

Second Progress Report

by Danny Valdez Webb County Judge

From the beginning of my political career it has always been my mission to help our community flourish and prosper into a place we can proudly call home. As county judge I have been able to realize some of my goals and expand the possibilities of a better life for the citizens of our county. This year has brought about many positive changes and an optimistic view of the things we can accomplish working side by side with our County Commissioners, the City of Laredo, and the Cities of Rio Bravo and El Cenizo, residents of the Quad City area (Bruni, Oilton, Mirando City, and Aguilares), our Congressman, Senator and State Representatives.

Since my last report I am pleased to announce that Webb County now has a public information officer. At the beginning of April, Mr. Larry Sanchez was appointed to this new and challenging position. Larry brings extensive communications and technical experience to this position. He will be responsible for promoting Webb County and informing the public of all our endeavors.

Webb County is also one step closer to establishing a regional county medical examiner facility. In April of this year, the Commissioners Court approved an inter-local agreement with Zapata County followed by a similar agreement with La Salle County in July, to provide autopsy/medical services from our Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Corinne Stern. Dr. Stern is a tremendous asset for Webb County. She has been in high demand over the last few months and has truly gone the extra mile balancing her workload at the office while also overseeing the County's new medical examiner facility located just West of LIFE Downs on Hwy 59. The new facility is currently under construction and should be completed by the end of the year.

Coming in to my administration, the new members of the Court and I inherited two very important transportation projects that have been pending for several years. These projects are the Fifth International Bridge and the International Rail Bridge at Colombia. As I mentioned in my last report, one of my main objectives when I began as County Judge was to improve the relationship between the City of Laredo and the County of Webb. As governmental entities we both represent the same people and with that in mind we have both acknowledged that we must all work together on these matters of mutual interest. These two bridge projects, which have been stagnated for many years because of a lack of cooperation, fit this bill.

These two transportation projects are essential for our community. One only needs to take a drive along Loop 20 and Hwy 35 to see the new infrastructure that has developed in the last few years. The City and County are growing by leaps and bounds. There is a need for new car/truck/rail crossings on our border. There is a need to alleviate from the inner city the congestion of

truck and rail traffic while protecting our citizens from the potential threats associated with the transportation of hazardous cargo as well.

On May 15, 2007, the Commissioners Court approved recommendations made on behalf of the City-County Government Issues Committee to resolve to partner and work together with the City of Laredo for the future planning, financing, construction and operation of a proposed Fifth International and Railroad Bridge. A formal resolution reflecting this agreement was approved by the commissioner's court on July 9, 2007. This same resolution also incorporated the approval of a settlement agreement between the County and the City which formally dismissed all pending lawsuits between both governmental entities.

Both projects have been progressively moving forward – on August 15, 2007, the Webb County Rural Rail Transportation District filed its presidential permit application with the U.S. State Department for approval of an International Rail Bridge crossing at Colombia. Additionally, the independent engineering firm of Poznecki-Camarillo of San Antonio submitted their report on an analysis of three potential site locations for the Fifth International Bridge. At present the City-County Government Issues Committee is pending a meeting to entertain a formal presentation of the engineering firm's technical study.

This year also marked my first experience with the preparation and filing of Webb County's budget for fiscal year 07-08. We began the budget process in early May. At that time we were apprised by the appraisal district that Webb County would not be having the same kind of healthy tax revenues that were experienced the year prior. This same situation was occurring in many other counties across the state. Nonetheless, we were able to focus on the fiscal needs of our elected officials, department heads and employees; and, I was able to file a balanced budget on July 31, 2007 which was later approved and adopted by the court on September 10, 2007. This year's budget increased by about Three Million Dollars (\$3,000,000.00) to almost Seventy Million Dollars (\$70,000,000.00) of revenues over expenditures. This budget effectively addresses the needs of Webb County.

The 80th Legislative session marked the beginning of a new era for Webb County. On June 25, 2007 the Webb County Commissioners Court and I took action to institute a Civil Service Commission for all Webb County employees. The amendment of this bill was a collaborated effort between State and County Officials. State Representative Richard Raymond, who authored HB 831 along with Texas Senator Judith Zaffirini who sponsored the bill, worked vigorously in order to adopt a bill that allows a county with a population of 190,000 or more to create a civil service system for all county employees.

It is our hard working employees that help facilitate and fulfill our duties and responsibilities to our constituents, and I am proud that during my tenure as

County Judge we will implement a civil service system that will guarantee job security to all county employees.

In an effort to help provide tax relief to our elderly and disabled, I am also proud to say that on July 23, 2007, the Webb County Commissioners Court unanimously voted to implement HB 136 of the 78th legislative session which will protect our elderly and disabled, many of whom live on fixed incomes, by limiting or “freezing” the amount of ad valorem taxes that can be imposed on their homesteads.

The month of July also marked the approval of federal funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Webb County will receive close to \$400,000.00 in federal funding to repair and upgrade county roads, bridges and other affected infrastructure that was damaged as a result of the heavy rains and flooding sustained in the month of June.

The same June rains that damaged our county roads also damaged many private roads that limited our school district buses access to some of our Colonia school children in the La Presa Subdivision. Through the cooperative efforts of U.I.S.D., Commissioner Frank Sciaraffa, and county staff, on October 9, 2007, the Commissioners Court approved and authorized our Road and Bridge Department to construct an asphalt road on county land along with a covered waiting area to allow for U.I.S.D. buses to pick up the schoolchildren.

A major development this year was the connection of the first set of Colonia homes to water and sewer services. This has been an ongoing project between the County, City and the Texas Water Development Board. There have been many administrative and financial hoops that we have had to get through to get to this point, however, the hard work has finally paid off. For the first time Colonia residents will have access to water and sewer lines for their homes. On August 13, 2007, the Commissioners Court approved certificates of compliance to authorize water and sewer connections for Eleven (11) Colonia tracts at Tanquesitos I, these were the first Colonia tracts to meet the approval criteria for hook-ups to the City-County EDAP funded water and sewer improvement project along State Highway 359. Thereafter, on November 5, 2007 Commissioner Rosaura Tijerina and myself helped install and turn on the first set of water meters for these residents. It was an incredible accomplishment, a big thank you to everyone who helped make this dream a reality. On October 24, 2007 the Texas Water Development Board awarded us an additional Eleven Million Dollars (\$11,000,000.00) to help finish installing these water and sewer lines in our Colonias. We will continue to push forward improving the quality of life for our Colonia residents until eventually all can receive and enjoy these basic necessities which we take for granted.

In summary, I believe that all citizens of this county should live under favorable conditions and though these are profound steps in the right direction it

is only a fraction of what may be accomplished with the continued help and hard work of our county departments.

It is the drive and commitment of the Commissioners Court and County Departments that have brought about numerous positive changes for the residents of Webb County. I strongly believe it is our job to ensure that our community continues to have quality of life and good government that they can count on.