

City Business
“Senior Citizen Program in Jeopardy”
by Michael Leamons

On July 19th, Peggy Forrest and Vela Booker, the directors of the Senior Citizen nutrition (including meals on wheels), utility assistance and weatherization programs in Hico and Lometa, respectively, were informed the programs at their two centers would be eliminated effective September 30, 2012. Hico and Lometa have the two smallest programs administered by Hill Country Community Action (HCCA), which is headquartered in San Saba. The agency’s service area includes Bell, Coryell, Hamilton, Lampasas, Llano, Mason, Milam, Mills and San Saba counties. It has been said due to their higher populations Temple, Belton and Killen dominate HCCA’s decision making process.

The loss of the Senior Citizen Program would be a real blow to some of our citizens. Obviously, some will suffer financially, but many more will suffer socially. The program serves as a nucleus for a number of social venues. There is fellowship over the meals served at the Center during the week. (Incidentally, most of Hico’s participants contribute the recommended \$2.00/meal to help offset the direct food costs.) Afterward, there’s a domino game. Monthly, the Center is home to a covered dish luncheon, a jam session with Lewie and Friends and an evening domino tournament. At times, special music groups are brought in to provide an evening of entertainment.

It is possible funds could be raised to pay for utilities and keep the building open, but Director Forrest helps coordinate and unify many of the Center’s activities and looks out for those who come and go. Is there anyone who would be willing to commit that much time and care as a volunteer? And, who will help citizens fill out the paperwork for the various assistance programs?

The Center is also home to the HOP public transportation program and the United Way food program. For the time being, the City is committed to keep the Center open for those programs, but what will happen over the long term?

HCCA Director Tama Shaw, when confronted with a program-wide projected budget deficit of \$86,291.00 (representing a 5% budget over-run) for the upcoming year, appointed a committee which determined the best way to address the shortfall would be to close the Hico and Lometa programs (for a total savings of \$96,665 with \$37,867 coming from Hico and \$58,798 from Lometa). The program in the City of Hamilton, as well as those in all the other cities served by HCCA, will continue operations as usual.

On a budget spread sheet, the committee’s solution might make sense, but did anyone calculate the human costs associated with shutting down the two programs? Rather than eliminating the programs and the financial and social benefits they provide to senior citizens in the area’s two smallest communities, why not institute a system-wide 5% reduction and make up the shortfall that way?

The proposal to eliminate the Hico program caught local officials by surprise. Although a year ago, Mayor Lavern Tooley, County Judge Randy Mills and local HCCA Director Barry Thompson had been informed funds were tight and there might be changes in the program, prior to July 19th, no one had been alerted of plans to terminate the Hico program. Upon learning of the current situation, the Hico City Council included discussion of the matter in a Special Called City Council Meeting held on July 23rd. The

Council voted to take action to save the Hico program and pledged, annually, to contribute the \$2,490 once used to pay Council members. For several years, the Council has elected to give up the small compensation allotted for their services; and, instead, use that money for worthy community projects. During the current fiscal year, some of that set-aside fund was used to host last fall's Volunteer Fire Department Benefit.

The City has supported the Senior Citizen Program for years, providing the building used to house the program, insurance on that building and water and wastewater utilities, all free of charge. According to a long time participant in the program, Hamilton County used to contribute \$4,500 annually. When contacted about the current upheaval, Judge Mills indicated the County now contributes \$2,250.

After the City Council Meeting, the City Administrator contacted State Representative Sid Miller's and State Senator Troy Fraser's offices. Staff members at both offices looked into the matter and reported Hico's program was simply the casualty of a budgetary shortfall. No offer was made to intervene on behalf of our community.

Calls, also, have been placed to the Governor's Office and to the area Silver Haired Legislature, but at this point, if the program is to be saved, it appears it will be up to local citizens. One hopeful aspect is that the HCCA Board has not yet voted to approve the closures. The Board is scheduled to meet at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 7th at the Lampasas Senior Center on 901 S. Live Oak in Lampasas. Please plan to attend that meeting and stand up for the senior citizens of Hico and Lometa who will lose out should the Board approve the plan to close the two centers. If there's a budget shortfall, cuts need to be made, but why not spread those cuts around?

A meeting is planned for noon, Thursday, August 2nd at the Hico Senior Citizen Center to coordinate local response to the current situation. Should you have questions, solution or simply want to help, please come to the Thursday meeting or call City Hall, 796-4620.

May God bless the City of Hico.