

BCC Meeting – July 26, 2011

Dear Santa Fe County residents:

Our last meeting had three issues that I think are of importance and relevance to all citizens of Santa Fe County. I attended the meeting for the first couple hours, due to the first two issues. I went home after that, but called into the rest of the meeting from home. (For those of you who haven't heard, I broke some ribs in a horseback riding accident, and I am still recovering.)

The first issue had to do with the ongoing negotiations between Christus-St. Vincent Hospital and the union that is representing the health care workers. (Of course, the issue has been settled, at least for the time being: The health care workers voted to accept the proposed contract and not go out on strike.) But a number of nurses, as well as union representatives, came to speak to the Commission under Matters from the Public about their concerns. There was no action taken, since no action item had been added to the agenda. However, we all made statements about the ongoing situation, and I will summarize the gist of what I said below.

The first action item on the agenda that we considered was passage of two possible ordinances on fees for the solid waste transfer stations put forward by Commissioners Anaya and Mayfield. Commissioner Anaya sponsored an ordinance to create a 12-punch pass for \$40 at the transfer stations, and Commissioner Mayfield had an ordinance to extend the lifetimes of the 24-punch passes so that they would not have to be renewed after a year. I sent out an e-mail that explained my position on the whole solid waste issue for the County, so I will not repeat what I said previously. But I will make comments below on staff's analysis of what the two ordinances would mean for County finances, and will also bring you up to date on what is happening now with regard to planning.

One of the most important topics of discussion was the redistricting process for the County. I will expand below on where we are now with regard to this process, as well as where we are headed.

As always, I welcome your comments and suggestions. And please forward this message along to whomever you think might be interested.

Sincerely,
-Kathy

Redistricting:

Now that the 2010 Census has been completed, the County must redistrict; that is, the five County Commission Districts must be redrawn so that the population is as equal as possible among the five districts. This means that there will have to be some rearrangement of precincts in the districts.

Two of our current districts have gained considerable population over the last 10 years, and three have lost population. Below are the differences for each of the 5 districts from the ideal population (i.e., one-fifth of the total County population).

District 1	-2811
District 2	- 670
District 3	+4008
District 4	-2789
District 5	+2262

You can see from this that Districts 1, 2 and 4 are going to have to gain precincts, and Districts 3 and 5 will have to lose. However, this is a somewhat simplified way of looking at the problem. One district taking on a new precinct may have a ripple effect: Even though a district might gain a precinct in one spot, it may have to lose a precinct somewhere else, depending on the actual population of the precincts. Balancing out the population is going to be a tricky, highly political process.

In general, any redistricting plan must adhere to the following principles:

- Equal Population
- Maintenance of Minority Voting Strength
- Compactness
- Contiguity
- Maintenance of Communities of Interest

The County GIS Department is putting together several different options based on the above principles, as well as on direction given them by the Board.

Commissioner Anaya (of District 3) asked that as little change as possible to the current district make-up be a guiding principle.

Commissioner Vigil (of District 2) and I also asked for an option that works to equalize the numbers of people in the unincorporated (i.e, non-city) areas as much as possible. There are great differences between the districts as to the percentage of the voting population that is urban. In general, we County Commissioners spend most of our time on issues that have to do with the unincorporated areas of the County. For people who live in the City of Santa Fe, the Town of Edgewood or Española, most of the decisions affecting their lives are made by the City or Town Councils.

Below is the percentage of the population in each district that is in an incorporated town or city:

District 1	46.6%
District 2	68.0%
District 3	60.5%
District 4	72.1%
District 5	48.7%

Note that my district (District 4) has the largest percentage of urban population. Two precincts that might make sense to be added to District 4 are Precinct 63 (currently in District 5) or Precinct 17 (currently in District 3). These are both rural, and they do all meet in the community that is near Cañoncito. Putting them in District 4 would have the effect of unifying the representation of County residents who live on County Road 51.

The Board and staff are encouraging strong participation by the people of Santa Fe County in this process. The following link will continue to have information about redistricting -- including maps! -- posted as it becomes available:

http://www.santafecounty.org/county_commissioners/redistricting

In addition, at each BCC meeting from now on, there will be an item devoted to redistricting, and public comment will always be encouraged. We will try to set a consistent time for the redistricting discussion. It will probably be somewhere between 4:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., but no firm decision on the time has been made at this point. I will keep you informed as I learn more details.

I would love to have feedback on what you think is important about redistricting, including on the topic of whether we should strive for equal numbers in the unincorporated areas. I have to admit that I am not entirely objective about this issue -- I am a country girl at heart!

So, please, e-mail me or -- better yet -- come to our meetings if you have an opinion about this important process. And don't forget to check out the maps on the website.

Solid Waste:

I have found out some interesting data on the use of the Transfer Stations in Santa Fe County, as well as their cost and the contribution to that cost from permits.

Approximately 6500 passes to the transfer stations are sold in Santa Fe County each year. (The rest of the households use a private trash hauling service.) The cost of operating those seven stations has been on the order of \$1.7 to \$1.9 million.

The Environmental Gross Receipts Tax (EGRT) has been totally devoted to the operation of our Solid Waste Department in years past. The amount collected from this tax has been from \$800,000 to \$900,000 in good years. However, for Fiscal Year 2012, our Finance Department is budgeting a more meager \$692,000 as revenue from the tax. In addition, only half will be going to the Solid Waste Program; the other half is now budgeted for our water and wastewater utilities.

So, here is the balance sheet as currently foreseen for FY 2012:

Cost of Transfer Stations	\$1.9 million
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Estimated Revenues:	
Permit Sales	\$480,000
EGRT	\$346,100
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Total Revenues:	\$826,100

This means that under the above scenario, the Transfer Stations will need a bit over **\$1 million** from the General Fund to break even.

At the last meeting, the two proposed ordinances to create a 12-punch pass for \$40 and to extend the life of the 24-punch passes failed. Our Finance Department and Solid Waste Department estimated that doing those two things would cause the County to lose another \$200,000 or so in revenue. In my view, the main reason we three Commissioners voted against the proposed ordinances was that the County needs to deal with solid waste in a way that reduces the costs. It is not enough to just mandate lower fees, regardless of long-term consequences.

However, there is good news! The County is now working on a plan to extend pick-up service and reduce costs.

Our Solid Waste Department is designing a program for a County-operated pick-up service for solid waste, which would include free recycling. It is estimated that if the County charged \$20 per month for this service, that would be half the cost of current private haulers. In addition, the County would generate some income that could be used to subsidize the Transfer Stations -- thereby getting at the lower permit fees desired by all. The County service would pick up all recyclables currently being processed at the Buckman Recycling Facility -- free of charge.

In addition, we are looking at also using revenue to purchase scales for the Transfer Stations. That would have the beneficial effect of allowing the stations to charge by weight for non-recyclables -- recycling would still be free. This would be the surest motivation for people to recycle more. It is important to keep in mind that more recycling means less use of our landfill, and less use of the landfill means a longer lifetime for that landfill, further reducing costs for the taxpayers of Santa Fe County.

One other thing that staff is working on is a plan for operation of the Transfer Stations. Right now, many of the stations only have one employee at any given time, which is somewhat dangerous. There is no way that the lone employee can keep a vigilant eye on how people are dumping their trash -- that is, whether they putting the right things in the right places. Staff would like to see at least two people at any Transfer Station when it is open. This reorganization may necessitate somewhat curtailed hours, but the County will certainly try to make sure that all stations are open on the weekends plus one other weekday at least, and more heavily used stations will be open more days.

All in all, the recent developments may not be what users of the Transfer Stations wanted to see in the short term. But I believe that good planning will lead to real savings for everybody in the County in the long run.

Christus-St. Vincent Hospital:

As you are probably aware, there have been some rather contentious negotiations between the management of Christus-St. Vincent Hospital and the healthcare workers' union. A number of people from that union came to speak at the last BCC meeting under Matters from the Public.

In a strange twist of fate, due to the horseback-riding accident I suffered, I had an especially personal point of view about the hospital, where I found myself just the week before the meeting. A number of ideas that became very clear to me during that stay included my conviction that we must have a well-run community hospital. You don't always get to choose the hospital you go to, especially in an emergency. Also, it is crucial to have a hospital that can deal well with emergencies, when you really need staff who can make good decisions on the spot.

In order to have a well-run hospital, there must be adequate staffing levels and good administration. Further, the administration and staff must work well together, a principal concern these days.

The most important issue emphasized by the healthcare workers' union was adequate staffing levels. Nurses are the caregivers who are on the front lines, so it is crucial for the hospital administration to give them meaningful involvement in setting staffing levels. Hospital management may well have financial incentives to minimize staffing, but for the nurses -- and the patients themselves -- adequate staffing is a top priority.

It became clear during the negotiations that a primary focus of Christus management was to engage in union busting. I understand that St. Vincent is the only hospital that Christus manages that has a healthcare workers' union, so they are uncomfortable having to deal with one. Nevertheless, they did make the choice to come into our community, and the corporation should respect our traditions.

In recent weeks, I have observed that Christus-St. Vincent seems to have substantial money to purchase medical buildings and practices around Santa Fe, as well as expensive full-page color ads in the newspaper. At the same time, they pay their top administrators handsomely, while nurses' and technicians' wages have stagnated. Yet Christus management has made the specious claim that they have had to lay off nurses because the BCC reduced the Sole Community Provider (SCP) contribution for unreimbursed indigent care at the hospital. In fact, that reduction guarantees that the Indigent Gross Receipts Tax is strictly spent on indigent care and no other programs, however beneficial. The BCC has repeatedly asked for full and open accounting from Christus Corporation of how SCP funds are spent at the hospital, to no avail.

I think that the County must pay very close attention in the future, to be sure that taxpayer-provided funding given to Christus-St. Vincent Hospital goes only toward actual costs of unreimbursed indigent care. If there is any request for supplemental SCP funding, my vote would be dependent on money being used wisely and only if it directly benefits the community. We at the County are far from seeing transparency and openness from Christus Corporation's management of the hospital.

-Kathy Holian
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