



COUNTY CONNECTION

HIDALGO COUNTY: GOVERNMENT IN ACTION | August 2014

Message from County Judge Ramon Garcia

Our county and region has drawn national and international attention, mostly due to the surge of Central American immigrants and, especially, unaccompanied minors.



What could have been a negative spotlight on our area has been, for the most part, a positive and accurate depiction of a united community that shows

compassion to the less fortunate and that follows our state and country's laws.

As you may already know, we are working with our partners and with Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa on creating a hospital district in Hidalgo County. In addition to helping fund the new medical school, the hospital district will also assume the county's responsibility to fund indigent care – which, under current regulations is 8 percent of our budget.

There is a great deal of speculation on the impact a Hospital District will have on residents. I assure you that all of the partners at the table are in agreement that there should be as little burden to taxpayers as possible. Every area in the state with a medical school has a taxing district to help fund it and, in each case, the impact has been an economic boon to the community, rather than a burden. Once we have more information to share, we will begin meeting with our constituents to provide details and answer questions.

After much debate, research and input from the affected communities and in open forum at Commissioners Court, we passed a new Sanitation Permit Fee for those who use the county's collection sites. We spend approximately \$5 million annually to maintain and operate the program; the new fee will help cover almost half the cost.

Much of the important county news is addressed in these pages. Our county strives for transparency and *County Connection* is one way of keeping you informed on your County Government in Action.

Hospital District will help fund new med school



Texas State Rep. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa at the July 22 Commissioners Court meeting.

will be well below the cap. He added that the additional population and businesses moving into the area because of the new medical school will boost the tax rolls and promote economic development.

Commissioners Court also voted unanimously to adopt a Memorandum of Understanding

provide \$500,000 and Mission will provide \$250,000.

McAllen, Edinburg and Pharr have joined the county in submitting a Memorandum of Understanding to the UT System, said Hidalgo County Special Projects Director Erika Reyna.

If created, the \$5 million annual commitment as well as the County's obligation to fund indigent care will be assumed by the new Hospital District.

Texas Senator Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa recently updated County Judge Ramon Garcia and Commissioners on proposed legislation to create a Hospital District in Hidalgo County.

Although there is a 25 cent cap on future taxes, the amount being discussed is even lower.

He stressed that every area with a medical school in Texas also has a Hospital District with taxing authority to help fund it.

Hinojosa said he has been meeting with representatives from the cities of Edinburg, McAllen, Mission and Pharr along with representatives from Hidalgo County to discuss the make-up of a Hospital District Board, its duties and responsibilities, and taxes.

While the State of Texas allows for up to 75 cents to be taxed, local officials agreed to cap the Hospital District taxes at 25 cents, Hinojosa said.

The cap is not the amount that will be taxed – the actual amount that will be assessed



Judge Ramon Garcia and Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa at a recent meeting. L-R: Senator's Legislative Director Josh Reyna, Senator Hinojosa, County Chief Administrator Yolanda Chapa, County Special Projects Director Erika Reyna, Judge Garcia and County Economic Development Director Bobby Villarreal.

between the county; the cities of Edinburg, McAllen, Mission and Pharr; and the University of Texas System for the development of and funding for a medical school.

Edinburg City Manager Ramiro Garza said part of the negotiations with the UT System to create a new medical school included commitments by local municipalities and the county to help fund it for 10 years by contributing \$5 million per year.

As it stands, McAllen will provide \$2 million, Edinburg and Hidalgo County will each provide \$1 million, Pharr will

Did you know?

Hidalgo County is one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States and is the 8th largest (most populous) of 254 counties in Texas.

Our county was named after Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the priest who raised the call for Mexico's independence from Spain.

The county's largest city is McAllen and Edinburg is the county seat.

Pct. 1 Partners with city, school district and chamber on project

Collaboration was the sentiment during the groundbreaking for the Sugar Cane Road and Drainage Improvement Project held, July 1 in Weslaco.

The project is part of the “Working Together for a Stronger Weslaco Community” initiative which partners Hidalgo County Precinct 1 with the City of Weslaco and Weslaco Independent School District to provide better roads and drainage to Mid-Valley communities.



Representatives from the City of Weslaco, Hidalgo County and Weslaco ISD at the Sugar Cane Road groundbreaking.



Pct. 1 Commissioner A.C. Cuellar speaks with reporters.

The total construction cost for the improvement is \$724,000, which will be split evenly between Hidalgo County Precinct 1 and the City of Weslaco. Weslaco ISD provided some of its land for the project. A one-foot retention pond will be built to serve as drainage outfall for Sugarcane Road in case of heavy rain.

When the pond is dry, it will serve as a soccer field and playground for area children. In addition to drainage, the project will widen the road. The project is expected to take three to four months to complete.

Linn-San Manuel to get new Emergency Services Facility soon



Precinct 4 Commissioner Joseph Palacios held a groundbreaking for the new Linn-San Manuel Emergency Services Facility on June 11. The new facility will be located on SH 186, just east of Hwy 281 and will provide the tools for first responders to serve area residents, including a fire station with three bays and an ambulance service, which will be offered by the Emergency Service District #3.

Hidalgo County is home to one of the fastest growing regions in the nation. We provide health and justice to the 807,000 residents of our county as well as a variety of services offered by our four precinct offices to residents who live outside city limits. We partner with the cities in our county on services, special projects and economic development. We strive to be accessible and responsive to our citizens. We are committed to providing excellent public service through the values of leadership, transparency, collaboration, fairness, respect and fiscal responsibility.

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Cost of new courthouse steep but doing nothing may be more costly

Commissioners have a dilemma. At \$157 million, the estimated cost to build a new courthouse seems excessive; but doing nothing may end up costing more if the county stays with the status quo.

That the current courthouse is inadequate for modern court operations, overcrowded, unsafe and a liability is indisputable:

- The basement, where the electrical system is located, floods and requires pumps to keep it dry.
- Granite blocks on the building’s exterior are coming loose and falling – even with work done to reattach and fortify them.
- The exits aren’t sufficient in case of fire or other emergency evacuation.
- Currently the inmates brought to court from the Hidalgo County Jail pass through the same public corridors as the public and staff. This creates a safety issue, exposing the public to potential harm.

“We know that there are safety issues involving the courthouse and, if they are not addressed, we’d better hope that no-one is harmed,” said County Judge Ramon Garcia.

The issue among those who oppose a new building is how to pay for the project. The City of Edinburg has agreed to cover some of the expenses. In past discussions, city leaders have indicated they would help cover from 20 to 25 percent of the cost, Garcia said.

“We must be good stewards of the community we serve and ensure that any monies spent are absolutely necessary,” Garcia said.

Executive Assistant Michael Leo, who is heading the courthouse project for the judge’s office, said the county has been looking into opportunities to lower the cost, including reviewing the proposed design to see where savings can be achieved as well as exploring funding mechanisms to finance the project without having an impact on the existing tax rate.

“We must be good stewards of the community we serve and ensure that any monies spent are absolutely necessary,” Garcia said.

A new building will provide a modern 21st century judicial complex that is more secure and technologically advanced and – at nearly 464,000 square feet – will provide enough space to meet the county’s needs for the next 75 to 100 years.

Hidalgo County Clerk:

“Our staff works diligently to serve the public.”



*Hidalgo County Clerk
Arturo Guajardo Jr.*

As the official record keeper for the county, the Hidalgo County Clerk is responsible for the safekeeping of all vital records, such as marriage licenses as well as birth and death certificates.



Busy work day at the County Clerk's office.

Other documents that the office is responsible for include military discharges; cattle brands; beer, wine and liquor licenses; land records, such as subdivision plats, deeds and liens; court records for County Courts at Law including criminal, civil and probate matters; and Commissioners Court.



The County Clerk's office criminal department.

The County Clerk's office prides itself on its ability to preserve, restore and protect much of Hidalgo County's history.

“We are dedicated to seeking the latest in technological advancements for county government,” said County Clerk Arturo Guajardo Jr. “Our primary goal is to provide our public with the best service its government can offer.

We firmly believe that county government and accesibility go hand in hand, and strive toward that objective in every effort.”

County land records are available via the web site for searching, viewing, printing and downloading.

“Our office continues to move forward with numerous projects that benefit the public and other county offices,” Guajardo said. “We stand committed and motivated in serving our general public as efficiently as possible.”



County Clerk employee going through files at the warehouse.

Guajardo says no two days are alike at the Clerk's Office.

“Over the past 15 years our office has implemented the use of various technological advances to improve efficiency,” Guajardo said. “Many of our services are now accessible on-line as well as on public user terminals located in our office.”

He added that the County Clerk's office has repeatedly been recognized at the state and national levels for innovation and excellent customer service.

County Clerk's office services

- Marriage Licenses
- Birth and Death Records
- Official Records
- Recording
- Probate
- Civil Department
- Criminal Department
- Collections

The office is located on the first floor of the County Courthouse. Contact them at: 956-318-2100

Immigration: Country needs bipartisan solution to resolve

Judge Ramon Garcia and many other Jarea officials have stated that the surge of immigrants from Central America have not caused an increase in crime or disease and, as such, we don't need nor desire help securing the border by National Guard troops – and even less by civilian militia.

Here are some facts related to the impact on Hidalgo County:

- Interim Sheriff Eddie Guerra reports no increase in crime due to the influx of immigrants. “The \$12 million a month the State is paying to bring in the National Guard would be better used in bolstering local law enforcement agencies including the DPS, border city police departments, and border sheriff offices,” Guerra said.
- Health and Human Services Chief Administrative Officer Eddie Olivarez reports no significant increase in health issues due to the influx of immigrants.
- Unaccompanied minors are not released to local officials or charities.
- No federal, state or local funds are used to purchase the transportation fares for the family units released here. The fares are purchased by family members for the immigrants to join them.

Garcia testified at the Field Hearing on the surge before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security on July 3 in McAllen.

“My sincere desire is that you will take our testimony and your own experiences back to Washington and not only identify the problem but provide solutions. Blaming others and turning this situation into a partisan political fight is not going to accomplish what we so urgently need here on the border and throughout our country, which is a workable solution, implemented through effective policy.”



Judge Ramon Garcia and Bishop Mark J. Seitz chat before testifying at the July 3 Field Hearing on unaccompanied minors in McAllen.

Head Start helps low income children succeed in all areas

The Hidalgo County Head Start Program works to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by providing the opportunity for early childhood education to low income families. The federally funded program offers school readiness, nutrition, dental, mental health, health and special needs services to children 3 to 5 years old. The program currently has 43 centers to teach more than 3,680 children from across the county.



Hidalgo County Head Start students at Commissioners Court on April 8.

Every school year Head Start pupils are provided with lessons and activities to enhance their social and emotional development, cognitive development and language development. Small classrooms allow teachers and aides to work one on one with children, instructing them on reading, math and history through fun, educational activities.

Head Start's commitment of inclusion means that children with special needs learn side-by-side with other pupils; classrooms are modified to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities; and teachers individualize the curriculum in order to meet the needs of all the children.

Improving the lives of the children of Hidalgo County is not Head Start's only goal, they also seek to help parents. Some of the services provided to parents include the annual Parent Fair, the Fatherhood/Healthy Marriages Conference and the Parent Leadership Conference. These seminars connect parents with the tools available in their community, in order to help them enhance their lives and break out of the cycle of poverty.

A recent study found that people who were enrolled in a quality preschool program ultimately earned up to \$2,000 more per month than those who were not.

They also were more likely to graduate high school, own homes and have longer marriages. In addition, these children are less likely to repeat grades, require special education, or get in future trouble with the law, studies show.

Parents who apply to Head Start must meet federal income guidelines and eligibility requirements. For more information call Head Start at 956-383-0706.

Woman of Substance: 102 years of iconic historical moments



L-R: Belinda Thatcher, Aurora Cavazos, Sonia Leal and Angelica Garcia. Back: Joseph Palacios, Pct. 4, Joe Flores, Pct. 3, Judge Ramon Garcia, Hector "Tito" Palacios, Pct. 2, and A.C. Cuellar Jr., Pct. 1.

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approved a resolution in honor of lifelong county resident Aurora G. Cavazos, who celebrated her 102nd birthday on July 18.

She was born to Melecio and Andrea Gonzalez in Tabasco and grew up in La Joya alongside three sisters, Frances Garza, Manuela Jackson and Angelica Garcia, and four brothers, Pablo, Roberto, Rodolfo, and Arturo.

In 1931 Cavazos graduated from Nellie Schunior High School – now known as La

Joya High School – becoming one of only a few women to receive a high school diploma. Judge Ramon Garcia stated that Cavazos, who is his aunt, shared her secret to life.

"She told me it is eating healthy and walking," said Garcia.

"I hope to be back here when I'm 110."

From traveling in covered wagon as a child to flying to Europe on vacation, Cavazos has seen and experienced a great deal of change in her 102 years.

She was two-years-old when World War I began in 1914; eight-years-old when the 19th Amendment allowed

women to vote; and 42-years-old when the Civil Rights movement began in 1954.

She recalls her wedding day as the "Celebration of the Century" because it was the first to be held at night.

It was the first time in their rural community that electric lights were used, said daughter Sonia Leal.

Cavazos was also honored at Commissioners Court two years ago when she became a centenarian.

"I hope to be back here when I'm 110," she said at the time.

Garcia reminded her of that comment and said, "I hope to see you in another 8 years."

Cavazos was accompanied to the ceremony by her younger sister, and only surviving sibling, Angelica Garcia, and her two daughters, Sonia Leal and Belinda Thatcher. Her eldest daughter, Maria Helena Heimsoth, lives out of the area and was not able to attend.

Hurricane Season: Not too late to plan for emergencies! Does your family know where to meet? Do you have a go-to kit?

Emergency Management Coordinator Oscar Montoya says two key components to preparedness are an emergency kit and family communications plan.

"You may need to evacuate at a moment's notice so the kit and your plan on how you are going to reach each other or where you're going to meet has to be ready well in advance," Montoya says.

The first step in preparing is to build a disaster supplies kit – a collection of essential items your household may need in an emergency – including food, water and medication to last at least 72 hours. Additionally, basic services (gas, water, telephone) may be cut off

for days or even a week, so kits should include items to help you manage during outages.

Montoya says Flood Insurance is a must in the Valley. There is a 30 day waiting period so homeowners shouldn't wait to act until there is a storm in the gulf. In addition, inspect your home and remove debris, trim trees and shrubs around your home, and make a plan to secure or store your outdoor furniture.

For more tips on creating a Family Communications Plan, building your kit, and preparing your home, visit www.co.hidalgo.tx.us or scan the QR code here.

