

**HARRIS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
QUARTERLY PLANNING SESSION**

Commission Chamber, Room 223, Harris County Courthouse  
February 22, 2024  
5:00 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Rob Grant, Susan Andrews (arrived at 5:08 p.m.), Scott Lightsey, Greg Gantt, Bobby Irions (arrived at 5:28 p.m.). Staff Present: Randy Dowling, County Manager; Russell Britt, County Attorney; Jamie Webb, Facility Maintenance Director; Steve Morgan, County Extension Agent; Jeff Culpepper, Water Works Director; Brian Williams, Community Development Director. Also Present: Jim Ingram, Studio 8; Mariyana Kostov, RVRC; Matt Smith, Carter & Sloope.

**CALL TO ORDER.** Chairman Grant called the meeting to order.

**Demonstration of GIS - Mariyana Kostov, RVRC.**

Mariyana Kostov, GIS Manager at the River Valley Regional Commission, made a presentation to the Board and demonstrated the GIS system being created for Harris County. She advised that she was tasked to create a data hub with different “pockets” and layers for Harris County. Ms. Kostov said that layers include city limits, parcels, legal boundaries, addresses, flood zones, district boundaries for School Board Members and Commissioners and links to contact information, water bodies, wetlands, community facilities and safety, water systems, census blocks and tracts, elevations/contours, and Comprehensive Plan maps. She said that multiple layers can be turned on but that it is better to not turn them all on at once as the information is difficult to analyze that way. County Manager Randy Dowling stated that this is a work in progress and will be continually updated as information changes and that the new aerial information should be available in the next 30 to 45 days.

**Review of Courthouse Phase II Plans - Jamie Webb, Facility Maintenance Director.**

Jamie Webb, Facility Maintenance Director, briefly reviewed the expected upcoming Courthouse renovations. He stated that the public entrance will be moved to the left and that there will be an awning over the walkway. Mr. Webb said that the Tax Commissioner/Tag Office will move to the first floor and Probate will move to the second floor in order for the public to be able to walk in and have easier access to the departments and areas that are utilized the most. He stated that employee areas in departments will have key card access in order to provide additional security for employees. He said that there is a finite amount of space and that some walls can be moved to make better use of space but that there is no way to add square footage. Mr. Webb advised that Court Services will have a window for the public so that people do not walk straight into the office. On the second floor, he said that there is no change to the Commission Chamber but there will be a window at the Superior Clerk’s office for people to go to for assistance. He said that the only significant change on the third floor is to the judge’s chambers for security purposes and access to judges has changed and requires badge access and that the witness stand in the courtroom will be elevated slightly so that people are more easily seen. He said that the parking lot area will be made ADA compliant and that there will also be security fencing where the judges park. In response to questions, he said that there will be a display case on the second floor in order to display historical items and that each floor will have vending machines so that they are more accessible to juries.

**Agricultural Center Presentation - Studio 8 - Jim Ingram.**

Steve Morgan, County Extension Agent and Chairman of the Agricultural Master Plan Committee, advised that Studio 8 Design will be presenting the master plan that has been developed for the Agricultural Center. Jim Ingram and Chase Gregory from Studio 8 Design were available to make the presentation to the Board. Mr. Ingram stated that they were asked to design a new AG Center and that the site of facility was to be located where the current facility is. He advised that the main focal element was a covered arena large enough to utilized for the annual rodeo that occurs as well as be used as a multi-purpose facility. Chase Gregory said that they wanted to stay away from areas that are already being used and that the plan includes a covered arena, livestock barns, practice arena, and equipment/maintenance shelter. He said that the existing facility will be retained and that there will be a paved loop road around the facilities and that some parking areas will be gravel. Mr. Gregory stated that the site works well for the intended purpose and provided an overview of the master plan including that there are bleachers that can hold 1, 500 people; additional bleachers can be added; areas for vendor booths; that there are restrooms on the north and south sides; livestock barn with modular 10' x 10' stalls and wash racks; equipment/maintenance building; and the artist renderings of the buildings and improvements in the master plan. Vice-Chair Andrews said that the County may be able to help with site prep that would help save on costs; that the plan can be implemented in phases; and that the \$14 million that people have been talking about is for the complete plan. Steve Morgan stated that the City of Hamilton has expressed interest in working with the County on the project. Joel Womack, EMC Engineering, stated that the design is for worst case scenario

as far as a septic system is concerned and that the structures would need to be placed above the flood plain. Discussion included some area facilities that may be comparable in size to the one proposed; that the scale of the structures are similar from facility to facility; that some Commissioners have been told that citizens would like a covered arena but not necessarily what is included in the master plan; that the facility can be considered a quality of life item; and that it would take a number of people to operate the facility. Ashley Marston, Recreation Director and Agricultural Master Plan Committee member, said that she has compiled some estimates for maintenance and operation based on other facilities. Jaime Tillman, member of the Agricultural Master Plan Committee, stated that there is a breakdown of the items on a smaller scale which includes just the covered arena with the restrooms and that she would like a facility like this to attract people from other areas to come and use it. Vice-Chair Andrews stated that the County has completed \$20 million in projects without borrowing money or raising taxes. Commissioner Irions said that this is another type of recreation that needs to be addressed; that it doesn't mean that they need to spend \$14 million dollars; that the Board needs to consider other ways to bring revenue into the County; and that they need to consider the current needs. Vice-Chair Andrews said that there are hundreds of students that participate in this sport in Harris County. She said that there is currently a student from Harris County High School that is on the cover of *American Trakehner Horses* magazine; just competed in Florida; and has a four-page spread in the winter issue. She stated that these sports are a big deal for individuals in Harris County and that they would like to be able to have facilities here for them to use. Chairman Grant stated that the information presented has given the Board a lot to think about and consider and thanked everyone for their hard work. When asked, Steve Morgan advised that the Committee has completed what they were asked to do.

*Chairman Grant called a brief recess at 6:47 p.m.*

*Chairman Grant called the meeting back into order at 6:54 p.m.*

**Water and Sewer 5-Year Master Plan and Water and Sewer Rate Study Presentation - Matt Smith, Carter & Sloop.** Matt Smith, Mark Hain, and Brian Caffrey from Carter & Sloop appeared before the Board to present the Water and Sewer 5-Year Master Plan and the Water and Sewer Rate Study.

Mr. Smith advised that they were tasked to evaluate existing system, purchased water, production, distribution, meters, billing/collection, and evaluate the rates charged for the services and the revenues generated. Brian Caffrey stated our area relies on surface water to provide water for the customers and that Harris County obtains water from several locations and that we are capped at 3 million gallons per day at the water treatment plant and that Harris County supplements by also sourcing from Columbus Water Works, Talbot County, and Callaway Gardens Resorts. Mr. Caffrey said that Harris County is limited by the amount of water purchased from Columbus Water Works due to the size of the current supply lines. He said that it is approximately 10 times more expensive to purchase the water from other sources than to treat the water at our own water treatment plant. He further advised that the areas of concern were to maximize production at the water treatment plant; that there are thin walled PVC mains; undersized mains; and low water pressure zones. Discussion related to the water side included ways to maximize production; that there is a recommendation is to build a model of the water system in order to analyze a good balance of what can be produced vs what is purchased; that the water map is in the process of being updated; that the upgrade along 27 will be helpful in increasing capacity; that Harris County has the capacity but there will be greater reliance on water purchased from other systems; that Harris County is expected to grow 62% from 2020 - 2065; that recommended improvements include flow improvements at the water treatment plant, PFAS removal, creating a water model, a GIS water map, Mulberry Grove 1 million gallon elevated tank, replace aging water mains, generators, improvements at Kings Gap and Skymeadows, Fortson Road water main, East Bon Acre altitude valve, pole barn at Public Works, add SCADA to BPSa, and new maintenance equipment; and possible funding options. Mr. Caffrey advised that the water model would help provide information about production and servicing future development. Discussion related to the sewer side included that the only customers are in the Mulberry Grove development; that currently 21,500 gpd of 2 MGD capacity is being used; that there are contracts in place related to sewer and the contract contemplates servicing the property; other treatment options if Harris County had its own wastewater treatment plant; that a new wastewater treatment plant would require a large creek for permitting purposes; that a 0.5 MGD wastewater treatment plant would cost approximately \$20 million and take 8 years to design, permit, and construct; that it is more economical to send wastewater to Columbus than to have a wastewater treatment plant; that GEFA has changed its loan parameters; and that existing systems in cities don't have the capacity to enable Harris County to tap on.

Mr. Mark Hain was tasked to evaluate the water and sewer rates. He advised that they looked at existing water rates, consumption and revenue analysis, historical finances, projected expenses and projects, rate study model, options, and their recommendations. He said that there is primarily a uniform rate structure which includes a base charge and then a per thousand gallon rate; that there are some high residential users and that some don't use much water; 97.8% of accounts are residential; and that 80% of revenue is from residential. He discussed the "cost to produce" vs "consumption charges" and that these numbers do fluctuate. He said that they look at revenues from rates and their ability to sustain the expenses. Mr. Hain said that Harris County would need to have a reserve that can help cover expenses that may occur but are not foreseeable. Discussion included expense projections; that expenses have increased approximately 4.63% per year; that there may be potential debt service for master plan to replace aging water lines and may have to consider bonds/SPLOST funds; that historically the expenses have outpaced the revenues; that right now the rates are not sufficient to qualify for future GEFA loans; that if Harris County had a sewer crew the expenses would go up but our revenues would still be tied to Columbus; that Carter & Sloope has three proposed options for rate increases and has added an additional consumption tier; that they are recommending an increase of 20% in the base rates and then 5% increases in future years; that the base rate has not changed over the past six years; that the model is set up so that different variables can be plugged in to make different projections; that they are recommending Option 1 which increases the base charges by 20%, the Tier 1 consumption charges by 10%, and include a second tier for residential and commercial use so that customers who consume more water pay for the increased cost of that water; that the rate increase should be effective no later than July 1, 2024; that the County should review revenues and expenses annually and implement increases to all rate codes (except Sky Meadow and Airport Road) to stay ahead of inflation and rising expenses; that revenues were the focus of the study; and that Carter & Sloope did not look at cutting expenses as it was not part of the study. The consensus of the Board of Commissioners was to finalize the Water and Sewer 5-Year Master Plan and the Water and Sewer Rate Study.

#### **Fire Training Center Use - Commissioner Bobby Irions.**

Commissioner Bobby Irions wanted to continue the discussion related to the limited use of the Fire Training Center and he invited Chief Jack McClung to attend the meeting. Commissioner Irions stated that he believes that it should only be used for Public Safety individuals. Chief McClung wanted to know why employees needed to use the Fire Training Center building and that they should be able to use other County buildings. Chairman Grant stated that the intention was not to allow the use by the public and it would only potentially have been used by employees so there would be knowledge of who would be using it. Commissioner Irions would like for there to be a consensus of the Board to only allow Public Safety individuals to use the building. Discussion included that a class was cancelled due to lack of water because there wasn't another location that would hold the number of people that had screens and internet available; that a CVIOG meeting was moved from the Fire Training Center to another location after they were told they were unable to use it; and that the intended purpose is to be a Fire Training Center. The consensus of the Board of Commissioners was to allow only Public Safety (Sheriff, EMS, 911, Correctional Officers, Prison, Jail, State Patrol) individuals to utilize the Fire Training Center.

#### **Budget Concerns FY 2024-2025.**

County Manager Randy Dowling advised that as always there is a budget calendar with the exact dates and benchmarks and that he has also included a list of upcoming budget items that he is aware of along with cost estimates. Discussion included the CVIOG study costs; budgeting for storm damage; and budgeting to allow the Board to attend the NACo conference.

#### **Discussion and Organization of Bicentennial Event - Chairman Rob Grant.**

Chairman Rob Grant introduced the item related to a Bicentennial Event. Discussion included that the County should do something for the Bicentennial and need to start planning now; that Chairman Grant is looking to obtain a picture of Charles Harris and maybe have a large event in March or April of the year and then a smaller event in December during the month that the County was formed.

#### **Employee Appreciation Event**

Commissioner Scott Lightsey informed the Board that he has received great feedback about the employee appreciation event and that there has been a great response. Chairman Grant advised that they hope to have one event per quarter going forward. County Manager Randy Dowling informed the Board that the Red Cross collected 27 pints of blood during the blood drive held that same day.

**ADJOURNMENT.** The meeting adjourned at 9:03 p.m.