

**ANALYSIS OF THE WILLIAMSON COUNTY (TEXAS)**

**DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN**

**AS POSTED ON THE COUNTY'S WEBSITE ON APRIL 3, 2010**

**AND SET AS ITEM NO. 27 ON THE AGENDA**

**OF COMMISSIONERS COURT ON APRIL 6, 2010**

By Kurt Johnson, Sr.  
kjohnson999@gmail.com

April 5, 2010

**Preface**

On or about April 3, 2010, Williamson County (Texas) posted on its website ([www.wilco.org](http://www.wilco.org)) an untitled document represented as a draft strategic plan, which had been commissioned by the Williamson County commissioners court (WCCC). The document appeared as a backup file for item No. 27 on the commissioners court agenda for April 6, 2010, which was captioned, "Discuss and take appropriate action on the draft of the Williamson County Long Range Strategic Plan.

**Problems regarding premise**

The caption for agenda item No. 27 is vague regarding the scope involved in the meaning of "appropriate action". Does the caption mean that the draft will be considered for final action by commissioners court as the county's strategic plan? This question is very significant in light of the draft's obvious shortcomings and technical deficiencies, making it clear that the "draft" needs much more work before it should be considered as a final "strategic plan" document.

The document has numerous technical deficiencies. It has neither a title nor title page. While referenced as a product generated by the consultant (LCRA), there is no attribution of authorship, either by individuals or by a specific LCRA department. The arcane format ("docx") in which the document is presented (rather than in the universally-accepted "pdf") is unprofessional and inconvenient for the reader. Various grammatical errors convey the impression that superficial or limited proofreading was done.

Based on the document's description of the compilation process, it appears that there was neither public involvement nor public input into the contents of this draft. Nowhere within the language of the scope of the draft nor in any information provided by the county is there an indication of whether there will be public involvement or how it might occur. The very idea that such an important document would be considered and/or adopted in the absence of a defined process for public input contradicts the very definition of open government. Further, the failure to define or schedule a process for citizens to have a public dialogue with officials regarding the strategic plan is a major shortcoming at this point in the process. Even if the county intended for such a process to occur, that description should have been set forth in this LCRA draft, if not sooner.

Reading the draft as a completed document, it is obvious that that the process utilized by the LCRA consultant simply involved summarizing the interviews with the various elected individuals and department heads and then publishing them as a unilateral, chronological narrative. It is clear that no effort was made to evaluate the content from the standpoint of internal contradictions and inconsistencies, much less resolve those issues through a process of continuing dialogue and refinement. Clearly, there was no systematic process for setting priorities and effecting a triage process to establish which components of the plan are the most critical.

Within the "Vision Statement" of the draft, this statement is made: "The citizens of Williamson County trust their elected officials and participate fully in the governance of the county."

The statement has no attribution. By what process or data collection effort was it determined that citizens of the county "trust" their elected officials, and what is the scope of that trust? How is it defined?

Other than voting in elections, the ability of citizens to "participate fully" is more than suspect. The most notable examples include the county's failure to provide a forum on such issues as the (county-owned) landfill master site plan, the failure to implement that portion of the landfill contract calling for an oversight inspector, despite the continued insistence of citizens for its implementation, the failure to schedule at least one meeting of commissioners court (per month) at night, the failure to enter into substantive dialogue regarding the county's commitments to reduce air pollution, the failure to videocast commissioners court meetings on the Internet, just to name a few items of government process.

## **The major omission**

Among the inconsistencies, absence of a premise for process, and other flaws of the document, the most significant, obvious problem is its failure to connect various programmatic, facilities and infrastructure iterations with its budget and bond programs. Financial considerations are at the heart of any strategy because of the manner in which they require (tax) revenue and because of the way in which they drive the ability of county government—or any government for that matter—to provide services. And yet, despite the critical importance of money as relating to the functions of government, budgetary constraints or strategies are not discussed at all.

In the Executive Summary of the draft, “fiscal conservatism” is identified as a core county value. In the section titled, “Plan Adoption and Implementation”, this statement is made: “Commissioners Court is responsible for using the (Implementation) plan in its budgeting process and to encourage other elected officials to do so as well. Because the plan includes input from across county leadership (sic--,) it provides a clear direction that should be supported across the board.”

In the absence of a priority or triage approach to the utilization of resources, how can the plan have any real value? And particularly distressing is the statement which gives a high priority to “input from across county leadership” which “should be supported across the board,” yielding the conclusion that the wide-ranging wish lists put forward by some of the elected officials have standing for implementation simply because they were shoved into the draft as a result of an interview. This characterization runs against the grain of what should properly be regarded as a deliberative process.

Under the heading of this major omission is the compelling issue of how the county will handle the current crisis involved in funding the costs of indigent health care within the parameters of the county's obligation. There is no mention of the short-term strategy being implemented for the current fiscal year, and there is no mention of what approach or strategy should be discussed in coming years. Further, no criteria or other evaluative tools are set forth regarding the critical decision to be made regarding whether services will be provided by the Williamson County and Cities Health District or the Lone Star Circle of Care, or both, of in what proportion and under what circumstances if both providers are used.

In light of the major costs associated with meeting the county's obligation regarding indigent care, the strategic plan should evaluate the priorities associated with various interviewees' wish lists as well as other major projects such as the huge expenses associated with the deployment

of the emergency operations center and the technical upgrade of the emergency communications system. Any strategic plan should consider whether the pace of such expenditures should be evaluated in the context of deciding whether the county will be able to meet its obligation regarding indigent health care.

The draft does not utilize information available from the discussion during the commissioners court budget workshop held on the afternoon of March 23, 2010. Present at that workshop were many (if not most) of the elected officials and department heads interviewed for the input to the strategic plan. Several wide-ranging ideas were put forward regarding ways to cut budget expenses in the 2010-11 fiscal year. For example, County Attorney Jana Duty raised the issue of whether or not the program at the animal shelter could be converted to having the Humane Society take care of the animals on a per-unit basis. Precinct 2 Justice of the Peace Edna Staudt questioned whether half as many animals in the animal shelter could be served as a move to provide space for homeless children. Also considered was whether it would be financially beneficial for the county to take civil action against prisoners who were arrested based on county warrants as a means of recovering some of the warrant-serving costs, to the extent of tapping the prisoners' commissary funds during their incarceration. None of these items made it into the content of the draft strategic plan.

Also not subjected to discussion in the draft strategic plan was the nature of priority associated with capital projects. Should the county schedule a road-bond vote in 2011, as has previously been projected? Is it a wise move to spend a million dollars on a recreational splash pad in the west side of the county? Even if capitalized as an expense, such an expenditure nonetheless adds to the tax base.

The only effort made by the draft to address cost issues is to place a column in a spreadsheet of project categories for "finance", but the references are abstract and limited to the extent that they are really of no value. In some cases, a year is cited without reference to whether the needed funding would be available in deference to other needs.

The Vision Statement of the draft ends with this statement: "There is a maximum effort to determine citizen needs and respond to those needs appropriately, while expending the least amount of public funds in a responsible, conservative and efficient manner."

The statement lacks supporting documentation. The process by which this very draft has eluded a public-dialogue process is a case in point. The failure to involve the public in the landfill master site plan process over the past year is yet another example. The notion of "expending the least amount of public funds" is suspect in light of such

examples as the need to evaluate the amount of county funds expended on the health care and retirement programs of county employees. Without a granular analysis in the context of working through a strategic plan, such a statement is presumptuous.

### **The wish lists**

The input from elected officials and department heads—including in the draft without question or priority consideration—amounts to nothing more than extended wish lists beyond the scope of what the business of county government ought to be. While some of the interviewees showed restraint in putting forward suggestions and needs, none of them was pegged to specific costs. And, as already noted, costs and revenues drive everything referable to programs and infrastructure.

Under the “Facilities” head, Goal 2.3 points out that “every department interview” contained a “long-term request for additional space and/or staff.” This wish-list item was accepted by the draft as a conclusive assumption without evaluating true need. For example, should there have been consideration of outsourcing tasks or in employee telecommuting as a means of reducing future space and staff requirements? Apparently, there was no such consideration. And Goal 2.4 assesses the manner in which additional space for the county jail should be provided without questioning whether various methods of the reduction of the jail population could be effective through such practices as electronic monitoring and quick-release through improved procedures for arraignment and bonding. It is obvious that all options were not considered.

Under the “Policy” head, Goal 4.1 discusses transparency of county functions. These functions actually require more than just the identification and management of documents. They actually involve a more pervasive area of government practice which involves the culture of operation. For example, the county has a practice of trying to sequester certain financial information (especially about its county-owned landfill) by claiming that such information is held in “auditors' workpapers” and thus is immune from disclosure under the Texas Public Information Act. The issue is that the county chooses not to make the disclosure, not that it is prohibited from doing so, but in any event, the county is not reluctant to file an objection with the Texas attorney general, triggering a protracted legal process.

Under the “Growth” head, Goal 5.1 calls for additional of paid staff to perform economic development work despite the fact that cities in the county are already rich with such paid professionals. The draft does not evaluate whether or not such a position would be redundant in the context of these other, existing professional assets.

Also under this head, Goal 5.3 seeks to offer services the county can't otherwise afford (or that is the claim), but the examples given are remote. For example, it is suggested that the county develop "a citizen-led group to ticket car owners parking in handicap spaces." Exactly how many handicap spaces are there in the county which are outside city jurisdiction? Did the draft consultant bother to consider that issue? And what are the legal implications of the operation of such a *posse comitas*? If such enforcement is truly a need, why doesn't the draft address the county's failure to enforce state law regarding diesel trucks idling in a stationary position for more than five minutes? Why the inconsistency?

### **County judge interview**

Despite critical budget constraints for the 2010-11 fiscal year, the county judge states that he wants to add an economic development professional "to help cities". Has he asked the cities whether they want this kind of help? What are these professionals in the cities not doing adequately such that a new, professional position at the county level would have to be created.

The judge also wants "to use training and professional development to increase the professionalism of the staff." Does that suggest that people in these positions at the present time are not qualified or sufficiently professional? Do allied government associations (such as through the Texas Association of Counties--TAC) not provide such training already so that the county would not have to develop its own?

In addition, the judge "would like to do some benchmarking with other counties" to see what Williamson County can learn from the way those counties do things? What is keeping him from picking up the phone or sending an e-mail, thereby doing that now? Doesn't TAC provide such content and data through conferences and publications?

### **Precinct 1 commissioner interview**

Under Objective C, this commissioner advocates that the county "add to its own facilities", but without consideration for outsourcing or telecommuting, raising suspicion that empire-building has a place within the service-provider matrix.

### **Precinct 2 commissioner interview**

Under "Priorities", Number 3, this commissioner believes that adding \$2 billion to the tax base over two years is viable, but without providing any implementing suggestions. At the same time, she supports the "Freeport Exemption" which actually is a reduction in tax revenues.

### **Precinct 3 commissioner interview**

Under “Priorities”, Number 2, this commissioner seeks to move the county's Veterans' Services office from Taylor to Georgetown, a goal which did not draw the support of the Precinct 4 commissioner (in whose precinct Taylor is located). This conflict is not resolved by the draft.

This wish list includes the building of another county annex—this one for Precinct 3. In an era of efficient technological communication, what is the basis for the strategic theory which concludes that all offices common to a precinct should be located under the same roof?

### **Precinct 4 commissioner interview**

Under “Priorities”, Number 2, this commissioner states: “One goal for economic development is opening up land for business development at the land fill (sic). The County can facilitate this (sic) by working towards providing the needed infrastructure in that part of the county.” Unstated within this priority is the identification of the kind of infrastructure which is needed. And the concept is offered as a disembodied concept apart from the landfill contract with Waste Management of Texas and the master site plan submitted in March of 2010 but which the county has yet to approve and for which the county has procrastinated in holding public forums. He also proposes restoration of the “historic farmhouse” at the landfill for various purposes, including serving as an office for the Precinct 4 commissioner, even though he is on record as having stated that he would not locate his commissioners office there. His proposal for the farmhouse also conflicts with statements made by the representative of Waste Management in March of 2010 regarding use of the farmhouse as a hosting center for landfill visitors. His view of the use of this deteriorating facility appears not to be based on any input from the public, even though the public has sought forums for providing such input on the landfill generally. Further, the commissioner doesn't suggest how any of these initiatives might be funded.

### **County attorney**

An emphatic focus of the county attorney is the acquisition of laptops with docking stations. No other county department has sought this resource. The county attorney provides no rationale or justification for the deployment of such technology platforms, especially in light of the current technology which allows for efficient data transfer using memory sticks or CDs.

## **District attorney**

The district attorney seeks “a forensic computer analyst” due to the increase in high-tech crimes. No statistics are presented showing the nature of increase regarding this category of crimes. The general impression is that such crimes are not part of a “growth rate” sector of crimes prosecuted by the district attorney.

## **Justice of the Peace, Precinct 2**

Under “Priorities”, Number 2, this justice of the peace proposes that her office publish “an informational newsletter to the community.” No suggestion is made regarding what the content of such a newsletter might be. No other justice of the peace offers such a proposal, so the purpose is unspecified. No consideration is given regarding the dissemination of any necessary information should be published through the county's website.

## **Sheriff**

Under “Objective B”, the sheriff cites as a liability the location of the shooting range as part of a separate training facility (on the south side of the county landfill). When this facility was located at the landfill several years ago, no public input was sought regarding the propriety of this location. Nonetheless, expense has been incurred in upgrading the facility. It would appear that poor planning in the past has led to an inefficient situation for the sheriff relative to current needs.

## **County auditor**

The county auditor does not address the conflicts created by not releasing records in response to public information requests and using the workpapers exception as a methodology for non-release. It is apparent that an extensive review of the policies in this regard are warranted. Further, it appears that the audits conducted regarding the county landfill are superficial and do not provide sufficient detail to generate confidence. An upgrade in the quality of those audits should be considered.

## **Conclusion**

These comments are intended to illustrate the importance of feedback and dialogue from the public regarding these various details of a strategic plan. Before adopting such a document, commissioners court should consider carefully the implications and impacts of adopting such wish lists in the absence of considering budget constraints and the future challenges—primary of which is indigent health care, which is not mentioned.