

City Business
A Seat at the Table
by Michael Leamons

Cards for negotiating, generally, are played close to the vest. Because of the open meetings laws, a public entity is subject to having its cards turned face up on the table for all to see. A decided disadvantage, wouldn't you agree?

Since you had an opportunity to see the City's Law Enforcement Agreement negotiating cards in last week's paper, I would like to fill you in on the details and offer you a seat at the table.

First, I'm not aware of any Council member who believes joint law enforcement is a bad idea and should be eliminated. The services being provided to Hico by the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office are greatly appreciated. Hico, Hamilton, and Hamilton County, by working together, are all receiving better law enforcement than any of the entities could afford on their own. That is the beauty of cooperation.

Funding for the joint law enforcement arrangement is provided on a modified per capita basis. With 3,153 residents, representing 36.4% of the county-wide population (CWP), Hamilton contributes \$346,200; with 1,403 residents, representing 16.2% CWP, Hico contributes \$154,052; and, with 4,103 residents (in the areas outside the two incorporated cities), representing 47.4% CWP, the County contributes \$450,508.

At first glance, it would seem everyone is sharing the costs equally. Not so. The contribution for the 4,103 county residents outside the incorporated cities is not paid by those 4,103 residents, but is paid by all 8,659 residents of the County (including those living in Hamilton and Hico). So, the residents of the unincorporated areas of the County end up paying \$52/person. The residents of Hamilton and Hico pay \$110/person for the two cities' portions; then, they also pay \$52/person as their county portion, for a total cost of \$162/person.

Admittedly, with higher concentrations of population, Hico and Hamilton require a higher degree of law enforcement presence and should foot a higher percentage of the bill. Do you think the current formula represents a fair division of those costs? If not, what formula would you propose?

In addition to contributing \$162/person, the residents of Hico also provide office space and utilities for law enforcement personnel. The Law Enforcement Agreement states, "...the parties have agreed to share the expense of law enforcement and police protection provided by Hamilton County Sheriff's Office for the entirety of Hamilton County..." Isn't it reasonable to have a Law Enforcement Office in Hico? Shouldn't the costs associated with providing that space and furnishing it with utilities be included as part of the total expenses shared by all parties to the agreement?

It has been said Hico is getting a better deal than Hamilton. While it is true that the same number of officers have been assigned to Hico as have been assigned to Hamilton, even though Hamilton contributes more than twice as much as Hico, it is also true that the Sheriff, the Chief Deputy, the investigative staff and the canine unit all office in Hamilton. So, although the number assigned to patrol duty in each of the cities is the same, the actual on-the-ground presence in Hamilton is greater. Additionally, the deputies on duty in the two cities provide back-up for one another. If, as one would expect because of its greater population, more law enforcement activity occurs in

Hamilton, then the officers in Hico will be called away from their posts more frequently than their Hamilton counterparts. (This provision of the agreement is particularly beneficial as it prevents our officers from being called out alone into potentially hazardous situations.)

Were the current cooperative effort to come to an end, Hamilton, Hamilton County and Hico all would end up with reduced law enforcement capabilities. For its \$154,052 contribution, Hico couldn't provide 24 hour coverage. For \$17.85 an hour (\$52,122 for 8 hours a night, 365 days a year), a night-time private security officer could be hired to patrol the City and respond to calls. Additionally, there would probably be enough funds to hire and equip a City Marshall and a part-time deputy to provide traffic enforcement and respond to calls during the business day. Otherwise, the City would have to rely on the Sheriff's Office and State Troopers, should one be in the area, to respond to emergency situations.

The question at hand is not: Should Hico continue the current cooperative effort? Rather, the question is: How should the costs be divided? You've got a stake in this. Let your elected officials know what you think. Alderman Steve Morgan, Alderman Linda Koonsman and Sheriff Gregg Bewley are the elected officials who represent you on the Law Enforcement Committee where the negotiations will take place. County Commissioner Jon Bonner of Precinct 3 (2/3rds of the voters in his precinct are registered as residents of Hico) is no longer on the Committee, but he can relay your input to the Commissioners who are.

You have an opportunity to make a difference. Who knows, perhaps your input could bring about the best arrangement possible for Hico.

May God bless the City of Hico.