

MINUTES OF THE HOUSTON COUNTY COMMISSION
REGULAR SESSION
July 25, 2022

PRESENT: Chairman Mark S. Culver, Commissioner Curtis Harvey, Commissioner Doug Siquefield, County Engineer Barkley Kirkland, Chief Administrative Officer Peter Covert and County Attorney Pres Register.

Chairman Culver called the 10:00 a.m. meeting to order and welcomed everyone to the July 25, 2022, Houston County Commission Regular Session. He declared a quorum as a majority of the commissioners were in attendance. Chairman Culver mentioned that Commissioner Shoupe was attending the NACO conference and Commissioner Herring's father-in-law passed away this morning. He asked everyone to keep Commissioner Herring and his family in their thoughts and prayers.

ABSENT: Commissioner Ricky Herring and Commissioner Brandon Shoupe

Allan Fowler of Grandview Baptist Church gave the invocation and Commissioner Siquefield led in the pledge of the allegiance.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved on a motion by Commissioner Siquefield and seconded by Commissioner Harvey. The motion passed unanimously.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND COMMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN AND COMMISSIONERS

There were no announcements.

REGULAR AGENDA

1. Request to approve resolution amending CDBG-COVID 19 Grant No. CV-NC-20-037 – Emily VanScyoc, SEARPCD

Commissioner Harvey made a motion to approve the resolution and Commissioner Siquefield seconded. Chairman Culver reported that this was discussed at Thursday's meeting and this is to allow the purchase of less-touch faucets at the Community Corrections facility and there will be some additional funds that will come forward at a later time. The motion passed unanimously.

2. Request to approve resolution authorizing application for Industrial Access Funds – Matt Parker, Industrial Development Board

Commissioner Harvey made a motion to approve the request and Commissioner Siquefield seconded. Chairman Culver stated that these funds are to apply for industrial access funds to construct a road for a project off Hodgesville Road. If the funds are available, the IDB will come back to the commission at a later date and request the work. The motion carried unanimously.

3. Request to approve Interlocal Agreement between the City of Dothan, Dale County and Houston County for the 2022 Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program – Sheriff's Dept.

Commissioner Harvey made a motion to approve the agreement and Commissioner Sinquefield seconded. Chairman Culver stated that this is the annual JAG grant that they partner with the city of Dothan, the Sheriff's Dept. and Dale County. This will be used for cameras in the vehicles. The motion carried unanimously.

4. Request to award bid for body worn cameras for the Sheriff's Dept. and the Jail Dept. to the lowest bidder meeting specs – Sheriff's Dept.

Commissioner Sinquefield made a motion to approve the awarding of the bid and Commissioner Harvey seconded. When called for the vote, the motion carried unanimously.

5. Request to extend the bid award date for the full body x-ray scanner for Houston County Jail pending review and authorization from the ACCA Legal Dept. – Sheriff's Dept.

Commissioner Sinquefield made a motion to approve extending the bid award date and Commissioner Harvey seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

6. Request to authorize resolution and approve sub-recipient agreement to expand ARPA funds for the Houston County Water Authority infrastructure project – Peter Covert, CAO

Commissioner Harvey made a motion to approve the request to authorize the resolution and approve the sub-recipient agreement and Commissioner Sinquefield seconded. Chairman Culver reminded everyone that as discussed on Thursday these are the water lines and tank that is part of the \$5 million dollar ARPA funds to run lines along Highway 231. This provides a tank as well as lines and this project will fall under the state law bids. As costs are fluctuating, this may have some adjustments as necessary. Mr. Sinquefield asked if this will be used for anything structurally built for Houston County Water Authority and Mr. Covert answered that this is project that has been reviewed by the consultants that the commission has engaged in and the funds will only be used on eligible projects. Chairman Culver stated that these are reimbursable funds as the requests for funds will be submitted by the water authority as the work is completed. At this time Chairman Culver recognized a member of the audience and he approached the podium. He stated his name as George Trotter and he resides at 4218 County Rd. 203, Dothan, AL. Mr. Trotter stated that he was in attendance on Thursday and he had a question about this item and the main line and his question is how much of this is available on the west side of 231 South and if it is, do they have the size lines that are coming under the highway and is this included. Chairman Culver stated that Mr. Parker had answered his question on Thursday before they left the meeting. Mr. Trotter said that he thought he said that there was some. Chairman Culver said that he believes that there are three or four crossings that Mr. Parker had researched before the end of the meeting. Mr. Trotter asked what size lines and Chairman Culver said he was not sure. Mr. Trotter said that Mr. Parker knew, as his concern as a citizen, is about the commerce and industry and not only

residential. Mr. Trotter asked again if there is money appropriated in the \$5 million in case a larger line has to be put down and that a sur-charge does not have to be charged to businesses that want to come in the area. Chairman Culver responded that based on the conversation on Thursday, there are crossings to the west side of 231 and that there are no water sur-charges by the county as the water authority has that authority. Mr. Trotter stated that the commission controls the water authority and Chairman Culver answered that the commission does not control the water authority. Mr. Trotter asked what they were doing in this motion and Chairman Culver responded that the commission is assisting the water authority by providing funds for them to grow their services. Mr. Trotter asked if they could tell him and the citizens of Houston County, especially in District 3, that they have at this day and time sufficient volume of water access that will accommodate commerce and industry in that area. Chairman Culver said that these lines are aimed at providing better quality water, higher pressure water to the citizens that are currently being served and will provide additional water availability to the people down Highway 231. Mr. Trotter asked if the citizens will have access to the water and Chairman Culver responded yes.

When called for the question, the motion passed unanimously.

7. Request to approve a 9% Cost of Living Adjustment effective with payroll beginning August 1, 2022, and obligate SSUT funds for current and future increases

Commissioner Harvey made a motion to approve the 9% COLA and Commissioner Sinquefield seconded. Commissioner Sinquefield began by stating that he had spoken to CAO Peter Covert, Chairman Culver and Sheri Garner, Personnel Director. He added that this is a lot of paperwork that the personnel department, county engineer, and others have put their heads together to evaluate this cost of living increase. Commissioner Sinquefield said that he appreciates their hard work and dedication in moving this forward and he has studied it for the last few weeks. He went back to 1999 as there was no pay raise; 2.9% in 2001; 2.0% in 2002, 1.1% and on down the line year after year with several years not having any increase until last year and they tried to catch up by bringing the COLA back in line. Commissioner Sinquefield added that they are seeing an enormous amount of cost to the working class people in the last year and a half as inflation has deflated the people whether it be personal or business, all have suffered. Commissioner Sinquefield asked how long this could continue on as he does not know but he does know that there has to be some adjustments. He stated that SSUT (Simplified Sellers Use Tax) which was birthed by the ACCA many years ago and he and Chairman Culver were on the board at that time, has benefited Houston County for many years and it will continue to rise as consumers continue to order online. He added that the SSUT is similar to a savings account and they depend on it, but today the average worker has been digging into their savings account due to inflation, but all the while were in hopes of benefiting from their savings instead of using it to live off. As this is a nationwide problem, it is hitting the local level. Commissioner Sinquefield said that he knows that this increase is important and that all the commissioners are seeing this as they are all in agreement with the request. He is in hopes that this percentage will benefit the commission in 2023 and as inflation declines, there will not have to be a COLA of this percentage. He added that as he reviewed this, the cost of low wages has created a lot of constant vacancies in the workforce at the county as there are 30-40 vacancies at this time with Road and Bridge leading and Probate not far behind in the way of empty slots.

Commissioner Sinuefield said that he has learned that there are not as many applicants due to the low wages that we offer. He added that there are two things he wants to make sure of if this COLA is implemented, is the fact that with this percentage we do not need to lessen the quality of the applicants as the standards have been set by Houston County. He said that if there are employees with discipline issues, that they need to be disciplined as we do not need to lower our standards as this percentage should bring it to a level that employees can survive on. Commissioner Sinuefield ended by saying that he believes that this is going to help in a lot of ways and he appreciated the employees and what they do as they are dedicated to the county and he is happy to know that the county has the best employees all the way around. Chairman Culver thanked Commissioner Sinuefield for his comments and that he is correct as a lot of work has been done on this. As stated on Thursday, there is an 11% vacancy rate in the county and this is unacceptable as the Sheriff cannot plan for the protection that is needed, we cannot provide the services in Road and Bridge, Probate or any other area with an 11% vacancy rate (45 vacant positions). Retention and recruiting are at an all-time difficult level and the Personnel Director will be glad to stand up and tell everyone that. Chairman Culver reported that the county is competing with local businesses that we cannot compete with due to salaries, and unless something changes, there will be a pay study put in the budget, as they do every four years, and, with inflation as it has been the last couple of years, that pay study will make some changes that will create a pretty significant increase if some action is not taken now to take a bite out of that increase, and the county is going to struggle to fund the increase. He said it is extremely important that the commission take action now to move the scale to a place that they can hire employees and take care of the employees, and fill the gaps that they need to fill. Chairman Culver then read two text messages that he received this morning with the first being from Commissioner Herring. It read: "I want to apologize for not being able to make it to the commission meeting today. My father-in-law passed away at 6:58 a.m. this morning and I am with my wife and family but I wanted to take time to send a text to you and let you know that I am in favor of the 9% COLA. Our employees work hard and they deserve it. Thank you for everyone's understanding during this difficult time." Chairman Culver then said that the second text message is from Commissioner Shoupe and it read: "I am in favor of the 9% COLA and will whole heartily vote for it today if I were at the meeting. We must up our pay scale to compete in this hyper competitive job market." Chairman Culver said he wanted everyone to know that they are all in unanimous support of this 9% COLA as they think it is the right thing to do. They have spent a lot of time looking at numbers and moving things from the general fund to ARPA and taking things out of budget request so that they can take care of their people and if they don't take care of the people, if we are not able to hire people, it does not matter if we buy new motor grates, new sheriff's cars, if there is no body to sit in that vehicle, sit in the probate line what difference does it make if we have the equipment. Chairman Culver stated that they have to take care of their most important asset and that is many that are out there (in the audience). Chairman Culver said that this is a significant increase and it may be the largest that he remembers in his 35+ years that he has been here, but it is necessary, it is needed and he appreciates all the work that Peter Covert and others have done to bring it to this place as they can afford this and they need to do this as they need to continue to provide services to the citizens and they have to have people to do it and this is the right step in the right direction to take care of that. At this time, Chairman Culver recognized Mr. George Trotter and told him he could come and make a comment. Mr. Trotter approached the podium and began by thanking the chairman and commissioners and that he knows that they get tired of him coming up and asking questions or making comments but they need to get

over it as this is the public's house and he wished more people would come and express what they express to him across the county about the government. He said he does not where to start and he knows he is limited on time and he appreciates Mr. Sinuefield supporting the people. Mr. Trotter said he is all about the employees but there are only 3 or 4 people in attendance that are not employees. He said that he loves the employees and the services that they offer the people and everybody needs a raise this day and time whether you work for a small business or a large corporation or work for the county, they all need a raise. Mr. Trotter continued and said correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Chairman, I think they already, in the last six or eight months, they have gotten a pay raise of some kind for all Houston County employees, right or wrong? Chairman Culver said "wrong" and Mr. Trotter asked about a 5% or 7% increase from the COVID relief fund or whatever, didn't the employees get a raise or was he dreaming? Chairman Culver stated that he is dreaming obviously. Mr. Trotter said that according to a lot of people that he talks to across the county they are under the impression that county employees, including all deputy sheriff's, everybody, had gotten a raise in 2022. Chairman Culver then asked all the employees in attendance if they had received a 5% raise this year and they all responded "NO" and Chairman Culver stated that he may want to check where he gets his information from. Mr. Trotter then said that prayers go out to Mr. Herring and his family for the death and he was in attendance on Thursday and he spent twenty minutes double talk and repeating himself trying to sell the pay raise to him and everybody else in the county. Mr. Trotter said that Mr. Kirkland and Mr. Sinuefield said that we cannot hire people and that we have stacks of applications and nobody comes to fill them out and it is because of the pay scale of where the employees are. Mr. Trotter said no it is not, as across the nation and the state and county it is called massive welfare through the unemployment agencies of funding money so people do not have to work or apply for jobs. He said that nobody can find employees because of getting paid not to work and he is hearing and getting vibes that the citizens are looking for the commission to start saying they need more tax to fund this and he has made a suggestion and he wants to conclude with this. His suggestion is, and he has not heard them use the word "cut" as most people in their budgets that cut is very important as they look where they can change things around. Mr. Trotter suggested that the 2 deputies at the front door, and he knows that Mr. Rafferty stated that it is a state law and the people of the county do not like it and they are paying for it. He suggest that they take these guys and put them back in their service where they need to be and the Judge should hold his court in the sheriff's office at the new building that the sheriff will be in and open this building back up to the citizens and not have to go through selective security that they are seeing downstairs. Mr. Trotter states that they see employees walk right through and they do not get checked.

Chairman Culver said that they did mention cuts twice on Thursday and once today, that when they went through the budget process they cut significant amounts out in order to do this.

At this time, Sheriff Valenza approached the podium and stated that he was not able to attend on Thursday but he did hear that it came up about the security officers and it is a law in the state of Alabama for the Sheriff to provide security. They have three buildings and some put one deputy on the door but he is not going to do a "half-ass job" and put one deputy on the door when there are many employees in this building that depend on the Sheriff's Dept. to keep them safe when coming to work and they are going through times right now throughout the entire country, where everything is changing

and everything is getting chaotic. Sheriff Valenza said he does not feel that they are over security on this building.

When called for the vote, the motion carried unanimously and a standing ovation was given to the commission by all employees in attendance.

8. Request to approve Houston County Engineer contract renewal effective October 1, 2022

Commissioner Sinquefield made a motion to approve the HC Engineer contract renewal and Commissioner Harvey seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

9. Request to approve FY 2022 Rebuild Alabama Contractor Report – Road & Bridge

Commissioner Sinquefield made a motion to approve the report and Commissioner Harvey seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

STAFF REPORTS

Chief Administrative Officer – No report.

County Engineer – No Closed roads and they appreciate the COLA

County Attorney – No report

Meeting adjourned.