



MINUTES

Aransas County Commissioners Court Workshop

AM – Tuesday, August 8, 2023

The Aransas County Commissioners Court met on Tuesday, August 8, 2023, at 9:00 AM, 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 \(aransascountytx.gov\)](https://www.aransascountytx.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

Called to order at 9:01AM

Roll call all present had have a quorum

Citizen to be heard:

1. Molly Jackson McConville
 - a. Pickle Ball, its affordable and a social sport. It is the fastest growing sport in Canada & the US. Today is National Pickle Ball day. Aransas County and the City of Rockport are behind in providing spaces for this sport. Other local communities have dedicated courts. We have our 1st tournament in November here in Rockport. This could draw many from around the State. We are currently using the High School Tennis Courts and have about 100 people per week playing. Rockport is the most popular site according to playtimescheduler.com, there is so much to offer here beyond the court. Our goal is to have 10 dedicated courts with some of them covered for extreme weather conditions, and there are a few feasible sites that could be used. I thank you for your time.
2. Wendy Laubach – Chair of the Animal Care Committee - Update on Adoption Event for Animal Care
 - a. Goal to increase adoptions to help relieve the overcrowding at the shelter
 - b. Successful seeing it was put together on very short notice and is our first on
 - c. 6 adoptions
 - d. 3 dogs left to foster care
 - e. 26 are now “tagged” to Rockport Fulton Rescue, 9 more at the event
 - f. We are still getting calls and questions about how they can help or adopt

Budget Discussion:

Amanda Oster – County Attorney but also speaking as a tax payer and a parent.

- Judge Garza stated he plans on putting the requested attorney in the budget before Amanda spoke
- For the last few years watched the budget process, with an overarching statement that residents do not want their taxes raised. Will probably ring true because nobody wants to pay taxes or more taxes. If that was the only consideration that would always be true.
 - What does Aransas County want in general? What do we hear? We hear they want more. What do they want more of or from?

- More from environmental health: Enforce Ordinances, Keep properties and roadways clean
- More from Road & Bridge: Better drainage, Fewer potholes, More street lighting
- More from Animal Care: Fewer strays, More spaces for animals to be cared for
- A safer County: More deputies on patrol, Fewer drug dealers and drug users, Fewer DWI's, Fewer sex offenders, Fewer burglaries of homes and cars, Faster turnarounds on criminal cases, Fewer people in jail and for shorter time

The reality is that these goals are important but none of these goals can be met by shrinking everyone's budgets. It's not practical. It cannot be done by continuing to overwork everyone's employees. When they are overworked, underappreciated and undervalued they leave. Then we get further behind because we have to hire new employees and train them, this is happening in almost every department on a regular basis. As elected officials and department heads we have a duty not only to the residents of this county but to all of our employees. Most of our employees are also tax payers that live here in this county. They want to live and work where their kids are happy and safe, where their homes are safe and clean. That is what we need to consider when we are determining our budgets. How we're going to live here in Aransas County. Thank you.

- Judge Garza -Question when we started the budget talks last Monday. We had about \$4,500,000 deficit that would be coming out of our General Fund. I am proposing to go as high as we can with voter approved unused increments that would be a 36¢ tax rate. With that the deficit would shrink to about \$700,000. This would include: County Attorney's request for another attorney, Sheriff's new full-time Bailiff, with the new larger 2 story courthouse we will need another full-time person for security, another full-time Animal Care officer and a part-time officer.
- Question of how the short fall happened, from a lot of things: Cost of doing business going up with inflation, we have to take care of our people, this would freeze all step increases for next year, and step increase policy/procedure needs to be revamped/rewritten as it has been abused. I am proposing a COLA of 2%, the Commissioner's Court will have the finale say.
- Insurance premiums for our buildings and vehicles have gone up, we got hit with a large jump in costs, and this really killed us.
- Jail's federal inmate contract, for many years this made money 2014 & 2019 were the best years creating a surplus, over the last few years not so much. We budgeted too high for anticipated revenue, for 2023 we budgeted \$2,400,000, our year to date is \$487,000. We've adjusted that to \$1,000,000 but our year to date variance is still \$2,000,000, this skews the numbers.
- We are still looking for reasons the budget skewed. 2021-2022 we went with no revenue rate and with costs going up eventually this was going to catch up with us and our budget. This is the year it caught up and we have to catch up. 2022 \$1,500,000 was pulled out of our reserves. 2023 it was a deficit budget of \$3,000,000 so will pull out of our reserves. Early on in my term I addressed the elected officials and department heads to encourage them to save as much as they can and try to get it down to \$2,000,000. Jacky Cockerham stated "we are doing well right now, provided everyone stays conservative. We should not need to pull that \$3,000,000 out of reserves. If everyone stays conservative we may not need to go into the reserves but not the full amount for sure." If we can make up \$3,000,000 we can make up \$700,000 for next year, but still get the mission done.
- Commissioner Dupnik wants to encourage everyone to stay focused on being conservative to help with the deficit.
- Jacky Cockerham stated the growth in the tax base has also helped this year. If we don't have people at the end of the year see money in their budget and spend it so they "don't lose it" we should be fine.

- Commissioner Rousseau comment about what the County Attorney said and she said it very well. We have terrific employees in several departments, however we have some departments that are very poorly managed. I think that needs to change. How do we do that? I'm uncertain because elected officials get to run their departments any way they want to. The Judge may be over the employees but if the employees are under another elected official that sets up a conflict. Ways to look at being more efficient or effective were suggested. Setting up staggered shifts for the Animal Control officers, some early, some come later. The Animal Care Department has been beat up. Animal Control Officers are not law enforcement officers and there are times when they are going to a location that is a constant problem they need backup from law enforcement. Cooperation needs to be better. I feel giving a COLA is a very bad idea, it makes the assumption that everyone here is doing the same kind of job. That is not the case, some are doing a terrific job and some that are coasting. If we give this COLA raise that will be about 20% in the last 5 years. No one working for outside the county has seen that kind of pay raise. What I suggested to the Judge is that we remove the COLA and put back a 1 step increase possibility for the Departments. At least if there is a step-increase it is tied to performance evaluation and why they deserve a step increase. If we want to recognize the ones doing a good job and not across the board as the COLA does. Talking about doing well with a conservative fashion that if anybody is recommending a step increase make sure one has not already been given, this has been an area of abuse.
- Commissioner Dupnik – COLA is (Cost of Living Allowance), it is not tied to the employee's performance. It is just an adjustment to their cost of living. The step increases come in if the employees are working above their normal skill set or has improved. I think the COLA is prudent, everybody's costs have gone up no matter who they are. We have a chronic issue in this county of losing employees because they have to have money to live. The cost of living in our county is higher than most counties in the Coastal Bend. They can make more money by driving 30 miles or less for jobs that pay more. The department heads need to have a financial incentive also.
- Commissioner Casterline – something to consider / remember is that every time the legislature meets we have more unfunded mandates. I've asked Jacky Cockerham, Auditor to start showing in the budget what is an unfunded mandate and what it actually costs us and it's shocking.
- Amanda Oster – when you are making your consideration that you know that COLA by definition is a COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE and are not performance based. I think we can all understand that everyone's cost of living like groceries and rent has gone up.
- Judge Garza – we will add everybody
- Jacky Cockerham – you want to add department heads as well? Judge Garza – Yes.
- Commissioner Chaney – Elected officials have things they need to do too. We don't have a lot of people that are in the upper tier of salaries. The guys digging the ditch if he doesn't get a cost of living increase then next year he's now 7% behind and we'll never get caught up. Step increases should be about the willingness to learn and work. If we focus on saving the taxpayer money we may cost them more in the long run. It won't help us a great deal financially but it will help us keep people.
- Jacky Cockerham – adding 2% COLA for department heads increased it by \$16,000, if elected officials are given the 2% COLA adds \$17,000 or totaling \$33,000 for department heads and elected officials.
- Pam Heard – COLA – if you give to one I believe you should give it to all. I have 2 deputies that live out of county because that can't find affordable housing. One of those makes almost the same salary that I do. I've been here 23 years and there have been many years we did not get a COLA, this is the only way that elected officials ever make any more money and we have to pay our bills too.
- Judge Garza – what is the percentage our health insurance benefit going up? Tana Taylor – employee only increased by 33%, those carrying family went up 6%.

- Commissioner Rousseau – that 33% is based on a cost of \$45 that would make it \$60. That \$45 had remained the same for about 5 years.
- Animal Control – we’ve added the 2 positions requested and a truck, what has not been added is the rabies vaccines and the industrial shop vacuum specific to kennel cleaning.
 - Wendy Laubach stated that spay and neutering that are not associated by adoption are being paid with donations and to cover additional items we are going to have to ramp up the fundraising efforts. We will also pursue grants and other funding opportunities.
 - Lori Ceasar – I do feel like adding rabies vaccines should be in the budget if not this year then next. As part of my job is rabies control I feel like we should be vaccinating all animals that come through our shelter.
 - Jacky Cockerham spoke with Alma Cartwright and they feel that the Health Care Tax funds can and should pay for the rabies vaccines.
 - Commissioner Dupnik – concern of the Parvo outbreak in the shelter that is spread by fecal matter. I believe the commercial shop vacuum could help contain the spread and be cost effective as it is more efficient and will cut labor hours to clean the kennels in a more sanitary way. The shelter does not have a designated quarantine area and this will help, we do vaccinate when they come in but if they already have it is a risk.
 - Commissioner Casterline – how much funding are we talking about.
 - Wendy Laubach - \$20,000 for rabies vaccination, \$22,000 - \$24,000 for spay and neutering, \$3,000 for the shop vac., new cat cages etc.
 - Commissioner Casterline – I say in the budget we were going increase the pool to the Animal Control budget, \$10,000.
 - Commissioner Rousseau stated that was already pulled out of the budget.
 - Judge Garza – add the \$10,000.
 - Jacky Cockerham – instead of just the \$3,000 we will make it \$10,500.
 - Commissioner Chaney – how is solid waste disposed of from your location?
 - Lori Ceasar - it is taken to the dump and as far as I know that is what other counties do as well, it is not considered a biohazard.
 - Wendy Laubach – when this county euthanized on large scale the carcasses were disposed of in the dump and other cities still do. At one time we were sending around 4,000 lbs. of carcasses monthly before our efforts of a no-kill shelter.
- Judge Garza I know Commissioner Rousseau proposed \$10,000 for the pool, can we use the Health Care Sales Tax Funds for the pool?
 - Jacky Cockerham - It does not qualify.
 - Alma Cartwright – we can spend Health Care Tax Funds if it is a community health issue. So if the pool is running water aerobics, geriatric aerobics, rehab, and those kind of activities then I think it fits in the category. Since the pool doesn’t do that 100% of the time so I think we can fund them some but not completely.
 - Commissioner Casterline – they have never been very forthcoming about what they do.
 - Commissioner Rousseau – I will get that information by our next meeting
 - Jacky Cockerham – so are going to take all that we give out of Health Care Tax Fund?
 - Commissioner Rousseau – no, I am proposing we add an additional \$10,000 to come from the Health Care Sales Tax Funds, to cover the activities that the pool enables people who have limited mobility to participate.

Recess 9:55 AM

Resume 10:10 AM

Sheriff's Budget

- Judge Garza met with SO about his request for \$300,000 for vehicles,
 - Tana Taylor - we are putting that at \$150,000, page 31.
 - Judge Garza – we agreed on \$112,000
 - Commissioner Dupnik – are we using ARPA funds for some of the vehicles?
 - There is another grant SB22 that we can apply for in January that if we are approved we can use it to purchase vehicles
 - Michael Brooks – Chief he thought it was going to be \$150,000, cutting in half. We can't supplement your budget with a grant we hope we will get \$150,000 but it is not guaranteed. \$112,000 might be 2 vehicles. \$150,000 would make it where we could get 3 vehicles. We have 5-6 vehicles that we will need to replace.
 - What about funds from other grants, Stone Garden vehicles have to be used ½ time just for that and ½ time on regular duties.
 - The original request was for 6 vehicles. \$112,000 will only cover 2, they are now requesting \$150,000 to cover 3 vehicles and hoping that we will get enough money from the SB22 grant to cover 3 more vehicles but that is not guaranteed. After Harvey we replaced 18 of the vehicles at 1 time. Now we are trying to replace some every year so we have a good rotation set up. The cars we have now are failing every week. They are now 5-6 years old and are failing.
 - Sheriff Mills by zoom. Pre-Harvey we were budgeting \$112,000 to \$130,000 per year to cover vehicles. I did not want to submit a grant application with zero in the budget and present an expectation that we expected the grant to cover it all. I feel if we at least show in the budget what we were doing prior to Harvey we're still in a hardship. I am comfortable requesting \$350,000 in grant funds which is what we could be eligible for in a county our size. This is not guaranteed, we haven't even seen the application form or the questions yet, we won't see that until January 2024.
 - Commissioner Rousseau – a concern was reported to me that we may have vehicles that aren't being used and are starting to rust out.
 - Michael Brooks – we use all the vehicle we have. This might be referring to a Stone Garden Vehicle, this are set aside because so we can trade them in and get a new vehicle. We are currently we are running short and putting officers in Stone Garden vehicles, 2 officers in a car, we are using everything we've got right now.
 - Sheriff Mills – this grant is eligible for every county in the state. Counties over 50,000 qualify for \$500,000. So we don't know if our how much we may get. But will be submitting for the grant.
 - Judge Garza – put it at \$140,000
 - Commissioner Casterline – on grant applications if they find out that you are buying cars that you normally budget it can cause you to lose the grant. That was affirmed.
 - Michael Brooks – to Commissioner Rousseau when you asked about vehicle that were rusting out I believe I know what you are referring to. There are 3 vehicles across for the Public Safety Center, 1 of them the motor is blown, 1 the water pump has almost cut a hole through the block, and the other is a truck for Stone Garden that has a rod knocking. We are waiting to trade those in when we purchase new vehicles. The one with a water pump issue will be traded in this year. The other 2 are Stone Garden and must be traded in or auctioned off, we will trade them in when we purchase new Stone Garden units.

County Clerk Budget

- Judge Garza – we reduced your shelves

- Misty Kimbrough - \$157,850 for high density rolling shelves for public records that must be available to the public. Total of \$204,550 for all furniture and curtain needs. Now putting \$120,000 for the high density rolling shelves.
- Commissioner Rousseau – what is the amount for the other furniture that was not the shelving. About \$50,000, all of that was presented to the court the first time I presented my budget in June.
- 1 of the items is for window coverings, one of the laws is that we have to protect our records from UV light and my office has 10 windows that must be covered. I also have to have a place to store maps, plats and blueprints, the list goes on and on.
- Judge Garza – should we increase to \$150,000
- Commissioner Chaney – it is really important that we get this right.
- Misty Kimbrough – it’s more than important, it’s the law.
- Judge Garza part of what is driving this deficit is a lot of purchases here that we don’t have prior years.
- Jacky Cockerham – and a lot of these are 1 time purchases.

Judge Garza – I believe we have gone through all of the changes.

Moving Expenses

- Jacky Cockerham – estimate of \$100,000, we didn’t pay that much when we moved into this building.
- Misty Kimbrough – that move to this building did not include all of my records and that is extensive.
- Pam Heard – maybe that we need a contingency fund for juries. For when we have to go offsite to pick a jury. None of the courtrooms will hold 100 people and for any aggravated felonies and murder trials we will need more than what we have chairs for. When that happens sometimes we will be able to use the community building, but it will not always be available like January 2025 for 6 weeks for the Smithsonian Exhibit that is coming. The point is we are going to have to somewhere else to pick the juries, this is not in the District Clerk’s budget. It will be split across multiple budgets, it will affect IT, Sheriff’s office, Jail, Maintenance for moving chairs and furniture around and safety for the courtroom. I don’t even know where we are going to be able to go or what it might cost. But a contingency plan is needed.
- Commissioner Rousseau – I thought we were getting a new software program that would eliminate some of the initial expenses of calling a jury.
- Pam Heard – Yes, but it has nothing to do with the number of people needed to select a jury. In the new District Courtroom, I am not sure how many chairs will actually be in there, they planned 18 inches per chair, and they didn’t account for people getting in and out of the rows. We can’t shove them in like cattle, there has to be safety and allow people to be able to get up, in and out. Even the biggest which is the Commissioner Courtroom will maybe hold 80 people. We all including the Judge’s advocated for this from the beginning and I have an email from 2020 where Judge Whatley reminded me that the Architects were told at least 2 different times that we were going to need 100-120 jurors and there no place in the courthouse that is going to accommodate that. The last jury we had we had 130 people respond to their summons. The new program is going to cut down on the excess people. I believe that about ½ of our trials are aggravated/murder type cases which means that about a 1/3 of our court cases juror selections will need to be in another location.
- Armando Chapa Detention Center Chief – our plan that we submitted to the Texas Jail Commission we proposed 2 jailers to assist in transport and security.

Citizen to be heard

- Jeff Hutt – I’ve heard today about conservative budgeting and an increase in taxes because we have no other choice. Aransas County are conservative American Patriots they are concerned about paying taxes

but they know that every time the government attacks the dollar it takes away from private industry and gives the government more power. The principle is what it's opposed to but if look at our budgets it's not because of inflation, it's because of mismanagement. The County Attorney's office was around \$250,000 until the Commissioners Court decided that its better that we give our County Attorney District Attorney privileges and that it would lower our budget. That office is up to nearly \$1,000,000 of our budget every year. Maybe we should go back to the State and say we were wrong. Also, we've been budgeting revenues for the federal inmate program that has not come through. The courthouse is another example. We are having to spend more money for a courthouse, and it's not because we didn't have a 3rd story, it because the County Clerk is stuck with windows there was no forethought. The budget is going to continue to go up until we start managing this government properly. Thank you for your time I appreciate it.

Elections Administrator – Kevin Stroud

- I have some good news. I did hear the comments from the last budget workshop and I am okay with dropping by conference budget by \$3,000, which will only be a \$500 increase from this year's budget.
- The court was appreciative for this reduction
- Commissioner Rousseau – just for the record the huge increase for your department is due to the thermal paper that is part of the unfunded mandate from the state legislature. You are doing a good job. You just had that assigned to you.

Road & Bridge – David Reid

- It is hard to keep good people when we can't pay them what they are worth. They work hard and in the elements outside. Everyone we hire takes a pay cut to work for us. Yes, we have good benefits but our Health Insurance is more money out of pocket. We are not keeping up with the COLA we give them. We have open position that I can't fill. I would like to be able to give merit raises this coming year. Our employees are our County's BEST asset, we need to keep our good people.

Treasurer – Alma Cartwright

- We got the Tax Levy (see attachment) which gave us a number for our Indigent Healthcare which is based on 8% of the Tax Levy. It is \$1,270,199 about \$59,000 increase from 2023.
- With the juror software that the District Clerk is going to get there also comes the ability to pay the jurors through a different system. Our current system with writing and mailing out checks is a mess and expensive about \$5 per check. With this new program/process it would cost 99¢ per juror to pay them, but other counties are paying less so I will work on getting that down. When they juror comes in, the clerk will scan their information that get sent to the Treasurer's Office and the data is sent in to create a pay card and it is done. If the card is not used in 90 days the money is transferred back to us. This process even at a dollar per card is much less expensive and much easier to manage. The new juror fee will be \$20, do we need to consider upping it another dollar for the cost of the payment? We are still working on the contract but I think we can work it out. We do have several
 - Commissioner Rousseau – I think that sounds like a good proposal.
- COAL &/or Step increase – I agree that people need raises, but we are in a situation that if we don't tackle it now management wise. There are large variances between departments pay. I think this needs to really be looked at and maybe do our own salary survey.

Judge Garza – this budget includes:

- \$1,500,000 for the construction of the Aquarium that comes from the Hotel/Motel Fund Balance these funds cannot be used for General Fund items.
- Anticipated construction costs associated with of the new courthouse because we have not been paid by the insurance. FEMA gave us \$4,500,000-\$4,800,000 towards it. We have to come up with the rest of

that at \$5,500,000, once we finish the courthouse if the insurance has not been paid FEMA will give us another \$3,800,000 leaving the difference of \$3,000,000.

- Commissioner Rousseau – page 89 Downtown Courthouse Fund Summary, that changed by \$5,000,000.
- Jacky Cockerham - Yes ma'am.
- Commissioner Rousseau – so the anticipation of the initial \$9,000,000 was \$5,000,000 from insurance, and \$4,000,000 from FEMA?
- Jacky Cockerham – I believe the \$9,000,000 was from FEMA and we've already got almost \$5,000,000 of it, so I reduced that down to \$4,000,000 that we anticipate what we will get if we do not receive our insurance prior to completion of the building. We will still pay about \$3,000,000 out of pocket until we receive insurance proceeds.
- Judge Garza – if we never receive insurance funds we will be out \$3,000,000.
- Judge Garza – did you plug in the numbers for the transfer station with anticipated revenue?
 - Jacky Cockerham – yes we did, there wasn't much difference that what was already put in there.
 - When do we need to approve that tax rate?
 - Jacky Cockerham
 - ❖ Proposing the tax rate at Commissioners Court next Monday, August 14, 2023 at 9:00 AM
 - ❖ Public hearing on the tax rate at Commissioner Court on Tuesday, September 5, 2023 at 9:00 AM
 - ❖ Adopt the tax rate on Monday, September 11, 2023 at 9:00 AM with a majority to pass.

Motion to adjourn by Commissioner Rousseau & seconded by Commissioner Casterline

Vote 5-0, it is so ordered.

Adjourned at 10:51 AM.

ARANSAS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' COURT



Misty Kimbrough

Misty Kimbrough,
Ex-Officio Clerk of the Commissioners Court

Ray A. Garza

Ray A. Garza, County Judge

