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Newspaper Editorial

January 2009

We have much to be thankful for as we end this holiday season and begin a new year. For many of us the challenges we face affecting our families, our health, and working to maintain a certain level of prosperity is what motivates us all to continue moving forward with some level of optimism that things will be better in 2009. However, we must be realistic that 2009 will be very challenging for many of us, as the financial and economic uncertainties begin to impact our daily lives.

Our community, much like the rest of our country must weather the economic storms, related to Wall Street, rising fuel and energy costs, housing foreclosures and unemployment. Living along the border and in a coastal community, our challenges are somewhat greater, having to deal with border security, trade with Mexico and tropical storms.

As I begin my third year as your County Judge I will continue to support measures that will first and foremost keep this County on sound financial footing by continuing to work to increase our cash reserves, while at the same time, keeping our tax rates low, continuing to improve on the services we provide, and making sure that your tax dollars are spent and invested efficiently.

We continue our plans for future transportation and infrastructure needs, to improve and expand health care services to our County residents, supporting efforts to provide a quality health care system for our Veterans, to develop a regional drainage plan and to promote economic development and tourism on a regional basis. I continue to organize and coordinate meetings with our area leaders as we collectively establish and share our priorities and agendas to present to our State and Federal representatives and to continue our efforts to forge regional and bi-national partnerships and coalitions.

This past summer Hurricane Dolly made landfall in Cameron County resulting in much damage and flooding throughout many parts of the County. Fortunately, the City of

Brownsville was spared a direct hit; however, many of the low lying areas throughout the County were severely impacted and remained flooded for many weeks after Dolly had left our area. Our Cities' leaders and emergency management personnel responded quickly and effectively to address the immediate needs of our County's residents and I salute their efforts. Debris removal, mosquito control, temporary housing and shelters and addressing flooding were Cameron County's priority weeks and months subsequent to the storm's departure.

Cameron County services continued throughout the aftermath of the storm. However, we found that many of our smaller communities were not adequately prepared to address the issues related to drainage, flooding, communications and loss of power. We must continue our efforts to develop a regional drainage plan, working with all jurisdictions to implement reliable communication links and aggressively work with our State and Federal representatives to provide funding for generator power to all our communities. We have been threatened twice in two years by hurricanes.... Dean in 2007 and Dolly in 2008 and I believe that both times Cameron County was prepared and responded well.

We must continue to carry out aggressive construction and maintenance plans for our rural area roads, however we must not lose sight of our future infrastructure needs. We will continue to work to expand our colonia lighting projects in our rural communities, similar to what we are doing in the communities of Cameron Park and Laguna Heights.

We are working with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) on an expansive drainage project along FM 800 to help alleviate flooding by re-routing flow of water to the Arroyo Colorado relieving many homes in the area and with grant funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, we will undertake a regional drainage study that will help us address and focus on the areas most impacted by flooding.

Our continued efforts to have an Interstate connection to the Rio Grande Valley and the construction of a second causeway to South Padre Island are at the forefront of our infrastructure projects. The Rio Grande Valley region remains one of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States without an interstate designation. This is unacceptable! Connecting US 77 with Interstate 37 in Corpus Christi, and upgrading certain areas of US 77, will provide a seamless transportation network, connecting our land border ports of entry to the major trading hubs of Corpus Christi, Houston, north Texas, the Midwest, northern Mexico and points beyond. TxDOT is in the process of carrying out a plan to finally bring this corridor up to Interstate standards and working together as a region we can make this happen. We will continue supporting a second causeway to South Padre Island in order to spur economic development while at the same time providing an additional access to and from the Island.

Cameron County will have two bi-national projects under construction simultaneously in the very near future. Cameron County is working towards construction start dates on the West Rail Bridge and the Veterans Bridge expansion projects. There have been many years of planning and development with several local, state and federal agencies on both the US side and the Mexican side to get to this stage. The West Rail Relocation will re-

route our current rail crossing at the B&M Bridge to a new bridge crossing location just west of the Riverbend Resort west of Brownsville. This rail crossing will be the first built in almost 105 years and we anticipate a completion date in late 2010. In addition, the expansion of the Veterans Bridge at Los Tomates will help alleviate traffic mixture of both commercial and regular vehicular traffic on our bridge. Separating the traffic and locating the commercial traffic on this new span will enable us to move cargo and just-in-time deliveries in a more efficient manner. Our regular vehicle lanes and our special lanes like the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) and Free and Secure Trade (FAST) will also be better positioned to allow for a better flow of traffic and ease the congestion conditions at this bridge.

Our County Park system continues to expand. This year we will add a community park in Laureles and in La Paloma. We will also be nearing the completion of the long anticipated Los Fresnos Boys and Girls Club. With the funding secure to move forward, the County and the City of Los Fresnos have partnered to get this project completed this year.

We have undergone a major change with respect to providing indigent health care as well as basic health services for those less fortunate. Through the County's partnership with the Rio Grande Valley Health Care Corporation, not only have we expanded our indigent health care program but have secured a significant amount of additional monies which has resulted in providing health care to more people, paying the providers of these services timely and keeping this program in operation all year long. In addition, we have introduced the Cameron County Prescription Card which allows County residents once applying, to instantly save on their prescriptions. This is another example of a strong public-private partnership that creates a sound relationship between local pharmacies and its patients allowing for dollars to stay here locally.

I wish to thank the residents of Cameron County for allowing your county government to work on your behalf. I also wish thank all of Cameron County's elected and appointed officials, employees and their families for their support. Without their dedication and public service, many of our endeavors and accomplishments would not have been possible.

I encourage all Cameron County residents to continue staying informed and engaged in our community. We need the cooperation of our local elected leaders, community leaders and residents to work together for the betterment of our County.

Thanks and God Bless.

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