

7-6-16 County Judge's Article

JULY 4TH. HAS IMPLICATIONS

The Fourth of July, Independence Day, has come once again and our independent spirits have been stirred within us with all the parades, fireworks displays, and celebrations of our freedom.

There are many countries that celebrate independence days where people broke away from colonial rule as we did or from dictators and the like. But what makes us unique is what we've done in applying the concepts of freedom and independence, beginning with the wording of the Declaration of Independence, then finally developing our Constitution and Bill of Rights with its separation of power in the branches of government on down. Hopefully we'll be able to maintain that but that's another subject.

This separation of power has carried all the way down into our county government structure in Texas in a big way as well. I know I've explained this in past articles and some of you already understand these things, but I know many continue to misunderstand how it works by the questions I get, and the fact is that it is very different from conventional organizations and even other forms of government including municipal government. It's basically defined in the Texas Constitution and detailed in the Local Government Code.

The first principle of county government is that elected officials are fundamentally independent of each other. I am not the boss of the other elected officials. I don't tell them what to do. They answer to you the voters. This can be good but it can present problems at times in the application. Lack of oversight can cause problems such as what has happened in the Tax Assessor Collector's Office.

Also I am the budget director for the county. But as budget director, I only work with the approval of the Commissioner's Court which is made up of the four commissioners and myself. We are beginning the important process of budget planning for 2017 where each elected official and department head will present their preliminary plan and these are then compiled and reviewed by Commissioner's Court in one or more budget planning workshops. The combined proposed budget and tax rate is then reviewed with you the general public in public hearings before final approval in Commissioner's Court in mid September.

In the past I had the department heads present their proposals to me and the auditor and maybe one commissioner and then I would combined them with the help of the auditor, Danica Lara, and present the proposal to the commissioners in the workshops for modifications and approval before going to the public hearings. This has become increasingly difficult as we have had to cut costs and personnel and deal with the uncertainty caused by the Luminant situation. As a result we struggled with finalizing the budget last year.

Therefore this year I've asked all four commissioners to be present at all the departmental presentations to try to avoid misunderstandings and have them as familiar as possible with everything and make the process go as smoothly as possible. County financial flows are difficult to understand at best and having

all the commissioners, much less the general public, understand our situation in order to participate in the decisions we're facing is a struggle. But the County Judge position is not that of a dictator, I do not make independent decisions.

Once the budget is set, each department then goes about its day-to-day operations more or less operating independently as long as they stay within budget. The commissioners make independent decisions concerning the roads in their precincts, the sheriff makes independent decisions regarding law enforcement matters and jail operations, the tax assessor decides if she is going to be closed during lunch hour, etc.; in other words, we're all free to go about getting ourselves into trouble as we see fit!