

MINUTES

Aransas County Commissioners Court



1:30 PM – Monday, March 18, 2024

The Aransas County Commissioners Court met on Monday, March 18, 2024, at 1:30 PM, in the Aransas County Courthouse, 2840 Hwy 35 N, Rockport, Texas. Aransas County Commissioner’s Court meeting video recordings are available by following this link: [Commissioners Court Minutes and Agendas \(aransascourttx.gov\)](https://aransascourttx.gov), then scroll to the bottom of the page and select the date you wish to view.

Present: **Ray A. Garza**, County Judge
Jack Chaney, Commissioner Precinct 1-1A
Leslie Casterline, Commissioner, Precinct 2
Pat Rousseau, Commissioner, Precinct 3
Robert Dupnik, Commissioner, Precinct 4-4A

I. CALL TO ORDER

II. ROLL CALL

III. DECLARE QUORUM

IV. ITEMS FOR DELIBERATION AND/OR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the Defense Community Infrastructure Program (DCIP) Grant and projects within the county which might be eligible for funding – Mike Geer / Judge Garza

Discussion:

- Mike Geer – DCIP or Defense Community Infrastructure Program Grant is only a few years old. Our interest in it was born from trying to get the Navy to either pay for or to contribute to pavement repairs at the airport. That is what they affect when they do touch and go landings. We have been treated as an auxiliary field for years but have never been funded like an actual auxiliary field. We’ve done traffic counts in the past to try and make our case to the Navy. I’ve had discussions with CNATRA that is the training wing command of the Naval Aviation. CNATRA means Central Naval Aviation Air Training, this is done between Corpus Christi and Pensacola. They depend on outlying fields like Aransas County Airport to complete their training missions so they can keep the Naval Fleet supplied with Aviators at a pace that they need too, to offset attrition. Without little Airports like ours they are not going be to get that done, you can’t do all of the operations that need to be done in Corpus Christi’s air space. It won’t hold it all, they have too many planes and too many sorties. Operations that take place away from Corpus Christi our airport takes up the Lion Share of those. Some take place at Goliad but the Navy actually owns Goliad Airport now. That is used for more solo training. In our air space they just want to do touch and goes. The Navy has never really paid us to do touch and goes. They paid for a land lease for a while on a hanger that Harvey destroyed and we are not going to rebuild it. I don’t think they have any intention of lease land or hanger space from us. We save our money for Federal Grants like the Airport Improvement Project Grant. We only qualify for those every four or five years and they’re big grants and help us tackle big projects like pavement, fuel farm, or fencing. The issue has been with all of these grants that we have to save our match for them. That’s a tall order for an airport that is trying to stay independent from the general fund, a couple hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money for us for a \$2 million dollar grant because it is a 10% match. We have had to spend so much for the grants toward pavement that other things have been put on the back burner. Things like the fuel farm, terminal building, and hangers. So we are asking the Navy to come to the table and meet with us on helping take care of the thing that they affect and let us spend our money on some other things that need to be taken care of. The Airport Advisory Board Vice Chairman Styles and I started this process by reaching out to Todd Hunter. To help us navigate the political landscape. Todd’s

suggestion was to get Senator Cornyn involved and Michael Cloud's office. We did both of those and got support and feedback from Cloud's office and they put a staffer on it in DC. His office said to look into DCIP it's the way forward for you. It's designed specifically to mitigate and offset impact that military operations have on a community. Even though we are not in Corpus Christi, the military has an impact here in Aransas County at the airport. Because the airport is having a hard time staying financially independent from the general fund, it becomes more than just an airport issue that we are looking at. When looking at things that have been funded by DCIP, I think we qualify for some of those same things in this community even though we don't have the military installation here. I started looking at this not only as the Airport Manager but also as the Emergency Management Coordinator on some opportunities that we may be able to capitalize on with DCIP. I think I have made a good case for those. For example our Emergency Operations Center is in a very compromised position downtown near sea level like it is. It's very likely that we might lose it in a hurricane that had significant storm surge. I believe we need to have some sort of center on higher elevations within the county and the airport is the highest elevation. I think there is an opportunity to fix that issue by expanding the terminal and create a space to have the Emergency Operations Center set up when the time came. In the meantime the airport might be able to monetize the space we could rent it, use it for community gatherings, and trainings. We don't have a lot of large spaces in the county that's not tied up or cost a lot of money to rent. We have also talked about a FEMA dome, after Hurricane Harvey there was talk about a dome. Ultimately the talk ended and the concept died because it was not a good idea to build a dome at the airport. It may not be a bad idea to build a hardened structure that can withstand a hurricane, build it at the airport and build it in the form of a hanger and use it as a hanger until we need it for Emergency Operations or preparedness and be able to pivot. DCIP may be a path for that as well. I've had conversations with the Judge and some folks to look into DCIP to see what projects have been funded in other communities with it and see if we can do some of those same things here. I have tended to look at things as the Airport Director but now as the EMC, I'm looking at emergency needs as well. We've been looking at opportunities to improve Animal Care, it could be that the animals are negatively affected by noise from the airport. We might be able to relocate it. County staff need to be able to vet options before we move forward and that is what today's Workshop is about. Does anyone want to speak about DCIP and how they think it might improve their department or if you have suggestions? I need to ask for permission to proceed with DCIP, the first step after asking the Commissioners for approval. By the way DCIP is 100% Federal for communities below 100,000 so our community would qualify for zero match up to \$20 million dollars. The second step is to set an appointment with the Navy, the two star admiral that's over CNATRA to get buy in. No matter how bad we want it or can justify it we have to have a letter of endorsement from the Military Installation that is sort of sponsoring us through the program. I feel the political avenue that we took has given us the opportunity to have the conversation, now it's being directed at them to listen. We may not get everything we are asking for but I think we will get some buy in. We may not get \$20 million, but I think we will get the things we need for the airport. I think we might get the things I'm asking for as the Emergency Manager.

- Commissioner Rousseau – You mentioned that essentially the airport has fallen on hard times and the general fund is now helping to support some things where usually you were your own fund and took care of things. That also is a problem we are experiencing because of our insurance quagmire, resulting from Hurricane Harvey. So it's not due to mismanagement of the airport. I also notice the Yvette Utley is here with Lone Star Strategies and Christina who have worked on some of these projects, I wondered if they are going to give us a presentation today.
- Yvette Utley, grant writer – we have met a couple of times with Judge Garza and with Mr. Geer and started looking at this option to help fund the increase in size for hangers and all the improvements that are needed. I know the very first Round Table discussion with most of the leads and departments it was noted that we don't have match monies for grants. So this is a great opportunity

and a good size grant to be able to without worrying about the match funding. Today we're coming for just the preliminary discussion. We feel this is a good project to support and go after. What that may look like in the grand scheme of things with presentation and design will come in next month. This application is due in June and I would come for approval to apply for this grant funding. We felt it was important to bring to the Court and the public so we can start having open discussions about what this project might look like.

- Commissioner Casterline – Do you have a list of things that qualify, other than a hanger? Is there a master list to give an idea of what may qualify?
- Mike Geer – It's pretty vague about what qualifies. If it's impacted by the military it qualifies. If it's infrastructure and it's impacted by the military it qualifies. Our airport is certainly infrastructure and qualifies in that way. Drainage at the airport would qualify. The airport is on a septic system - we may qualify to bring sewer all the way to the airport if we put that in the request to make the airport more resilient and allows us to get open faster after a hurricane or disaster so the Navy can get back to work. We got them back to work pretty quickly after Harvey, but that was Herculean effort. That didn't affect our community like one that say has a high storm surge. The Navy has an interest in the airport getting open immediately after a severe storm. Some of the things I'm proposing increase our resiliency. It offers the Navy that our airport would be open and ready to go sooner.
- Commissioner Rousseau – Do you have examples of projects that have been funded by this grant, not necessarily in Aransas County but in other locations.
- Mike Geer – The Parish around New Orleans, I think it's Plaquemines. That “county” applied for DCIP grants on two different DCIP request asks. Everything in the ask needs to dovetail with the next thing in there. They had one they felt didn't match up with the first request so they put in another one for close to \$20 million, they asked for all together. They built an EOC, a Children's Resiliency Center or something to that effect. I was having hard understanding how, they have a Naval Installation kind of like what we have in Corpus Christi, and why they qualified for it. At some point grant writing is creative writing. You have to be able to show the Navy or the Commander of CNATRA why what you are wanting to do is going to make our facility available to him quicker after a hurricane. We opened an avenue through our political elected officials that started the discussion. I think this is the time to go after it but I was also want to try to do something before there's a change in command. Because then we have a new commander that we have to start the conversation all over again. If we end up with a new elected official then we have start over again.
- Commissioner Rousseau – One of the projects has been that you know of in Louisiana, an Emergency Operations Center.
- Mike Geer – They are real easy to find, DCIPs are very transparent. There's a lot that is public to find. What we don't see is the actual request and how it was written.
- Commissioner Casterline – When does our current lease/agreement with the Navy expire?
- Mike Geer – There is no lease. No agreement. We have a memorandum of understanding that was written in 2015 or 2016. All it said was that the Navy will try to do their training operations between 0800 and 1800, Monday – Friday, and that they would give us consideration on special weekends, such as Hummer Fest.
- Commissioner Casterline – There has been a problem in the past that they were doing all their stuff over Spanish Woods. I think at that time we ask and they relocated them. I think we have the same thing going on, I don't know where the people live at, but
- Commissioner Rousseau – The Reserve
- Commissioner Casterline – That happened in Spanish Woods several years ago and I think the airport manager then requested that they move where they were doing all the stuff.

- Mike Geer – I’m not familiar with that. I will say the airport is 643 acres. It’s not big enough to have all of the air operations take place over the airport.
- Commissioner Casterline – I realize that but we have a lot of water out there that they can do their stuff over that it wouldn’t be over somebody’s house.
- Mike Geer – I understand that. I’m trying to put this in perspective. They have military operating areas that are just past San Jose Island and they do a lot of their aerial training out there. That’s when they simulate air-to-air combat or any kind of aerobatic maneuver, they are going to do that out there. The traffic pattern here they are just doing touch and goes. Our traffic patterns are set up over the airport as much as possible. We have 4 runway approaches, 2 landing strips but each is its own runway. In aviation left turns are standard, right turns are non-standard, the reason for that is the pilot typically sits on the left hand side and when the plane turns the pilot can see everything out his window. When doing something that is non-standard you have to publish that. If you are not published for anything non-standard then it’s assumed that your airport is standard. We are non-standard on 2 of our runways. Landing from the northbound and landing to the south we do right turns in that traffic pattern. If you are coming in from the Aransas Bay to land on the runway next to Hwy 35 we do right patterns there as well. That keeps much of the traffic over the airport as possible. The other 2 runways are standard left and they go over the airport as well. There are a couple of communities that no matter what runway we’re on they are going to get some of that traffic. Spanish Woods only sees anybody fly directly over their community when the wind is straight out of the north.
- Commissioner Casterline – Several years ago it was happening on a daily basis. You weren’t the airport manager then but they were right over the top of the subdivision on a daily basis.
- Mike Geer – It could have been that they were doing standard turns at that time. That would make sense for runway 14, which is where 95% of the wind comes right down that runway. I get a lot of phone calls when the wind switches to come from the north, and almost all of those are from Spanish Woods. Usually saying the plane is too low or how long are they going to keep doing this. Then when the wind changes they don’t call back.
- Commissioner Chaney – The big advantage of this is that everything’s going to affect all the people not just the military. But it has to be based on primarily military.
- Mike Geer – We need to show how we are improving the airport to benefit the military.
- Commissioner Chaney – I looks like a win-win.
- Mike Geer – There are other things that I think are eligible under DCIP that benefit the military. Some of that is how does it resolve issues for like what was going on over Spanish Woods. It would take a lot of money to change the traffic pattern. Bird attractants are they look to mitigate against with grant dollars, and DCIP certainly has bird attractant mitigation focus. It is important for other department heads to look at this and think what if we wanted to relocate the Transfer Station. I don’t know if there is a need but Transfer Stations and dumps attract birds so we could very easily make the case that we want to get birds out of the picture that benefits the Navy. There may be other opportunities that we need to listen to or vet out. I don’t want to just say we need to do this for the Airport and Emergency Management and move on.
- Commissioner Dupnik – You mention about the people complain about the airport, from what you were telling me in another conversation is that everything is within the right decibel level limits out of the public property.
- Mike Geer – Yes, all of our decibel thresholds occur on the airport property. 65 DB is the threshold that the FAA gets involved if you are going over. Our master plan study from 2015 verified that our 65 and above decibels are kept on the airport. We should remain that way until the 2030s.
- Commissioner Dupnik – We have received several grants and we can’t tell the Navy or anybody they can’t land there?

- Mike Geer – That is correct. We don't get to pick and choose who uses the airport once we are federally funded. There are instances where we can't charge the military or other federal owned aircraft to say use our ramp. If we had a ramp fee we would have to wave that as part of our grant share.
- Misty Kimbrough – I live in Spanish Woods and I have never had a problem with any of the airplanes going over. The only time we can hear them is if we are in our yard, not ever have I heard them in my house. I've lived there 16 years.
- Commissioner Chaney – It's my opinion that this is too good not to pursue. It seems like the government is moving to help some of the smaller communities rather than the mega communities. I think we'd be remiss if we didn't look into this further.
- Mike Geer – If we do take advantage of DCIP the operations are not going to increase. Unless somehow the Navy gets bigger, then maybe it would increase. Circling back to pavement on this, I wouldn't necessarily think we need pavement at the moment. DCIP came at a time that we had already addressed our pavement needs. I put in the information to the Commissioners that we've exhausted other federal dollars that were given to airports and communities from ARPA to CARES and to those airport improvement project grants on pavement. I feel like these other projects that were put on the back burner, are eligible under DCIP. My focus would be the next we need pavement, that it's available for that no matter what. But I feel like the Navy could fix some of the things that we had to put on the back burner and I feel like they are eligible.
- Commissioner Chaney – It would hurt us if the Commandant of Naval Station Corpus Christi signed on to the project.
- Mike Geer – You have to have that, you can't move forward without it.
- Commissioner Dupnik – Is your fuel farm part of this?
- Mike Geer – Yes, sir. Board member Styles reminded me that we don't get any money from the Navy for fuel, they don't buy any fuel. The Coast Guard buys a lot of fuel, they come in for lunch and go eat at Stevie Lou's or Paradise Key, will give them a car and they go eat. They do that a lot and they always top off their tanks when they do it. The Navy will not buy gas, they're too close to Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. The only time we sell gas to the Navy is if they have a plane land because it had an engine failure or bird strike and it had to land and be evaluated by mechanical staff and crew before it could take off. They take off with a full bag of fuel, so in those cases we sale them gas and that is rare. If they bought gas from us it would offset some of the impact on the airport.
- Commissioner Chaney – If we upgraded our fuel farm maybe they would come get fuel?
- Mike Geer – I can't speculate whether or not they would. I don't think they would. I think we are too close physically to Corpus Christi. I think what they would have interest in is knowing that our airport is ready and available to take every single one of their aircraft in the event that Corpus Christi had a problem. If they had a runway rehab or something that would close the airport. You could bring them all over here, and stage them out of here. We would have clean, dry fuel to put on the aircraft. We currently have clean and dry fuel, it's that our fuel farm is nearing the end of its life, it's in the last few years of its life. We are trying to be proactive to fund it. It's going to time up with runway repairs at some point and it will have to take a back seat. FAA doesn't care if we sell another gallon of gas but our runways better be in shape.
- Judge Garza – The question isn't whether we're going to go after this, because we are. It's what the project looks like. We've got the fuel farm and the other thing Mike mentioned was our EOC currently is in a bad location. Since I took office I've heard nothing but you need to build another one or we need a FEMA dome. But, I don't like the idea of having a FEMA dome that just sits there.
- Mike Geer – There are issues with how FEMA domes are funded.

- Judge Garza – Mike’s idea of having an EOC that during a time of emergency it’s an EOC and during non-emergency we could rent it out, put airplanes in there and generate some income.
- Commissioner Dupnik – During Harvey the Sheriff’s Office lost a lot of vehicles and some other type vehicles were destroyed. This hanger you are talking about it would be built to withstand and it could protect those vehicles during the storm.
- Mike Geer – Yes, sir. So specifically, to the hanger part of the request. That’s where the word resiliency keeps coming to mind. When we write this it should be a Resiliency Center for the Community. I’m proposing an 8 compartment T-Hanger. You could have one for just the Sheriff’s cars being sheltered prior to a hurricane. Once they are out it becomes a place to stage materials for the recovery. One could be used with a facility use agreement with Red Cross. 1 for County Government. Any number of things. I know that after Hurricane Harvey the citizens were scattered all over town looking for whomever they could get assistance from. FEMA was in a different location than American Red Cross that was in a different location than County Government, we were spread out. This would be on focal point where on highest ground in the county where everybody could come to. We could park every car in Aransas County on the runways if had to. To get our people in one spot so they could start recovering, to get their lives going again quicker and easier. We might have been able to keep people here if we could have answered questions early on. This would give focused location. All of the lumber and dry wall that was donated by the Church of Scientology after Hurricane Harvey rotted in the hanger because we didn’t have a place to put it that was dry, and we ended up with material that the county was responsible for the Stafford Act on. We had to go out and show and prove that whoever was going to receive that material hadn’t already received some other funding source. My suggestion would be to write a facility use agreement with Hands of Hope and Samaritan’s Purse as well and give them a place to store it. That way when someone donates a lot of material to the county we’ve got a place to put it but we are donating it to Samaritan’s Purse or other organization. Then it can get to the people who need it a lot quicker. A hanger is what you need in that situation. My proposal for the hanger is that it be big enough to handle all the government uses that we can think of for it to put the vehicles in or back hose or firetrucks or things we know that we need and make every effort to put it in a facility that can withstand a storm. We will build this to 200 miles an hour, you can engineer that. Insulate it and run HVAC, a generator, a men’s and women’s locker room, then you leave that stuff turned off until you need it. On clear days it’s a place to put airplanes.
- Collin Jackson - What about communications infrastructure?
- Mike Geer – Communications as well. I wouldn’t set up the EOC operations, I was proposing, in the hanger. It would be concrete floors and metal walls. I would use the added space in the terminal expansion to put an EOC facility around 2,000 square feet. That would suffice, and that’s where you would add all your IT infrastructure.
- Commissioner Chaney – the EOC did really well in Harvey but half the people had to stand up because there was no room. It would have been better if it had been set up to handle the amount of people that are involved. I was amazed at how many departments and agencies and federal support that was involved.
- Keith Barrett Navigation Director - The lack of space for those who stayed and tried to help including the volunteers that came in, we had no place to shower, use the restroom, or do laundry. It was a tough go for about a month. Having a building that had restroom and showers, even it was more sports complex like or locker room oriented to sustain their needs is a plus. Also, building buildings to help with our revenue within our county, if this money is available, maybe even some Homeland Security. Reach and see if they need a place to come we are close to the borders and the Gulf. We have clean airspace. I think our airport right now is a diamond. Any of this we could get funding for can’t do anything but help the bottom line. Can we get a building large enough to take

care of those who are going to stay behind and are the first boots on the ground to start recovery, and to take care of their personal needs while they're making a sacrifice away from their family?

- Commissioner Chaney – Betty would like address from the Boards aspect?
- Betty Styles – It's a win-win. The fact that it's 100% funded grant is unbelievable. We have another grant with BIL that Mike can speak too that we are working on as well. The Board is very supportive, I think Commissioner Dupnik & Rousseau have been in those meetings. Don't you think they have supported this?
- Commissioner Rousseau – Pretty much so.
- Betty Styles – I can't believe we wouldn't do it.
- Commissioner Chaney – The fact that it is zero match is very attractive. I think we ought to go forward.
- Jacky Cockerham – *Could not hear as she was not speaking on mic.*
- Mike Geer – This is a public meeting so the cat is officially out of the bag with DCIP. There are other communities around us that are affected by the Navy. The Aransas County Airport gets somewhere between 35,000 and 50,000 operations a year. One touch and go is two operations, that's how the FAA classifies it. We have software now that you approved for me last year, VirTower. It has an antenna on our airport that captures every ADSB, a transponder component for the aircraft, it says here I am at this altitude, this speed, on this location and sends it out. They use radar but they're using ADSB more and more, planes know where each other are with ADSB. It's counting this data and it knows when it's coming in and then on the go again. I can already say that if every month was like January, which had low ceilings, low visibility, days when no flying was going on at all and part of the Navy training squad was in Roswell NM because of better weather. We'd be at 25,000 operations for the year. So I think my estimation was low. When we get better flying months and these numbers start ticking back up I bet we see over 50,000 for the year. McCampbell could go after this too and I don't know how many endorsement letters the Two Star Admiral at Navy Corpus Christ is going to be willing to sign off on. I think we need to strike while our iron is hot.
- Commissioner Dupnik – How many airports are subject to get this?
- Mike Geer – I would assume it's the municipality or the airport sponsor that gets the grant. San Patricio County could, the Navy owns Cabaniss, Waldren and Goliad. They are putting their dollars and efforts into those. Victoria could make a case. Refugio could make a case. When I have the discussions with the Navy about this grant they said that we are perfectly qualified candidate for the grant. It's what do we ask for?
- Commissioner Dupnik - *Could not hear as he was not speaking on mic.*
- Mike Geer – Mid-June is the deadline.
- Judge Garza – What do we need to do between now and June.
- Mike Geer – We need to have Commissioners Court support so we need a resolution.
- Judge Garza – Do we need engineering?
- Mike Geer – Yes, so it has to be shovel ready within a year. We will probably RFQ. We have to prove that we can have this job ready to go next year.
- Commissioner Dupnik - *Could not hear as he was not speaking on mic.*
- Yvette Utley – Yes, we would need to put out an RFQ for the sake of the application. It doesn't have to be shovel ready but very close to it. We need designs, specs, and a detailed project budget. That is something they look for. The only way we will get that is with professional services.
- Mike Geer – Speaking of timeline, I think the next thing is a resolution, RFQ, to decide what is going to be in the ask. Then we have set an appointment with the Navy.
- Commissioner Rousseau – Do you think you'll bring that to the first meeting in April?
- Mike Geer – I don't know what we need to put in this yet.

- Yvette Utley – If we get it in next Monday, Mike can set up that initial meeting with the Admiral and we can start rolling on this. Everything takes time.
- Commissioner Dupnik – We are talking about the Resolution right now?
- Yvette Utley – Yes, sir. Approval to apply and then the resolution.

V. ADJUORNMENT

Motion to adjourn: by Commissioner Rousseau, motion was seconded by Commissioner Dupnik
Vote: Motion carried 5-0: it was so ordered
Meeting adjourned at 2:18 PM

ARANSAS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' COURT

Ray A. Garza, County Judge

Date signed

**Misty Kimbrough,
Ex-Officio Clerk of the Commissioners Court**

Date signed