



Good Morning. My name is Sofia C. Benavides and I am your county commissioner for Precinct One, which includes part of Brownsville, the Southmost Area and South Padre Island. Welcome to Cameron County, and to the Dancy Building. I am so glad you could come.

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. 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 – as a matter of fact, I started out working in this very building.

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.



Just recently, I have been involved in several important projects, including an effort with the PUB and the City of Brownsville to install first time sewer connections for 1,200 people in the El Salado area. I have also been working with the Town of South Padre Island to construct an emergency helipad on the Island to improve access to emergency medical care. The county is also looking forward to expanding its relationship with the Port of Brownsville, and finding ways that both entities can cooperate on transportation projects that will cut down on traffic jams and bring new jobs to Brownsville.

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 to 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 big part of my responsibilities deal with the roads in my precinct. Although Cameron County is one of the few counties in the state to have a unified road and bridge system, meaning that road projects are overseen at a county-wide level by professional employees in the public works department, I devote much of my time to making sure that the roads in Precinct One are maintained, and that transportation projects in our area are moving forward. Nearly every day, I travel through the precincts checking on the condition of the roads and the work of the road crews.

Now that I have told you a little bit about what I do, I'd like to orient you to your visit here by giving a brief overview of the county structure. The commissioners' court is the administrative head of county government, combining legislative, executive and quasi-judicial powers. Each of the four county commissioners' sits on the court, as well as the county judge.



The court supervises the function of various county departments, including the transportation department, the health and human services department and the parks department. In addition, there a number of independent elected officials who administer their own departments, such as the Sheriff, the County Clerk, constables and so on. I believe you will be hearing from them later on in the program, so I will leave a description of each department to them.

Counties are constitutional subdivisions of the State, meaning that unlike cities, drainage districts, school districts and the like that are created by the State, counties are part of the state itself. State law mandates certain responsibilities to counties, such as: providing for the administration of justice, including jails, law enforcement and courts; providing local, connecting transportation; protecting public health; and providing for the indigent.



Unfortunately, it is generally up to the counties to find the money to carry out these responsibilities. A major function of the court is its responsibility for the county's finances. The court approves the tax rate, the sale of bonds and the county budget. Cameron County works very hard to keep its tax rate low – we have the lowest rate in South Texas, and one of the lowest in the state – but it is very difficult for the county to meet the demands imposed on it by the state, while also meeting the other needs that are present in the community.

I am proud to say that during the last few years, Cameron County has found innovative ways to provide needed public services without turning to taxpayers. For example, the county's park system, which is among the most highly-regarded in the state, is funded entirely by its own revenues. Not a single tax dollar is used to support the parks. Additionally, Cameron County owns three of the four international bridges in the county, and we use the money generated at these bridges to provide services, while reducing the overall tax rate.



The court also adopts policies, such as the personnel policy, that are related to fiscal matters or to compliance with state and federal laws. Oversight of budgets and related policies extends to regular county departments, and to those headed by an elected official. It is important to point out that in the case of independent elected officials, the court's control is limited to the ability to adopt budgets and enforce policy. Unlike, say the health director, these individuals answer to you, the voters, not the commissioners' court, for the performance of their departments.

Another function of the court is to adopt rules and regulations, called court orders, that serve the residents of the county. As I mentioned earlier, the court is responsible for keeping county operations within the law. State law also limits the kinds of regulations that the county may adopt, and the activities it may conduct, to those specifically provided for in the statute, or those that fall under a general authority, such as the protection of public health. This is different from a city government that has much greater authority to provide services, or adopt ordinances that regulate activities within the city.



Over the years, this restriction has sometimes meant that it is difficult for the county to keep up with changes in our community, or to address problems that have developed. One of these areas is housing. As more and more homes are built in rural areas, we have been limited in what we can do to protect the investments of homeowners and promote affordable housing. For example, the county does not currently have zoning authority to prevent the opening of business establishments in residential neighborhoods, which has created a problem for some residents. In other cases, there is a need for the county to provide a service that is not currently authorized under the law. For example, many years ago there was a need to improve law enforcement in our county parks, so the county worked for legislation that allowed the formation of the county park rangers.

Whenever we encounter a challenge like this, we go to the legislature for their assistance. Every legislative session, we work with our local cities and the other counties in the Valley to



propose changes in the law to the legislature that will allow us, or the cities, to meet a need that has developed.

Cameron County also joins other local governments in going to the legislature, and to federal officials in Washington, to seek funding for important projects here in the Valley. We go up to Austin with officials from the City of Brownsville to seek money for new highways, or with officials from the Laguna Madre area to obtain funding for coastal projects like beach renourishment or the restoration of the Bahia Grande.

These are just a few of things that county government, and I do, every day. There are so many things happening that I could spend the rest of the day talking to you, but you still need to hear the next speaker. If you would like to learn more about the county, I invite you to visit our website at www.co.cameron.tx.us and to watch the commissioners' court meetings, which are broadcast each Thursday evening at 10:00 on KMBH.



If one theme runs through everything I have said today, and everything we try to do each day here at Cameron County, it is that the greatest responsibility Cameron County has is serving you, the public. I take that responsibility to heart, and look forward to the opportunity to help you in any way I can. If you would like to learn more about the county; if you have a problem, or an idea; or if you would like help with something related to county, my door is always open to you. My office is located on the first floor of this building, right by the front door, and my telephone number is 574-8167. Please feel free to call me, or stop by.