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Travis Commissioner Eckhardt looks ahead to a creative 2011

By Mike Kanin

Sarah Eckhardt spent a decade in the New York theater company of well-regarded screen and stage director **David Mamet**. She called the experience “intense.”

“We used to play a theater game, called the repetition game, where you sit across from someone and you repeat each other until it changes,” she said. “It makes you very intensely aware of the other person, and because we played this game continually, it becomes embedded in your life and, truly, almost in a cult-like way, you become almost incapable of editing. So you start saying whatever you are perceiving in the other person—which is great for theater, but a little dicey for real life.”

That’s even truer in politics. Nonetheless, after a successful re-election campaign returned Eckhardt to the Travis County Commissioners Court for a second term this fall, the Precinct 2 Commissioner finds herself firmly seated in that world.

There, Eckhardt will continue to wrestle with the paradox of limited county regulatory power in a growth-minded region that might benefit from a few limits. She says that she’s begun to accept the sometimes impotent authority afforded to her jurisdiction.

She sat-down with *In Fact Daily* at her office on the fifth floor of Travis County’s Granger Building. “I’ve sort of made my peace with that,” she said of the county’s lack of regulatory input. “I’ve decided that the wonderful thing about having very little authority in the county...is that it forces you to be very collaborative and creative in ways that I think are really profitable in a state like Texas that is kind of government phobic.”

Eckhardt calls this the silver lining of the county's regulatory predicament. She sees Travis as “a sort of lab experiment for things that could work elsewhere--either at the state level or in other parts of the nation.”

She explains an ambitious theory: “The more we can find collaboration and get out to the folks and prove-up what government does for us cheaper than in any other way you could possibly do it, for more people than anyone else could possibly reach, I think that we are in a really unique position in local government to restore the credibility of government itself.”

For Eckhardt, creativity will be key. With the Texas Legislature set to make massive cuts in state spending, local municipalities will find themselves picking up the slack for more health and human service programs. Eckhardt notes that she and her colleagues can finagle their criminal and civil justice charge to compensate for what's been lost in health and human services at the state level. “We bootstrap a lot of what we do with health and human services through our civil and criminal justice system,” she said.

Still, she noted, working within the system would not provide all of the answers. “In the next legislative session, we are likely to see some pretty profound cuts in health and human services that will have, perhaps, an even more profound effect at the local level,” she said. “So we're going to have to find unprecedented levels of cooperation and collaboration both with other governmental entities and with the private sector to continue to meet what are baseline services for folks who find themselves on the bubble of not being able to make it.”

Eckhardt opened a massive filing cabinet and pulled out a copy of the **Community Action Network's** annual report. The Community Action Network is an organization that uses a host of demographic statistics to monitor the quality of life of Travis County residents. Eckhardt is vice chair of that organization, and has championed its efforts in court.

She began reading off numbers. Then she got to something she'd worked up herself.

“The last time I ran the statistic, it indicated that, I think, a little more than one in 80 Travis County residents was behind bars,” she said. “The rough statistic nationally is the incarceration rate is one in 100.”

Eckhardt said that, among other county issues--including what she termed a “drug and alcohol problem” for her jurisdiction--she would like to work on the incarceration rate. “What we're seeing is that once you get a felony record, you become a part of a permanent economic underclass where we can't access your human capital any longer,” she said.

Eckhardt, it appears, has found an intense outlet some 1,700 miles away from New York City.