more time with his family.

Cortez is married to Elva Cortez and they have 4 children: Rick Cortez married to Ana, Sandy Chandrahasan married to Gopinath, Jay Cortez married to Susana, and Laura Mangleshots married to Tom. They have eleven grandchildren: Alexi, Carlos, Eric, Alan, Daniel, Mia, Kailani, Lucas, Evan, Delphine and Troy. Upon accepting the recognition, Cortez humbly thanked Commissioners Court and stated that his years of service were a great honor to serve on his part.

Pct. 4 Commissioner Joseph Palacios, who requested the recognition on the agenda under his office, praised Cortez for his leadership and wisdom, and for opening up the doors to welcome and foster partnerships among the two governing entities - City of McAllen and Hidalgo County. Palacios noted that he looked forward to continuing to use Cortez as a mentor, and congratulated him for his service. Hidalgo County recognizes and honors Mayor Ricardo F. Cortez for his 8 years of service to the City of McAllen and Hidalgo County.



Former McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez

HONORING FORMER MCALLEN COMMISSIONER MARCUS BARRERA

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court recognized Marcus Cayetano Barrera for his outstanding and dedicated service to the citizens of the City of McAllen and residents of Hidalgo County. Barrera was born in Fort Ord, California to Dr. Cayetano E. Barrera and Yolanda Barrera, and with his father in the military and serving in the Vietnam War the family traveled. After his father finished his tour he moved the family to the Rio Grande Valley, settling in McAllen, Texas when Barrera was three years old.

In 1984, Barrera graduated from McAllen Memorial High School and after earning his undergraduate degree from Baylor University, he continued his education at the University of Texas-Pan American obtaining a Masters in Business Administration and later, a Juris Doctorate from Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University.

Barrera is presently the Shareholder and Co-Owner of Barrera, Sanchez & Associates, P.C. and has actively participated in various civic groups and organizations, holding a variety of titles where his legal experience and education help his community and the residents of Hidalgo County.

From 2001 to 2008, Barrera served as McAllen Mayor Pro Tem and McAllen City Commissioner, District Two, where over the course of his tenure he helped shape McAllen into what it is today by

leading the city into a thriving economy of businesses, roads, and parks that flourish for its citizens. Barrera thanked Commissioners Court for the recognition and also thanked them for helping him lead McAllen into what it is today. He stated that this sitting Commissioners Court was one of the best, and was proud to have County leaders working as hard as they do to accomplish monumental achievements such as the creation of the medical school. Barrera was accompanied by his wife, Velma Barrera and his mother Yolanda. Barrera has one daughter Isabela, and twin sons, Andres and Diego.

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court honors Mr. Marcus Cayetano Barrera for his dedication and commitment to the citizens of McAllen and Hidalgo County.



Former McAllen Commissioner Marcus Barrera

COUNTY COMMISSIONER SPOTLIGHT

COMMISSIONER JOE M. FLORES HIDALGO COUNTY PRECINCT 3

Serving western Hidalgo County

Serving his third term in office, Commissioner Flores has seen abundant growth and progress under his leadership.

From paving colonia roads to installing crosswalks and school crossing signs at local schools, Commissioner Flores strives to improve the quality of life of every resident and constituent in Precinct 3.

Accomplishments

During his seven years in office, his accomplishments include:

- Interlocal agreements with the City of Mission, Sullivan, Penitas, Granjeno, Palmview, Palmhurst, La Joya, and McAllen for the paving and overlaying of roads
- Infrastructure for the City of Palmhurst
- Brought new businesses, Whataburger, Walgreen, WalMart
- Renovation of Veteran's Pavilion
- Renovation of Los Ebanos Park (in progress)
- Building of third substation for landfill located in Los Ebanos

