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Redistricting plans selected for public input

With deadlines looming large, Ellis County Commissioners put aside their differences and selected two redistricting plans to be submitted to the Citizens' Advisory Committee and to public hearings for comment.

"If we submit only one plan, we are saying to the committee that we have already made up our minds and their recommendation will not matter," said Commissioner Dennis Robinson, pct. 1. "I think it is important to give them an option of two and get their recommendation."

The Court is required to review Commissioner Precincts after the release of new data from the U.S. Census office every ten years to ensure, first, that the Constitutional provision for equal protection under the law is met – in other words, "One man, one vote." However, in drawing new precinct lines, the Court must also ensure that they do not dilute the voice of any minority group.

"We need to do what is most responsible and pursue a plan that is not going to make us defend it," said County Judge Carol Bush. "I don't want a legal challenge to our plan."

Commissioners have met individually or in pairs with Waco attorney Michael Morrison, who is representing the County in the process, since April of this year, and have held two public workshops on the topic. The Citizens' Advisory Committee has also met twice to hear about progress and to provide input. Last week, members of the Committee received information on six different proposals.

This evening's vote narrowed the field to only two of those proposals: Plan Three and Plan Seven.

The Court addressed another long-term process during the meeting as well when it voted to approve the County's basic Emergency Operations Plan and functional annexes. Emergency Management Coordinator John Patterson said the plan complies with Government Code 418.106.

"It has been reviewed by all stakeholders and signed off by all County departments and agencies and is ready for your approval," Patterson told the Court. "Then I will finish taking it out to the Mayors of the signatory cities for their final approval, then on to the State for their final approval."

A presentation was made by David Quin, Program Manager for the Public Power Pool (P<sup>3</sup>), updating the Court on the status of the County's electricity contract.

"Public Power Pool members have saved \$134 million against market rates since the program inception in 2002," Quin said. "Under the current contract, which began in 2009, members have saved over \$34 million against the benchmark rate, which is the price available on the day the contract was initiated."

Quin noted the organization uses a sophisticated procedure to "hedge" the purchase of power and divides its members into 26 sub-pools based on how the organizations use energy.

"Street lights are grouped together, for instance, so we can get the lowest price possible," he said. "All the jails go into another pool – jails use energy in a very distinct way, 24-hour flat usage. So we group them together and that way we can find additional savings."

Quin's charts show that Ellis County currently pays approximately 6.6 cents per kilowatt hour for its electricity, which is slightly lower than the pool average.

In the June 13 meeting of the Commissioners' Court, Commissioners approved the purchase of electricity from Texzon, the lowest bidder in a recent request for quotes on the utility.

A discussion-only item focused on the safety practices of the Ellis County Commissioner Precincts, with an emphasis on the consistent use of personal protective equipment such as hard hats, safety glasses, safety vests, and steel-toed boots or shoes.

"We have an obligation to provide a safe working environment for our workers," said Bush. "We have taken steps to do that, and one of the steps is ensuring that our precinct workers are abiding by the rules we have set up for them."

Commissioner Bill Dodson, pct. 2, agreed. "I agree with you one hundred percent that the county needs a safety policy. I think it should be across the board, all the different departments. It has to be pushed from the top down."

Bush noted that the county has been working with safety professionals at the Texas Association of Counties to educate employees and improve safety, including participating in recent safety surveys.

"One of the things we were commended on in our safety survey was that every man has a hard hat," said Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3, noting he requires the use of a hard hat in any situation where employees are working with hazards overhead, such as tree trimming or work under bridges.

In other business, Commissioners:

- Granted a one-time variance from County of Ellis Rules, Regulations and Specifications for Subdivisions and Manufactured Homes relating to the requirement of 300' road frontage for a private water well with an on-site-sewage facility in precinct 2;
- Granted a one-time variance from County of Ellis Rules, Regulations and Specifications for Subdivisions and Manufactured Homes relating to the 150' road frontage requirement and a variance relating to the one-acre-per-lot requirement for a single piece of property in precinct 4;
- Declared as salvage for disposal over 100 used tires located at Sheriff's Station Two, with Interim Purchasing Agent Hannah McCleary stating she would sell the tires for \$3 each;
- Took no action on a proposal to authorize a property owner to install a gate on a roadway;

- Awarded the Bank Depository Contract, to Comerica Bank for the period of August 1, 2011 to July 31, 2015 and authorized the County Judge to execute any and all necessary documents;
- Authorized participation in TexasTERM/TexasDAILY (a local government investment pool), designating authorized representatives;
- Approved the use of two unmarked, seized vehicles for undercover investigation purposes including emissions enforcement;
- Approved a contract with RCC Consultants, Inc. to assist Ellis County in the development of two-way radio communication improvements, including narrow banding;
- Approved a work order under interlocal agreement with the City of Red Oak for improvements on Pratt Road;
- Approved a work order under interlocal agreement with the City of Milford;
- Adjourned into a short executive session after which no action was taken.