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Tree trimming the topic of conversation

Monday evening's regularly scheduled meeting found Ellis County Commissioners engaging in an open and productive dialogue regarding tree management practices in county right-of-ways.

"This has recently been the subject of a lot of attention," said County Judge Carol Bush. "We are always interested in hearing from our constituents, and there are a lot of people here that want to speak or just to register their opinion in writing."

On hand to lead off the discussion was Micah Pace, regional urban forester with the U.S. Forest Service.

"While trees are not as precious as our children, they do invoke a lot of passion," Pace said. "We all have different reasons we like trees, but in the end, trees are important to all of us."

Pace highlighted the value of trees in the community -- from providing shade to storing carbon to preventing soil erosion -- before discussing proper tree management.

"I would be happy to be at your service to train or educate your crews," Pace concluded. "We also put on a workshop in Grand Prairie at the Ruthe Jackson Center."

Currently, precincts 2 and 3 regularly utilize a Boomax to both cut infringing trees and brush and mulch the trimmings. Precinct 1 uses the machine less frequently, while precinct 4 has opted for a sickle mower.

Speaking against the County's use of the Boomax were Suzanne and Ray Downs. The couple provided members of the Court with informational materials including photos, manufacturer's recommendations for the safe use of the Boomax, and a petition containing an estimated 600 signatures.

"Your decision to stop this practice will improve soil, runoff, and erosion," said Suzanne Downs. "Your decision to end this practice will preserve wildlife habitat and our habitat. Your decision to stop this practice will preserve the natural beauty of Ellis County. We are counting on your stewardship of natural resources, and we are counting on you to end this practice of mowing the county trees."

Ray Downs focused on the safety aspects of the process.

“You will find some parts of the operator’s manual in your book,” he said. “It is required to have a 300-foot clearance. I confirmed this today that in the operation of this machine they recommend that a flag man be posted 300 feet in front and 300 feet behind.”

Downs told the Court that the machinery can fling debris at a speed of up to 200 miles per hour, posing a hazard to passing motorists, households located within 300 feet of the roadway, and county employees. He noted that alternative blades are available for the equipment that would be safer and perhaps have a more palatable result.

“Do you think the property owners in Ellis County would be willing to care for their own trees?” asked Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3. “You got six of one and half a dozen of the other – I am looking at the money we have, the number of road miles we have, and trying to balance that.”

Several residents also approached the Court in favor of the County continuing its current tree trimming practices.

“I farm on the south end of Ellis County,” said Ron Janek. “I use the roads. We don’t farm with two- and four-row machines. We farm with large equipment.”

Janek said some machinery that must be moved from farm to farm is as much as 26 feet wide and 16 feet high.

“This is necessary – it is important that you do this,” he concluded. “And it is a lot more expensive to do it by hand.”

Joe Jarratt, a Fort Worth resident who owns a farm in southern Ellis County, said that the roadways are in better shape than he has previously seen them, adding that two or three years after cutting, the trees trimmed with the Boomax are beautiful.

Donald Wood of Italy also supported the practice and thanked Sims for keeping the roadways clear, particularly at the corners, to enhance safety.

“I don’t trim trees unless I have school buses or residents coming to me,” said Commissioner Dodson, pct. 2. “I have some residents that want to trim their own trees, and I work very closely with those residents. A lot of stuff we trim with the Boomax is small brush.”

Bush emphasized that landowners could trim their own trees to relieve the county of the responsibility, adding that she was hoping to engage the concerned constituents present at the meeting to spread that message. She encouraged them to continue constructive dialogue with their respective Commissioners, particularly in regard to cost effective solutions.

“We are constrained unless we raise taxes, and I don’t think that’s a very popular idea right now with the economic climate,” said Bush. “How can we spread the word to other landowners? It opens up the conversation. Maybe more people will say I am going to take care of my own trees, and at the County, we are going to listen.”

The Court proclaimed the month of April, 2010 as Child Abuse Awareness and Prevention Month in Ellis County, taking time out to welcome and recognize a number of volunteer groups.

“Our children are precious – they are a valuable resource, and we have an obligation and a duty to take care of them and protect them,” Bush said.

On hand to receive the Court’s proclamation were representatives of Bikers Against Child Abuse, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), the Ellis County Child Welfare Board, Child Protective Services, the Gingerbread House, and the Rainbow Room of Ellis County.

Another light moment was the announcement that the Court had received a certificate from State Representative Jim Pitts recognizing the County for its receipt of the Industry of the Year award from the Waxahachie Chamber of Commerce.

“I think we should be proud of it,” Bush said. “We received it this year for the outstanding job of the new courthouse going up and the sub-courthouse in Ennis.”

In other business, Commissioners:

- Appointed Raymond C. Miner to the board of the Ferris Emergency Service District #5 for a term through December 2011;
- Heard an update on the County's energy contract with the Public Power Pool (P3);
- Conveyed the following tax sale "struck off" properties to the City of Waxahachie for the purpose of establishing a quiet zone:
 - a) 0.1159 acre, more or less, being a portion of Lot 3, block 106, City of Waxahachie, Ellis County, Texas, as described in deed dated April 24, 1980 from Mary Halley to I. V. Woods, recorded in Volume 643, Page 669, Deed Records of Ellis County, Texas (171124);
 - b) Lot 4, block 106, Town Addition, City of Waxahachie, Ellis County, Texas, as described in deed dated July 7, 1936, from Martha Gowan to Harvey Edwards, et al, recorded in Volume 326, Page 357, Deed Records of Ellis County, Texas, (171125);
 - c) 0.223 acre, more or less, situated in Lot 9, Block 106 and in Lot 7, block 158, Town Addition, an addition to the City of Waxahachie, Ellis County, Texas, as described in deed dated November 10, 1973 from Dorothy Mergerson, et al to Gloria Faye Cumby in Volume 557, Page 262, Deed Records of Ellis County, Texas (171112);
 - d) Lot 8, Block 106, Town Addition, an addition to the City of Waxahachie, Ellis County, Texas, as described in Volume 755, page 372, Deed Records of Ellis County, Texas (171119).
- Accepted the donation of miscellaneous road construction materials from J.C. Evans Construction Company to Road and Bridge Precinct 2;
- Authorized an agreement with J.C. Evans Construction Company concerning the use of approximately 4.4 miles of Ensign Road during a project to improve U.S. Highway 287;
- Authorized a contract with Freese and Nichols to provide dam breach assessment on six flood control dams throughout the County, contingent upon contract approval by the District Attorney's office;
- Set spending limits for three outgoing elected officials as required by Local Government Code 130.908, specifically \$500 for Justice of the Peace Precinct Four, \$500 for County Treasurer, \$1000 for office expense for County Court at Law #1, and \$5000 for discretionary and statutory expenses for County Court at Law #1;
- Ratified an amended arbitration agreement authorizing a continuance of Cause No. 71-181-00458-08, City of Midlothian and County of Ellis vs. Kehe Foods;
- Declared the following items as surplus from Road and Bridge Precinct 2 and authorize disposal at auction: one (1) 1999 Ford F250 ¾ ton pickup, one (1) 1995 Chevrolet 1500 pickup, one (1) 2009 Long Wheel Base Truck Bed from Chevrolet 2500 (new), one (1) pipe and ladder rack for utility truck bed; and
- Approved a contract with Simplex Grinnell, contingent upon DA's office approval of terms and conditions, to replace old sprinkler heads in the County Jail with newer, tamper-proof versions, at a cost not to exceed \$29,568.

Bikers Against Child Abuse



Casa of Ellis County - April 2010



CPS Child Welfare Rainbow Room



Gingerbread House - April 2010

