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1210 San Antonio • Austin, TX 78701 • P.O. Box 2131 • Austin, TX 78768-2131
512-478-8753 • 800-456-5974 • 512-478-0519 FAX

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CONTACT: LONNIE HUNT
(512) 478-8753,
lonnieh@county.org

Local Officials Gather to Discuss Impacts of Legislative Session on County Government

Donna Kay M^oKinney, Bexar County District Clerk was one of hundreds of county officials who gathered in Austin Aug. 26-28 at the Texas Association of Counties (TAC) 2015 Legislative Conference to discuss common concerns shared by Texas local governments, learn about the biggest issues facing counties and local taxpayers following the 84th Legislature.

Notable speakers included Sen. John Whitmire (D-Houston), the chair of the Senate Committee on Criminal Justice, who discussed the juvenile justice budget, its impact on county programs and new policies that were enacted during the legislative session and Texas Secretary of State Carlos Cascos, who spoke about border security.

“The Legislative Conference is the one time each year county officials from around the state can get together as peers to discuss common issues and potential solutions to our shared challenges; and discuss how the legislative session impacts that,” said TAC Executive Director Gene Terry. “It is also a perfect opportunity to meet and visit with our colleagues in the legislature outside the whirlwind of the session, to discuss issues and solutions for the next session in 2017.”

In addition, the conference’s General Sessions included presentations by author Stephen M.R. Covey, the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, organizational communications expert Anne Grady, who discussed best practices for building and strengthening relationships with community leaders and legislators; and Cary Roberts, strategic communications expert and managing director for the Washington, D.C.-based Herald Group.

Several county officials and department heads also led discussions and helped educate their colleagues on a number of topics. Those county officials included Limestone County Judge Daniel Burkeen, Jackson County Sheriff A.J. “Andy” Louderback, Limestone County Sheriff Dennis Wilson, Bell County Judge Jon Burrows, Midland County Justice of the Peace David Cobos and Eastland County Judge Rex Fields.

During their three days in Austin, officials heard from experts on several hot topics, including:

- An update on the property tax reform legislation that was a central focus of the 84th legislative session;
- An insider’s look at the transition of power to the new governor and lieutenant governor from the perspective of a panel of staff members from the offices of the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the House;
- An update on current issues in emergency management from county officials affected by the May floods, including how recovery is progressing and how local entities are responding;
- An examination of rising indigent defense costs and best practices;
- A look at how the state budget is written, how legislators use dedicated funds to balance the budget and the affect that practice has on Texans and the delivery of important services; and
- A candid discussion about the counties’ role in securing the border, including the executive orders affecting immigration as well as the appropriation and adequate funding of local planning efforts.

TAC works to unite Texas counties together in search of solutions for challenges faced by all counties and to provide services to support county officials in the vital work they do for their local communities.