

WILLIAMSON COUNTY GOVERNMENT
“STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS”
JANUARY 2012

I would first like to thank each one of you for taking the time to be here today. I am pleased to be standing before you issuing the annual State of the County Address.

You may be wondering, “What exactly is a State of the County Address?” This is our way, as your county government officials, of updating the public on some of the county’s accomplishments over the past year, as well as some of the goals we are planning to achieve in the future.

The first ever State of County Address was given in 2007. In past years, the address was presented at a local high school or Chambers of Commerce. But today, we’re breaking the tradition and I am really excited to be presenting here at the Marion Senior Citizens Center.

Personally, I feel blessed to live in Williamson County, because we are one of the fastest growing counties in the southern part of the state. In fact, the latest census results show that we have recently topped 66,000 residents.

As Commissioners, we work for you and the rest of the residents who count on us to keep the county functioning and financially sound. We have a mutual belief regarding the financial planning for Williamson County government.

I would like to take a moment to speak on behalf of the entire board. Each and every year, our focus and goal for this county is a balanced budget. It's that simple.

We believe that we must treat county funds with a great deal of care. In other words, we absolutely CANNOT spend more than we bring in. Even in some of the worst of economic times, we still hold true to this belief – to plan and ensure that the county remains fiscally responsible.

In our current economy, many people are struggling to live within their means. Just like you, our county government has obligations and bills to pay. The past few years our county's annual budget process has been challenging at best and our collective decisions have not been popular with every appointed or elected official within Williamson County Government.

To be blunt, we are not in office to win any popularity contest . We are in office to do what's right and make good solid business decisions. That is what the taxpayers expect from of us. This is the standard that all elected officials should be held accountable to.

Sometimes, for county's financial health and well-being, our board has to say "No" to some budget requests. The key is to set politics aside and work together as one unit. As Commissioners, we have to take each of our individual beliefs about what is right and form a collective decision.

Don't get me wrong, this board is no different than other Government boards and there are many times we don't see eye to eye. You see, that is what's great about America, we can all have different opinions and

ideas, but we are still able to work together for the betterment of the people.

I have been in office since 2004 and I can tell you from my personal experience that being an elected official is not always the easiest job in the world, but it is a great honor. We each ran for office so that we could make a difference by helping and serving the people who make up this county.

As county commissioners, we oversee the county's business; and just like any other business manager we learn to wear many hats. You may be surprised to learn that we handle a variety of issues far beyond a county budget.

There is no typical day for a county commissioner. It's not unusual to be handling a major budget issue in the morning and later in the day be dealing with county road issues, stray animals, employee matters or even a roadside litter problem. My biggest Pet Peeve is the complaints I receive of county eye sores such as extreme high weeds, run down houses and trailers or even excessive junk in a person's yard. How would you like to live by that? In my eyes this is unacceptable and I will continue to do everything under my power to bring this to an end by working closely with Bi-County Health Dept.

Being an elected official, we realize there are those critics out there. We realize that it is impossible to please 100% of the people 100% of the time. We also know that there are some people that you can never please that will always criticize just because they can. I think that people need to get more involved in their government and understand

why decisions are made. I personally welcome constructive criticism and discourage destructive criticism.

We want you, our residents, to know that we do not take our job lightly. We stop and listen to the requests of our residents. We take the time to educate ourselves on the issues, we analyze and research topics before taking any action. We realize that our decisions can affect the future of our children and grandchildren who choose to live in Williamson County.

One accomplishment from this past year that I am very proud of is the new Williamson County Jail and Sheriffs Department. For at least the last 20 years this county has clearly needed a new jail facility. We have letters from the Department of Corrections stating we must either 1) build a new jail, or 2) transport and house our inmates at other locations or they could shut us down because the old jail was dilapidated and not passing the required inspections.

We determined that transporting and housing inmates at other locations would definitely be more expensive in the long run than it would be to build a new facility to deal with the county's growing inmate population.

The old jail, which was located on the third floor of the courthouse, had countless flooding incidents. Malfunctioning or broken plumbing in the jail with water and sewage pouring down into the offices below and those incidents cost thousands dollars in insurance claims and out-of-pocket expenses to make the necessary repairs after each occurrence.

Simply put, the old jail was inadequate and unacceptable. Jail staff members were at risk for harm and the county was at risk for lawsuits

due to the inadequate facility. While it may have seemed an overwhelming task, we decided to take on the challenge of building a new jail and accomplishing what had been needed for at least 20 years, but politics always seemed to interfere.

During our decision-making process, we took various elected officials and the media through our old jail to give them a first-hand look at the facility. I remember one of the Mayor's saying "This place should be condemned." He was correct.

A big thank you goes out to the local media for helping us get the message out about how dilapidated our old jail was. I think the majority of the taxpayers understood the issues and concerns at hand, however, there is always the question, "How in the world are we going to pay for it?"

During the planning phase, which began in 2007, the county board began building a line-item in the General Fund in anticipation of growing the line-item to a large enough amount to cover the annual debt service.

We started the line-item with \$200,000 in the first year. Then, each year after that, we added approximately \$200,000 to the line item and watched it grow. Then, when plans were made to begin building the new jail, we were financially prepared.

The best part of preparing it this way was to prevent ANY new tax increase. The timing of the project could not have been anymore perfect. The initial bids came in \$2 million dollars lower than projected and we also qualified for approximately \$400,000 per year of Stimulus

money towards our interest payments, which we will receive each year for the life of the debt service.

I'd also like to mention that after reviewing our financial status and financial planning principles, Williamson County Government received a high AA- rating from the bond rating company. That enabled us to receive a very good interest rate. I can assure you our state and federal government could only wish to have this high of a rating.

An added benefit of the new jail is that it created hundreds of construction jobs for local labor as well as the hiring more correctional officers. I am proud to say it was a team effort that gave us our new Williamson County Jail and Sheriff's Dept.

Make no mistake about it that getting this project from the drawing board to brick and mortar has been an uphill climb. Past county boards have expressed doubts the achievability of this goal, but we were able to bring this jail to fruition and now have a state-of-the-art facility to show for it.

The outcome of the new county jail is a prime example of what our county government can accomplish when we work as a team. This was a well-planned project, which benefitted the taxpayers with more jobs and added public safety.

We will soon be having the official opening for the new jail and everyone is invited. Our events begin on February 18th with a fundraiser for Crime Stoppers called "BBQ in jail", you may even get the opportunity to stay in a jail cell during this event. On Feb, 19th, we

will have our jail dedication and there will also be tours provided. I hope you can join us to see how far we have come.

I'd like to touch on some of our other accomplishments during 2011:

- We continued to make further strides in our transition away from our old Workers' Compensation and Liability insurance company – ICIT. In 2009, we began working with a new insurance company, and have just this past year began seeing a reduction in the number and severity of our Workmen's' Comp and Liability claims. The new insurance company has an increased emphasis in safety and training in order to prevent injuries and accidents from occurring. The result has been a decrease in insurance premiums due to an overall improvement in claims. This means that taxpayer dollars can be put to better use.
- We have been successful with MARS grants the past few years, MARS stands for Mobility Accessibility Rehabilitation Services. The grant is basically for people with mobility impairments. The type of rehab work includes construction of ramps or handrails, installation of handicap bathroom and kitchen facilities, widening hallways and parking improvements. Williamson County, Marion and Herrin have received a total of 12 of these grant awards. For more information you can contact our Economic Development Office.
- Let us not forget our Spring, 2011 flood victims. This was a tragic and traumatic event for the county residents affected. As a county, we were depended upon to reach out to IEMA and FEMA in order to communicate our county's residents need for help. Our EMA

Director, Steve Land, proved invaluable during this natural disaster and I thank him for his efforts. Also, our Highway Department responded to the clean-up needs and provided assistance to many. A big thank you goes to the Greg Smothers, our Highway Superintendent and the entire Highway Department as well. Recovery and clean up from the Spring, 2011 floods is still ongoing. We will continue to help where needed.

- We have also worked hard over the last several years to beautify our County by offering Free Trash Dump days, Adopt-a-county road program and by offering recycling opportunities to our residents. This past year we set cameras up at popular illegal dumping areas and the first ten days we caught two people and they were arrested and prosecuted. We plan to add more cameras to other illegal dump sites and my message to those people is time is on our side and we will catch you. Keeping the County clean and beautiful is important to us and we know it is important to you as well.
- On an administrative note, we developed and implemented increased controls over our fixed assets. Some examples of our fixed assets are squad cars, computer, printers, copy machines, etc. Taxpayer dollars or grants are used to purchase these items for us. We need to be accountable for their use and location at all times. We realize that change is not always popular, but at times it is necessary. We thank the appointed and elected officials for their current and future cooperation with our internal policy changes.

This is just a snapshot of our accomplishments over the last year.

In the future some of our goals are to:

- Discuss implementing some type of County Building Permit. Simply put, if you need one inside the city limits why not in the unincorporated areas? A building permit would assist residents in ensuring that structures are built to current building codes and that all residents are properly assessed and taxed for real estate tax purposes so where everyone is treated fair.
- Continue to improve our County roads with on-going maintenance,
- Implement a smooth transition into our new jail facilities,
- In light of construction projects coming to a close, some offices will move around our complex. We will discuss the best use of vacated spaces so the citizens can receive the most services in one location.

In closing, I'd like to take this time to remind everyone that this is your county – your government. As a resident, you have both a right and an obligation to help care for it. Every day, through programs such as neighborhood watches and roadside trash clean up, our residents have demonstrated what communities can accomplish.

Williamson County is a shining example for the rest of the state. We are fortunate to have a financially sound county government, business and industry, good schools, a beautiful scenic landscape and residents who truly care and take pride in their community.

Thank you for coming today and May God continue to bless Williamson County government and all of our residents.

Brent Gentry
Williamson County Board Chairman