

Judge Nelson W. Wolff
State of the County Address
Wednesday, January 11, 2006
Commissioners Court

In my address to the Court last January, I suggested that our community was at an historic turning point with regard to economic development. As it turns out, 2005 truly was a year full of great economic news. I believe that 2006 can be another watershed year for San Antonio's growth and prosperity. If we respond to our good fortune in a progressive way, if we handle the job growth and new population to benefit our citizens and our community, we can make the most of these opportunities. To do so we have to invest, not just spend; we have to invest in the long term needs of our city. Investments in our educational and physical infrastructure will have a long-term payoff, improving our quality of life.

We can afford to invest now because of the spectacular performance and of our economy and because of the good luck that has brought more than 6,800 jobs to San Antonio, with more on the horizon. Just a partial list includes the merger of SBC and AT&T to create the United States' largest phone service provider, now headquartered in San Antonio; Valero Energy Corporation's expansion to become the largest North American refiner, number 15 on the Fortune 500 list; and the continued good news from Toyota and the associated Supplier Park, which will both be up and running by the end of the year with more than 4,000 jobs.

Major new investments in our community also include the Regional Cryptology Center for the National Security Agency, representing up to 2,000 jobs, 60% of which require advanced degrees. The Washington Mutual headquarters, located at the former MCI campus, could bring 4,200 jobs, and a major World Savings Bank service center has the potential for 2,000 jobs. On January 12 the Commissioners Court will vote on a Public Improvement District Agreement for the Cibolo Canyons project, a PGA/Marriott resort that will generate 2,000 permanent jobs and bring more than \$757 million in cumulative taxes to local governments over the next 25 years. Together, these projects represent more than \$1 billion in new construction.

Last but certainly not least the military's realignment of missions to Ft. Sam Houston could eventually bring 5,000 new families and more than \$2 billion in construction. Ft. Sam will truly be the home of Army medicine, and supporting this expansion has been a real community effort.

How do we make the most of these opportunities? Our challenge both in this and upcoming years is to invest wisely in our community and improve our quality of life by addressing long-term community issues.

Education

First we need to look at our education and job training system, which is not doing its job in providing bare essentials and basic work skills. Local businesses are filling local jobs with

skilled employees brought from outside San Antonio, and our local and community colleges are spending scarce resources providing remedial classes for students graduating from local high schools.

This is an issue that can be addressed if we work together. We need to prepare workers for high-tech jobs by creating a technical education program like the ones in high schools in Oklahoma and Georgia. Advancing this program will require community support, and we'll be appointing a committee of employers and educators to move it forward.

I also support creation of advocacy group, modeled after successful San Antonio Mobility Coalition, that would have as its goal increasing the number of high school graduates ready to pursue a college degree or post-secondary coursework to equip them with skills necessary to compete in today's job market. Finally, to determine what kind of job our schools are doing, we need to expand to all districts a current study by the Gates Foundation that's trying to determine high school graduation rates in San Antonio – a basic performance measure.

We do need new facilities to train workers for high-demand fields like healthcare and biomedical research. To accomplish that, we'll support ACCD and UHS and work with both of them on creating the new nursing and allied health profession programs and facilities funded through ACCD's recent bond issue.

Transportation

We all agree on the need for enhancing mobility. I hope that bus and commuter rail will play a larger part in personal mobility in the future, but for now most people drive to work. We also need to recognize that the State of Texas is already in the process of building toll roads and that we have to ensure that these revenues stay in the community. To exert local control, we'll continue to support Alamo Regional Mobility Authority under Chairman Thornton and Executive Director Terry Brechtel. At the same time, we'll continue to work with TxDOT on a number of highway projects, as well as developing a freight rail plan in conjunction with the private rail industry to relocate rail lines. Our goal is to enhance safety and to provide improved rail service to local businesses.

We also urge VIA Metropolitan Transit to advance its timetable for the building of planned transit stations on the periphery of downtown. At the same time, Bexar County will bring forward a plan to accelerate construction of selected projects to be financed through the Advanced Transportation District.

Healthcare and Hospital Infrastructure

I applaud the creation of the two-year "Access to Care for the Uninsured" program by local area health providers, including UHS, through which we will seek to coordinate care for Bexar County's 278,000 uninsured citizens. As the public hospital, funded by Commissioners Court, UHS provides a great deal of care to this population. UHS participated in the effort to secure the \$1 million federal grant that will fund the program,

understanding that primary care delivered by a primary care physician is cheaper for the community and more convenient for the patient than having primary care delivered by an emergency room physician.

UHS continues to do a good job in advocating for better CHIP benefits for our youngest residents and improved formulas for federal Upper Payment Limits, and we support those efforts.

We certainly support University Health System's efforts to improve its infrastructure, including three main projects: remodeling the downtown, Brady Green facility; remodeling their hospital at the Medical Center; and creating a new ambulatory care center in conjunction with the University of Texas Health Science Center. I ask that UHS present a capital plan for these improvements for consideration by Commissioners Court before the end of the year.

Water and Flood Control

Drought once again is upon us. March 2005 to January 2006 was the 9th driest period on record. These dry conditions serve to remind us of the necessity of conserving our water supply and also of the need to obtain additional water at affordable prices.

I applaud the San Antonio Water System's decision to seek cheaper sources of water, because I think it would be irresponsible of community leaders to not look to the west. From their presentations to Commissioners Court, the Edwards Aquifer Authority also supports exploring these options. A recent District Court ruling in Kinney County Water District case could provide opportunity for productive use of surplus resources, and I will soon meet with former Governor Briscoe to discuss western water opportunities, such as the previously proposed Uvalde pipeline.

Extreme changes in weather are common in Texas, so we know this month's drought could easily turn into 1998 or 2002-level flood. We must continue taking steps necessary to prepare for catastrophic flooding, and loss of property and life, by preparing a potential \$250 to \$300 million flood control bond package. This would require an increase in the existing flood control tax, which is currently .012719. Just to put that in perspective, if you own an average \$100,000 home, you're paying about \$13.00 a year, or \$1.00 a month, for flood control right now. An expanded flood control program would fund 68 of 176 flood projects identified in the five major watersheds of the San Antonio River, Leon Creek, Salado Creek, Medina River and Cibolo Creek

Both for me and for Mayor Hardberger, fulfilling the promise of the San Antonio River Improvement Project is a top priority. We need to jump-start the implementation of the northern or museum reach of the project, while securing dollars for its timely completion. I will be traveling to Washington, DC next month to visit with our Congressional delegation and with project administrators, including the Army Corps of Engineers, to make sure that this project is fully funded, especially around the Missions on the South side.

Cultural and Recreational Infrastructure

We are working on the creation of a countywide Library District, which was a joint City-County legislative initiative in 2005. In close conjunction with the City of San Antonio and Mayor Phil Hardberger, we'll have an opportunity next month to appoint a Blue Ribbon Commission to determine whether this solution will provide equitable, sustainable funding for our libraries.

I am also working with Mayor Hardberger on his Plaza de las Islas plan. I support the Mayor is his goal to improve this important public space. I know that we'll be able to reach agreements on street closures so that we can have a new front yard for the Bexar County Courthouse and a great town square.

Another important downtown project will be developed through a partnership of the National Museum of Western Art, Bexar County and the City of San Antonio. Renovation of the Hertzberg library building and installation of a history center and museum will show a real investment by our community to preserve our heritage. Last month I met with the City and the Western Art Museum to review a proposal through which SAWS can contribute adjacent land for a well-designed public space and downtown venue right on the river. The next step is for the City to approve a lease agreement with the Western Art foundation.

Sports

The world-champion San Antonio Spurs are having another great season and their success will always be a top priority for the County, which built their home court Community Arena. The arena is also the home of the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo--recently judged one of the best rodeos in the country. During the coming year we'll be looking at their facilities and how we can not only enhance the rodeo experience but also provide some additional revenues.

I love basketball and rodeo, but everyone knows my feelings about baseball and about pro baseball in San Antonio. The County has taken the lead in talks with MLB, and most recently with the Florida Marlins. I should hear later this month whether the Marlins will give us serious consideration as they make decisions about the future of that franchise. If they do, we would have to create a joint public private partnership to build a new baseball stadium, which could be accomplished through extension of the existing hotel-motel tax. We would not impose any new taxes.

With respect to major league football, we've had some good times with the New Orleans Saints this year and were happy to welcome them to a temporary home in the Alamodome. We packed the dome with 55,000-65,000 people for three games, but it looks like the Saints are headed back to Louisiana in 2006. This is a great thing for that state and for Saints fans, but of course we don't know what the NFL will do in the future regarding this franchise. The City has taken the lead in efforts to attract an NFL franchise and I will continue to support the Mayor on this issue.

Division I college football is something we can and ought to move toward right now. We already have Division I athletics at UTSA, but football will establish us in new peer group of colleges and universities. We all know how much successful teams like the Spurs do for our community. If we move up to Division I football and other college sports, we'll see more of the positive impact of NCAA championships, tournaments, and games played in the Alamobowl.

Bexar County has invested \$1.5 million to fund new track and soccer fields that will be available to the public, but we know that new fields for baseball, softball, tennis, and a new football practice facility will be required to make it to Division I status in more sports. UTSA has a facility study underway to figure out how to move their sports program to this next level.

This is a worthwhile investment, because we all know that the level at which you play, and who you play with, makes all the difference in how much excitement the community enjoys. We want to compete in the Conference USA against schools like Rice, UTEP, and Tulane, and we want UTSA to be seen in that company, not just for athletics but for the value our community and others attach to a degree from UTSA.

County Priorities

While we will be working on those community-wide issues, we also have some work to do here at Bexar County.

Our primary responsibility is administration of the criminal justice system and the county jail system. Controlling the jail population is the tough task we have assigned to our new Director of Criminal Justice Planning and Coordination, Keith Charlton. Our current housed population is nearly 8% higher than five-year running average for second week of January, and we know we must pass the state February Jail Inspection. Keith will also be focusing on proposing performance measures to better understand and monitor the judicial system.

Bexar County has millions of dollars in outstanding projects from the 2003 Bond Program. Joe Aceves, our new interim Director of Infrastructure Services, will take on the job of making sure that those projects move forward and are under construction this year. They include a \$3.5 million Automated Fingerprint Identification System, a \$16.7 million Adult Probation Facility, and a \$9.7 million Juvenile Probation Office. Joe will also be responsible for continuing to focus on energy efficiency in County facilities, so that we aren't wasting taxpayer dollars, while seeking more options—such as ethanol fuel—to help us be more energy-independent.

David Smith, Director of Planning and Resource Management, is working with the Commissioners Court to redesign our compensation packages, and to move forward with collective bargaining for deputies in the Sheriff's office. We expect to see progress on these issues over the next several months.

Modernizing the County's financial management and computer systems is another big task that we'll focus on during the coming year. David Smith will continue implementation of a \$100 million dollar commercial paper program and of the managing for results strategies we've developed internally. At the same time, David Morgan, the Executive Director of Information Services will complete the requirements assessment needed to update Bexar County's core computerized justice systems (CJIS) and continue development of new Juvenile Case Management System, in cooperation with the Conference of Urban Counties, and Tarrant and Dallas Counties. Finally, we'll acquire and install a new tax collection system and plan for an upgrade of our financial management system.

Also in 2006 we are preparing for the upcoming Special Legislative Session and for the 2007 Regular Session of the Texas Legislature. Leilah Powell, Government Services Manager, has received the Court's direction to protect the County's ability to provide services to taxpayers and to try to fend off additional unfunded mandates. We are working under new assumptions from the state, where the mindset has gone from the support of local control to controlling the locals.

While I've outlined an ambitious program, each of the issues will help us invest in our community and bring long-term benefits to Bexar County.