

State of the County Speech

Travis County Judge Sarah Eckhardt
League of Women Voters of the Austin Area
Doubletree Hotel, Austin, TX
March 9, 2016

THEME

Good evening. It's a pleasure to be with you to share the exciting work we've been doing at the County and will be doing over the next year and in years to come. The State of Travis County is strong. Our economy is the envy of the nation. We are rapidly changing. People see this exciting time in Travis County and want to be a part of it.

But rapid growth must not occur at the expense of our most vulnerable neighbors or our unique community identity. We hear it every day – from friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, constituents. Traffic is terrible and the tolls are high. Can I afford the time and money to get to work and back? Housing costs and property taxes are killing me. Sure, my house is worth more if I sell. But, where would I move? Can I have a career here and pay my bills? Will my children be able to have a career here and pay their bills? Will my children even want to live here if we have lost our culture, our environment and what had made our community unique?

We are experiencing a growing anxiety that the prosperity isn't for everyone. That is our challenge in local government, indeed that's the whole point of any government of, by and for the people – to level the playing field, to address inequity, to put opportunity within reach of every Travis County resident through affordable, efficient and fair government.

I'd like to thank the League of Women Voters for recognizing the important role that local governments play in building resilient and prosperous communities.

THANK YOUS

I am honored to be here tonight with the women mayors of Travis County who are being recognized for Making Democracy Work in 2016.

Congratulations to:

Mayor Linda Anthony of West Lake Hills
Former Mayor Deane Armstrong of Jonestown
Mayor Rose Cardona of Sunset Valley
Mayor Cristin Cecala of Point Venture
Mayor Rita Jonse of Manor
Mayor Caroline Murphy of Bee Caves

I'd like to thank the other elected officials for being here tonight to celebrate these mayors and local government. I so enjoy working with all of you.

I also want to take a moment to praise the employees of Travis County, many of who are here tonight. Y'all stand up and let us look at you. I am so proud to work side by side with you all.

Most importantly, thank you to the residents of Travis County. This community is growing and changing so fast and the nature of civic involvement is growing and changing, too. We have lots of folks with lots of different opinions creating a lively civic dialog that may be messy, but will ultimately produce a more resilient and prosperous community.

BUDGET/EQUITY

Let's start with the taxes. Travis County has, over the past several years, attempted to lessen the cost of living here by decreasing the County tax bill for the average homestead. Property taxes disproportionately impact lower income owners and renters. But it is the only revenue source of consequence given to counties by the Texas Legislature.

Travis County makes full use of the tax exemptions available to homeowners. Our universal homestead exemption is already at the statutory maximum of 20% and has been for many years. In 2012 and in 2016 the Court raised the additional exemptions for our senior and disabled homeowners, which is now at \$75,000. We will explore the possibility of another modest increase again this year.

Now let's move on to how we use your taxes. To maximize efficiency and effectiveness, Travis County has embraced a continual performance-based budget analysis of why, how, where and what type of services we deliver. We are moving away from funding problems and toward funding solutions. We have begun using limited-term pilot programs to prove up the effectiveness of our investments in advance of long-term commitments of tax dollars. It's not enough that a program feels good. It must do good.

JUSTICE

And where do most of our tax dollars go? Counties in Texas exist primarily to provide Justice – a civil and criminal court system and a jail. Hence, courts and jails represent the largest part of our budget.

Expanding populations demand expanding our Justice System. But last fall the voters rejected a bond to expand our Civil and Family Courts. We got the message. We will start fresh **without** a specific site in mind or set notions of what kind of building we might need. County staff has sifted the "must haves" from the "want to haves". And we are convening a Citizens Advisory Committee to vigorously push back on what is really a "must" and what is just a "want."

And, we are challenging our colleagues in the judiciary to reimagine and reinvent how we deliver justice by looking at operational changes in the Court system and how we use our space.

On the criminal justice side, in 2015 the Commissioners Court demanded that the Sheriff restore Face-to-Face Visitation at the Travis County jail. After making some systematic changes, the Sheriff's office will once again provide families and friends Face-to-Face visits with their loved ones. *No family should be forced to have some of its hardest conversations over a video screen.*

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Now let's talk about affordable homes. Who has the hardest time finding one? Those of us struggling to get our first opportunity or to get back into opportunity after a fall. Over the past year,

Travis County has been developing our first Affordable Housing Policy and action plan. Out of that effort, the Travis County Housing Finance Corporation has entered into its first ever partnership with the NRP Group to build the Terrace at Walnut Creek, a state of the art apartment complex. Units are projected to be available in Fall 2017 for households earning 40% of the area median income and 60% of the area median income.

And, Travis County has issued a Request for Proposals to redevelop land we own on Airport Blvd. and 53rd St. for mixed-use development with County offices on the lower floors and affordable apartments above. That project is expected to break ground in 2017.

Travis County has also worked with the City of Austin and the Salvation Army to expand the Women and Children's Shelter and to include an apartment complex for families transitioning from Shelter to independent homes.

Stay tuned for more recommendations coming out of the Affordable Housing Policy group at the County.

WORKFORCE

Let's talk about work. What kind of work do we need to grow here? I am not a fan of tax incentives generally. Companies want to move here, with or without the housewarming present. It's time to apply performance-based budgeting to economic development. We need to stop funding problems like corporate entitlements to tax breaks and start funding solutions. The solution is to look at the workforce we have, the training of that workforce and the jobs that are needed today and start lining them up for the jobs of tomorrow. We have a lot of people who are ready to work. We have a serious training gap. And with the exception of the food and entertainment industry, we have few mid-skill jobs that provide a living wage and a career path for those who are not getting advanced degrees.

I have partnered with Austin Mayor Steve Adler to task *Workforce Solutions of the Capital Area* with developing a strategic plan challenging assumptions and delivering real job opportunities for our neighbors most in need.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Let's talk about disasters. Because we need to talk about it. In 2015 we have seen floods, been under threat of wildfire and withstood active shooters. We lost three Travis County residents in the Halloween floods. We had a shooter target the APD headquarters and other government buildings and an attempted murder on one of our district judges. And, we lost STAR Flight nurse Kristin McLain in a medical rescue along Barton Creek. In memory of those we have lost and in honoring those who have been terrorized, we continue to analyze these events and improve our response for the future.

With regard to STAR Flight, we are in full cooperation with the FAA to investigate Kristin's tragic fall so that first responders and the people they are responding to are kept from harm.

With regard to active shooters, the County is re-examining all of its security protocols and weighing carefully the costs of being a public servant in these dangerous times. We are thrilled to have

Judge Kocurek back on the bench. We are committed to striking the right balance between security for the public servant and accessibility for the public served. With regard to floods, we are in full partnership with all who responded to the Halloween Floods to understand what went right and what went wrong. We have engaged experts to study the flood plain and its unusual behavior in this most recent flood to guide our infrastructure investments and, if warranted, challenge the infrastructure investments of others if they are contributing to the frequency or strength of the flooding in our region.

We know that we can and must do more in collaboration with private and public sectors to better protect our community in the future.

LAND, WATER, AND TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Let's talk about land, water and transportation. Travis County is the first county in Texas that I know of to pass a comprehensive plan known as our Land Water and Transportation Plan, or LWTP. So let's start with Land.

LAND

Growth and change will continue. And the rate of growth and change in Travis County is occurring at a faster rate outside the city limits of Austin. We must act fast and with discipline to set aside precious natural beauty and resources to preserve for future generations.

We must complete the mighty Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, ensuring the survival of endangered species like the Golden Cheeked Warbler and ensuring that future generations will know the awe of the wild and unadorned Hill Country. This year we celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the 30,000-acre Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. The BCP was the first of its kind in the nation, bringing together the environmental and development communities behind a common purpose - preserving the natural beauty and wildlife that have been a draw to Central Texas for centuries.

Though we have nearly bought up all the land required for conservation under the BCP federal permit, the real challenge and honor is just beginning – mindfully introducing this fragile ecosystem to managed public use as we steward this habitat into the future. We love mountain biking, camping, spelunking, rock climbing and swimming in the Hill Country. But the BCP is for the critters. The push of a growing population to invade the BCP, whether it's with a mountain bike, a water treatment plant or a Lakeway toll road, must be resisted.

At the same time as we acquire land to protect our critters, we must also expand the system of recreational opportunities for our growing population. Travis County has the most beautiful system of parks in Central Texas with opportunities to hike, bike, climb, boat, BMX, skateboard and even play cricket. And, through collaboration with landowners and other local governments, we are creating a network of creek and river trails that include the Pedernales, the Colorado, Onion Creek and Gilleland Creek.

Our motto at Travis County Parks is Take It Outside. We want you to do just that.

WATER

Next, we must embrace the fact of limited water supplies in our region. I am honored and excited to be invited by the county judges of the wetter counties to our east in assessing how much, if any, water their communities can afford to export to dryer high growth counties like ours. At this moment, we are all suffering the mere illusion of planning and management of this limited and vital resource. The illusion is encouraged and maintained by greed. Through partnership, we can bravely face the greed we have all benefited from in the near term but is literally sucking us dry in the big picture.

TRANSPORTATION

OK, everyone wants to talk about traffic. As I stated earlier, growth and change will continue and the rate of growth and change is happening faster around Austin than in Austin. More of our friends and neighbors live in Buda, Kyle, Round Rock, Bastrop and Leander. We must invest now in effective, efficient and fair ways to move safely through our sensitive environment.

I have, for all my time in public office, been critical of paving over our most environmentally sensitive areas. But we cannot deny our transportation needs nor shirk responsibility for addressing them.

As the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority continues to plan for the expansion of MoPac South, 183S, 183N, the Y at Oak Hill and 45SW, we must hold it to its rhetoric about being more than just a toll road operator. I have consistently pushed the CTRMA for a decade to live up to its promise as the builder of the new way of moving from here to there, with a focus on moving people, not cars. I have worked with the CTRMA and CapMetro to make sure that CTRMA highways are designed for park-and-ride, buses, bikes and pedestrian access.

Please help me demand that the CTRMA dedicate now some portion of future toll revenues to the operation of the transit system that should be seamlessly woven into those tollway projects.

And let's single out 45SW, a project freighted by its potential to seriously damage the BCP and the limited water resources I spoke of previously. That roadway should become the safest, most environmentally sensitive, most technologically enabled and, yes, visually appealing travel space in Texas, if not the world. It is our responsibility, as the elected representatives of Travis County, to hold the CTRMA to that high standard. It is one the CTRMA embraces in conversation. It must be willing to put its money where its mouth is.

TRANSPARENCY

And finally, one of my favorite topics – government transparency. No one knows what the heck we do in county government. Travis County has a culture of putting our noses to the grindstone and getting our work done. What our workforce does and how well they do it is not widely known because we don't tell anyone! We must do a better job of telling our residents and our potential private and public partners what we do and what is available to them through the County. I don't want no stinking *marketing machine*. I want effective, efficient communication with the people we serve and the public and private institutions with whom we partner.

We have launched an open data portal. I urge folks to go to traviscountytx.gov and click on the Government Transparency tab and check out what we have posted and give us feedback.

The Commissioners Court has established an Online Message Board so that the public can follow the deliberations of the Commissioners Court. One feature you will find on the Online Message Board is something I call the CATAA-Lyst. CATAA stand for Consider And Take Appropriate Action. It is a real-time working draft of upcoming agendas for voting sessions and work sessions.

The Commissioners Court has also named a committee of highly regarded professionals willing to donate their time to propose a new Ethics Policy for the County. I am excited by their work and look forward to implementing their recommendations.

And, the Commissioners Court is considering establishing for the first time a County Public Information Office to guide residents to sources of information held by the County and to guide the County in getting that information out to folks who may not even know we maintain such records.

So keep in touch. These are exciting times in Travis County. I know the changes we are experiencing will bring out the best in us as we level our playing field, addressing inequity, putting opportunity within reach of every Travis County resident through affordable, efficient and fair government. Like the mighty Post Oak in my backyard that just busted out in buds this week, we are flourishing in Central Texas. Let's plant the seeds today so that every Travis County resident can flourish here tomorrow and into the future.