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Gandhi once said, “A man is the product of his thoughts. What he thinks he becomes.”

Below are a few of the thoughts I am becoming.

## In This Issue

- Care for Our Air
- Economic Enrichment

Look for the “**What You Can Do**” suggestions at the end of each section.

## Coffee Jolt

The third Wednesday of every month from 8am - 9:30am at a coffee shop near you.

Go to the Events Page of my website [www.SarahEckhardt.com](http://www.SarahEckhardt.com) for more details.

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## Year Three

Although Travis County government is going full tilt on many issues, in the interest of space I have chosen just two topics for this communication – our air and our economy. Share your thoughts with me by visiting my website [www.SarahEckhardt.com](http://www.SarahEckhardt.com), joining us at a Coffee Jolt (third Wednesday of every month), or by sending me an email at [sarah.eckhardt@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:sarah.eckhardt@co.travis.tx.us).

## Care for Our Air

The EPA recently changed its standard for rating the quality of air in regard to ground-level ozone in the United States. The national human health standards for ozone have been lowered to 75 parts per billion, measured by monitoring equipment, including a monitor in Travis County. The upshot is that Travis County is now unofficially in non-attainment. Tailpipe emissions and electricity consumption (because of coal-powered plants that produce most of our electricity) are our chief contributions to dirt in the air. Our driving, mowing and energy consumption habits are creating high ozone concentrations affecting our health as well as the health of our vegetation and our economy.

The Clean Air Coalition has declared 2009 the year of “The Big Push” during the upcoming ozone season running from April 1<sup>st</sup> to October 31<sup>st</sup>, to reduce ozone formation by better control of air emission sources. Through concerted effort, Central Texas partners can prevent air quality conditions that would require the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to decide in 2010 that the air quality is insufficiently protective of human health (non-attainment status). The air pollution sources that are most important to address with the Big Push include voluntary reduction of vehicle emissions, changes in operations by businesses/government, and changes in personal and household behavior.

The consequences of dirty air affect our health and our economy. Health concerns due to high ozone include:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Throat and lung irritation
- Increased asthma attacks

High ozone is linked with increases in hospital admissions and school absences. Sensitive groups to ozone include children, the elderly, people with lung disease, and adults who are active in outdoor pursuits. In addition, high ozone levels affect vegetation by resulting in reduced crop yields, reduced survival of tree seedlings, and increased susceptibility of plants to disease and pests. Economic costs associated with high levels of ozone include increased health care, decreased property values, and diminished quality of life. Reducing air pollution is costly too in terms of planning, implementation and enforcement of air pollution control strategies.

As a member of the Clean Air Coalition, Travis County is implementing internal procedures to address high levels of ozone including:

- Restrict county operations on Ozone Watch Days;
- Institute a special Ozone Watch Day teleworking schedule;
- Educate county employees on commuting options; and
- Expand communications to Travis County citizens and county employees.

Travis County is encouraging other Clean Air Coalition members as well as major employers to join the effort.

### **What you can do:**

#### **IN THE CAR**

- Limit driving and delay errands. For short trips consider riding a bicycle or walking. Other options include carpooling, vanpooling, working at home, and teleconferencing.
- Ride the bus. Plan your trip online at [www.capmetro.org/planner](http://www.capmetro.org/planner).
- Don't let engines idle unnecessarily. When you can, avoid drive-thru services.
- Minimize "cold starts" by combining trips. Emission levels are highest when vehicles are first started.
- Postpone refueling your car until after 6:00 p.m. on hot, sunny days. This reduces the time that escaping fumes have to "cook" during the heat of the day and form ozone.
- Maintain your vehicle for fuel efficiency. Maintain recommended tire pressure, replace air filters, keep the engine tuned up, and change the oil regularly for peak gas mileage.
- Don't overfill or "top off" the gas tank. The refueling process releases ozone-producing fumes. Check to see that the gas cap fits tightly.
- Be sure that gasoline engines (including boats and mowers) are properly tuned and maintained. Ask that the catalytic converter on your vehicle be inspected for proper function.
- Avoid traffic congestion. Whenever possible, drive during off-peak hours.
- Avoid driving for your lunch break. Take a lunch to work or walk to

lunch.

## IN THE HOME

- Apply paint with rollers and brushes (instead of sprays) to cut down on fumes.
- Use latex paints rather than oil-based paints to cut back on ozone-forming fumes.
- Compost yard waste (instead of burning it) to reduce air pollution.
- Use an electric or push mower instead of a gasoline-powered mower. A typical gasoline-powered lawn mower generates as much air pollution per hour as 11 cars.
- Ensure that when you dispose of a gasoline-powered mower that it is destroyed and unusable. Otherwise, it could be resold and it remains a pollutant source.
- Use rakes, hand edgers, or brooms or other non-gasoline-powered equipment for other yard chores.
- Conserve energy. Burning fossil fuels in the production of electricity is a source of pollution contributing to ozone formation.
- Insulate and weather-strip your home.
- Adjust thermostats to reduce electric consumption.
- Run dishwashers and washing machines only with a full load.
- Conserving water also conserves energy—it takes electricity to treat and deliver drinking water.

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## Patriotism and Economic Stimulus

There is no doubt that we in Central Texas are hurting more economically than we have in a long time. Wherever I go, I hear hopeful speculation of what federal dollars our region may draw down. I too am hopeful that federal stimulus will chart a course toward new or renewed investment in education, health care and energy independence. But, we must do our part locally to the greatest extent possible so that federal dollars can be routed to the most desperate areas of our national economy.

The following chart illustrates how our region is better off than our state and our country in most metrics of economic health.

	<b>Austin MSA</b>	<b>Travis County</b>	<b>Texas</b>	<b>United States</b>
<b>2007 Median Family Income*</b>	\$70,809	\$69,334	\$55,742	\$61,173
<b>Percent with bachelors degree or above*</b>	38.4%	42.4%	25.2%	27.5%
<b>January 2009 Unemployment Rate+</b>	6.4%	6.1%	6.8%	8.5%
<b>2008 Per capita GDP</b>	\$48,305	n/a	\$46,721	\$46,929
<b>Total tax burden per capita ++</b>			\$1,368.45	\$2,049.20 (weighted state average)

\*American Communities Survey 2007  
+ U.S. Department of Labor February 2009  
++ Texas has the lowest state tax burden in the U.S.

This is not to say there aren't folks in our community that were hurting before the downturn and even more folks who are hurting now.

- **14.7% of Travis County residents live in poverty\***
- **18.7% of Travis County children live in poverty\***
- **9.6% of Travis County residents over the age of 65 live in poverty\***
- **24.8% of Travis County residents are uninsured\*\***
- **Those without a high school diploma are three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in the current downturn+**

\*American Communities Survey 2007  
\*\* U.S. Census Bureau's 2005-2007 Average Rate and 2005 Small Area Health Insurance Estimates  
+ U.S. Department of Labor February 2009

For long-term economic health we as a people must invest in education and healthcare. While our school districts and our healthcare district and its partners do what they can with inadequate public funding, these issues largely require action at the state and federal level.

In the short term, local government has a role to play in lessening the impact and duration of the downturn. In addition to supporting our school districts and our healthcare networks, county government can:

- Keep taxes as low as possible;
- Provide good and necessary jobs in county government;
- Accelerate needed county capital improvement projects and road projects to inject additional work into the construction industry;
- Provide workforce training and placement for those in need of work;
- Provide rent and utility assistance to those who are struggling;
- Provide foreclosure prevention counseling to those in fear of losing their homes;
- Provide down payment assistance and lease-to-own opportunities for qualified home buyers; and
- Target specific industries as a bulwark against economic uncertainty.

I hope that the first seven bullets above are not controversial. I expect and welcome controversy on the last bullet.

“Special support” is most often understood as some form of preferential tax treatment or abatement to lure a large employer to our region that would not otherwise locate here. I am not a fan of tax abatements generally for several reasons. First, the best ways for county government to attract and support businesses of any size are to keep taxes low, services high and infrastructure maintained. Second, most jobs are created by small businesses. And third, academic research over two decades indicates that, more often than not, tax abatements simply reward industry for going where the market was taking them anyway. However, I believe there is utility in offering abatements to industries

providing a social benefit in a timid market, such as:

- Encouraging businesses to locate or remain in targeted areas;
- Innovation with a social benefit that has not yet gained sufficient market share to be cost competitive; and
- Hiring and training of the otherwise under-skilled or under-employed.

An Economic Development Subcommittee of the commissioners court has been formed to examine all the tools for economic enrichment available to county governments. Tax incentives or abatements are among those tools along with other more traditional lures such as workforce training, robust infrastructure, public safety and the like. The members of the subcommittee are Commissioner Ron Davis, Commissioner Margaret Gomez and me.

I hope that the subcommittee will not favor an entitlement program of abatements distributed to all comers meeting a scoring matrix. My initial thoughts are to recommend a policy requiring an appropriate weighing of:

- Desired future conditions for the community – what geographic areas of the county are most suitable for industry, what demographic populations are most in need of job training and employment, and what industries best fit these geographic circumstances and demographics?
- Objective criteria – a scoring matrix including such elements as type of industry, numbers of jobs created, health insurance coverage provided, cost of utility, road and other infrastructure necessary to support the proposed business, demonstrated venture capital investment, etc.; and
- Current economic circumstances – will the impact of the tax abatement shift undue burden onto other taxpayers or will the job creation benefits outweigh the shifted burden?

#### **What you can do:**

- Attend and testify at our Economic Development Subcommittee meetings. I will post the meeting times and places on my website at [www.SarahEckhardt.com](http://www.SarahEckhardt.com).
- Write or call the subcommittee members with your ideas:  
Commissioner Eckhardt – 854-9222, [sarah.eckhardt@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:sarah.eckhardt@co.travis.tx.us)  
Commissioner Gomez – 854-9444, [margaret.gomez@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:margaret.gomez@co.travis.tx.us)  
Commissioner Davis – 854-9111, [ron.davis@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:ron.davis@co.travis.tx.us)
- Join the policy debate within other local governmental entities through attending public meetings, writing Letters to the Editor and talking to your neighbors and colleagues.

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#### **On the Watch List for the next quarter:**

- Recap of the legislative session
- The new City Council and Travis County government
- The Travis County budget season