

County Judge Nelson W. Wolff  
Statement before Commissioners Court  
May 8, 2001

During the two terms that I served as Mayor of San Antonio, each year I laid out a proposed agenda for the City. That agenda kept me and the Council focused on the major issues that faced us in both the immediate future and the longer term.

Over the last week, I've had the opportunity to visit with former Judge Krier and with each member of the Commissioners Court. I've gained a great deal of insight into your concerns and your priorities for the future. I have also met informally with each of the other County-wide elected officials, to discuss their priorities in a similar fashion. And I know that with their cooperation, and with the maturity, experience and goodwill of Commissioners Adkisson, Tejada, Elizondo, and Larson, we all have a unique opportunity to make great strides for our community.

At the same time as I take this office, we all know that the City of San Antonio also has a new City Manager, Terry Brechtel, and within a few weeks it will have a new Mayor, Ed Garza, and five new Council members. New ideas, fresh perspectives, and new enthusiasm pervade City Hall. If we can combine the wisdom and experience of this Court with the strengths of the new generation of leadership in the City, then together we can achieve more than anyone ever thought possible.

Let us use this opportunity to redefine the relationship between the City and County governments. We are not competitors. Neither one of us is in any kind of hierarchical relationship to the other. We each have our separate constitutional sphere of concern, just as we share many of the same issues, problems, concerns and priorities. Most essentially, we cannot escape the fact that 80% of the County's population, and three-quarters of our tax base, is within the City of San Antonio. The same citizens pay their taxes to both of us, and they are governed by both of us. Duplication, overlap, redundancy, bureaucratic turf protection, and a thinly veiled "us versus them" mentality are not in the best interest of the taxpayers that we both serve. We absolutely *must* work better together, if either side is to fulfill our obligations to our constituents.

Toward this end, I have already met with both Mayor Howard Peak and Mayor-elect Ed Garza, and the Mayor-Elect and I have agreed to meet every week to review the status of the issues facing our community. Most important, we have agreed that the time has come to replace the present patchwork of short-term, single-function contracts that now link City and County governments by a comprehensive system that structures the integration of City and County government services--for the benefit of both City and County taxpayers.

As a first step we should develop an overarching central agreement that would include a mission statement, goals, and objectives. This agreement should encompass both our existing functional consolidation contracts and an agenda for additional contracts. It should address the financing and accountability issues that are common to all combined service contracts. Its scope should include joint operating agreements and any other mechanisms that are appropriate for combining City and County services.

It is important that not only the members of this Court be involved but also Sheriff Ralph Lopez, District Attorney Susan Reed, County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff, District Clerk Reagan Greer, and Tax Assessor-Collector Sylvia Romo. I will be relying on the competent advice of the D.A.'s Civil Section staff to help develop this agreement.

I will begin the dialogue on this issue in my first meetings with the new Mayor and bring back to my colleagues a proposal under which we will move forward on this very important issue. We should reach this agreement between our two governing bodies before the end of 2001. I will also be relying heavily on the leadership of Commissioner Larson, who has also previously served as a City Councilman, and on that of Commissioner Adkisson, who has also pledged continued leadership in this area.

In a somewhat similar vein, we must address the difficult financial challenges facing our Hospital District and our entire local health care system. I have met with both Jeff Turner, the Hospital District's President/CEO, and Bill Rasco, the Director of the Greater San Antonio Hospital Council, to explore these challenges. I am convinced that we must reassess the institutional and financial relationships between the Hospital District and the County's other providers of health care.

At the same time, I believe we should also examine and perhaps re-adjust the interface between the Hospital District and the City-County San Antonio Metropolitan Health District. And we must address an entire range of related issues, including: the duplication of services and equipment; the efficient use of bed space; the geographic distribution of services; the provision of emergency care for uninsured out-of-County residents; and lobbying for more reasonable reimbursement rates for Medicare and Medicaid.

To address these issues, I will attend the next board meeting of the Hospital Council and ask them to convene a meeting of the presidents of all our local hospitals--for profit, nonprofit and military--along with the leadership of the UT Health Science Center, the Metropolitan Health District, and the Center for Health Care Services. This "Health Care Summit" should develop an overall plan and strategy to achieve a more efficient health care system for the community as a whole. I am grateful for the benefit of Commissioner Elizondo's experience in working on these issues, and I will look to him for continued leadership in this area.

Like every other local government in America today, our County faces an array of infrastructure and physical development issues. I would like to address four of them in particular, along with several related issues.

First, I believe that the improvement of the San Antonio river is the most important physical development project in the County. It links the jewels of the City on the south--Missions Concepcion, San Juan, San Jose, and Espada--with the downtown Riverwalk and Brackenridge Park and Olmos Basin on the north. We are fortunate to have former Mayor Lila Cockrell and Irby Hightower as co-chairs of our intergovernmental River Oversight Committee. I look forward to working with Commissioner Tejada on ways to speed up the improvements to the River on the south and with Commissioner Larson on extending these improvements to the north through Brackenridge Park. And I note once again the importance of working cooperatively with the City on these priorities, along with the San Antonio River Authority and the private sector.

Beyond the River Corridor, however, we must address drainage and flood control issues on a systematic, Countywide and watershed-wide basis. We must follow up on the recommendations of the Countywide Citizen Watershed Masterplan Committee, chaired by Doug Leonhard, to implement a long-range and comprehensive plan for drainage improvements. And once again, we must implement this plan in a true joint strategy with the City and SARA.

Second is the issue of the County's role in historic preservation. During my term as Mayor, San Antonio developed and began implementing the Historic Civic Center plan. We restored City Hall, built the new Council Chamber in the old Frost Bank Building, turned Trevino Street into Elizondo Plaza, purchased the Alameda Building and land adjoining the River. Mayor Peak has followed up with the building of the stairway to the River which is now under construction and will be completed this summer. And Father David Garcia has raised \$15 million to restore San Fernando Cathedral and is leading the drive to rebuild the Plaza de las Islas, which is literally our front yard.

I have studied the Bexar County Courthouse Historic Preservation Master Plan and I have visited with Betty Bueche and Andres Andujar from 3D/International. I am excited about the \$4.2 million in work that is underway.

But we have more work to do. The 1963 and 1972 additions to the Courthouse were misguided. The damage they did to this wonderful historic building must be undone and repaired. The deterioration of parts of the interior of the Courthouse must be addressed. In this overall context, we must also review our Courthouse security, and develop a more efficient and less intrusive means to provide the needed security, compatible with both the historic architecture of this building and our contemporary functional needs.

To begin work on these issues, my wife Tracy and I have visited with District Clerk Reagan Greer about the creation of the Hidalgo Foundation fund. Tracy has agreed to lead an effort to raise private funds to match our public funds in restoring the Courthouse interior. I have

also talked with Dr. Felix Almarez of our Historical Commission about a plan to commemorate the founders of *San Antonio de Bejar* and the many historic events that have taken place on the grounds surrounding the Courthouse, City Hall, and the Plaza de las Islas. We should develop a joint City-County plan for signage and historic markers throughout this area. I will also ask Jimmy Allison and Michael Black, the leaders of the San Antonio Bar Association, to survey their membership to obtain their input on security and physical conditions at the Courthouse.

Also closely related to these issues, I believe we must go beyond merely preserving our priceless store of historic records to making them more available to scholars and researchers on the history and development of our community. Therefore, I will work with County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff and with the San Antonio Public Library--which is the County's library system too--to develop a true partnership with the City to create a Center for San Antonio History, comparable to the Austin History Center. We should also use the corridors of this historic Courthouse to display a selection of our most important historic documents, to enhance public appreciation of our history.

Third, the on-going construction of the SBC Center is perhaps the most "high profile" physical development project on our current agenda. We must be diligent in working with the Spurs to be sure it is completed on time and within the budget. We should work with Joe Linson, who is heading the Spurs' outreach efforts, to ensure that as many contracts as possible are awarded to local small and minority businesses. We must work cooperatively with the City to implement the Tax Increment Financing Zone for the street improvements that are necessary to support this facility. And we must develop a consensus plan for the long-term future of the Freeman Coliseum. I look forward to working with Commissioners Larson and Elizondo as they continue to provide leadership on these issues.

Fourth, I think it's time we gave serious attention to the need to improve our park system. The City has been improving its parks and extending its open space network through land acquisitions along the major creeks and over the recharge zone. We need to improve our facilities in parallel and in partnership with the City. One particular priority I would like to pursue is to upgrade Spencer Sanchez Baseball Field and to build a twin ballpark to it across the street for senior baseball, where the senior players could act as mentors to our youth. Commissioner Tejada has been an effective leader on youth issues, and I look forward to working with him on these priorities.

And I would note once again in passing that parks are an obvious candidate for more functional consolidation with the City. We can do more than the single City-County park at Walker Ranch on West Avenue and a combined system for reservation of park pavilions.

I believe the County should also play a more aggressive role in fostering the economic development of Metropolitan San Antonio. I am particularly pleased to note Commissioner Larson's role in creating the San Antonio-Laredo Corridor as an example of this. We also need

to expand our links north to Austin and south to the port of Corpus Christi, and to play a role as a hinge linking that port with the Rio Grande Valley.

We need to improve the County's use of technology, as pointed out in the review by MGT of America, Inc. As co-chair of the San Antonio Technology Accelerator Initiative, I look forward to working with Dr. David Morgan, our Chief Information Officer, District Clerk Reagan Greer, and Commissioner Tejeda on these efforts. For example, while the City has made major strides in making public services accessible through its Community Link Service Centers and kiosks, and in using the Internet both to make information available and to support the conduct of business with the City, we have done comparatively little in these areas. Likewise we should move forward to participate in the Texas Online portal for "e-government." I would stress once again, however, that all of our efforts in this direction should be linked and integrated with the City's as much as possible, rather than being developed in isolation as duplications of each other.

Another area where the County should play a more significant role is in our community's environment and energy problems. The threat to our air quality attainment status and the recent spike in our gas and electric bills should call our attention to these issues. I will look to Commissioner Tommy Adkisson for leadership in working with the City, CPS, Solar San Antonio and the private sector to develop strategies for energy conservation and renewable energy sources. To ensure follow-through on this issue, we should consider creating a joint County-City energy office, modeled after the Portland, Oregon energy office.

Of course, the basic constitutional obligations of our County government will always be at the top of our agenda. And among the highest of these priorities right now is the improvement of our elections administration.

We all saw the consequences of bad elections administration in our last national election, when over 2.5 million votes nationwide were never counted as the voters intended. I was present here when County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff presented the recommendations of the Bexar County Voting Systems Task Force to the Court. I think it is clear that we have outgrown our system of optical scanning of paper ballots. Therefore, I urge the Court to issue the request for proposals to upgrade our voting system to a touch-screen system, such as they currently use in Dallas, El Paso and Guadalupe Counties. This kind of system was also used in the Northside Independent School System's February 2001 bond election and it received good reviews from the community. We should implement this kind of system for early voting in the 2002 general election, and then extend it throughout all our voting precincts in the future.

In the meantime, we must also move forward to create an Elections Commission, to hire a new Elections Administrator, and to complete the redistricting of Commissioners Court precincts in a fair and equitable manner. I look forward to working with all of you to support the recommendations of the task force that Commissioner Elizondo has chaired on the Elections Commission.

In these last few weeks of the legislative session in Austin, we must be especially diligent in working to pass the bills supported by this Court and to head-off bad legislation. I am pleased to work now with Seth Mitchell, who heads up our intergovernmental programs from the staff level, and I assure you that I will use all of my skills and experience in this effort. But we all need to spend more time on this in Austin, and I appeal to you to lend all of the political support you can. We should especially support the City's Human Development Fund bill, which may be the most important bill in this session for the San Antonio community.

And we all know that our next budget will be tight. We will be challenged to find funding for new programs such as a change in voting equipment at the same time as we address the need for a pay increase for sheriff's deputies and the funding requirements for our infrastructure improvements. We will have to find every possible saving, through bold strategies such as City-County service consolidation, in order to maintain our existing tax rate.

And before we get too far into the budget process, I would like to re-institute the quarterly meetings between Commissioners Court and the other County-wide elected officials to see how we can help each other reach the goals and aspirations of each elected official.

We have a long agenda. We have enthusiasm for the task. Let's get on with it.