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Vol. 1



Politics is an every day act. You see it in our choice of food, how we treat one another, in our expression of beliefs. When we are mindful about our everyday choices, our everyday politics creates long-range policy that preserves our quality of life, not just for us, but for generations to come.

## In This Issue

- One Year In
- Transportation
- Environmental Preservation
- Economic Opportunity
- Criminal Justice
- On the Watch List for Next Quarter

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

### Coffee Jolt & Think Tank

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

1/16/08

**Blue Marble Coffee**

1912 West Pecan, Pflugerville  
(between the Volvo Rents and Sonic)

2/20/08

**Quack’s on 43rd**

411 E. 43<sup>rd</sup> St., Hyde Park

3/19/08

**Genuine Joe Coffee**

2001 Anderson Ln, Austin

Go to

[www.saraheckhardt.com/events](http://www.saraheckhardt.com/events)

For more details.

## One Year In

Thank you so much to everyone who has provided me with ideas, support, and criticism this year. We tackled some major issues in **transportation, environmental preservation, economic opportunity, and criminal justice**. We made progress, but much work remains to be done on these issues, as well as in **mental health**, gaining greater **land use authority** from the Texas legislature and many other areas. Below is a thumbnail sketch of some of the issues we faced and some predictions for what’s to come. Tell me what you think, either by visiting my website [www.SarahEckhardt.com](http://www.SarahEckhardt.com), joining us at a Coffee Jolt (the 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).

## Transportation

Just when you thought it was safe to get back on the roads...the issue that won’t go away is back! Transportation cuts across so many other issues – quality of life, environmental preservation, tax equity, economic development, privatization of core governmental services – that it must be attended to constantly.

Let me state my priority up front – **reducing per capita Vehicle Miles Traveled**. Our current transportation habits are literally choking us to death. Tailpipe emissions account for one third of the CO<sub>2</sub> contributing to global warming in our state. If Texas was a nation it would be the seventh largest producer of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the world. We must make radical changes now to ensure a future for our children and our children’s children. Failure to act is not an option.

We must do our part regionally by shifting away from a *move more cars* paradigm toward one of *moving more people*. There are many ways to move people efficiently without increasing congestion --many of these solutions will reduce per capita Vehicles Miles Traveled in the process.

Accommodating past growth and bringing our roadway infrastructure up to current demand is needed, particularly in eastern Travis County. We were told in no uncertain terms by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) that State funding for additional roads was contingent on local willingness to leverage State-controlled dollars with local toll revenue. Stopping this inequitable and inefficient funding mechanism was not possible. I was, however, able to amend the plan to blunt some of its worst aspects and harness excess revenue for transit alternatives to toll roads.

The amendments:

- Prohibit the sale of toll roads in our region to private interests;

**Other Interesting Links**  
**County of Travis Website**  
[www.co.travis.tx.us](http://www.co.travis.tx.us)

**CAMPO**  
[www.campotexas.org](http://www.campotexas.org)

**Balcones Canyonlands Preserve**  
<http://www.co.travis.tx.us/tnr/bccp/>

### Local Blogs

**Grits for Breakfast**  
[Gritsforbreakfast.blogspot.com](http://Gritsforbreakfast.blogspot.com)  
*Tx criminal justice and political opines*

**Austinist**  
[www.austinist.com](http://www.austinist.com)  
*Local Austin happenings*

**Burnt Orange Report**  
[www.burntorangereport.com](http://www.burntorangereport.com)  
*Tx politics of all levels*

**Eye on Williamson**  
[www.eyeonwilliamson.com](http://www.eyeonwilliamson.com)  
*a good Central Tx overview, lots of focus on transportation issues.*

- Guarantee immediate free access to toll roads by high occupancy vehicles;
- Nail any excess revenue generated from tolls to the corridor in which the revenue is generated (to be used for such things as rail, park-and-ride, bike trails, pedestrian ways; and local feeder roads adjacent to the toll ways);
- Guarantee the maintenance and improvement of non-tolled options around toll ways;
- Remove tolls once the debt from building the toll ways is retired; and
- Remove toll taxation when and where preferable revenue sources become available.

I am proud of having authored these amendments and if upheld, they will:

- Increase tax equity;
- Decrease per capita Vehicle Miles Traveled;
- Increase transportation options for people of all economic strata; and
- Increase pressure to raise and index the gas tax, end diversion of gas tax revenue, and explore more effective funding mechanisms.

Since that October vote, TxDOT has continued to advocate for highly unpopular concession agreements for private toll operators. Further, due to political, financial and/or policy miscalculations, TxDOT states it is no longer able to provide between \$500 million and \$700 million in promised funding for our regional transportation needs.

The tighter funding constraints will necessitate scaling back some of the projects approved in October. I suggest that the first two projects trimmed be 45SW and 290West. Most recognize that these two roads, as designed, are out-and-out over-builds. First, 45SW should be eliminated entirely. The project addresses *future* growth, while all others address current demand. Given the present crises, we cannot justify including 45SW. Second, every viable option for shrinking the *Sasquatch*-like footprint of 290 West should be explored, resulting in a significant trimming of its width, height and cost.

Thanks to all who have remained constructively involved in these issues. I value your input. Stay tuned as this situation continues to unfold.

### What you can do:

1. Contact members of CAMPO and express your support for moving people rather than cars – trim all fat from necessary road projects and support measures to reduce per capita Vehicle Miles Traveled in our region.
2. Contact members of the Texas Legislature and express your opposition to privatization of our highways and your support for equitable taxation in the funding of transportation – raise the gas tax, index the gas tax, stop diverting funds from the gas tax, explore and implement other more equitable forms of taxation for the funding of transportation.

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## Environmental Preservation

Environmental issues are a top priority in Travis County. The expansion of the BFI and Waste Management landfills on 290 East, and the proposed use of Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) land for a City water treatment plant required attention in advance of my arrival on the job. Since taking office, increased recreational access within the BCP, a possible landfill in Webberville and the devastating polluting of Hamilton Pool have also hit center stage.

### Balcones Canyonlands Preserve

#### *WTP 4*

On my first day in office, I was faced with the City of Austin's proposed use of the Cortana site within the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP), as an alternative site to Bull Creek

for Water Treatment Plant No. 4. I argued against industrial use of the Cortana site based on the requirements of State law. I did not believe that the City had met the statutory burden of establishing that no other reasonable alternative to utilizing BCP lands for the Water Treatment Plant existed. Fortunately, the City has since come up with another site, outside the BCP, for WTP4.

### ***Recreational Use within the BCP***

A related issue has arisen, with the renewed push for increased recreational access within the BCP. The BCP currently supports sustainable recreational access. Some argue that the amount and types of access should be expanded. I favor recreational use only when and where it poses no threat to the endangered species for which the Preserve was created. Any recreational use that is not solidly supported by the scientific experts charged with overseeing the preserve should remain prohibited.

The BCP was created to offset the destruction of endangered species habitat by development. Ironically, those who live in the houses that sit atop what was once habitat are now clamoring for increased access to the preserve. We cannot have it both ways. The preserve is for the critters. The rest is for us. We need more parks in Travis County. But our healthy appetite for green spaces should not swallow the Preserve.

In recent days the Commissioners Court has taken action to declare that Travis County is wary of expanded public access and would prefer to err on the side of caution. The Court voted to not contribute financial resources to the access planning process. I am apprehensive about creating false hope and then being forced to say no in the face of intense public pressure. The financial investment that the various stakeholders (including the City of Austin, the County, the Lower Colorado River Authority and developers) is simply too great to gamble recklessly with. I believe that an overwhelming majority of the access advocates are people of conscience who would take the greatest of care to abide by the rules that govern access to the BCP, but all it takes is a few people who go off trail to destroy the dwindling habitat that these species need to survive in Central Texas. This primary mission trumps all others.

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

- 1. Contact the BCP Executive Committee members (Mayor Wynn and Commissioner Daugherty) and express your support for holding the line against any risk of habitat loss within the Preserve.**
- 2. Support Travis County and its other Preserve partners in purchasing the remaining 2,500 acres necessary to complete the Preserve.**

### **Landfills**

#### ***BFI's application to expand along 290 East***

The issue of expanding the landfills located on 290 East predates my arrival on the Commissioners Court. In December 2006, weeks before I took office, the Court contemplated agreeing to BFI's 75-foot vertical expansion in exchange for a 2015 closure date for the facility. This despite having determined that the landfill at its current size is inappropriate land use in what has become a rapidly growing and increasingly dense residential area. BFI and the two other landfills immediately adjacent to it (WMI and the now-defunct County landfill) cover 600 acres on 290 East, 4 miles from I-35 and only 50 feet from homes and schools.

I have argued, before my arrival on the Court and since, that the guaranteed 2015 closure cannot change the fact that the landfills at their current size and proximity to homes are already inappropriate. Any application to TCEQ allowing for further expansion beyond their current permit limitations should be openly contested on those grounds. Texas counties are obligated to clearly and unambiguously declare the compatibility of a proposed land use before the TCEQ. TCEQ is then obligated to make the decision on the

proposed permit that best serves the interests of the public. We cannot expect TCEQ to live up to its obligations if we do not live up to ours.

The proposed agreement to find BFI's expansion "conditionally compatible" in exchange for the 2015 closure is no longer being considered. When TCEQ sends BFI's application to a contested hearing, I will make a motion that Travis County file as a party contesting the expansion. Beyond my vote and Commissioner Davis's vote, the outcome of my motion is uncertain.

**What you can do:**

**Contact and urge other members of the Commissioners Court to support joining as a party contesting the expansion of the BFI landfill.**

***Webberville***

The issue of whether the City of Austin will utilize the Austin Energy acreage in Webberville for a landfill is before us at the Commissioners Court. Unlike the landfills along 290 East, the concept of a landfill at the Webberville property is not, on its face, incompatible land use. If one believes, as I do, that a community must take responsibility for its own garbage, then landfills within our region are necessary. The next order of business is to raise the bar for how we dispose of our trash. The only sure way for a county in Texas to dictate the location and the manner of garbage disposal within its boundaries is to control the dirt under the landfill. Webberville, theoretically, could be that dirt. I suggest the following guidelines for any new landfills in Travis County:

- Generous Buffers to shield residents;
- Aggressive Recycling Requirements for both the clients and operator of the landfill;
- Methane recapture and other innovations in maximizing the operations of the landfill; and
- Established Green Collar Industry recipients for the re-use of recyclable materials.

I applaud the City of Austin for pursuing a Zero Waste Policy. I am also encouraged that private landfill operators in our region are striving for higher operating standards and innovation. If a publicly owned landfill inside Travis County will meet these higher standards, I will be in favor of it. If not, I will concede to private industry continuing to set the bar for the disposal of our garbage and pray that the industry as a whole rises to the higher standards, despite the lack of economic or regulatory incentive to do so.

**What you can do: Reduce, re-use, recycle! Urge local officials in Travis, Williamson, Hays and other surrounding counties and municipalities to jump on board with the City of Austin to make Zero Waste a regional reality.**

***The Polluting of Hamilton Pool***

The Bad News – Yet again, the lowest common denominator in engineering has produced a foreseeable (and potentially preventable) environmental disaster for which a county (in this case, Hays County) had no authority to prevent.

The Good News – Travis County, TCEQ, Hays County and several surrounding landowners are united in a lawsuit to force the landowner, engineer, and developer of the *Ranches at Hamilton Creek* to clean up the mess that they have made. The "mess" is up to two feet of silt at the bottom of the Pool that, when stirred, clouds the waters and chokes the life from it. The source of this mess is run-off from road cuts made on steep slopes adjacent to a creek, during the rainy season, utilizing only the minimal standards applicable no matter the terrain on which the subdivision is being built. The reason counties are forced to live within these "one size fits all" engineering standards is that developers and the building industry have continually and successfully lobbied the Texas Legislature to kill any county land use regulation reforms.

More Bad News – In order to stop the continued fouling of Hamilton Pool, the creek

upstream of the Pool and the Pool itself must be rid of the choking silt as soon as possible. Remediation cannot wait for a determination of responsibility by the Courts. Removing the silt will cost millions of dollars. Although we are asking the parties responsible for the degradation, and other injured landowners along Hamilton Creek, to contribute, Travis County will likely borrow the funding necessary to remove the silt as quickly as possible and reduce the overall damage done to the Pool. Travis County will then seek reimbursement through the litigation.

**What you can do:**

- 1. Call every state official and developer you know and beg, cry and scream for counties to be granted local land use authority to prevent future degradation.**
- 2. Support the litigation to establish responsibility and require remediation for this degradation.**

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## Economic Opportunity

I believe that government exists to support the people who have consented to be governed. Therefore, I believe that economic development and “growing the tax base” are not ends in themselves, but means to greater opportunity for the folks most in need of increased opportunities. Tax abatements and workforce development have been hot topics in the past year and deserve additional attention in the year ahead.

### ***Tax Abatements***

Late last year, I opposed providing tax abatements to Heliovolt, a solar technology manufacturer. While I believe Heliovolt is a laudable corporation engaged in an industry we should be actively promoting locally, I opposed it because (1) The corporation’s proposal did not fit the county’s “one size fits all” policy for abatement; and (2) I believed that the corporation saw significant economic benefits in remaining in Travis County without the encouragement of economic incentives.

While I am happy that Heliovolt will remain in Travis County without a County abatement, I believe that my first point needs to be addressed in the coming year. I am not a fan of tax abatements generally. More often than not, abatements simply reward industry for going where the free market was taking them anyway. There is, however, utility in offering abatements to industries providing a social benefit in a timid market, such as encouraging redevelopment in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, the hiring and training of otherwise under-skilled employees, and innovation and increased efficiency in industries where the market might not support such economic investment. I look forward to re-examining the County’s policy in 2008.

**What you can do:** Communicate to your Commissioners Court what kind of social benefits should be the goal of any abatement policy.

### ***Workforce development***

Before I took office, Travis County began an assessment of its workforce development efforts. Travis County contracted with the Ray Marshall Center to analyze our current efforts and advise and guide us going forward. The preliminary analysis has been completed and the evidence suggests a focus on rapid employment and re-entry for our prison population.

In light of these findings and the available resources for workforce development beyond Travis County government’s efforts, we must now decide where to invest our Travis County tax money. In our current climate of 3.5% unemployment, private industry has an incentive to seek out and train workers. I believe that Travis County should concentrate on those populations less likely to be sought out and trained by the local private sector such as felons re-entering the workforce, the physically or mentally handicapped, and the under-employed. Additionally, after identifying industries we would like to attract, we should

encourage the development of a workforce ready to support such industry.

**What you can do:** Support public K-12 education, support adult education, and consider hiring an ex-offender for appropriate jobs.

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## Criminal Justice

Justice, Corrections and Public Safety are fundamental functions of county government and consequently represent more than half of the expenditures from our General Fund. Therefore, effective rehabilitation, jail conditions, court efficiency, and appropriate staffing and pay for enforcement, corrections, prosecution and rehabilitation are among the highest priorities of county government. In the past year, salary increases and expanded drug and alcohol treatment options have been hot topics.

### ***Peace Officer Pay Scale***

Despite my deep commitment to and appreciation for our law enforcement and corrections communities, I voted against the pay raise provided to them last year. No one gets rich being a Sheriff's deputy, and they deserve the raises they received. I voted against the size of the pay raise because it was out of scale with the pay raises afforded to other job categories within Travis County that are clearly below market level. There are many law enforcement and corrections issues which need attention. I look forward to working with the Sheriff and his staff in supporting the crucial and excellent services they provide.

### ***Drug and Alcohol Treatment***

Drug and alcohol-related crimes remain the most common offenses bringing people to our county jail. The academic literature clearly states that treatment is crucial to stopping the repetition of these crimes. The Texas Legislature appears to be taking notice at least to the economic benefit of treating drug and alcohol addiction, rather than relying on incarceration. Consequently, the State provided Travis County additional funding this year for drug and alcohol treatment programs.

Travis County is utilizing that funding in the expansion of the SMART (Substance Abuse Residential Treatment) program and in the development of neighborhood-based drug and alcohol treatment counseling. We ran into neighborhood opposition late last year to locating our neighborhood counseling center near East 12<sup>th</sup> Street and I-35. While neighborhood input is always welcome, I believe the fears of the residents were unfounded. I also believe that we can do a better job of engendering neighborhood support for this highly effective and desperately needed service.

**What you can do:** Express your support for expanded access to drug and alcohol treatment and counseling prior to and as a result of criminal activity.

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## On the Watch List for the next quarter:

- Land Use Authority
- Decriminalizing and appropriately addressing mental health issues
- Ramping up for budget season
- Ramping up for the Texas Legislature
- Working closely with our new Executive Manager of Criminal Justice and Planning
- A new Executive Manager of the Planning and Budget Office

## Contact Us

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