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County issues burn ban

Ellis County Commissioners voted today to approve a 90-day ban on outdoor burning.

According to Fire Marshal's Investigator Jim Pharr, the Keetch-Byram Drought Index was at 559 on Friday, with extreme heat over the weekend evaporating much of the moisture received in Friday's rain.

"Hill and Navarro Counties have adopted burn bans," Pharr told the Court. "I recommend we adopt a burn ban."

The 90-day ban does allow welders to work with certain fire safety provisions.

Commissioners heard presentations from three agencies requesting funding in the 2010-2011 budget year, including Meals on Wheels, the Ellis County Child Welfare Board, and the Ellis County Historical Commission.

"The \$25,000 that you have given before not only nearly pays for 5000 meals, but it also triggers some action that allows Meals on Wheels to get some other things," said Board President Charlie Morton. "The first thing is the \$100,000 that we will get from the Texas Department of Agriculture, and then \$250,000 from the North Central Texas Agency on Aging."

Morton said the organization provided nearly 104,500 meals in Ellis County alone last year, delivering five days a week along 45 different routes. The meals are delivered by over 300 volunteers, who volunteer both their time and their vehicles and gasoline.

"We have a new route getting ready to be started in the Maypearl area," Morton said, adding that the organization is raising funds for future facilities in the Railport development in Midlothian.

Sylvia Smith of the Child Welfare Board requested \$20,000 for that organization.

"We use some of those funds to help prevent the children from being in the system," she said. "A lot of times they are taken from their parents, but a relative wants to help raise those children. But they need certain items they can't afford, and we try to help supply those to give them a heads-up chance to make it."

The organization funds a clothing allowance for all foster children twice a year, provides \$25 annually for each child's birthday, and assists high school seniors with graduation-related expenses.

Additionally, the group does several fund raisers to augment the funds they receive from the County and places children's names on Christmas trees in banks throughout the community at Christmas in order to provide Christmas presents.

"They also do more administrative things," added Catherine Jones of CPS. "If a child comes up for adoption, they have to have a birth certificate, and we pay for that birth certificate. There are times as an investigator that we need specialized money for investigation – sometimes there is some pretty expensive testing."

Smith also represented the Ellis County Historical Society in the absence of chairman Larry Felty.

"We are requesting \$3,000," Smith told the Court. "We are the guardians of the past, and we want to keep alive the things that were important to Ellis County as it was forming and growing – the Courthouse, and so many historical sites that we do have in our community."

Smith said that October is Archeology Month in Texas and the group annually sponsors an archeology-related event for area children.

Commissioners Approved continuation of employee health benefits through the Texas Association of Counties and Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Texas, with minor plan changes, at an estimated cost savings of \$145,000 per year.

"Nobody likes cost increases of any kind, but I think these changes are sustainable," said Human Services Director Diana Buckley.

"I like that word 'sustainable,'" said County Judge Carol Bush. "This does place some additional burden on our employees, but we are all looking for ways to save in order to avoid possible loss of jobs, and I think this is a much better alternative."

Buckley thanked the Court for continuing the benefit through TAC and Blue Cross/Blue Shield, citing provider choice, depth of coverage, and ease of communication as positives, along with a strong renewal discount.

In other business, Commissioners:

- Approved a two-year term of Presiding Judges and Alternate Judges as presented by the Democratic and Republican Party Chairs;
- Approved an agreement to contract an election with Buena Vista Bethel Special Utility District and Avalon Independent School District for their November 2, 2010 elections;
- Ordered a General Election to be held on November 2, 2010 for the purpose of electing county and precinct officers as required by Article XVI, Section 65 of the Texas Constitution;
- Ratified an agreement between the Ellis County Sheriff's Office and Glen Garrison regarding the lease of an all purpose law enforcement animal, which will be utilized in a wide range of law enforcement activities and will be paid for out of funds already budgeted;
- Declared as surplus a list of ten vehicles seized by the Sheriff's Office and authorized their sale via competitive bid on eBay;
- Approved a final amendment to an existing Intergovernmental Cooperative Reimbursement Agreement with TCEQ for the Local Initiatives Program and Low Income Vehicle Repair, Assistance, Retrofit, and Accelerated Vehicle Retirement Program (LIRAP);
- Approved an agreement with Johnson Controls to perform an energy audit on the 1990 and 2000 portions of the county jail for a fee of \$30,350 to be funded by the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant;

- Declared as surplus various office furniture, supplies and equipment no longer needed by the County Clerk's office and authorized their sale at auction;
- Approved the FY 2010-2011 payroll schedule, holiday schedule, and Commissioners' Court meeting schedule;
- Authorized the County Judge to hire the Commissioners' Court Coordinator and Special Projects Manager at a part-time position to increase to a full-time position as necessary, filling a position that has been vacant for some months;
- Approved on-site sewage facility interlocal agreements with the City of Alma, the City of Garrett, the City of Italy, the City of Maypearl, the City of Oak Leaf, the City of Palmer, and the City of Pecan Hill;
- Approved a variance from the Rules Regulations and Specifications for Subdivisions relating to the fire hydrant requirement for a property in precinct 3, due to the fact that water lines will not support a fire hydrant;
- Denied a variance from the Rules Regulations and Specifications for Subdivisions relating to road frontage for proposed replat in pct. 2 that would have created a piece of property with no road frontage at all, with Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3, casting the dissenting vote;
- Approved a replat in Green Manor, pct. 3;
- Declared as surplus one Dura Patcher Pothole Repair Machine in pct. 4, authorizing disposal at auction;
- Declared as surplus items collected from pct. 4 roads during clean up, such as scrap metal and other miscellaneous discarded items, authorizing disposal at auction;
- Awarded the annual contract for quarter-inch Chipped Limestone to Hansen Materials;
- Awarded the contract for bridge and headwall repair to James R. Bolton (primary contractor) and Neyland Bridge Construction (secondary contractor);
- Took no action on a proposal to extend the contract for Grade 4 Pea Gravel another 12 months;
- Took no action on a proposal to reject bids for the Juvenile training program "Ready4Career;" and
- Amended a previously approved interlocal agreement with the City of Ovilla to include an additional 1195 feet on Red Oak Creek Road and 400 feet of repair on Hosford Road.