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Our Last Community Meeting of the Year!

Join us on **Tuesday December 1** at

Ascarate Golf Course 18th Hole Restaurant

at **6900 Delta Dr, El Paso, TX 79905.**

Get an update on county government and ask me any questions or concerns you may have!

See you from 5:30 - 6:30 PM.

County Budget grows by degrees, tax rate stays the same

When it all boils down, officials elected to political subdivisions have one main task with which they are charged: adopting a tax rate and budget. On August 31 and October 5, respectively, the El Paso County Commissioners Court did just that by unanimously adopting the tax rate and budget for Fiscal Year 2016.

Throughout the tax rate and budget discussions, we listened closely to the public, working to meet their needs and concerns. As a result, the Commissioners Court voted unanimously to not raise property taxes and we adopted the same tax rate as the previous year. That rate is \$0.452694 per \$100 property valuation. Broken down, the new tax rate is composed of a maintenance and operations rate of \$0.401819 and an interest and sinking rate of \$0.050875. This tax rate is lower than the effective rate, which is what would produce the same amount of tax revenues as the previous year.

What this means for homeowners is that you will pay the same amount in property taxes if your property did not increase in value. Only those whose property values rose will see a small increase in your tax bill. While the tax rate remains the same, our budget did increase slightly as a result of property value increases throughout the County, greater growth in sales taxes, and an anticipated increase in our federal prisoner rate.

The new County budget totals \$322,337,148. It is composed of the Enterprise fund, totaling \$3.4 million; Capital Projects, totaling \$3.9 million;

Debt Service, totaling \$20.5 million; Special Revenue, totaling \$31.9 million; and the General Fund, totaling \$262.5 million.

The General Fund, which is the main, day-to-day operating fund through which the County conducts its business, grew by \$9.58 million or 3.78 percent over the previous year. As our Executive Director of Budget and Fiscal Policy, Wallace Hardgrove, has pointed out on several occasions, the General Fund budget had increased over the course of the past five years by an average of \$13.4 million or 6.16 percent each year. As you can see, holding the line and living within our means was the theme of this new budget.

Despite the budget increasing by a smaller amount than in recent history, we were still able to meet important goals and set new precedents. Chief among them, and one for which I strongly advocated, was giving our hardworking County employees a living wage. To that end, we set a minimum wage of \$10 per hour for our lowest paid employees. In addition, our general service employees will see a four percent wage increase in the new year and our professional service employees will see a two-and-a-half percent increase. Elected officials' wages will remain the same. Similarly, we reduced employees' health premiums, keeping more money in their pockets, while affording them the opportunity to access quality healthcare services.

Other budget priorities we met focus on service delivery and enhancing the quality of life for County residents.

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Children’s Hospital, UMC file joint reorganization plan

After more than a year of tumultuous, back-and-forth negotiations between the Children’s Hospital, University Medical Center, and the Commissioners Court, the stalemate over the pediatric hospital’s debt and bankruptcy filing appears to be over, and we have made an important step forward. On Wednesday, October 14, UMC and Children’s Hospital filed a joint plan of reorganization to keep the doors open at Children’s Hospital and begin the transition out of bankruptcy.

I believe we’re all prepared to continue working together to reach a final resolution that keeps the vital services offered by the Children’s Hospital open and accessible to this community.

As part of the joint agreement, all of EPCH’s outside creditors will be paid in full and UMC will reduce the debt it is owed by Children’s Hospital – largely related to rent – by nearly half. In exchange, UMC will become the Children’s Hospital’s sole corporate member. EPCH will have a reconstituted board of directors comprised of seven members. Four will be nominated by UMC and two current Children’s Hospital board members will continue serving for a transitional 90-day period, at which point they will nominate their replacements. The seventh board member will be a medical staff physician chosen by the doctors at EPCH.

I want to be clear, however, that we are not yet completely out of the woods. The joint plan still must be confirmed by all other creditors and ultimately by the federal bankruptcy judge, Judge Christopher Mott. There have been some minor objections raised by the Texas Attorney General’s office regarding certain language related to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission’s ability to assess penalties for discrepancies in cost reporting and their ability to possibly go after anyone they feel was involved in any wrongdoing; however it seems those issues have been resolved. If all goes well, EPCH should be out of bankruptcy by the beginning of 2016.

I realize the dispute over the Children’s Hospital’s future may have reached boiling points at times, but it was only because the Children’s Hospital and UMC are absolute cornerstones to our community’s health and vitality. It wasn’t said nearly enough in the news media, but both Children’s Hospital and UMC provide this community with a level of service unmatched anywhere else. The doctors and healthcare providers at both hospitals perform their duties with the utmost professionalism, keeping their patients’ care their first priority. I sincerely offer my thanks to those who, despite the difficulties they faced, continued providing the highest quality care to our residents. I look forward to a strengthened relationship between our two most important medical institutions.



I had the pleasure of meeting with Consul General, Jacob Prado Gonzalez to discuss our ongoing initiative with community IDs.

County creates Truancy Prevention Task Force

The 84th Texas legislature created a new law requiring all 254 Texas counties to have a new truancy prevention plan set in place before January 2016. Commissioners Court decided to create a Truancy Prevention Task Force chaired by District Attorney, Jaime Esparza, in order to create a countywide plan. I will serve on the committee, along with Commissioner Andrew Haggerty, and other stakeholders. Currently truancy is considered a criminal case, and the County wants to move in the direction of treating it as a civil case. If a plan is not created before the beginning of 2016, the state has the power to make a plan for El Paso County. Throughout the next weeks, the task force will be looking at other counties around the state to see what policies they are creating.



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We allocated an additional \$550,000 to our Public Works department for staffing increases which are directly related to facility improvement projects throughout the County. By improving our facilities, we not only enhance the working environments for employees, but we make them much more accessible and reliable for residents obtaining services. Earlier in the year, the Commissioners Court decided during our strategic planning session that if we are to be in the parks business, we ought to fund park maintenance and operations adequately. To meet that objective, we increased funding for park maintenance by half a million dollars. Of that figure, \$150,000 has been allocated for maintenance and operations at Ascarate Park, in addition to current funds.

Yet another policy objective we met in this budget, which I supported, was the creation of the Criminal Justice Coordination Office. This new office will streamline the process through which individuals arrested receive their due process. Screenings will be conducted upon intake into our County jails to ensure that high risk offenders are processed correctly and that low risk, non-violent offenders don't languish behind bars, away from their families, jobs, and responsibilities. This new office will screen for mental health conditions, making sure that those with such disabilities receive the care they need in our jails, but more importantly, that they receive care outside of our jails. We expanded our jail magistrate program to run 24 hours per day, which will include three-and-a-half additional jail magistrates as well as four new court clerks. A director for this office was recently hired and he will begin in early November.

In addition to the items above, I was successful in my advocacy to continue providing funding to our Veterans Court program and the allocation of \$50,000 to Project ARRIBA.

Project ARRIBA is a non-profit that provides high-skilled training to at-risk El Pasoans who need occupational skills necessary to access jobs that are in demand and in occupations that pay a living wage. Those funds will receive a one-to-one match from the Texas Innovative Adult Care Education Grant Program and will go to help 18 individuals.

The Commissioners Court is also tasked with adopting the budgets and tax rates for the University Medical Center (UMC) and our two Emergency Service Districts (ESDs).

UMC, the public hospital, presented a \$590 million budget, which the County approved, along with the same tax rate as the previous year at a rate of \$0.220682 per \$100 property valuation. For my part, I strongly advocated that UMC include a living wage for their lowest paid employees. I'm happy to say that UMC increased its minimum wage to \$10 per hour.

Following suit, the County urged the ESDs to not raise taxes either. We approved a \$1.9 million budget for ESD 1 and a tax rate of \$0.099 per \$100 valuation. We also approved a \$9.1 million budget for ESD 2 with a tax rate of \$0.095 per \$100 valuation.

Again, much of this year's budget and tax negotiations focused on holding the line and only expanding the most important of services, while also focusing on quality of life issues. I want to thank our budget and finance team for all the hard work and countless hours they put into helping the Commissioners Court reach a reasonable budget and tax rate that keeps our County moving in a positive and progressive direction.

Resolutions that capture our community's culture, efforts, and service

From July to September, I had the privilege of passing resolutions honoring Jaime and Julie Ito Morales for their efforts in rescuing abandoned domestic waterfowl at Ascarate Park and recognized Chicano Heritage Month through Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe.



Stick House Sanctuary

The Stick House Sanctuary was established in 2008 in an effort to address the needs of rehabilitating wild waterfowl and shore birds and rescuing abandoned, injured, or abused domestic waterfowl within our community to find them a forever home. On July 13, Commissioners Court adopted a resolution for the Stick House Sanctuary recognizing the work of Jaime and Julie Ito Morales for their efforts in rescuing over 70 abandoned domestic ducks at Ascarate Park and placing them in forever homes. Stick House Sanctuary has educational presentations for city and county officials and within schools, for children, stressing the importance of not abandoning domestic waterfowl in an effort to keep them safe while shielding wildlife from them as well.

Tax Office Moves to the Ascarate Annex

As of August 24, the Tax Assessor-Collector's office has relocated to the Ascarate Annex, 301 Manny Martinez Dr., adjacent to the entrance of Ascarate Park. This office handles important government business that includes vehicle registration, alcoholic beverage tax and permits, title transfers, and occupational permits. The move comes after 25 years of being located behind the County Courthouse to a new location that will more adequately serve the growing population and provide free parking to the many daily visitors. In addition to this office, there are also branch offices throughout the county to include Fort Bliss at the Welcome Center in Building 505 Room A115, the Northeast at 4641 Cohen Suite B, and in Ysleta at 9521 Socorro Rd, Suite B4.



Chicano Heritage Month

On August 31, Commissioners Court approved a resolution recognizing Chicano Heritage Month from September 15 through October 15, 2015. During this time, La Fe had a series of arts, culture, and educational events that were highlighted by a September 19th celebration at La Fe Preparatory School. Throughout the month, La Fe honored the lives and legacies of great activist leaders like Corky González, Reies López Tijerina, Dolores Huerta, José Ángel Gutierrez, César Chávez and many other leaders, artists, educators, grassroots organizers, youth, and parents. This social justice call-to-action for today's community members aspires for them to be educated, voting citizens and leaders of all ages, and to defend the human and civil rights of every man, woman, and child of El Paso County and beyond.



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Veterans Advisory Board to serve as link between community, County government

I am proud to announce the creation of the El Paso County Veterans Advisory Board, which was approved unanimously by the Commissioners Court on September 28, 2015. This initiative was brought to fruition through the collaboration of my office with that of Commissioner Carlos Leon and a group of local advocates for veterans.

The Veterans Advisory Board will develop a Veterans Affairs policy for the County of El Paso to consider. Additionally, the Board will develop and maintain an up-to-date database of Veteran services and Veteran service organizations, which will be made public and available for Veterans seeking a range of services.

This new board will serve as a link between the local Veteran community and El Paso County government. The five-person board will be composed of Veterans or spouses of Veterans who will volunteer their time, knowledge, and expertise of Veterans' issues. They will gather information from the Veteran community and identify gaps in services throughout the County.

I thank the Commissioners Court for taking swift and unified action to create this important advisory board. For too long, the County of El Paso has gone without a policy to guide Veteran affairs and one that specifically targets gaps in services. We now have a mechanism in place through which policy recommendations can be made to better serve our large and vibrant Veteran community.



Outreach continues to promote Community IDs

As I discussed in my previous newsletter, I'm working with civil society organizations to promote the creation of a community ID program in El Paso County. To offer a brief recap: Community IDs are identification cards that are issued to residents and recognized by local governments and their departments, including law enforcement.

We envision local IDs to be targeted to a number of vulnerable populations, including but not limited to, the homeless, children and students, transgendered persons, the indigent, the disabled, the elderly, immigrants and mixed-status families, runaway youth or youth exiting the foster system, ex-convicts looking to reintegrate into society, survivors of domestic violence, and others who are currently underserved by their lack of ID.

In a community like El Paso County, too many residents lack government-issued identification and therefore can't access some of the most basic services which many of us may take for granted. That's why it is imperative that stakeholders across this County, including municipal governments, school districts, medical centers, and financial institutions, recognize and actively support the creation of such a local ID.

My staff and I have been making presentations to city governments throughout the County to inform and promote this project. We've also met with some of our local school districts and members of the business community.

But I can't do this alone. This truly is a community-wide effort, and I ask for your help and support in getting the word out on this important program. Community ID cards strengthen public safety by bridging the gap between law enforcement officers and members of the community who lack identification. Community ID cards enhance civic participation and integration. And Community ID cards have the potential to increase economic opportunity and economic safety. As a community, we have a moral obligation to make sure that all residents who are contributing to our economy, our schools, and our workforce can readily identify themselves to obtain the most basic of services.

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<h3>September 2015</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Crece exigencia para una identificacion municipal, El Diario, 9-01-15 -Municipal ID program underway for all of El Paso County, CBS 4, 9-02-15 -El hospital infantil de el Paso pagara renta al centro medico by Friday 10 a.m., KVIA, 9-24-15 -univeritario, Univision, 9-08-15 -Incierto el futuro del Hospital Infantil, Telemundo, 9-08-15 -UMC, Commissioners Court ask Children's for joint plan, El Paso Times, 9-09-15 -Children's doctor says rent won't sink hospital, KTSM, 9-09-15 -Ascarate Park collects less in Sun City Music Festival parking revenue than previous year, CBS 4, 9-14-15 -UMC may withdraw offer, allow Children's Hospital closure, KVIA, 9-17-1515 -ABC-7 Xtra: Children's Bankruptcy, KVIA, 9-20-15 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Still no deal between UMC and EPCH, KTSM, 9-23-15 -Mandan una ulitma oferta para el Hospital Infantil, Telemundo, 9-24-15 -El Paso Children's Hospital must respond to UMC's last offer by Friday 10 a.m., KVIA, 9-24-15 -El Paso Children's Hospital has until Friday to respond to UMC's offer, KFOX, 9-24-15 -EPCH meets 10 a.m. deadline; UMC attorneys reviewing response, KFOX, 9-25-15 -Deadline looms for Children's Hospital, KVIA, 9-27-15 -UMC says deal not reached with El Paso Children's Hospital; Children's says it agreed to terms, KVIA, 9-28-15 -Commissioners approve \$590M budget for UMC, El Paso Times, 9-28-15 -County Commissioner Stout has issues with Children's latest statement, KFOX, 9-29-15 -Confusion over UMC-Children's deadline, KTSM, 9-29-15