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Newspaper Editorial
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Upon taking my oath of office as your County Judge, I pledged to work to build consensus with the County Commission, as well as reaching out to the municipalities and elected officials throughout Cameron County and South Texas to improve the quality of life for all our residents. Given the unprecedented economic conditions we faced last year and in spite of the uncertainty that has plagued the nation and our region; we continue to move in a positive direction. We have developed open lines of communication with many of our municipalities and other governmental agencies to develop a spirit of working together for the enhancement of our region.

Our 2009 budget faced almost a \$6 million deficit. This was the largest budgetary deficit Cameron County had encountered in recent history. With much hard work and countless hours and budget hearings, a balanced budget was adopted. The budget was balanced without dipping into our reserves and without reducing salaries. It included a reduction in operating costs by over \$3.5 million, evaluating existing programs, raising our international bridge tolls slightly and raising the tax rate by a penny. In addition, we asked our vendors to participate and provide us with cost savings initiatives, which they did.

As County Judge, I will continue to lead in exercising fiscal moderation and bringing about a sense of personal responsibility to do what is right for the taxpayers of this County. Keeping the County on sound financial footing, supporting economic development and infrastructure, partnering with state and local governments to move our region forward and addressing the pressing needs of the citizens in a fair, responsible and expeditious manner. Cameron County continues to be one of the fastest growing areas in the country; however, this growth brings a responsibility and a commitment to continue to provide services, such as indigent health care, infrastructure enhancements and public safety within the financial constraints that we have.

As our population grows, so does the need for continued infrastructure improvements. Two important projects that will be under construction in early 2010 are the West Rail Relocation in Brownsville and the North Rail Relocation in Harlingen. The Cameron County Commissioners Court has recently approved two Memorandums of Understanding with Union Pacific Railroad for these two projects. Both rail relocation projects will enhance safety, reduce congestion and will attract economic growth and development in and around the downtown areas of the respective Cities. It is a testament to all involved that we were able to approve two agreements on the same day for two different projects with a conglomerate the magnitude of Union Pacific Railroad. It took countless meetings; trips and negotiations to get to this point, where we will soon see everyone's hard work and commitment come to fruition.

The West Rail Relocation Project will relocate the current railroad tracks leading to the international rail bridge as well as the rail component of the bridge that currently passes through the downtown areas of Brownsville and Matamoros to a more rural area west of the two Cities. At a cost estimated to be \$35 million, this project will alleviate traffic congestion within the commercial and shopping districts of both Cities. This project will be the first international rail bridge project constructed on the U.S.-Mexico border in over 100 years.

The North Rail Relocation Project will consist of several phases of an overall rail relocation plan for Northern Cameron County. Phase one will have Union Pacific relocating all of their current switching operations at the downtown Harlingen facility to the Olmito switchyard. The Rio Valley Switching Company that currently operates within the confines of the switchyard in Harlingen will remain at the current yard; however their operation will be limited within the existing rail yard. This first phase is intended to end the switching that occurs in downtown Harlingen, thus eliminating the traffic congestion on the busiest intersections of the City. This is a good first step to our overall goal of removing all rail operations from downtown Harlingen. Additional funding is needed to reach this goal; however, Cameron County and its partners will continue to pursue funding for the construction of a new switching yard north of Harlingen.

In the summer of 2010, we anticipate to begin construction on the Veterans Bridge at Los Tomates. The expansion will help alleviate traffic mixture of both commercial and regular vehicular traffic on our bridge. Separating the traffic and locating the commercial traffic on this new span will enable us to move cargo and just-in-time deliveries in a more efficient manner. Our regular vehicle lanes and our special lanes like the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) and Free and Secure Trade (FAST) will also be better positioned to allow for a better flow of traffic and ease the congestion conditions at this bridge.

Cameron County, along with other agencies are currently working on a comprehensive regional drainage plan identifying major drainage flaws in the County to provide some level of relief to those most affected. Working towards redirecting storm waters to major collection points in the immediate area is a priority of Cameron County, Drainage Districts, Cities and our neighboring Counties.

Health care accessibility to our Veterans has seen significant improvement through the enhancement of the Clinic in Harlingen, however, I as one will continue to advocate for a Veteran's Hospital in the Rio Grande Valley. I continue to work with the various Veterans' groups and our Federal legislators to bring this to fruition. Working together as a region, which we continue to do, will assist in bringing a fully staffed and operational facility to the Valley.

During 2009, we completed construction and have opened two additional community parks. One park was opened in Rio Hondo and the other in La Paloma. Both parks are being utilized by our youth and families, which adds to the quality of life for the families in our rural areas.

Through the County Judge's Office of Emergency Management, we reached out to all the communities in Cameron County and offered to present programs and explain the evacuation process, the 211 system and hurricane preparedness. Our presentations were given to numerous municipalities, service organizations, adult day care facilities, churches and other groups throughout Cameron County. Solid working relationships have been developed with our neighboring Counties of Hidalgo and Willacy to address the logistics related to the evacuation process, should the need for an evacuation arise. I believe that our Emergency Management division is better prepared today than it was three years ago to address the challenges we face as a coastal community.

As we continue to strive to meet the demands of our taxpayers we also continue to work on innovative programs and initiatives to increase efficiency, provide effective programs and bring a better quality of life to all the citizens of this County. For the second consecutive year Cameron County was awarded with two “Best Practices Awards from the Texas Association of Counties Leadership Foundation”.

The first award was for a community improvement project to bring lights to the colonias of Cameron Park and Laguna Heights. While a county does not traditionally provide lighting in rural areas, the Commissioners Court believed it important enough to partner with utility companies as well as with the County Tax Assessor Collector to provide lights in these once dark colonias and develop a mechanism for billing of utility services to the residents of these areas. We hope to continue to work to expand our colonia lighting projects in other communities of the County.

Our next award was truly an “outside the box” award that centered on addressing the needs of the hearing impaired. For the first time in Texas, Cameron and Hidalgo Counties utilized a contract with the State Division of Emergency Management to provide American Sign Language interpreters during Hurricane Dolly to translate information from the National Weather Service and emergency messages to local television stations. This service provided up to date information to our hearing impaired residents during the storm. This model is now being used nationwide to address the needs of the hearing impaired.

We continue to work with the Port of Brownsville and other governmental entities to improve the transportation arteries of the region. Bringing an interstate highway to South Texas continues to be at the forefront and working with our neighboring Coastal counties, such as Nueces, Kenedy, Kleberg and Willacy, will help I-69 become a reality.


The uniqueness of our border coastal communities brings an added attractiveness to the region and as we grow it is important that we have an accurate count of our population. In the first half of this coming year, the 2010 Census will be underway and forms will be delivered to every household in the County. It takes about ten minutes to fill out these forms. Making sure that all our residents are counted is extremely important to the future of our region in terms of federal dollars and federal representation. Ten minutes of your time will determine our community’s future for the next ten years. The future is in our hands and I urge everyone to take part in this nationwide effort in making sure that we have an accurate count.

We face many challenges in the year to come; however, Cameron County continues to move forward. We must continue to remain diligent in providing a level of service our residents have come to expect, while at the same time being fiscally responsible. Fiscal responsibility requires that we budget within our means, continuing to implement cost saving measures, assessing the success or failures of programs, and ensuring that your tax dollars are efficiently expended and invested.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the residents of Cameron County for allowing your county government to work on your behalf. To our Veterans, thank you for your service and I remain committed to being an advocate for each of you. And lastly, a special thanks to all of Cameron County’s elected and appointed officials, employees and their families for their public service.

I encourage all Cameron County residents to continue staying informed and engaged in our community. I will continue reaching out to our local elected leaders, community leaders and residents to work together for the betterment of our County.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carlos", written in a cursive style.

Carlos H. Cascos
County Judge