

MY TURN
Highlights of 2007

John Wood
County Commissioner Pct. 2

2007 was an interesting and unique year for Cameron County. In precinct 2 lots of roads were rebuilt and repaired, as were in the other precincts of the County. The second phase of rebuilding the roads and drainage system in Cameron Park got started and is continuing at this time, along with the rebuilding of the roads and drainage system in Olmito. Cameron Park and Olmito, along with Del Mar Heights are being done with funding through the State Colonia program. This program will eventually fund about 12 million dollars of road and drainage projects in Precinct 2 alone, and much more in the rest of the County. The small community of San Pedro also benefited from some of these monies by getting about half of their main road overlaid and widened. The balance of the road that is in the County is being done now.

The completion of the expressway work in Brownsville and in Pct. 2 was a very welcomed event. The actual work on the different phases was either completed on time or before the scheduled completion time. A lot of this was due to the good working relationship between TxDot, the Brownsville Metropolitan Planning Organization (BMPO) where I serve as Vice Chair, and the County Administrator's office. TxDot was also able to let the contract on El Jardin Heights road between Paredes Line and FM 511. That work is going on at this time. In addition, TxDot, with the County's assistance from our Right of Way office has been able to contract for the expansion of FM 511 from the Port of Brownsville to the Expressway. This is important, because just a few weeks ago, all of the TxDot regions throughout the State were directed to suspend contracting for any new projects due to financial restraints.

Another project that has been moving forward in Pct. 2 is the rail relocation to the West of Brownsville and Matamoros. During 2007 we were able to acquire the bulk of the right of way needed for the relocation on our side of the river, and the progress in Mexico is running parallel to our progress. The rail bridge itself is under design based on the approval of the relocation of the levee on the Mexican side of the river. CILA, the Mexican agency that is similar to the United States International Boundary and Water Commission is the agency that has approved the relocation of the levee, which will save millions of dollars in the construction of the bridge. We are currently working with a schedule for both sides of the river that would begin construction at the end of this year.

A different type project that was begun during the early part of 2007, was the Mental Health Task Force Committee that I have been chairing. Toward the end of 2006, Margal Vicars brought it to the County's attention that the last psychiatrist serving the general public was closing his office and that would leave our citizens that were either insured or paid for their medical needs without the services of a Psychiatrist in Cameron County. The Mental Health Task Force Committee of about 35 members is broken up into four

different sub committees. Some of our accomplishments include a compilation of health service providers that can now be found on the County website (and other web sites), and the bringing together of several governmental, non profit and private entities to address the issue. Our legislative committee has brought the issue to our State elected officials with the intent of their assisting in legislation that will help in our efforts to bring more Psychiatrist to Cameron County. Valley Baptist Medical Center has attributed our Committee's efforts to helping them in their decision to open their Inpatient Behavioral Health Services Center in Brownsville. In addition to our other committee activities, we are currently looking into the possibility of creating our own non profit in order to apply for the money we are going to need to get our goal accomplished of having adequate psychiatric help for the citizens of Cameron County.

I also serve on the Good Neighbor Environmental Board that annually publishes and presents to the President and Congress of the United States a report on specific environmental issues along the US border with Mexico. The 2007 report had to do with border security and hazardous cargo crossing the border. That report does not support a wall along our section of the border, but does encourage "environmental review, public participation, and scientific analysis into the design and implementation of all border security infrastructure projects". The 2008 report that we are currently working on has to do with natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and fires. It will be published and available in March, 2008.

Yes, lots was accomplished in 2007 at the County. The five departments that had made up the Department of Administrative Services went back to being five separate departments, each with it's own director when the Administrative Services Department was dissolved in January 2007. However, since then, three of the five departments have been re-combined with a single department director, and the other two will probably be included during this year.

The establishment of a County Administrator position has greatly relieved the burden of oversight that has historically been the responsibility of County Judge's office and provided the County Commissioners with a single focal point to address issues and work with to accomplish our goals for the citizens of Cameron County.

Other County restructuring that has taken place was the contracting with Valley Baptist Medical Center to establish an entity to manage the County's indigent health care responsibilities. Although the matching money from the State and Federal government has not come to fruition as of yet, I think we have benefited from this move, we now know, according to a report by Valley Baptist, that some providers were occasionally getting paid more than once for the same services. However, this change has left many providers without getting paid for services that they did provide. According to our auditor, we owe all of the providers (doctors, hospitals, pharmacies and others) a total of over two million dollars (\$2,000,000.00) from last fiscal year that ended September 30, 2007. Even one of our County Commissioners that owns a pharmacy is owed money from last year's indigent health care program.

The County completed the purchase and removal of over 37 structures in Del Mar Heights Subdivision along Highway 100 East of Los Fresnos, with the funding coming from FEMA and the Environmental Justice Fund. The funding was available for the work in this Colonia because the land elevation created a continual flooding problem. Unfortunately the County did not use about \$90,000.00 of the Federal grant funds to buy some of the vacant lots and the money stayed with FEMA when the grant was closed out this past summer. These are lots that people own but will not be able to get building permits or utilities. This virtually makes the lots worthless.

As in past years, the issues before the Commissioner's Court probably have a unanimous vote 95 percent to 98 percent of the time. Occasionally we disagree, but generally those disagreements are put behind us and we move on to the next item. From time to time we assist each other in carrying out our responsibilities. Just this past December Judge Cascos pointed out that a report coming out of my office had been being prepared incorrectly. Although it had been previously requested by the Auditor's office, I discussed it with our attorneys, and learned that it should not have been being prepared at all. So it is no longer being prepared, and we are still getting the job done.

We have lots of challenges before us this year, but I believe that if we really work with all of the other local entities and the State and Federal agencies, to include those in Mexico, that we will be successful in accomplishing what needs to be done.

John Wood