



your COUNTYconnection

HIDALGO COUNTY NEWSLETTER | SEPTEMBER 2013

Residents of Hidalgo County:

September is a busy time of year for us here at Hidalgo County. Not only are our employees and their families bustling with the business of the new school year, but our County Commissioner precinct offices have worked diligently to make sure our county roads are prepared and on-track to accommodate the busy transportation season, ensuring that children living in rural areas of the county have access to safe and reliable roads to travel to and from school.



In addition, we remain in the midst of hurricane season, and our County leaders and employees are keeping an eye on the tropics for any developments that would affect our area. The latter part of the summer

has brought ample rain, bringing relief to our drought-stricken areas, but too much rain is always a problem for low-lying areas and areas with poor drainage. Our county emergency management and operations teams are preparing with training exercises and learning experiences to remain ready to act in the event of an emergency.

Finally, this time of year brings the annual budget cycle. Our county revenues have experienced minimal growth over the last few years, while steadily increasing expenditures to accommodate the growth in population and demand for services. Our County leadership is adamant about not raising taxes, so we have to devise creative solutions to address this year's shortfall. We are looking at methods to cut expenditures across the board, as well as exploring innovative means of bringing in new revenues to the County. Some of the solutions are short-term fixes, so at the same time, we must plan to address and resolve our present budget challenges while planning for the future.

Sincerely,

Ramon Garcia

Ramon Garcia
Hidalgo County Judge

JUDICIAL ANNEX RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY

On August 16, 2013, Hidalgo County hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony in celebration of the addition of the new judicial annex to the Hidalgo County Courthouse. The Judicial Annex houses County Courts at Law 7 and 8, Master Courts 1 and 2, the Child Protection Court, and District Clerk staff.

Court at Law 4 Judge Fred Garza, County Court at Law 5 Judge Arnoldo Cantu, County Court at Law 6 Judge Albert Garcia, County Court at Law 8 Judge Rolando Cantu, Master Court 1 Judge John Rivera, Child Protection Court Judge Carlos Villalon, County Tax Assessor-Collector Paul Villarreal, District Clerk Laura Hinojosa, District Attorney Rene Guerra, Hidalgo County Democratic

In attendance at the ceremony were many County officials and judicial leaders, including County Judge Ramon Garcia, Pct. 1 Commissioner A. C. Cuellar, Jr., Pct. 2 Commissioner Hector "Tito" Palacios, Pct. 4 Commissioner Joseph Palacios, 92nd State District Ricardo Rodriguez, 139th State District Judge Bobby Flores, County



Party Chair Kelly Rivera Salazar, State Representative Terry Canales, City of McAllen Commissioner Aida Ramirez, University of Texas Pan-American President Robert Nelsen, and ambassadors from the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce and the RGV Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

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OPERATION LONE STAR VIP & MEDIA DAY

Local city, school, county, state, federal, military officials and partner organizations, as well as local media, were in attendance at the annual Operation Lone Star VIP Luncheon, which provided an opportunity for leaders to get first-hand information on the positive impact Operation Lone Star has on the citizens of the Rio Grande Valley.



of recipients of dental and vision services at the PSJA site totaling over 1,000 as of noon on Thursday. The cost associated with providing dental and vision services is over \$240,000, and these services are provided at no cost to recipients. Project coordinators anticipated that the entire operation's projections for this year for all four sites in South

Operation Lone Star is a public health emergency preparedness exercise, held annually during the last week of July. This year marks OLS' fifteenth year providing free medical services to South Texas residents, including health screenings and treatments, immunizations, student physicals, hearing and vision exams, behavioral health evaluation, and for the first time, dental health exams were offered at PSJA High School.

Texas totalled over 10,000 registered patients and a total of 42,000 services provided. These projections far surpass last year's totals.

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The expanded services have brought an increase in demand for services, with the total number

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JUDICIAL ANNEX RIBBON CUTTING

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Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia and 139th State District Judge Bobby Flores delivered remarks on behalf of the County. Judge Garcia noted that though today marked the occasion of a move to centralize the County's judicial system back at the courthouse square, the Judicial Annex is by no means permanent solution; the County desperately needs a new courthouse. Judge Flores echoed Judge Garcia's sentiments, and conveyed great gratitude to the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court for taking the steps to make it a reality. Judge Flores also specified another major change happening at the Courthouse - the County's transition to e-filing for civil cases as per a Supreme Court mandate, and announced the E-filing Service Provider Fair held later in the day



in the Courthouse lobby. After closing remarks, the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce and the RGV Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, along with all dignitaries and residents in attendance, cut the ceremonial ribbon, celebrating the opening of the Hidalgo County Courthouse Judicial Annex official. Courtroom and office open houses were held following the ceremony, with refreshments and mingling among guests.

E- FILING IN HIDALGO COUNTY

Major changes are coming soon to filing procedures for civil cases in Hidalgo County. To comply with a recent Supreme Court mandate, Hidalgo County is preparing to transition to electronic filing for all civil case, including family and probate cases, by attorneys in appellate courts, district courts, statutory county courts, constitutional county courts, and statutory probate courts. The Supreme Court mandate aims to address inefficiencies and expenses relating to the processing, management and storing of paper court documents. Electronic filing of digital documents in this information age produces a number of benefits including quicker access to documents, reduced storage costs, increased efficiency for attorneys and litigants, reduced printing and mailing costs, and increased transparency and access to the courts, the Supreme Court order states. Texas courts first experimented with e-filing in the 1990s and saw an increase in efficiencies which prompted a pilot project to test and refine the e-filing model, and since then, e-filing has been offered as a convenient option for filers throughout the state. However, there were multiple systems available for e-filing, each various requirements, making it difficult to efficiently navigate the system and reap the true benefits and ease of e-filing.

What became evident was the need to develop a streamlined, centralized and uniform statewide e-filing system. The Supreme Court's Judicial Committee on Information Technology recommended that the Court "mandate a statewide, uniform system of e-filing for all courts with a phased implementation starting with the most populous counties." The Office of Court Administration approved an agreement with a vendor to provide e-filing to all Texas courts through the TexFile System; the statewide system also reduces the cost of e-filing for filers by 48 percent.

In Hidalgo County, beginning January 1, 2014, all civil case filings must be electronically submitted to County and District Clerk's offices. This means that attorneys will no longer be able to manually file cases in person at the courthouse and must submit documents electronically using the TexFile electronic filing system through one of the state certified e-filing service providers of their choice. A listing of vendors and their services can be found on the TexFile website at www.texfile.com, as well as frequently asked questions, informational videos, and trainings on the TexFile system. Attorneys can earn one hour CLE credit after viewing the TexFile training videos and taking a short exam. To ease the transition, Hidalgo County has approval to implement a "permissive" go-live with e-filing, which will commence on September 17, 2013. Filers are encouraged to begin utilizing the system at this time to become accustomed to using the new electronic filing system and procedures to ensure 100% compliance with the new law in January. For more information, visit the Hidalgo County website at www.co.hidalgo.tx.us.

OPERATION LONE STAR VIP DAY



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At the luncheon, County Judge Ramon Garcia applauded the coordinated efforts by all entities, organizations, and individuals to provide the critical medical services and help meet the health care needs for residents and families throughout South Texas. Also in attendance and speakers at the luncheon included Texas Department of Emergency Management Chief Nim Kidd, State Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr., State Representative Bobby Guerra, and State Representative Ryan Guillen. Representatives from the offices of U. S. Congressman Henry Cuellar, State Representative Sergio Munoz and State Representative Oscar Longoria also

attended on their behalf. Precinct 2 County Commissioner Hector "Tito" Palacios, District Clerk Laura Hinojosa, State District Judges Ricardo Rodriguez and Juan Partida were also in attendance to show their support of the efforts. Leaders honored and recognized the efforts of all partners including the state, county, and local health departments, Texas Military Forces, Texas Department of Emergency Management, local school districts, and especially, the volunteer brigades such as Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps.

OLS VIP and media day was an excellent opportunity for leaders and local media to witness first-hand the tremendous impact that OLS has on residents of South Texas. A week after the luncheon was held, Hidalgo County Commissioners Court recognized the participating school districts of PSJA ISD and La Joya ISD for the critical role they played to make this year's OLS a great success.

PHOTO ID NOW REQUIRED TO VOTE

Hidalgo County Elections Administrator Yvonne Ramón reminds voters that photo identification will now be required for voting in person, as per a Supreme Court decision which upheld the Voter ID Law requirements earlier this year. The new requirements were in effect for recent city and school district elections held this month, and will be in effect for the constitutional election in November.

“In Hidalgo County, we are working to make sure our voters understand the new ID requirements and have all the information they need to cast their ballots,” said Ramón. “We are taking the steps necessary to ensure our elections workers are trained and that our residents are informed so that they can seamlessly adapt to the new changes,” she added.

A voter will be required to show one of the following acceptable forms of photo identification at the polling location before the voter will be permitted to cast a vote:

- Texas driver license issued by the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) (most common form of photo identification)
- Texas Election Identification Certificate issued by

DPS

- Texas personal identification card issued by DPS
- Texas concealed handgun license issued by DPS
- United States military or Veteran Affairs identification card containing the person’s photograph
- United States citizenship or naturalization certificate containing the person’s photograph
- United States passport

With the exception of the U.S. citizenship certificate, the naturalization certificate and the Veteran Affairs ID, the identification must be current or have expired no more than 60 days before being presented at the polling place. This photo ID

requirement is for voters casting a ballot in person, not by mail. Voters age 65 and older may vote by mail. Detailed information about acceptable identification, including sample pictures of the documents, can be found online at www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/voterid. If voters are unable to provide an acceptable form of photo identification, they will be allowed to vote provisionally; voters will have to present an acceptable form of photo ID and have



it accepted by the Elections Administrator during the “cure period,” and no later than six calendar days after Election Day, in order for their ballot to be considered valid. County officials are encouraging voters to update their voter registrations to reflect the names on their IDs. Voters may use IDs that do not exactly match the name on their IDs if the names are substantially similar but will have to sign an affidavit stating they are the same person. Voters may look up their registration at www.votetexas.gov and if their name is not an exact match they can update their voter registration online at the same website. The last day to register to vote for the November election is October 7, 2013. To check and update their registrations, voters can visit www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/elections or call 956-318-2570 for more information.

For more information about photo ID requirements including exemptions, visit www.votetexas.gov. Information on how to obtain an election identification certificate if you do not have another form can be found at www.dps.texas.gov.

PCT. 4 COMMISSIONER PALACIOS HOSTS GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY FOR SUNFLOWER PARK

Dozens of San Carlos residents, families, special guests, and children from the Edinburg Boys and Girls Club - San Carlos site, joined Hidalgo County Pct. 4 Commissioner Joseph Palacios at a ceremonial groundbreaking for Sunflower Park in San Carlos. The new park will provide outdoor play space and recreational activities for residents and families in the San Carlos area, which has a population of approximately 5,936 residents. The project is scheduled to be constructed in three phases; the groundbreaking ceremony marks the commencement of Phase I. Later phases include the construction and development of a Community Resource Center to serve children and families residing in the area.

being funded through Precinct 4 funds in addition to federal funds from the Hidalgo County Urban County Program. To maximize resources, the project infrastructure and construction work will be done in-house. The project is anticipated to take 3 to 6 months to complete.

In his remarks, Commissioner Palacios noted that though he is from Edinburg, San Carlos has always held a special place in his heart. He acknowledged the work of his staff, and of community partners, who worked together to bring this vision into a reality. With over 6,000 residents that live in San Carlos, Palacios said the children and families of San Carlos deserve to have all the amenities and recreational activities that are offered inside city limits.

“The residents of San Carlos deserve this,” Palacios remarked. “We are so proud to be able to get this project off the ground and provide this park and community center for the benefit of our San Carlos residents and families.”

Palacios also noted that the convenient access to Hwy 107 also means that residents and families from the Delta Area will also be able to access and utilize Sunflower Park, and announced the upcoming plans for State Highway 68, a state transportation project that will mean easier access to major highways and interstates and allow for greater growth in the area.

After his closing remarks, project partners, community organization representatives, and children in attendance assisted in turning over shovelfuls of dirt, ceremonially marking the commencement of the Sunflower Park project.

Proposed amenities for the park include a pavilion with basketball courts, rest-rooms, play-ground equipment, walking trails with exercise stopping stations, picnic tables with shelter, a BBQ area and a soccer and baseball field.

This initial phase of the project will cost an estimated \$500,000 to construct; the total project cost is approximately \$1.13 million. The project is



HIDALGO COUNTY APPLAUSE: HONORING JUDGE MARIO E. RAMIREZ, JR.



Amid a remarkable backdrop of over 15 state district and county court judges in attendance, Hidalgo County Commissioners Court recognized 332nd State District Court Judge Mario E. Ramirez, Jr., for achieving a momentous milestone and completing his 30th year as Judge of the 332nd Court and a total of 33 on the bench. Judge Ramirez, a native of Roma, Texas, is Hidalgo County's Senior Judge and is currently the longest-serving, currently-presiding Judge in Hidalgo County and in the 5th Region of the State of Texas.

Judge Ramirez graduated from Rio Grande City High School in 1968, attended the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana where he obtained his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1972, and attended St. Mary's University School of Law in San Antonio, Texas, where he graduated with a Juris Doctorate in 1974.

Judge Ramirez began his career as an attorney for the Department of Public Welfare in 1975 and later opened a private practice. In 1980, Judge Ramirez was appointed by Hidalgo County Commissioners Court as Judge of County Court at Law #2, beginning his tenure serving Hidalgo County residents. In 1981, Judge Ramirez was appointed by then-Governor Mark White as State District Court Judge of

the newly-created 332nd State District Court. On January 1, 1983, Judge Ramirez began his long and illustrious occupancy in this particular courtroom and has been the sole officeholder of the Court since its inception.

Judge Ramirez's lifelong career as a public servant has had numerous honors and recognitions to his name. He is a diligent advocate for the protection and improvement of life for youth and presently serves as the judicial overseer of the Hidalgo County Juvenile Probation Department, and in 2009, became the namesake of the newly expanded Mario E. Ramirez Jr. Juvenile Justice Center, a short-term stay facility for 96 male and female juveniles to help better and steer them away from a life of crime.

Judge Ramirez is married to Noelia Ramirez; they have three children, Melissa Ramirez, Rebecca Ramirez Stocker, and Mario Eduardo Ramirez.

When presented with the resolution, Judge Ramirez humbly and graciously thanked Commissioners Court and his colleagues for being part

of such a joyous occasion. Judge Ramirez, was accompanied by his wife Noelia Ramirez, daughter Rebecca Ramirez Stocker and his father Dr. Mario Ramirez Sr; Honorable District and County Court Judges as well as, County elected officials. Members of Judge Ramirez's court staff were also present, including Court Coordinator Tootsie Barrera, Assistant Court Coordinator Damian Carranza, Court Reporter Regina Vasquez and Bailiff/Interpreter Joe Perez.

Also in attendance were most of Hidalgo County's state district and county court judges, all wearing their judicial robes; they attended the ceremony as a demonstration of respect and admiration for Judge Ramirez to witness and celebrate the occasion.

On behalf of Hidalgo County, Commissioners Court congratulated Judge Ramirez Jr., for his tremendous accomplishments throughout his legal and judicial career, for his leadership and commitment to improving the lives of youth, and for his dedication to serving the citizens of Hidalgo County and the State of Texas.



COUNTY WINS NATIONAL AWARD

Hidalgo County was recognized for receiving the National Association of Counties (NACO) 2013 National County Government Month Award. Hidalgo County received 2nd Place in the Metro County Division for its efforts to increase public awareness of county programs and services while incorporating this year's theme of "Smart Justice: Creating Safer Communities." Celebrated in April, Hidalgo County was one of only six counties across the country honored for outstanding public outreach. The purpose of the National County Government Month Award program is to encourage counties to participate in National County Government Month (NCGM) and recognize those counties that sponsor outstanding programs to reach out and educate citizens about county government during the month of April.



COUNTY COMMISSIONER SPOTLIGHT

COMMISSIONER HECTOR "TITO" PALACIOS HIDALGO COUNTY PRECINCT 2

Commissioner Hector "Tito" Palacios is serving his 15th year as County Commissioner for Precinct 2. He is a native of Hidalgo County and has held public office beginning with his service on the PSJA school board then serving as Mayor of San Juan before he held the office of County Commissioner.

Throughout his tenure, Commissioner Palacios has made a tremendous impact on improving the quality of life for residents and families in Precinct 2 through his sound fiscal responsibility and dedication to public service.

He has implemented numerous projects over the past 14 years including maintaining over 123 miles of precinct roadways with infrastructure and colonia improvements totaling over 6 million dollars, provided assistance to 8900 colonia residents with living improvements, maintained over 50 acres of parkland for families to unite, and opened

two community resource centers that have served over 760,000 people to date.

Commissioner Palacios has also been instrumental in working towards promoting "green" initiatives to conserve natural resources. His Precinct 2 Administrative Office is the County's first "green" government facility, harnessing solar and wind power to provide electricity. He continues to be a good environmental steward of the community, collecting over 155,000 tons of trash and 70,000 tons of tires keeping Precinct 2 as clean as possible.

Commissioner Palacios is married to Berta Palacios and has three children.

