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Advisory Board to be Appointed

A Citizens' Advisory Committee for the redistricting process will be appointed by Ellis County Commissioners, following action taken during Monday's regularly scheduled meeting.

"The Department of Justice has said that an essential part of the redistricting process is for protected minorities to give input and feedback," said Special Projects Director Kathy Eriksen. "They recommend an advisory committee made up of well-known and well-respected members of the community who represent different ethnic sections of the community. You will need to look at urban versus rural representation and gender diversity as well."

The advisory committee, which will include no more than three persons appointed by each member of the Court, will meet at least three times and will be asked to attend public hearings as well.

Eriksen asked the Court to be prepared to appoint the Advisory Board at the next regularly scheduled meeting on February 28.

A lengthy discussion centered on County policy regarding expenditures for employee morale.

"When auditing credit card bills, I came across transactions totaling \$266.02, including a \$25 tip, a luncheon at Willie's Place in Carl's Corner for \$181.02, and a recognition award for \$60 for a 'Christmas luncheon for employees,' and an awards plaque for Road and Bridge Precinct 3," said County Auditor Mike Navarro.

Navarro noted two opinions issued by the Texas Attorney General's Office indicating that if the county decides such expenditures serve a public purpose the expenditures are an allowable use of public funds.

"Historically, officials ask in advance, and I've denied their requests to use funds in this manner, telling them that the County's unwritten historical policy has been to deny such expenditures," Navarro said, adding that most officials will still choose to hold the event but pay for it through their own pocketbook or employee contributions, not through public funds.

“The one exception has always been the county’s annual employee appreciation dinner and awards banquet that services every department,” he concluded. “It could become a situation if every department chose to use funds in that way.”

Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3, argued that his department “enjoyed that meal better in December than something done at a different time of the year.” This year’s annual employee appreciation dinner was held on February 11, with employees having been notified of the date several months ago.

“It’s hard to spend taxpayer money on something like this, except for the one dinner that is for all the departments,” said Commissioner Ron Brown, pct. 4.

“We have our yearly function county-wide – I believe that is how as a county we show our appreciation for our employees,” said Commissioner Dennis Robinson, pct. 1. “If we choose to do something extra for our staff, I believe we should do that, but that it should be paid for from our personal funds. I did the same thing at Christmastime, but I expended my own funds to do that. What Commissioner Sims has done is to set an example for all the other elected officials that this is OK to spend taxpayer money in this manner. I think we should lead by example.”

“I definitely think we need a policy, and it would be best if it would go through the Court prior to the expenditure for one of those things,” added Commissioner Bill Dodson, pct. 2.

“As much as we like to recognize our employees, I think because of the precedent and because of the potential for abuse by someone who is not being responsible, it is better to have a policy in place and a way to handle the recognition that is consistent,” said County Judge Carol Bush.

No official action was taken on the item, but the consensus was that Sims should repay the funds and county staff members were directed to draft a policy to be approved by the Court at a future meeting.

“If the Court says that \$266 is not money we will spend, that’s fine, we will finance it,” said Sims. “I will go back today and talk with my guys and we will come in and bring it in.”

In other business, Commissioners:

- Took no action on a proposal to donate two surplus cruisers to the City of Milford Police Department;
- Did not hear a planned update of the Prairielands Groundwater Conservation District;
- Approved a resolution in support of the City of Midlothian in its pursuit of legislation creating the “Windsor Hills Municipal Management District #1”, which is located entirely within the Midlothian city limits and is not a taxing entity;
- Accepted a grant of \$5,000 from the Texas Department of Agriculture for eradication of feral hogs;
- Heard a presentation of the Sheriff’s Annual Racial Profiling report;
- Heard a presentation of Constable Precinct 2’s Annual Racial Profiling Report;
- Authorized Constable Precinct 2 to appoint one additional, non-paid reserve Deputy Constable;
- Approved a resolution requesting the 82nd Texas Legislature to support funding of the AirCheck Texas Drive a Clean Machine Program and of the Ellis County Emissions Enforcement Program, both of which are funded through special purpose fees;
- Authorized execution of the renewal clause of the county’s contract with Emergency Communications Network to provide the CodeRed Telephone Warning System service throughout the county, as funded through a 2010 State Homeland Security Program grant;

- Authorized payment of \$3496.72 to Southwest Solutions Group for shelving in the Law Library;
- Secured the professional services of Sonny Wilson to design the wastewater treatment systems for the Sheriff's Training Center and the Juvenile Building located at the new County Farm Facility;
- Authorized payment to Fisk Electric for testing, evaluation and possible modification of electric security doors and control systems to meet Jail Commission requirements in the old jail facility;
- Pursuant to Sections 284.003 and 284.066 of the Texas Transportation Code, approved appointment of an operating board to manage the goals expressed within the Ellis County Thoroughfare Plan; and
- Canceled the Ellis County current contract with TROTT Communications.