

March 5, 2010

Individualized Communication to All Council Members
City of Austin
301 West 2nd Street
Austin, TX 78701-3906

Dear :

Your Public Safety Commission is now fully organized with the addition of Commissioner Sam Holt at our March 1 meeting. We have now completed our initial set of hearings to provide us with a preliminary read on the resource readiness and operational challenges of our three major City structures addressing Public Safety: Police, Fire and EMS. We have heard from the three chiefs and the three association presidents. We have also heard in each of our first three meetings a number of citizen concerns.

The degree of interest and complexity of topics produce substantial challenges to accomplish all that we hope to do in the monthly 2 hour meetings. There have been requests to extend the time but the room is reserved at 6:00 by another City board (our time is 4 to 6 on the first Monday of each month). Some have noted the need for more space and asked me to inquire if we might use your meeting chambers. However more space does not mean more time for citizens to address the Commission and that seems the more focal concern. I am very wary of adding more meetings in the month as your Commissioners are all very busy with their own professions, other boards, family and travel and for some the monthly meeting is, itself, a challenge. Yet, having such involved persons is a significant strength of the Commission.

Last Monday we passed two unanimous motions that I wanted to convey to you and did via e mail today. I do not know how you prefer to receive communication from us and presume that our staff support through APD (Chief Carter and Mr. Davila) provide our agendas and minutes. I will try to periodically summarize what I see and I know individual Commissioners speak to you as well. These are the two motions from the March 1, 2010 meeting.

One is increased funding for equipment and personnel for EMS reflecting the proper movement of two ambulances owned by the County to County buildings and creating the need for replacing that equipment in City facilities and the addition of one ambulance and staff resources for the three ambulances.

Two is support for the concept of the Fusion Center. We view the Fusion Center as a work in progress and are satisfied with what we see so far from Chief Carter. We advise that he continue the development of the Center.

The Public Safety Commission will ask Chief Carter to keep us continually apprised of the Center as it develops including the form of the Interlocal Agreement, data audit procedures and governance patterns. There are important civil liberty concerns as we work to increase the ability of public safety entities to track certain crimes and yet not encroach upon privacy, free speech and the right to assemble. These are

Constitutional guarantees and are very central to citizen wellbeing and to the creativity and innovation so critically needed in our future economy.

These were concerns of citizens at our meetings as well and, I hope, as a Commission we assured those attending and to you, the City Council, of our vigilance relative to them.

I suspect we will address these matters again and again. As the plane episode with the IRS building illustrates, we seem to be returning to a time of heightened threats. That was a fair test of who we are in Austin and Public Safety passed the exam this time. I suspect this is not the only exam coming. In my research I work closely with the State of Texas and my soundings from the Legislative Budget Board and the Comptroller is that the coming budget session in January of 2011 will be very difficult. Only a 12 billion dollar economic emergency addition from the Federal Government averted a calamity in the current Texas State budget. That is not anticipated in 2011 and we still are likely to be suffering from revenue shortfalls. This means both less resources to address needs and increased needs from unemployed persons and more families in poverty.

We also have a bit of a “perfect storm” that continues to develop in Mexico. Their economic situation is far more grave than ours and exacerbated by cartel violence involved in controlling movement of illegal drugs into the United States. Texas, of course, is the big route with its long and often urban border with Mexico. Information coming last week out of Juarez suggests that now large numbers of refugees are leaving Juarez and moving into Texas as well as other to other regions of Mexico to escape both the violence and the economic collapse. We do not know what these sorts of numbers may be in Austin but public school personnel suggest to me that unknown but increasing numbers of children are now in the schools whose parents were from Mexico and in some cases parents deported leaving children behind. Children without family supports are, of course, ready recruits to gangs as well as surely to become homeless. These refugees now join the problems of the Mexican cartels and the drugs that flow along IH35. We have in the City a desperate need to secure more precise estimates of these numbers and need characteristics.

From my own research I grow ever more concerned with the economic and civil conditions in Mexico and in what ways that “perfect storm” will reach Austin. Such matters are complexly related to the very difficult world economic problems and the fact that we are not immune in Austin. My sense is that the Public Safety Commission must seek to secure expert information to estimate what the demographic, economic and disruptive features of these events may be and how best for our Public Safety structures to prepare for such challenges. As a Commission we are actively talking to various experts and concerned citizens on such matters and will seek to bring these voices before us to meet our obligations to the City and its citizens.

Yours truly,

Mike Lauderdale

Chair Public Safety Commission