

The Abilene Chamber of Commerce recently asked the 2020 candidates for County Commissioner a few questions. The questions come from Chamber leadership and are aligned with the core values of the Abilene Chamber of Commerce. The candidates' answers are presented here, complete and unedited, for your information. The intent of the Chamber is to arm our members with as much information as possible, which results in informed decisions at the ballot box.

The Candidates are:

Precinct 1: Miles P. Owen
Randy Williams
Precinct 3: Brad Birchum
Jeff Dressen

*All responses received are unedited below.

For more information about the Chamber of Commerce Government Affairs Committee, please email dwilliamson@abilenechamber.com

Miles P. Owen

1. What role should the Taylor County Commissioners Court play in area economic development? There should be involvement from the Taylor County Commissioners Court in economic development. The essential role of each county commissioner is to 1st take care of the infrastructure; roads, bridges, drainage ways etc in the county. Then our next priority is to effectively and efficiently manage the business of the county. Taylor County government is funded largely by property taxes. Thus, it is absolutely in the best interest of every resident in Taylor County to see the economy grow. The Commissioners Court should seek every viable opportunity to attract, recruit, and eliminate obstacles that would impede economic expansion. As more families and businesses move into Taylor County the tax revenue generated from economic growth can provide much needed revenue that can be invested in areas like law enforcement, drug prevention, Veterans services and ensuring that the employees of Taylor County

are properly and competitively compensated for their efforts.

2. Most governmental entities are facing challenges of deteriorating infrastructure and need new infrastructure. What are the top infrastructure needs for the County and how can you pay for them? The most glaring need is the expansion of the Taylor County Jail to accommodate more female inmates. Everyday Taylor County houses a large number of female inmates in other counties because of overcrowding problems. The county has to pay to house those inmates, for transportation back and forth, and for the accompanying officers. If we expand the jail now it will not take long for us to be able to recoup the cost of housing inmates in other counties. In fact, at some point Taylor County could be making money by housing female inmates, male inmates and federal inmates from other counties. The Law Enforcement center is in need of some repair. The engineering firm hired by the county to assess the situation has recommended needed structural and functional updates to the Law Enforcement Center so that it can become a highly utilized and viable building for years to come.

3. The state legislature placed limitations on how much counties, and other governmental bodies, can increase property tax revenues. Are there any instances where you would support an over-the-cap amount? If so, what are some examples? As a true fiscal conservative, it is very difficult for me to see the need for a tax increase over the mandated level imposed by the Texas Legislature. My conservatism leads me to have 2 principles I follow. One is to eliminate debt and two is to plan for the future. There are bond obligations that need to be paid down ASAP. Plus, we should reserve revenue to plan for emergencies. Thus, in an emergency situation Taylor County would either have access to reserved funds or access to credit so that we can get back to normal sooner rather than later. Additionally, I have developed open communication lines with Rep. Lambert and his staff, with Sen. Buckingham and her staff with civic leaders so we can understand what is going on in Austin to fend off unfunded mandates that might blow up our county budget.

4. Taylor County has a variety of governmental entities – school districts, cities and water conservation districts. How can Taylor County Commissioners take the lead in improving the working relations among the 16 entities?

I will absolutely make it my mission to increase the effective communication level and to foster better working relationships between all entities of government in Taylor County. Since I announced that I was running for Taylor County Commissioner in Precinct 1, I have made it a priority to meet with department heads and those in leadership positions within Taylor County, within the City of Abilene, within Abilene Independent School District (AISD) within Wylie Independent School District (WISD), with former elected officials and with citizens groups. The fact-finding nature of all these meetings has been to figure out what is working and what is not working. These meetings will continue with the express purpose of making government more efficient.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Commissioners Court, and what is its solution?

Taylor County is experiencing great growth in the county. With that growth comes the challenge of being able to provide much needed support from all first responders. We must find ways inside our budget to invest in making sure that the Sheriff's office, rural fire departments and ambulance service have the personnel and equipment to protect Taylor County Residents in rural areas. Additionally, we must find ways to stop drug use, especially Methamphetamine. Clearly 70-80% of all crime in Taylor County is directed by or related to drug trafficking and use. So, applying the resources to law enforcement to stop supply and education programs to stop demand have to be priorities. President Trump just announced his desire to rebuild infrastructure. In working with many elected officials I've been fortunate to develop relationships with elected officials that will help Taylor County access the federal funds from Trump's infrastructure initiatives.

Randy Williams

1. What role should the Taylor County Commissioners' Court play in area economic development?

In 1988, Taylor County Commissioners waived their percentage of the Hotel Tax meant for economic development to the City of Abilene, as they believed this was a more appropriate function of cities. These funds were used to help start the DCOA. According to the Texas Association of Counties, economic development is not listed as a core responsibility of a Commissioner. However, there are ways for counties to support economic development. Tax abatement is one example. I am open to tax abatement for new businesses that do not compete with or potentially harm existing businesses within our community. Also, I support efforts in the S.o.D.A. district to restore and create zones of reinvestment.

2. Most governmental entities are facing challenges of deteriorating infrastructure and need new infrastructure. What are the top infrastructure needs for the County and how can you pay for them?

New subdivisions in the Southeast and Southern portions of the county create a strain on road maintenance and expansion, drainage, brush abatement, and emergency services. To address this we will have to plan long-range through the budgetary process to make sure those residents are protected.

Repairs to the Law Enforcement Center (LEC) and restoration of the 1913 Courthouse will be partly covered by preservation funding from the state. The county's remaining portion of those costs will require the issuance of Certificates of Obligation.

The old jail and sheriff's department will be torn down with funds budgeted in the current fiscal year.

As the women's population in our jail continues to grow as a result of the drug epidemic, the sale of some undeveloped county properties might be necessary to provide funding for this in addition to requesting a Bond Election to build on to the existing jail.

3. The state legislature placed limitations on how much counties, and other governmental bodies, can increase property tax revenues. Are there any instances where you would support an over-the-cap amount? If so, what are some examples? The drug epidemic in Taylor County and unfunded mandates from the state legislature have added significantly to county budget requirements. At the same time, subdivision expansion into the county has strained current emergency services. Safety and security are my top priorities and yet, many services such as fire and ambulance are not required of county government. Fire, ambulance service, and additional pay for law enforcement are the primary areas that I would be willing to go to the voters for consideration should it become necessary. However, my goal is to bring in a budget that does not exceed projected revenues and provides excellent emergency services to all of our citizens.

4. Taylor County has a variety of governmental entities – school districts, cities and water conservation districts. How can Taylor County Commissioners take the lead in improving the working relations among the 16 entities? When dealing with several entities that have fundamentally different missions, communication becomes key to meeting the overall needs of the public. Taylor County already has a reputation for problem solving through collaboration and coordination of resources to address identified needs. An example of this is the Pentagon P4 (Public-Public, Public-Private) Initiative where numerous entities met to discuss how military bases and communities could partner for a more effective and efficient working relationship. Some of the work from those meetings has continued through the Chamber's Military Affairs. I would advocate for the establishment of a quarterly Meeting involving representatives from these entities for the purpose of sharing information about their mission statements, how they provide services, how they are funded, and what they see as unmet needs. With an understanding of these needs, just as in the P4 Initiative, the group could then work together to seek out resources.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Commissioners' Court, and what is its solution? In recent years, Taylor County has experienced significant shortfalls in revenues from property tax and the costs associated with providing services. Additionally, citizens 65 years and older can freeze their taxes – roughly 42% of tax payers. This places the tax burden on our younger population who are faced with paying off school bills, buying a home, and raising children. Census statistics show that this population is migrating toward the I-35 corridor and eastward to obtain higher wages. As a community, we should focus on addressing the needs of our younger generation, offering better starting pay, benefits, and other enticements like more choices of shopping and entertainment, while promoting the excellent quality of life we experience in our cities and surrounding areas. These efforts will pay big dividends for the future of our great county.

Brad Birchum

1. What role should the Taylor County Commissioners Court play in area economic development? It is the responsibility of the Commissioner's Court to encourage economic development. The best way to achieve this is to provide sound infrastructure with good and well maintained roads as well as other county services. Local government should not pass ordinances and regulations that might prevent or hinder development or growth. The best thing that we can do as a governmental body is to stay out of the way of economic growth and only provide for the needs as they arise.

2. Most governmental entities are facing challenges of deteriorating infrastructure and need new infrastructure. What are the top infrastructure needs for the County and how can you pay for them? The top needs for infrastructure for Taylor County are as follows: The historic renovation of the 1915 Courthouse. We have applied for a state historic commission grant that will hopefully pay for half of the renovation. Next, is the refurbishing and repurposing of the Law Enforcement Center. An engineer has completed a structural examination of this building and believes it to be sound. Lastly, there is a strong possibility of

an expansion at the Taylor County Detention Center. The rising number of female inmates has created the need for more jail space. All of Taylor County's funding is from property tax, so with these three projects on the horizon, it is possible that we may need to incur some debt to complete these projects.

3. The state legislature placed limitations on how much counties, and other governmental bodies, can increase property tax revenues. Are there any instances where you would support an over-the-cap amount? If so, what are some examples? It's hard to say what we will do since we have not started the budget process. No one wants to raise taxes and we absolutely don't want to have to go over the cap. We have been preparing for this budget cap for the past two years. At this point and time I cannot think of any reason to exceed the cap.

4. Taylor County has a variety of governmental entities – school districts, cities and water conservation districts. How can Taylor County Commissioners take the lead in improving the working relations among the 16 entities? The key to improving working relations is with communication and listening to all parties involved to see how we can work as a team to meet the needs to serve the citizens. Working relationships are best when there is open dialogue between all parties. Communication is a two-way street that must be done on a regular basis by all parties involved.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Commissioners Court, and what is its solution? The biggest challenge that Precinct 3 faces is the rapid change from rural to urban environment. Farm and ranch lands are becoming neighborhoods overnight. It will be a challenge to keep the infrastructure on pace with the growth in the rural area. This includes, providing law enforcement, fire fighters, ambulance services and roads to handle the large amount of vehicles using them today.

Jeff Dressen

1. What role should the Taylor County Commissioners Court play in area economic development? I believe economic development belongs to the cities. While the court should find ways to be business friendly with each community, it should not come at the expense of taxpayers within the county. As your Commissioner, I will act as an extension of the taxpayer. At its basic core, the role of a commissioner is to create policy-making budget decisions for the county and to maintain roads and bridges within each precinct. And I see my role as protecting the taxpayers of precinct 3. The Taylor County Expo Center is a huge revenue source for the County with a unique mission and fantastic reputation; it provides a tremendous opportunity for growth. As a businessman myself, I understand how to live by an annual budget, make payroll, and the tough decisions that come with a successful business, and if elected, I look forward to bringing those principles to the Court.

2. Most governmental entities are facing challenges of deteriorating infrastructure and need new infrastructure. What are the top infrastructure needs for the County and how can you pay for them? The main infrastructure needs of the county are roads and bridges. I believe Taylor County roads can be better and safer. By meeting with residents, law enforcement officials and driving them myself, we can begin to better prioritize them in a critical order. As they are prioritized a realistic budget can be formed to make sure they are better and safer and not just maintained. Thankfully The Taylor County Expo Center is almost finished with updates from the 2016 bond package approved by Abilene voters, the Taylor County History Center needs attention, certainly the jail needs modifications and an answer to the overcrowded female population, and the Taylor County Enforcement Center needs a complete overhaul. Again, these must be calculated efforts to see results and upgrades without being a burden to the taxpayer.

3. The state legislature placed limitations on how much counties, and other governmental bodies, can increase property tax revenues. Are there any instances where you would support an over-the-cap amount? If so, what are some examples?

Texas's history of rising property taxes, and the rapid pace in which they rose, was unacceptable. And it placed a terrible burden on Texas homeowners. I stand with Gov. Greg Abbott and the Texas Legislature when they overhauled school finance and lowered Texan's property tax bills and fought to slow the future growth of property tax bills. These are the common sense solutions we need. And if elected I will fight to make sure we never return to a system that taxes Taylor County Texans out of their homes.

4. Taylor County has a variety of governmental entities – school districts, cities and water conservation districts. How can Taylor County Commissioners take the lead in improving the working relations among the 16 entities?

Authentic, genuine, continuously evolving conversations lead to strong and trustworthy relationships. While we might not always agree, I will always lend an ear to hear someone out, consider their perspective, and be fully transparent on my decision-making process. Different situations with each entity will bring their own complex set of circumstances to be carefully weighed and considered. I'm ready to make those decisions based on my experiences and integrity.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Commissioners Court, and what is its solution?

I think the growth we are facing in Taylor County, especially in precincts 3 and 4, will become an even bigger challenge to the court on a variety of levels. By having this tremendous growth, there will be new obstacles for commissioners on how to maintain not just functioning departments and roads - but require us to be more creative in how we work to have the best volunteer fire departments and peace officers - with the best equipment. As our roads become more traveled, it will force us to look at new approaches and solutions to challenges. And I see that as a real opportunity for precinct 3. And if

elected, I look forward to advancing Taylor County as the leader in Texas when it comes to addressing those issues.

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