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**Approved Bexar County Budget Includes Funds to Establish
Mental Health Co-Responder Approach to 911 Calls**

Initial phase includes licensed mental health professionals and peer support specialist.

Today, the Bexar County Commissioners Court approved the FY 2020-21 budget, which totaled \$1.785 billion for all funds, including \$708 million in operating appropriations, \$639.8 million in capital projects, \$152.2 million for debt service, and \$9.2 million for contingencies and \$276.1 million in reserves and carry-forward fund balance.

The FY 2020-21 adopted budget for the general fund totaled \$560.4 million and compared to last year's budget of \$565.4 million, demonstrates a decrease of \$5 million.

"This year's budget approval process was nothing short of a monumental task as we navigated through uncharted territories in our response to COVID-19," stated Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff.

"Bexar County has taken steps to address the inequities in our criminal justice system as well as our mental health problem. I'm proud to say we're staying on the forefront by providing funding for a new partnership with STRAC and the County's Mental Health Department on a new mental health co-responder program as well as implementing a Managed Case Assigned system."

Once again, the County has maintained the current tax rate of \$0.301097, which is the 26th consecutive year in which Bexar County either lowers or maintains rates for property owners. Based on certified appraised property values reported by the Bexar Appraisal District, values increased by 5.97 percent, or \$10.3 billion. Property values on existing properties increased by \$5.8 billion, and new construction generated \$4.5 billion in additional value.

Included for the first time, the County has allocated funds to establish a mental health response co-responder approach to make the determination for the most appropriate response when receiving 911 calls.

The Office of Criminal Justice is set to contract with the South Texas Regional Advisory Council (STRAC) to assist with infrastructure and to adopt a best practices model, which will include mental health professionals to be deployed on mental health calls. The expanded phase will be initially funded at \$1.5 million to be housed in the Office of Criminal Justice/Mental Health Department.

"I realize the need to make a positive difference in how we respond to mental health calls and am proud to support our Behavioral Health Department as they undertake the task to implement new policies" stated Precinct 1 Commissioner Sergio "Chico" Rodriguez. "By adopting successful practices

from around the nation and partnering with STRAC to work on response plan through dispatch, we not only aim to provide excellent emergency services to our constituents, but to provide assistance to one of most vulnerable populations – the mentally ill.”

In addition, \$100,000 has been allocated for the Managed Assigned Counsel Program. This new office will work in conjunction with the Public Defenders Office to increase accountability and supervision of court-appointed counsel.

Incidences of domestic violence have increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been 24 family violence homicides so far in 2020; there were 24 in all of 2019. Family violence calls to the San Antonio Police Department increased in March by 18 percent when compared to March 2019.

To address these rising cases, the Protective Order Unit, part of the Family Justice Center, launched an online digital protective order system. The adopted budget provides for three new positions at a cost of \$173,460 to provide the long-term support for the system, in addition to the already approved \$500,000 from Coronavirus Relief Funds.

Complementing the Protective Order Unit, the proposed Civil Protective Order docket would more efficiently process requests for protective orders, which are accumulating rapidly. Funding in the amount of \$948,487 was approved in Contingencies to implement this program and will allow the County to provide badly needed assistance and support for the victims of domestic violence and abuse.

For those facing incarceration or are incarcerated, the budget includes \$3.6 million for expanded residential treatment and GPS services to help judges and magistrates continue to assist with jail population reduction. These programs will help with the short-term goal of keeping jail population low due to COVID-19. They will also build on the County’s long-term goals of reducing recidivism through mental health and drug treatment.

The Office of Criminal Justice Planning estimates that these programs will provide alternatives to incarceration and treatment to 674 inmates each year, which will also help relieve staffing demands at the Adult Detention Center.

For the Constable’s Offices, in FY 2020-21, workload is projected to decrease by 15 percent, even without considering the workload decreases attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reduce the duplication of effort and unnecessary costs, it was recommended that the Constables be staffed to handle only civil process and bailiff services, with 19 Deputy Constable positions being deleted for a savings of \$1.3 million.

Commissioners Court moved \$0.000915 from the Debt Fund tax rate to the General Fund tax rate resulting in a transfer of ad valorem taxes in the amount of \$1.5 million to reinstate 19 Deputy Constable positions in the General Fund. The overall tax rate of \$0.301097 remained the same.

“COVID-19 has presented new challenges to an already difficult budget development process, requiring Commissioners Court to carefully examine and reevaluate the priorities of our community,” stated Precinct 2 Commissioner Justin Rodriguez. “The adopted budget makes important investments to support victims of domestic violence, mental health emergency response, and continuity of care. We will continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on our property tax revenue, keep a pulse on the needs of the community, and make necessary adjustments throughout the year.”

Although no salary increases or compensation enhancements (such as Cost of Living Adjustments) for employees were approved in the budget, the County has maintained the existing out-of-pocket costs for health insurance for employees for Plan Year 2020.

Because interest rates on municipal bonds have reached historic lows during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bexar County issued bonds to refund existing debt with new debt at lower rates, resulting in savings of about \$3 million per year in debt service costs.

As part of the refunding process, Bexar County was evaluated by all three bond ratings agencies. Despite the projected economic impact of COVID-19 on finances, the County maintained its Triple-A ratings with stable outlooks. One of the most significant factors is the healthy cash reserve balance Commissioners Court has approved over the last several budgets. Additionally, the rating agencies cited the Court's conservative fiscal management practices.

"There is no doubt that working throughout a pandemic created a multitude of challenges for us at the County," stated Precinct 3 Commissioner Kevin Wolff. "From bringing the courts online to introducing telework options, we have managed to keep the County running for essential services and provided businesses with much needed supplies to stay open. And, we've done it all while maintaining Triple-A credit ratings and negotiating our existing debt to lower rates. I am incredibly proud of the work our budget employees have been able to accomplish in such a short amount of time."

In this challenging financial environment, the cooperation from all elected officials, appointed officials, department heads, and County staff has been essential in helping the County keep its finances on a sound footing, and in approving the FY 2020-21 adopted budget.

The adopted budget provides the framework to help the County navigate through the anticipated challenges during FY 2021 and to work together as a community to bring about our economic recovery.

The adopted budget will be soon available on www.bexar.org.

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