

City Business by Michael Leamons

Last week, Mayor Tooley, Judge Buenger and City Administrator Leamons met with Sheriff Bewley, Chief Deputy Pearce and County Commissioner's Clary and Boatwright to discuss the annual Law Enforcement Contract renewal. Mayor Tooley opened the meeting by affirming Hico wanted the contract to work and expressing appreciation for the work the deputies have done for the City. She went on to explain how Hico's Council doesn't believe the City is getting the level of service the taxpayers are paying for. (*Per capita, those living in the two cities pay considerably more for law enforcement services than those living in the unincorporated areas of the County. ML*)

Mayor Tooley then reported that the City's representatives on the Law Enforcement Committee were having trouble communicating Hico's needs through the current channels.

(In the past, committee members had been accustomed to discussing matters of contract performance at the committee meetings. For some reason, the agenda for committee meetings conducted between the beginning of the current contract in October, 2011 and the meeting now being reported had been structured to preclude such discussion. That obstacle has since been overcome by the inclusion of this agenda item: "Discussion of Law Enforcement contract performance in the City of Hico since the last Committee Meeting". ML)

Tooley again affirmed the Council wants the contract to work, but said the City needed to have 24 hour coverage and needed more traffic enforcement.

Judge Buenger then spoke up praising the deputies' professionalism, while also making a plea for increased traffic enforcement. Sheriff Bewley asked, "How many traffic tickets should be written in a month?" Judge Buenger responded he didn't know how many tickets were being written since he only sees the ones which are contested, and that the number of tickets being written wasn't the main issue. He commented when fueling at Ranglers, he often witnesses trucks speeding through the intersection of Highways 6 and 281. Buenger indicated more traffic enforcement was needed in the interest of public safety.

A lengthy discussion then ensued between Sheriff Bewley and Judge Buenger regarding the Judge's requiring deputies who had issued tickets attend monthly arraignment hearings. The Sheriff objected to the practice because of overtime costs and because his deputies didn't want their off duty hours interrupted. Expressing sensitivity to the time issues, Buenger said he tried to get the deputies out of the courtroom as quickly as possible, but liked having their feedback in assessing fines when pleas of guilty or no contest were entered. At the end of the discussion the Judge agreed to forego having all the deputies present, though he did want one present when court is in session.

Regarding to traffic enforcement, Sheriff Bewley noted most of his career had been in municipal law enforcement and that he knew how to get deputies' to write tickets. He explained previously when he had worked for one municipality, it had required traffic patrol officers to write 20 tickets a day, and that he, himself, had written 50 during one day. The Sheriff indicated he apportioned his deputies' traffic enforcement efforts based on formulas relating to how many accidents had occurred in Hamilton, Hico and the unincorporated areas during the previous year.

Mayor Tooley asked that the formulas be set aside and that where traffic violations were occurring, enforcement should be provided.

As the meeting was being wrapped up, City Administrator Leamons asked that the contract provision removed during last year's negotiations which required other than for absences of no longer than 75 minutes, a deputy always be present in Hico, be reinstated. He also observed how the deputies had duties other than traffic enforcement, so it wasn't expected they would be held to the 20 contacts per shift required of State Troopers, but that language be added to the contract requiring some minimum number of traffic enforcement contacts be made each week.

Commissioner Clary asked if those were Hico's only concerns. The Hico delegation affirmed that was correct. He then asked about the analysis in the recent Hico newsletter regarding funding formulas. The Hico delegation responded that the Council hadn't taken any position regarding that matter.

The County Commissioners Court will be preparing a contract for next year's joint law enforcement operation. Last year the contract was executed during the final days of June. Some years, it has been executed in July or August. Each year, it goes into effect on October 1st.

May God bless the City of Hico.