

City Business

by Michael Leamons

The City Council continues to grapple with Hico's law enforcement options. At a recent Town Hall Meeting, the majority of those who spoke were opposed to continuing the joint law enforcement with Hamilton County. Citizens expressed dis-satisfaction with the level of service and with the significantly higher price tag placed on this year's contract by the Commissioners Court (\$227,000 versus last year's \$150,000). Citizens did caution the Council that for a local Police Department (PD) to be successful, it was critical the right officers be hired. Rather than taking action at the July 9th Meeting, at Mayor Tooley's request the meeting was adjourned to provide the Council time to mull over the various citizen comments.

At a Special July 16th Meeting, the matter was taken up again. The consensus was that in years past, the joint operation had proven successful. So, rather than abandon the agreement, the Council desires to secure a contract which will satisfy citizen concerns. A contract was drafted calling for, with a few modifications, a return to the cost sharing formula used in 2010 and to 24/7 coverage. To provide a means for measuring performance, a clause requiring a monthly minimum amount of contacts between officers and the public was added along with requirements for regular financial and operational reporting. The contract will be forwarded to the Commissioners Court for consideration.

As had been pointed out at the July 9th Meeting, initially the Hico City Council had entered the agreement after being approached by then Sheriff Murphry and City of Hamilton Alderman Helen Townsend. At the time, due to "dollars and cents" considerations, Hamilton was contemplating setting up its own PD. An appeal was made that if Hico would become part of the joint law enforcement, the arrangement would become more "cost effective". After further investigation and consideration, Hico agreed to join.

The initial annual contract was for \$117,000 (considerably less than the \$136,000 Hico had spent on its own PD the previous year). Under the joint agreement Hico was to receive 24/7 coverage. Three to five officers were to be located in Hico and office space was to be provided by Hico for the officers "free of charge for the first year at least". This was a good deal for Hico. The City wouldn't have to handle the concerns associated with managing a PD, while realizing cost savings.

For the next three years the contract remained the same except for annual cost escalations: \$135,000 to \$140,000 to \$164,000. In 2010, the contract cost was reduced to \$154,000 and a clause was added providing, if the officer assigned to Hico had to leave the city for more than 75 minutes, a replacement officer would be provided. In 2012, commitment to 24/7 coverage was removed from the contract.

Since the costs associated with administering the contract have been fairly stable (in recent years the Sheriff has been either reducing or holding the line on departmental costs), why this year's huge increase for Hico? Already contributing more than \$400,000 annually to county coffers through property taxes and sales taxes, it's not as though by asking the County to set a reasonable price on the Law Enforcement Agreement, Hico is asking for a free ride.

The Council had another Special Meeting on Monday with the Hamilton County Appraisal District (HCAD) Board as a follow up to the May 31st Council meeting where

concerns about property valuations in Hico had been raised. HCAD valuations appear to have tracked the national Case-Shiller home price index as property values increased, but since the 2006 nation-wide real estate peak, HCAD valuations haven't tracked the decreases in that index. The Hico delegation was told HCAD staff were handicapped in following changes in market valuations because buyers and sellers aren't required to file sales prices with HCAD and often don't.

City staff presented the Board with a copy of the Attorney General Opinion affirming that foreclosures must be considered in the property appraisal process. Adherence to that opinion should bring some relief to Hico property owners since many recent sales have been foreclosures. A request was made that HCAD staff work to obtain the most accurate assessment of current property values in Hico rather than assessing the highest possible valuations for the benefit of the various taxing units. Property tax revenues are needed to pay for services, but those revenues should be based on fair market values.

Mayor Tooley concluded the meeting on a positive note by reporting how, although in the past she had received complaints about how citizens had been treated when protesting property values, now she is receiving favorable reports about those interactions.

May God bless the City of Hico.