



## Spirit Group Speech

Good Evening. My name is Sofia C. Benavides and I am your county commissioner for Precinct One, which includes part of Brownsville, the Southmost Area and, of course, South Padre Island.

I would like to thank Ms. Downing for inviting me to speak today, and also to thank you for having me. Also, I would like to apologize for being a little bit late; we have a commissioners' court meeting tonight in Brownsville, and I had to break away to come here.

Although I have spent most of my life in public service, I am a little bit new to politics, and have not yet had the opportunity to get to know some of you, so I would like to start by telling you a little about myself. As many of you know, my husband, Pete, represented this area for many years. After we lost him in October, I was appointed to take his place on the commissioners' court.

Before becoming a county commissioner, I worked with the federal government in the US Probation Office. I also worked for many years for Cameron County as an assistant to the county judge during the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's.

In my role as county commissioner, I represent the people of Precinct One on the county commissioners' court, which is the county's governing body. I also supervise county projects in my precinct, and work with other government officials to solve problems and improve public services. If you will allow me, I would like to take a few minutes tonight to fill you in on some of these projects, including several that impact the Island.

Oftentimes, I find that although one single government entity may not have the resources to complete a project, several different entities will each have a piece of what is needed. By bringing officials together, and piecing together a solution from what we all bring to the table, we can solve problems that may have previously been insurmountable, many times at a savings to the taxpayer.



A great example of this is the restoration of the Bahia Grande, which was spearheaded by Cameron County, and I am proud to say, is the largest estuary restoration project in the United States. You may be familiar with this project if you travel to Brownsville, as the Bahia Grande is visible from SH 48, and was formerly the 'dust bowl' that motorists encountered on windy days. This is a cooperative project that the county is involved in with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Ocean Trust and other entities.

Although this effort is still a work in progress, we have made tremendous strides in the last few years. The steps we have taken to date, including the construction of a pilot channel, have greatly reduced the dust problem that afflicted the Laguna Madre area, and have also allowed Mother Nature to begin healing herself. Animals, plants and birds are returning to the area, and the view from the roadway is much more attractive.

Right now, we are working to dig additional channels that will connect the Bahia Grande with the Little Laguna Madre and the Laguna Larga. These additional channels will restore additional habitat, and improve the circulation of water in the estuary. A bicycle trail and visitors center are also under construction, and once completed, visitors will be able to travel in a loop around the restored Bahia. Observations decks and other facilities will also be in place for birders, kayakers and other nature tourists. I was fortunate enough to go on a tour of this area several months ago, and it is truly spectacular.

Future steps include the opening of a much larger, main channel that will greatly increase the water flow in the estuary, and allow restoration to be completed. We have worked with TX DOT to ensure that a bridge is already in place on SH 48 to accommodate this future channel.

-South Padre Island birding center?

Of course, here on the Island, you are also familiar with coastal restoration issues in the form of beach re-nourishment. This is a vital activity, and I look forward to doing what I can to help it proceed, and be successful. The beach is so important not only to the economy of Cameron County, but also to the quality of life of our residents, and in fact, to the safety and security of the residents of the Island. A healthy beach is an important need today, and an important part of the legacy we hope to leave to future generations. Beach re-nourishment efforts are costly and complex. Just as a healthy beach is important to the sustainability of the Island, we also need to ensure that the



re-nourishment practices themselves are sustainable and environmentally sound. I am committed to finding ways to reduce the cost and logistical complexity of re-nourishment efforts. Lately, I have been working with our town leaders and our legislative delegation to secure funding to conduct a study of potential renourishment methods in the local area. One of the elements of this study would be to review the feasibility of pumping high quality sand that is similar to that found on the beach from offshore. By substituting this higher-quality sand for the dredge material that has been used in past renourishment efforts, we hope that to maintain the appearance of the beach, and reduce the unpleasant odor that is caused by the current renourishment practices. Another benefit of this approach would be reduced susceptibility to erosion, due to the coarse grains of sand. At the same time, I also believe that there are steps we can take separate from renourishment to prevent erosion. Dunes are important to the health of the beach, and can help prevent erosion. We need to be good stewards of our dunes, and also to do what we can to build these natural defenses up. One of the practices we have adopted at Cameron County is the placement of natural materials, such as seaweed and driftwood, in the dune line.

From the county's perspective, another challenge related to beach maintenance is the need to keep the beaches clean of trash. It is very difficult, due to many miles of beaches under the county's jurisdiction, as well as the action of currents that tend to deposit heavier items on the Northern part of the Island. We've worked hard to apply the available resources to removing debris from the beaches, but I recognize that more needs to be done. That is why I have been working with our parks department to obtain grant funding to acquire additional equipment to be used in cleaning the beaches.

While I am on the subject of our parks department, I would like share some information about the county's plans for improvements to Isla Blanca Park, and other facilities throughout the county, as well as for the construction of new parks in underserved areas.

#### -LIST OF IMPROVEMENTS

My hope is that this project will begin to address the need for repairs in some parts of the park, as well add amenities that have been requested by local residents and visitors. There is more still to be done, and in the future, we will be looking at additional improvements as resources permit.



One of the things I recognize - and it's why I am so pleased to be addressing this group - is that this town isn't just about the beach, it is also about the people who live here. This is a community, and the residents needs are very important to me.

I know a particular concern here on the Island, and in the Laguna Madre area, is access to medical care. There is a real need out here for better care, both primary care and emergency care. Recently, I have had the opportunity to work with your town officials on a project to construct an emergency helipad on county property at the Southern end of the Island. When completed, this helipad will feature lighting, plus automatic weather and landing systems, to enable emergency helicopters to land on the Island in a greater range of weather conditions. My hope is that this helipad will save lives, and I am pushing to have construction completed as quickly as possible.

I would also like to tell you tonight that I am interested in establishing a task force to explore ways to improve access to clinic and hospital services. I feel the Laguna Madre area has the population and resources to support these type of facilities, and that if we, as elected officials, work together, we can find a way to make it happen.

These facilities could take the shape of a clinic or small hospital, either private or publicly-funded. While this will not be something we can achieve tomorrow, and while I can't say yet what form these facilities will take, my point is that this is something we must pursue. A lot of good work on this subject has already been done by members of this group, and others, and I know we can build on your work as part of an area-wide process.

Of course, another issue that is very important to emergency medical care, public safety, our economic growth and overall quality of life is the construction of a second causeway. We need a second causeway, and I have been working very closely with the Cameron County Regional Mobility Authority to move the project along.

Already INSERT INFO ON STUDIES, LEGISLATION, ETC

While the final alignment of the bridge has not been determined, I want you to know that there are several factors that are important to me. Number one is that the environment is protected. We also need to consider quality of life issues, including a route that will promote a reduction in traffic congestion and allow residents to travel to Port Isabel and Laguna Vista, as well as cities like



Harlingen and McAllen, in the most efficient manner possible. I am also concerned about the alignment of the roadway, because I know how important the view of the bay is to our economy and your quality of life, and I want to ensure that it is not unnecessarily impaired by the construction of the bridge.

In the meantime, the county continues to work on the realignment of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. This project is designed to improve safety in the area by eliminating a dangerous curve in the channel, and while it alone cannot prevent another tragedy like we had in 2001, it is important that we do everything possible in this area. We have already been successful in obtaining several million dollars of funding for studies required to begin this project.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about a matter that I know is of deep concern to us all, and that is the seismic testing and possible oil production in the Laguna Madre. Cameron County's role in regulating this kind of activity is limited, but my role as an advocate for you is not. This activity may be legal, but as a matter of public policy, I do not believe it is appropriate to conduct oil exploration in environmentally-sensitive areas. Pete and I spent a lot of time on our boat in the Laguna Madre, and like you, the area is very special to me. I am going to monitor this situation very closely, and speak out when the need arises.