

# *Harris County*

# **HANDBOOK**

FOURTH EDITION

**History and Facts About Harris County**

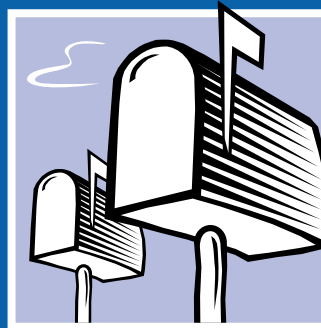
**County Government • Budgets**

**Court System • Public Health**

**Law Enforcement • Family Services**

**Emergency Management • Parks**

**Special Districts • Election Procedures**



**League of Women Voters of the Houston Area**



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# Introduction



## Some Defining Characteristics

**H**arris County is one of Texas' largest and most important counties. Covering 1,729 square miles along the Upper Texas Gulf Coast, it includes 33 municipalities and extensive unincorporated areas. Its population of more than 3.5 million people is notable for its diversity: 58.7% white; 32.9% Hispanic/Latino, 18.5% African-American and 5.1% Asian; more than 22% of its inhabitants are foreign-born. It is the hub of an economy based in all aspects of energy research, production, distribution and manufacturing; banking and service industries; and traditional agriculture commodities such as rice, cotton, sorghum and cattle. Over the past three decades, technology has come to represent an increasingly important part of Harris County's identity. The presence of the Johnson Space Center, the Texas Medical Center, and a strong nucleus of private and public research and educational institutions places the county at the forefront of research in petroleum, computer and biomedical technology, including such ground-breaking fields as nanotechnology.

The Harris County area is rich in history. Some of the earliest Spanish expeditions to North America explored the region, including that of Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca who in 1528 left the first written record of the area. Early French explorers also visited the region. It existed under Spanish and then Mexican rule through the early 1800's. In 1821, land surveys by Stephen F. Austin paved the way for settlement by citizens of the United States. John Richardson Harris built a trading post between Buffalo and Brays Bayous in 1823 and within three years laid out the town of Harrisburg, which soon became a thriving port. The region played an important role in the Texas Revolution of 1836 and was the site of the pivotal battle in that conflict, the Battle of San Jacinto. One of the first acts of the new Texas Congress was the approval of the County of Harrisburg in 1837. In 1839 the county was renamed Harris County.

Geography and climate have played a critical role in the character and growth of Harris County. Although renowned for its warm, humid summers, the moderating influence of the nearby Gulf of Mexico results in abundant rainfall and mild winters. It also sits at the southern end of the great pine and hardwood forests of East Texas. Through much of the nineteenth century the combination of cotton, cattle and timber fueled the county's growth and that of its largest municipality, Houston. Critical to that growth was Buffalo Bayou, the slow-moving waterway that allowed the shipment of the region's products to the markets of the eastern United States and abroad. By the early twentieth century, the volume of products and the needs of shipping led to the widening of the lower reaches of the bayou and its connection to Galveston Bay through what became known as the Houston Ship Channel. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson officially opened the new Port of Houston. Today that port is one of the largest and most active in the United States.

Equally important in the development of Harris County was the rise of the petroleum industry in southeast Texas. Fortuitously sited near the great Spindletop Gusher of 1901 and with five major oilfields within its boundaries, accessible by railroad and eventually pipeline to other major fields in Texas and Louisiana, and possessing a major port, the county quickly became the center of the modern American oil industry. Today, Harris County is a world leader in oil production and refining, oil and gas transportation, oil field equipment manufacturing and petrochemical production. As petroleum production has shifted overseas, the county's significance to the energy industry is felt around the world and has played a major part in its increasingly international character. Although the county's economy has diversified greatly over the past two decades, oil and energy continue to define it.

*Harris  
County  
serves  
more than  
3.5 million  
people  
living in  
1,729  
square  
miles.*

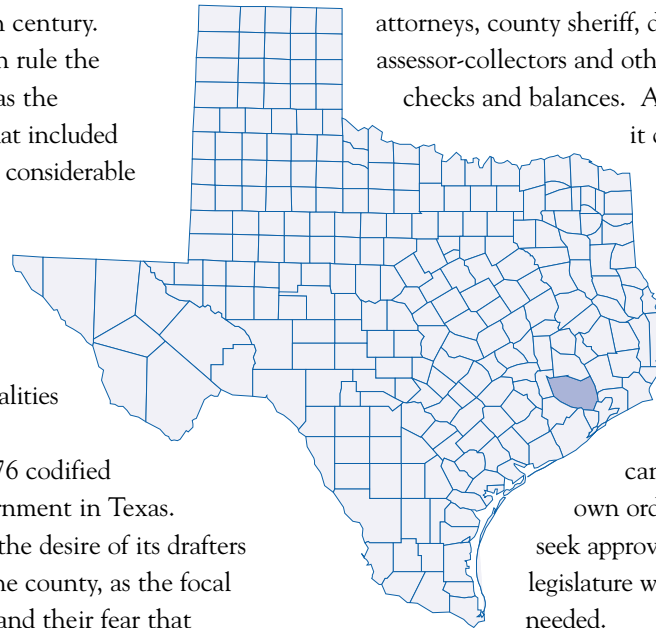
## County Government in Texas

The concept of the “county” is rooted in this nation’s English heritage. Used as early as 1400 in England to define local units of government, the term was brought to the New World by English colonists who settled eastern North America in the seventeenth century. Under Spanish and Mexican rule the local unit of government was the “municipality,” large areas that included one or more settlements and considerable tracts of rural land around them. In 1835, there were 23 municipalities and departments. With the creation of the Republic of Texas in 1836 those municipalities became counties.

The Constitution of 1876 codified the concept of county government in Texas. That constitution reflected the desire of its drafters to maintain the state, not the county, as the focal point of Texas government and their fear that county governments dominated by rural interests would impede the growth of the cities within their boundaries. As a result of these concerns, the 1876 Constitution essentially viewed counties as local extensions of state government. It laid down strict requirements defining the organization, structure and functions of county government. The focal point of each county government in Texas is the commissioners court, consisting of an elected county judge and four elected precinct commissioners. The court handles the general affairs of the county, oversees its budget and other financial matters, and hires individuals with the

expertise to run such activities as public health, human services and transportation. To ensure that the power of the commissioners court is limited, the Texas Constitution also provides for a variety of other elected county officials – county attorneys, county sheriff, district clerks, tax assessor-collectors and others – to act as checks and balances. And, importantly, it denies counties the general home rule authority, that is, the right to pass laws. Today, Texas counties, unlike its cities, cannot pass their own ordinances and must seek approval from the state legislature when such laws are needed.

The Constitution of 1876 also granted the state legislature the power to divide the vast areas of Texas not already so organized into counties of no less than 900 square miles with the provision that they be in the form of a square unless existing boundaries intervened. A quick look at any map of Texas will reveal the startling contrast between the hodgepodge of county shapes and forms that dominate much of the eastern part of the state and the checkerboard appearance of western areas such as the Panhandle. Today, Texas has 254 counties averaging 1,000 square miles in size but varying in size from the 147 square miles of Rockwall County to the 6,208 square miles of Brewster County, and ranging in population from the 91 inhabitants of Brewster County to the more than 3.5 million of Harris County.



*The Constitution of 1876  
codified the concept of  
county government in Texas.*

# The Role of County Government in Harris County

In a large county like Harris County, highly urbanized and dominated by Houston, the fourth largest city in the United States, the role of county government is sometimes poorly understood. A common misconception is to assume that the government of Houston and the other 32 municipalities within Harris County's boundaries take responsibility for most of this area's major needs and concerns, leaving county government with relatively little to do. That misconception ignores a number of important realities.

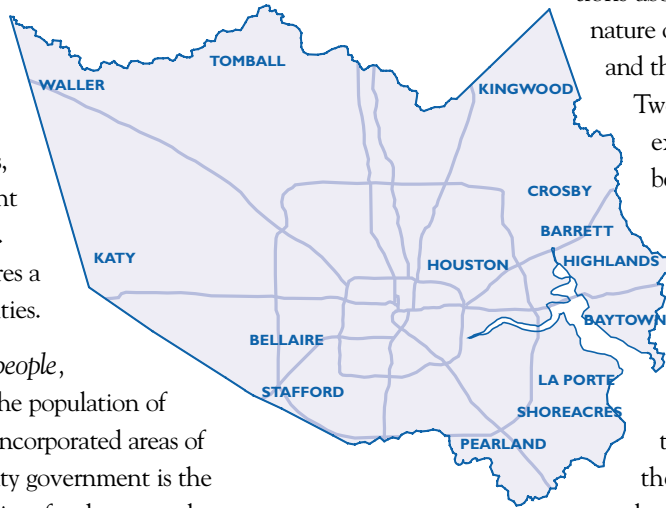
- *More than a million people*, a number as large as the population of Dallas, live in the unincorporated areas of Harris County. County government is the primary source of services for these people.
- *The Harris County budget* for 2004-2005 is more than 2 billion dollars, larger than the budgets of some foreign countries.
- *Issues like flood control* and regional transportation, critical elements in the life of any citizen of this region, require something smaller than state government, but larger than city government. Harris County fills that void.

Despite these important roles for Harris County government, voter turnout for county elections is traditionally low. Many voters are apparently unaware of the importance of county government and their role in it. Voters must select the Commissioners Court, whose members are charged with setting county policy, overseeing the huge sums of money needed to provide county services and the departments that provide those services. Additionally they elect such officials as the county sheriff and

constables and the county tax assessor-collector. And they are frequently asked to approve bonds that pay for improvements in the flood control system, road repair and construction and other important needs.

Moreover, citizens frequently have misconceptions about the structure and nature of county government and the services it provides. Two frequently cited examples are the belief that the county judge has the same position and authority as a judge in the federal or state court system and that the county has the power to pass its own laws. Neither example is true, as the handbook will explain further on.

The purpose of this handbook is to help the citizens of Harris County fully understand the importance of its government and their role in it. By explaining the structure and function of county government, the handbook will enable citizens to more actively participate in the selection of the county's key officials and thus more directly influence the decision-making process at the county level. It will also aid Harris County residents in understanding and taking full advantage of the many county services available to them.



*Harris County serves  
33 municipalities and over a million  
people in unincorporated areas.*

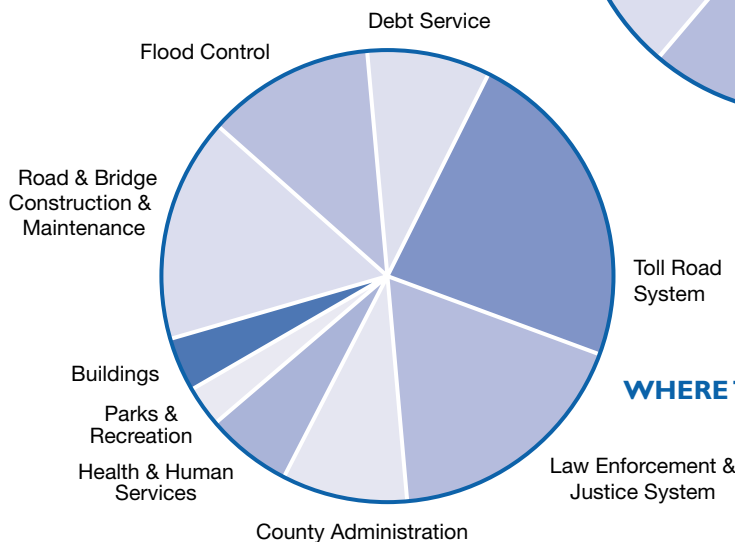
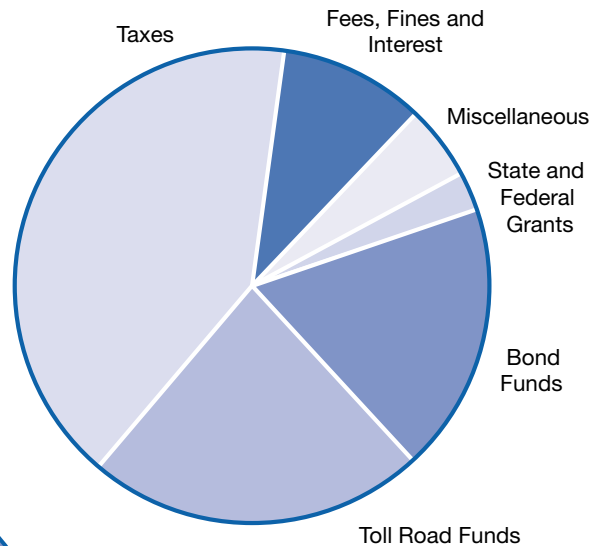
# The Functions of County Government

The projected 2004-2005 budget for Harris County is more than 2 billion dollars.

The projected budget for Harris County for fiscal year 2004-2005 is more than 2 billion dollars. Funded by that budget are such varied county agencies as the Toll Road Authority, the Flood Control District, Public Health and Environmental Services, Library Services and Youth and Family Services. County monies also support road and bridge maintenance and construction, law enforcement and the administration of justice, including the sheriff's department and county jail, and the salaries of judges and other court personnel. Revenue for Harris County comes primarily from the general property tax (also known as the ad valorem tax) and from bond sales that support capital improvement projects like toll roads. Additional revenue is derived from sources such as building permits and court fees, traffic and court fines, interest on investments and various forms of state and federal aid. The story of Harris County government is largely the story of how it raises, manages and spends these immense sums to effectively provide needed services for the residents of Harris County.

Although state law requires each county in Texas to perform the same basic functions and outlines the same basic structures, it does allow some variability in how these are implemented. This variability reflects the highly variable nature of Texas counties themselves. A densely settled county like Harris County with its large population, highly diverse economy and complex transportation networks will confront different problems and face different needs than the less populated, rural counties which are typical of the state. Therefore, the function and structure of government in Harris County, although following the basic template laid down by the state, may vary in ways that reflect these differences.

## WHERE THE MONEY COMES FROM



## WHERE THE MONEY GOES

# Harris County Government and Administration

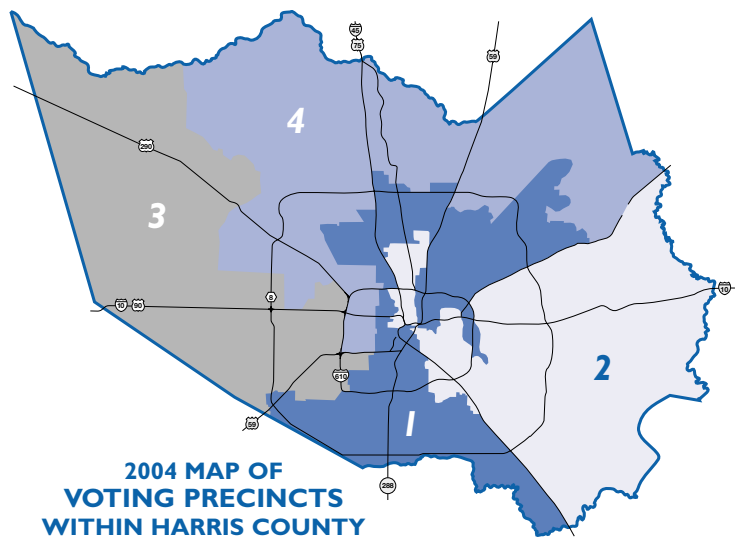
## COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT

The Harris County Commissioners Court is the governing body of Harris County. Composed of a county judge elected at large and four commissioners, each elected from and representing a separate precinct, the Commissioners Court takes primary responsibility for managing the overall affairs of the county, particularly its budget and expenditures. In addition it sets the tax rate for Harris County, the Flood Control District, the Hospital District and the Port of Houston. The judge and commissioners are elected to four-year terms. The commissioners are elected in staggered terms with commissioners from Precincts 1 and 3 being elected in the same year, and commissioners representing Precincts 2 and 4 being elected two years later. If a vacancy occurs, the county judge may appoint a person to serve until the next election.

The Court meets every other Tuesday in the Harris County Administration Building. Special meetings may be scheduled as necessary. Any three members of the Court constitute a quorum for the transaction of business. An exception is made in the case of tax levies, in which case all members must be present. All meetings are open to the public and citizens are encouraged to attend. Meeting agendas are posted beforehand and may be easily obtained from the Harris County Homepage on the Internet ([www.co.harris.tx.us](http://www.co.harris.tx.us)). A typical meeting agenda revealed both the scope and diversity of issues before the Commissioners Court: public infrastructure, including contracts, flood control work and repair to county buildings; right of way acquisitions; and items relating to specific agencies like the Toll Road Authority and the Flood Control District are among the many concerns addressed by the Court.

The main functions performed by the County Commissioners Court are:

- Supervision and control of the county courthouses and jails
- Appointment and employment of county personnel
- Filling of vacancies in elective and appointive positions
- Determination of county taxes
- Adoption of a county budget
- Establishment of voting precinct boundaries, appointment of precinct judges and call of county bond elections
- Letting of contracts in the name of the county
- Building and maintaining county roads and bridges
- Establishment of libraries and parks.



The commissioners are also responsible for appointing members to 32 boards and/or commissions, including:

- Port of Houston
- Metropolitan Transportation Authority
- Children's Protective Services
- Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority
- Harris County Hospital District
- Mosquito Control
- Houston-Galveston Area Council
- Flood Control Task Force
- Toll Road Authority
- Harris County-Houston Sports Authority.

It is important to point out that the Commissioners Court does not have the power to make laws. That power is delegated to the state legislature and any county, including Harris, must seek legislative approval for new laws or changes in laws.

### COUNTY JUDGE

**B**ecause he is elected at large and therefore represents the entire county and is also the presiding officer of the Commissioners Court, the County Judge is perhaps the most visible member of that body. However, like the precinct commissioners, he has only one vote in court proceedings.

*Commissioners Court meeting agendas are posted on the Internet ([www.co.harris.tx.us](http://www.co.harris.tx.us)); all meetings are open to the public.*

He also has administrative responsibilities covering such widely varying matters as applications for beer

and wine licenses, juvenile work permits, and court-ordered birth records and death certificates; he may also perform wedding ceremonies. In most Texas counties, the county judge is the judge of the constitutional county court which also has jurisdiction as a probate court. Illustrating the variability allowed by the Texas Constitution is the fact that in Harris County the probate function is handled by four probate courts rather than the county judge.

The Harris County Judge also serves on a variety of boards and commissions, including the County Election Board, the City of Houston Planning Board and the Bail Bond Board. He is chairman of the Juvenile Board and the director of the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

### COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

**T**he four precincts that comprise Harris County were established in 1857. To account for population changes and ensure equitable representation, the boundaries have been periodically changed, using

the voters in their respective precincts. Each commissioner participates fully in the work of the Commissioners Court and each has one vote in Court deliberations. Individual commissioners take a special interest in county-wide departments located within their precincts.

Commissioners are responsible for managing affairs within their respective precincts, keeping within a budget approved by Commissioners Court. Expenditures, contracts, travel and other activities in the precinct must be placed on the Court's agenda for approval. Included in commissioner responsibilities are the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges within the precinct. They also are responsible for maintaining the precinct park system, precinct community centers and precinct-based programs including senior's activities, youth education and athletic programs. In addition, Social Services, a community assistance program, is housed in Precinct 1.



*Commissioners Court meeting*

population figures available from the most recent U.S. Census. The four commissioners are elected by

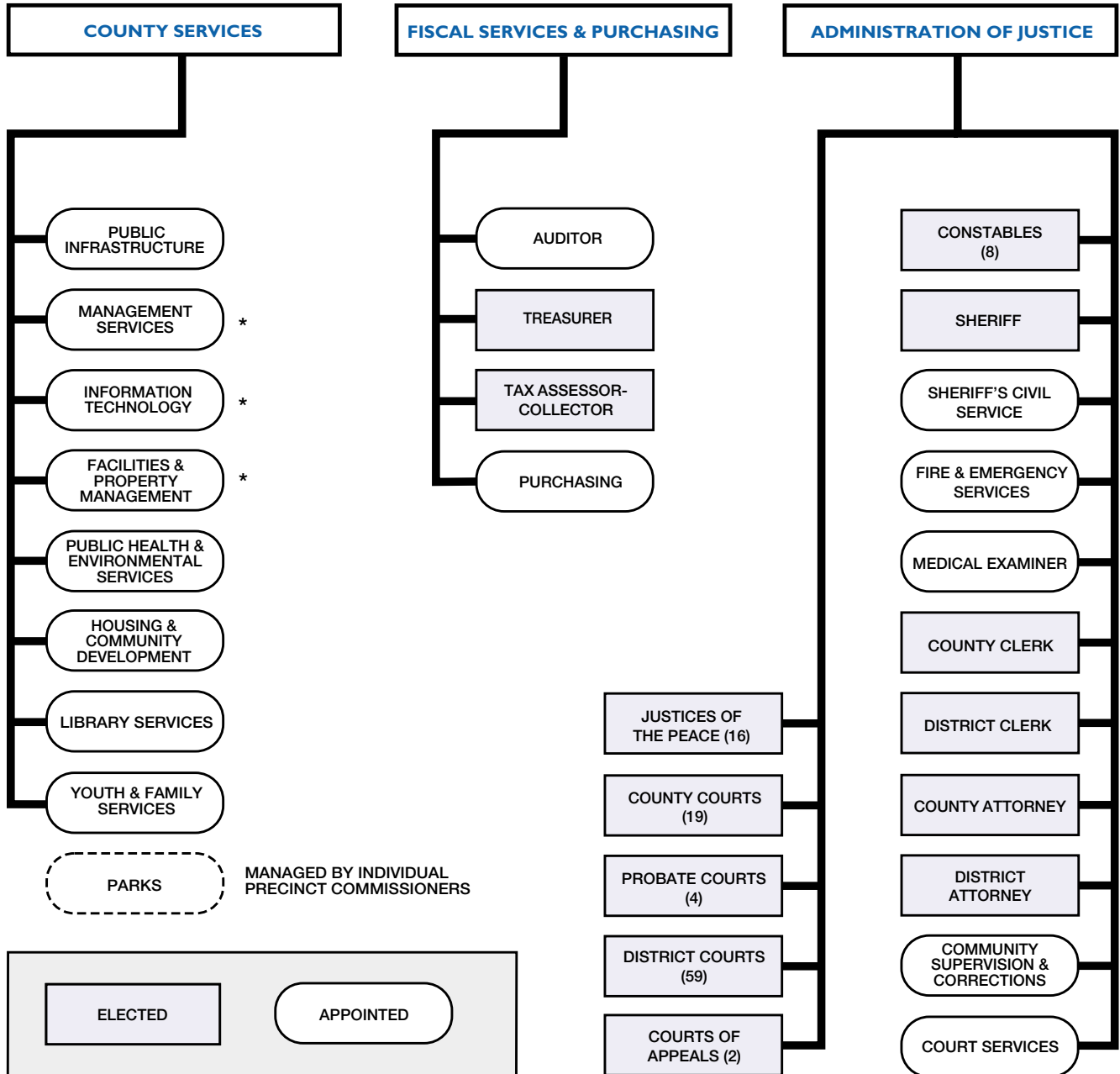
# HARRIS COUNTY ORGANIZATION CHART

MARCH 2004

## HARRIS COUNTY VOTERS

### COMMISSIONERS COURT

COUNTY JUDGE    COUNTY COMMISSIONERS (4)



\* PRIMARILY INTERNAL SUPPORT, NOT DISCUSSED IN THIS HANDBOOK.

## County Services

### PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Planning, building and maintaining the county's infrastructure, particularly its roads, bridges, flood control projects and the growing toll road network, is one of county government's most important responsibilities.

Expenditures for public infrastructure consume a considerable portion of the county budget. Infrastructure needs are handled through the divisions of the county's Public Infrastructure Department.

This department exists to develop budgets, plans and studies for the county's infrastructure program, to run that program in a cost-effective manner, and to communicate information about the program within the county system and to the community at large. It is headed by an executive director appointed by the Commissioners Court. It includes the following divisions.

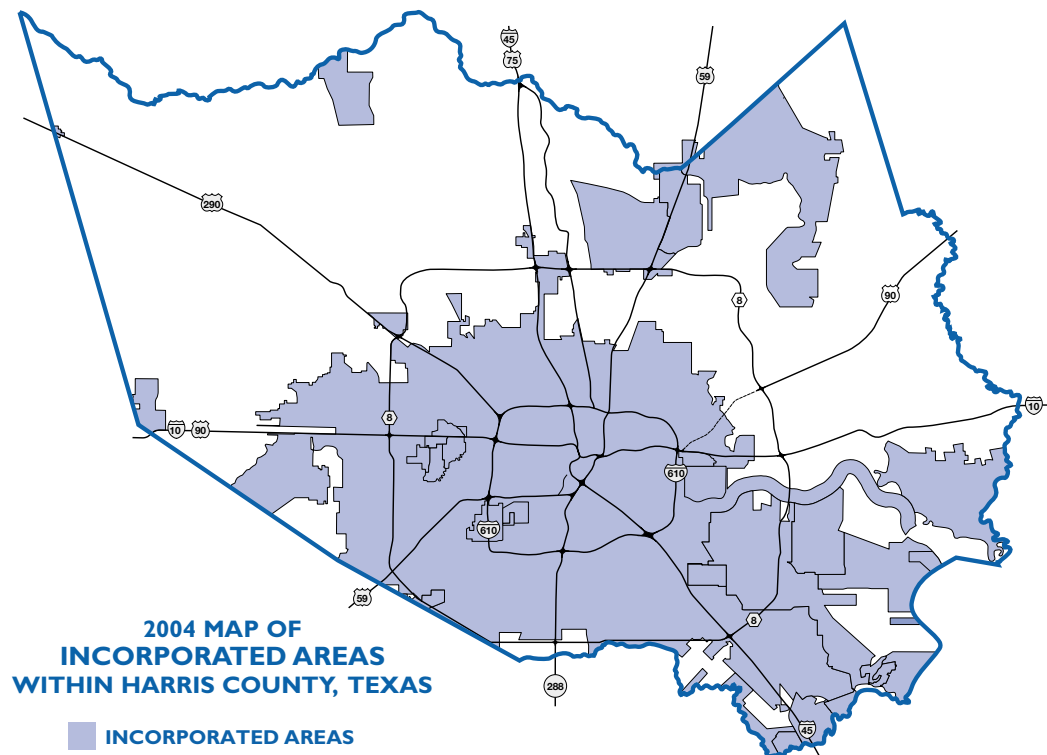
#### *Office of Public Infrastructure*

This office includes the executive director, a Research and Operations Division, and the Right of Way Section devoted to securing rights-of-way for county transportation projects.

#### *Toll Road Authority*

In 1983, Harris County voters authorized some \$900 million in toll road bonds. That money funded the 21.7 miles of the Hardy Toll Road, completed in June, 1988, and the 28 miles which comprise the western portion of the Sam Houston Tollway, completed in July, 1990. In May, 1994, the authority acquired the Jesse Jones Toll Bridge – 4.25 miles from Interstate 10 to State Highway 225. Since that time, the Sam Houston Tollway has expanded through eastern and southern sections of the county, with a southwest section completed from US 59 to SH 288 in May, 1997. The most recent addition, the Westpark Tollway, opened in May, 2004. All told, the Toll Road Authority is responsible for approximately 83 miles of roadway in Harris County.

The governing board for the authority is the Commissioners Court. The director is appointed by the executive director of the Public Infrastructure Department with confirmation by the Court.



### **Flood Control District**

Lying as it does near the warm Gulf of Mexico, the Harris County area is frequently subject to intense periods of rainfall and occasional heavy flooding. The most recent example of the disastrous consequences of such heavy rainfall occurred with Tropical Storm Allison in June, 2001. The Harris County Flood Control District was established in 1937 in response to similar flooding disasters in 1929 and 1935. It plays a critically important role in the lives of every resident of Harris County.

The Flood Control District encompasses some 1,700 square miles, 22 major watersheds and 3,000 miles of watercourses within its borders. It is responsible for constructing and maintaining projects to reduce flooding in Harris County. In its early years, the Flood Control Authority was responsible primarily for widening major bayous, in particular Brays Bayou and White Oak Bayou. Following advances in modern flood control technology, it has expanded its remedies into such projects as

storm water detention – it currently manages 40 regional detention sites covering some 7,100 acres – and bridge modification programs designed to improve stream flow. The District is responsible for major capital improvement projects, maintains drainage facilities, approves subdivision drainage plans, and, in cooperation with the Office of Emergency Management, provides flood watch and flood alert programs. Its director is appointed by the executive director of the Public Infrastructure Department.

### **County Engineer**

The County Engineer is responsible for all phases of engineering and construction for county projects, including buildings, parks, roadways and traffic signals. The Engineer also reviews subdivision development and planning, issues development permits, operates the flood plain management program, and coordinates road bond programs. The County Engineer is appointed by Commissioners Court.

## **PARKS**

**H**arris County residents can take advantage of any of the more than 100 parks available within the county's boundaries. Each commissioner is responsible for developing and managing the park system within his/her precinct. Precinct parks offer a wide range of facilities, including soccer and baseball fields, picnic facilities, basketball and tennis courts, and activities such as fishing, canoeing and many others. Harris County also owns unique parks such as the Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens, one of the Gulf Coast's premier horticultural sites, and Armand Bayou, managed by the Armand Bayou Nature Center, which offers area residents the opportunity to visit and explore an important example of the mix of coastal plain, wetlands and forest that is an essential element of the region's environment.



*Park in Harris County*

### PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

Citizens of Harris County depend upon Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services for a wide variety of needs and services. This department is essential to the well-being of county residents outside the City of Houston for everything from the food inspections that ensure food safety in local restaurants and groceries to mosquito and animal control. It accomplishes these important tasks through its eight divisions, including the following.

- **Community Health Services** provides services ranging from health education and disease prevention to family planning, immunizations, lead poisoning prevention and tobacco prevention and cessation.
- **Emergency Medical Services** is responsible for the Regional Advisory and Assistance Team, a disaster response team, and works closely with the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

*Many voters are unaware of the importance of county government and the services it provides them.*

- **Environmental Services** handles environmental nuisances such as weeds and garbage as well as food inspection and regulation for everything from restaurants to food carts.
- **Mosquito Control** deals with the prevention and control of mosquito populations, an increasingly important task given the rise of such mosquito-borne diseases as St. Louis Encephalitis and West Nile virus.
- **Pollution Control** sponsors periodic collection events for such household wastes as old paint and insecticides; monitors ozone levels and toxic substance release; takes citizen complaints about

pollution; and issues violation notices for everything from illegal outdoor burning and the release of hazardous materials to failure to acquire proper permits for commercial composting.

The Public Health and Environmental Services director is appointed by the Commissioners Court.

#### **Ryan White Planning Council**

The Ryan White Planning Council's role is to establish service priorities in the Houston Eligible Metropolitan Area (EMA), a six-county area, for the use of Title I funds from the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act. The County Judge, as Chief Executive Officer, is the official recipient of those funds. The County Judge has designated the Harris County Health Department as the Administrative Agent to oversee the contracting of those services.

The Ryan White Planning Council, a 38-member volunteer planning group appointed by the County Judge, decides what services are most needed in the EMA through needs assessments and public hearings and allocates the amount of funding for each service category.

Since the early 1980s, HIV/AIDS has devastated people across the nation and around the world. The CARE Act is federal legislation that addresses the unmet health needs of persons living with HIV disease by funding primary health care and support services that enhance access to and retention in care. CARE Act-funded programs are the "payer of last resort" intended to fill gaps in care not covered by other resources. For the grant period ending February 28, 2005, Harris County received a Ryan White CARE Act Title I award of \$19,128,572.

### HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

#### *Community Development Agency*

This office plans and implements the Community Development Grant program for the unincorporated areas and the smaller cities of Harris County, to benefit low and moderate income people, prevent or eliminate slums and blight, and encourage economic development and increase job opportunities. The program is funded through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

#### *Harris County Housing Authority*

The Harris County Housing Authority was created in 1975 to provide safe, clean and structurally sound housing for low-income residents of Harris County. It also provides rental assistance for low-income households, administers a self-sufficiency program to help residents achieve economic independence, and works with private-sector developers to create affordable senior citizen housing projects.

Five members, appointed by Harris County Commissioners Court, make up the Authority.

### LIBRARY SERVICES

#### *Harris County Public Library*

The Harris County Public Library is a network of 26 community-focused libraries that meet the informational, educational and recreational needs of a highly diverse public. Serving a population of 1.2 million card holders, it is the largest county library system in Texas, and it is continually expanding. The average annual cost for operating a Harris County branch is \$900,000. In order to offer services in a cost-effective manner, Harris County is seeking creative partnerships, such as the newly opened Clear Lake City-County Freeman Branch, built and operated in cooperation with the City of Houston and the soon-to-open Tomball Library, that will be operated jointly with Tomball College.

The library system offers county residents an extensive array of library services and an online branch to provide easy and convenient access to its services. Its collection contains some 6 million items ranging from printed books to videos, CDs and DVDs. It provides reference services in person, by phone or email and through its online eBranch. With more than 600 public computers, the library provides access to the Internet and numerous online databases as well as the use of up-to-date

word processing, spreadsheet and database programs. Some locations make laptop computers available for checkout.



*Clear Lake City-County Freeman Branch Library*

#### *Law Library*

The Law Library provides legal reference materials for use by judges, litigants and attorneys. The Director/Law Librarian is recommended by a committee of the Houston Bar Association for appointment by Commissioners Court.

### YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

**H**arris County is responsible for an extensive array of programs that provide services to assist children, adolescents and families as well as the mentally impaired. These services range from child protection and juvenile offender programs to mental health and mental retardation services available to county residents who need them.

#### *Domestic Relations*

The primary focus of the Domestic Relations Office is to provide for the needs of children involved in family litigation, particularly issues involving child support, contested custody or access cases and visitation rights. The Office works through its three divisions: the Legal Enforcement Division which provides legal representation for parents seeking to establish and enforce child support and visitation rights; the Family Court Services Division which conducts investigations for adoptions and contested custody or access cases; and the Alternative Dispute Resolution Division which provides family mediation services for the Family District Courts. The Domestic Relations Office works closely with the Harris County Family District Courts and is a partner agency of the Harris County Youth and Family Services Division. The Commissioners Court appoints its Chief Administrative Officer.

#### *Juvenile Probation*

The Harris County Juvenile Probation Department works with youth who have been referred to it for violations of the law. Under the mandate of the Texas Juvenile Justice Code, it treats, trains, rehabilitates and, in some cases, incarcerates such youth. Its approach emphasizes the goal of moving youthful offenders away from the juvenile justice system through assessment, counseling, training and close supervision. Among its many programs, the department offers both three-month and six-month deferred prosecution programs with the aim of working with participants through intensive counseling and supervision. The department also manages residential facilities for post-adjudication cases, including the Burnett-Bayland Assessment Center, Delta Boot Camp, the Harris County Youth Village and the Burnett-Bayland Home.

The Chief Probation Officer is appointed by the Juvenile Board, made up of eight judges from the

juvenile courts. The County Judge is the Chairman of the Juvenile Board. The Harris County Juvenile Probation Department administers the Community and Juvenile Justice Education program.

As mandated by the Texas Education Code, the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program provides education for certain expelled and adjudicated youth based on standards of academic accountability and performance as approved by the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission. For each student, the school district in which the student was enrolled must transfer to the Juvenile Board funds equal to the district's average student expenditure for alternative education programs. In addition, the Juvenile Probation Department administers a state open-enrollment charter school for juveniles placed in a Harris County Juvenile Probation Department detention or residential facility.

#### *Protective Services for Children and Adults*

Since 1966, Harris County has worked in concert with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services through its Protective Services for Children and Adults Department.

Harris County Protective Services for Children strongly stresses prevention of abusive situations by providing services that aid parents and other family members in resolving problems which might otherwise lead to child abuse.

The Department is responsible for a variety of other resources for children, including the Chimney Rock Emergency Shelter, the Medical and Dental Clinic, funding for clothing, school supplies and medical and dental services for foster children and those in residential placements. The department's executive director is appointed by Commissioners Court.

A primary mission of the state's Child Protective Services program is to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect. CPS has the power to remove children from an unsafe home environment and place them temporarily in a safer environment. In such cases, the State Department of Family and Protective Services develops a permanency plan that helps parents and other involved parties work toward a permanent home for the child.

*The goal is to move youthful offenders away from the juvenile justice system.*

### *Children's Assessment Center*

The Children's Assessment Center, a public/private partnership, exists to provide care, support and treatment for sexually abused children and their families. The Center uses a multi-disciplinary approach to prevent, assess, investigate and treat victims of child sexual abuse. When necessary it may also make referrals for prosecution. Clinical social workers at the Center work closely with family or guardians of abused children, provide crisis intervention and needs assessments to determine appropriate referrals. They also coordinate services to families. The forensic interviewing program attempts to limit the number of times a child must tell his or her story of sexual abuse by videotaping disclosure statements to be viewed by professionals involved in their cases. The forensic interviewer may be the first person a child meets after making a disclosure of abuse. The Center uses a variety of expressive therapies, including play, movement, art and music therapies, to allow children to express their memories and to help them avoid long-term trauma. The executive director is selected by the Children's Assessment Center Foundation Board and with approval of Commissioners Court.

### *Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority*

The services of the Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority (MHMRA) have recently been split by the reorganization of Texas Health and Human Services. The mental health division of the Authority provides mental health services to both adults and child/adolescent residents of Harris County. The Mental Health division uses a team approach to offer treatment for indigent and poor adults who suffer from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other severe mental health disorders. The Child and Adolescent Services Division offers treatment and support for a limited number of children from birth to age 18 with serious emotional or behavioral problems and/or mental retardation. Services include Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Emergency Services (CAPES), a mobile crisis intervention unit, Family Resource Centers, and a school-based program that offers therapeutic services in an educational setting. The division works closely with the county's Juvenile Probation Department to provide assessment and treatment services. MHMRA also runs the Harris County

Neuropsychiatric Center, a short-term crises stabilization facility.

The Mental Retardation Services Division provides such services as early childhood intervention, in-home and family support, transition services for children 12 years and older, clinical services, transportation for all ages and other programs.

The MHMRA Board of Trustees, appointed by the Commissioners Court, selects the MHMRA director.

### *Social Services*

Harris County Social Services, which provides support for county residents in need, is part of Precinct 1. The Social and Financial Services program offers emergency financial assistance, case management and referral services as needed. The Bereavement Services program ensures that indigent citizens that die in Harris County receive a dignified burial or cremation; it also provides a marked grave space and interment at the Harris County Cemetery. The Veterans Service office helps veterans and their dependents with applications for pensions and other veterans benefits and works with the State Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that Harris County veterans receive the benefits they are due. The Social Services department also has a Transportation Services program that offers transportation for non-emergency medical care.

### *Texas Cooperative Extension-Harris County*

Texas Cooperative Extension-Harris County is a part of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, a cooperative educational agency that disseminates information about agriculture, horticulture, home economics and community development. Residents seeking expert advice regarding plant pests and pest control measures, the best way to plant tomatoes, fruit tree spray programs and many, many other topics can rely on the Harris County Extension. It sponsors activities such as the Harris County Master Gardeners program, the Texas Master Naturalist program, 4-H Clubs and the Empowering Teen Leaders program. Harris County Extension is directed by the County Agent, appointed by Commissioners Court upon recommendation by the District Agent at Texas A & M University.

*The  
Mental  
Health  
division  
uses a  
team  
approach  
to offer  
treatment.*

## Fiscal Services and Purchasing

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### COUNTY AUDITOR

The County Auditor's office provides both accounting and auditing services for Harris County and some of its associated agencies. The County Auditor, appointed by the State District Judges to a two-year term, is considered the chief financial officer of Harris County, the Toll Road Authority and the Flood Control District. The County Auditor is also the auditor for the Port of Houston Authority and is the internal auditor of

the Harris County Hospital District. The Auditor's office is comprised of the Accounting Division, which includes financial accounting, accounts payable, revenue accounting and accounts receivable, and the Audit Division, which handles audit services, compliance and payroll audits and includes a systems and procedures department responsible for Open Record requests, among other functions.

### COUNTY TREASURER

The chief custodian of Harris County funds and the receiver of all funds belonging to the county is the County Treasurer. The Treasurer's office keeps and accounts for county funds in designated depositories. Funds are

disbursed by direction of the Commissioners Court. This office also serves the Flood Control District and the Port of Houston Authority. The County Treasurer is elected for a four-year term.

### TAX ASSESSOR-COLLECTOR

For most Harris County residents, the office of the Tax Assessor-Collector may well be the best known of all county offices simply because its services are so frequently used. While the Harris County Appraisal District has assumed the assessment function, the Tax Assessor-Collector is responsible for collecting taxes for the county and

county-wide districts and collecting certain state taxes and fees. The office also registers vehicles, processes vehicle titles and collects sales tax on all vehicle transfers. Additionally, it collects license fees for wine and beer licenses.

Another high area of visibility for the Tax Assessor-Collector's office results from its role as the county's voter registrar. The office conducts voter registration at its main and branch offices, maintains approved voter registration applicants' files and, before any county election, prepares a certified list of registered voters in each precinct. At this time, there are approximately 1.9 million registered voters in Harris County. The Tax Assessor-Collector is elected for a four-year term.

*The Tax Assessor-Collector's office is the county's voter registrar.*

### PURCHASING AGENT

The Purchasing Agent for Harris County is appointed for a two-year term by a board composed of three district judges and two members of Commissioners Court. The Purchasing

Department is responsible for the purchase and inventory of supplies, materials and equipment used by the county, the Flood Control District and the Hospital District.

# Administration of Justice

## JURY SYSTEM

### *Grand Jury*

The Grand Jury is composed of 12 persons and two alternates selected by a criminal district judge from a list of up to 40 names submitted by the Grand Jury Commission whose members are appointed by one of the criminal district judges on a rotating basis. The Grand Jury investigates alleged activities that may be subject to indictment or prosecution in the county and determines if there is sufficient evidence to warrant a trial. Nine or more votes will lead to an indictment. Normally two grand juries serve simultaneously in Harris County.

### *Petit Jury*

A petit jury is a trial jury that tries the actual charges in a criminal case or determines the facts in a civil case and sets the amount of damages awarded. In district courts, a jury of 12 members is selected from a panel of 32; in county and justice of the peace courts, the jury consists of 6 members chosen from a panel of 12 to 15 individuals. Petit jury verdicts must be unanimous in a criminal case; 10 votes are needed for civil. In some cases, the jury may also be required to determine the sentence for convicted individuals. Jury panels are put together from lists of registered voters and those who have a valid Texas driver's license.

*Harris County courts handle civil, criminal and probate matters.*

## COURTS

**H**arris County courts handle civil, criminal and probate matters. The county court system is divided into three divisions: justices of the peace, statutory county courts, including the four county probate courts, and statutory district courts. In addition, there are two courts of appeals in Harris County. The courts are arranged in a three-tiered system with lower level crimes and cases handled by justices of the peace, more serious crimes and civil cases under the jurisdiction of the statutory county courts, and the most serious cases the purview of the state district courts.

Justices, elected to four-year terms by voters in their precincts, are not required to be licensed attorneys.

### *Statutory County Courts*

Harris County statutory courts are organized into three judicial divisions: the Criminal Courts at Law, the Civil Courts at Law and the Probate Courts. The 15 criminal courts handle serious misdemeanor cases, those punishable by fine, jail or both. The four civil courts try civil cases involving damages between \$500 and \$100,000. Typical cases heard by these courts include personal injury and property damage suits, cases involving the illegal conversion of property and property rights. The civil courts also have sole jurisdiction over condemnation cases, regardless of the amount of money involved. Judges in these courts must have been a practicing attorney in Texas for at least five years before election and are elected to four-year terms.

### *Justices of the Peace*

Dealing with issues within their individual precincts, the 16 justice of the peace courts represent the most local of the courts that comprise the county court system. They typically handle lower level criminal and civil cases: Class C misdemeanors with fines of up to \$500— assault, bail-jumping, criminal mischief, disorderly conduct, bad check writing, public intoxication, theft and traffic offenses – and civil cases where the amount involved is \$1,000 or less. Their other duties include presiding over the Small Claims Court, where the range of claims is from \$1 to \$5,000, holding examining trials, issuing emergency commitment papers for the mentally ill and issuing search warrants and warrants of arrest. Justices of the peace may also perform marriages.

The four County Probate Courts are responsible for some of the most personal issues faced by Harris County residents. A major role is handling the affairs of the deceased, including the probation of their wills, determining heirs, appointing executors and administrators and dealing with lawsuits against those individuals. These courts are also responsible for determining an individual's competence for managing personal and financial affairs, appointing guardians in the case of those who are

## Administration of Justice *continued*

judged incompetent and dealing with lawsuits against guardians. County residents facing problems with the construction and modification of trusts or lawsuits involving trustees will also be under the jurisdiction of the probate courts. Finally, Probate Courts Three and Four are charged with the serious duty of dealing with such issues as involuntary commitment to mental health institutions and the administration of forced medication. Judges in these courts are elected to four-year terms.

### State District Courts

The 59 state district courts in Harris County are divided into four trial divisions.

- The Civil Trial Division contains 25 courts with responsibility for cases involving workman's compensation, breach of contract, personal injury, damages, injunctions, contested elections and change of name petitions.

- The Criminal Trial Division has 22 courts that have primary jurisdiction in any criminal actions that involve serious felonies punishable by imprisonment in the state penitentiary or by death and misdemeanors involving official misconduct.
- The 9 courts of the Family Trial Division have general jurisdiction over a wide range of family matters, including divorce, annulments and adoptions.
- The 3 Juvenile Courts handle cases involving neglected, dependent, abused or mentally incompetent children and juvenile offenders who are mentally ill. They also handle all cases concerning children involved in delinquent conduct or in conduct requiring supervision. These courts frequently hear adoption cases as well.

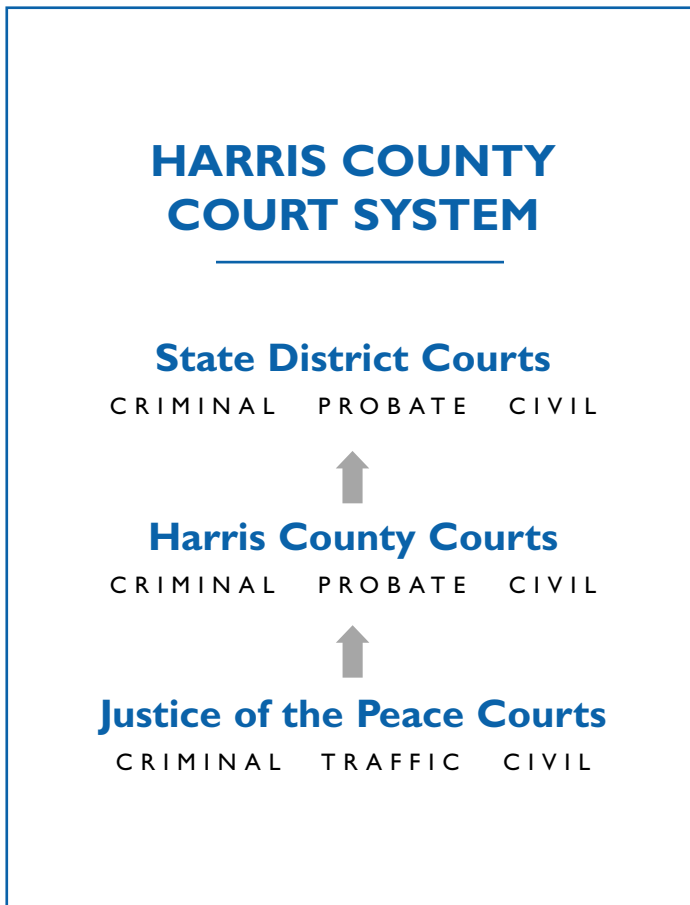
Judges in the district courts are elected to four-year terms and must have practiced law in Texas for four years preceding election.

### Courts of Appeals

The First and Fourteenth Courts of Appeals are located in Houston and have responsibility for cases from Austin, Brazoria, Brazos, Burleson, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Grimes, Harris, Trinity, Walker, Waller and Washington Counties. These courts are the intermediary between county courts and the State Supreme Court and hear appeals involving civil and criminal cases from trial courts in their district. Each appellate court is composed of a chief justice and eight associate justices. A justice is elected for a six-year term.

### Pretrial Services

The Pretrial Services Agency gathers information concerning the criminal and social history of defendants for use by the county and district criminal courts in considering bond. Defendants released on personal bond may be required to pay the agency a fee based on judicial determination and state law. The director is appointed by Commissioners Court.



### PUBLIC SAFETY/LAW ENFORCEMENT

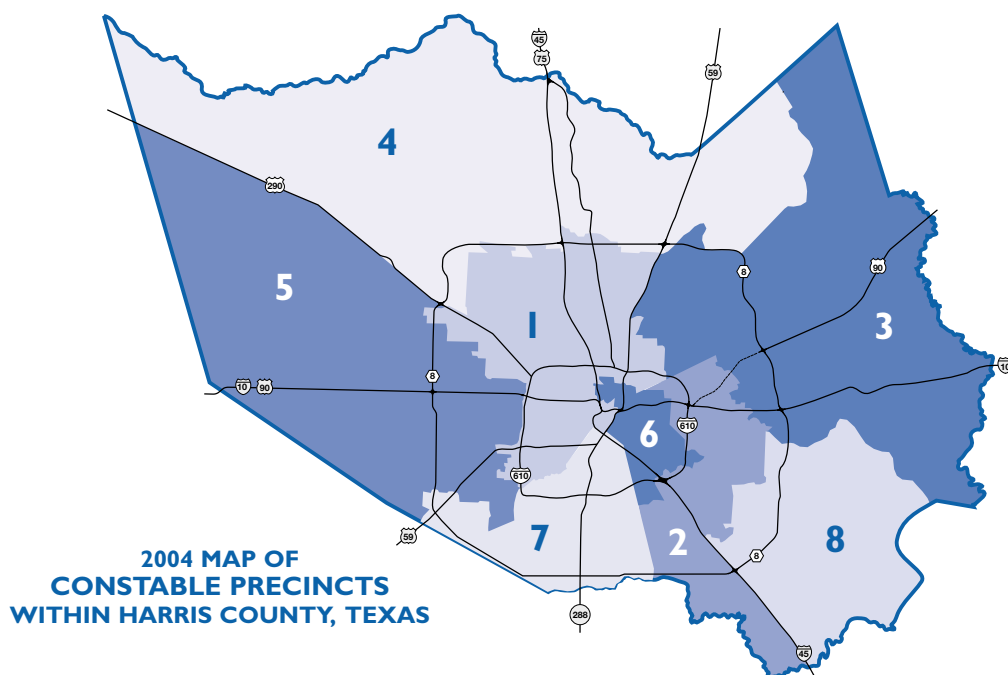
#### Constables

Serving the residents within each of their precincts, the eight Harris County constables (two per precinct) represent the most local level of law enforcement in Harris County. They and their deputies provide precinct residents with a wide variety of services. A primary responsibility is that of serving legal documents issued by various entities of the county's court system, including suits for debt, divorce suits, eviction writs, foreclosure papers and summons. They also serve criminal warrants issued through justice of the peace courts and provide bailiffs for those courts. Constables provide traffic control for streets and roads in their precincts, including the toll roads, and patrol services for precinct parks and unincorporated areas within their boundaries. The Precinct 1 Constable is responsible for handling mental warrants and juvenile court papers. Each constable is elected by precinct voters to a four-year term.

#### Sheriff

The Harris County Sheriff is the county's chief law enforcement officer and is elected by a county-wide vote every four years. The Harris

County Sheriff's Department has responsibility for providing law enforcement services to all unincorporated areas of Harris County. The department operates through its eight bureaus. The Detective Bureau deals with the entire range of possible criminal offenses from sexual assault, child abuse and auto theft to narcotics and vice violations and homicide. Its Detention Division maintains three jail facilities that house pretrial defendants and post-conviction prisoners, including those awaiting transfer to the Texas penitentiary system, and fugitives awaiting transfer elsewhere. At any one time, the division may be responsible for more than 9,000 prisoners. The Patrol Bureau is responsible for deputy patrols throughout the county's unincorporated areas. Patrol deputies investigate criminal activity, apprehend violators, are part of enhanced enforcement efforts, and provide traffic enforcement and control. The Patrol Bureau also is responsible for the county's bomb squad, its canine division and for mounted and marine patrols in appropriate areas. It is heavily involved in community programs like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) and the Citizens Academy.



### PUBLIC SAFETY/LAW ENFORCEMENT *continued*

#### *Fire and Emergency Services*

Under the direction of the Harris County Fire Marshall, this department is responsible for fire prevention, fire inspection and fire investigations in the county's unincorporated areas. The department works closely with the 46 fire departments which provide fire-fighting services in those areas. It provides a variety of training programs for area firemen as well as educational information for county residents concerning fire prevention and the avoidance of other potential hazards. Since the September 11 terrorist attack, the department has joined with the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management to acquire the necessary equipment and training to be ready for any emergency that might occur. The Fire Marshall is appointed by the Commissioners Court.

#### *Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*

In August, 1987, the Harris County Commissioners Court adopted the Harris County Emergency Management Plan as the basis for county action in the event of any major public disaster. The Basic Plan, as it is called, was written in recognition of the fact that Harris County faces potential disasters from flooding, from tropical storms and hurricanes, or from problems arising from the great complex of petrochemical facilities that exist within its borders. The Office of Emergency Management coordinates the responses of county offices and agencies and works in conjunction with state, federal and local authorities, including the City of Houston and other municipalities. The Basic Plan spells out specific procedures for warnings, initial and continued response, disaster relief and disaster

recovery. In the event of a serious situation, the Office of Emergency Management will open its Emergency Operations Center to coordinate and control responses to the problem. The County Judge, charged by law with responsibility for emergency planning and operations for the county, is the director of the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

#### *Medical Examiner*

The Medical Examiner's Office exists to provide expert analysis of the cause and manner of death in the case of deceased county residents. By state law, the Medical Examiner is required to conduct an autopsy to determine the manner of death in all cases involving accident, homicide, suicide or undetermined death. An autopsy may also be required in cases when an individual is not under a physician's care or dies within 24 hours of admission to a hospital. This office works closely with law enforcement officials to evaluate evidence collected during criminal investigations and to provide expert scientific analysis and by providing expert witness testimony in courts of law. To support those tasks, the Medical Examiner oversees the operation of the county's Joseph A. Jachimczyk Forensic Center, a laboratory which analyzes controlled substances, DNA and related biologicals, toxic substances and trace evidence such as gunshot residue and other physical evidence from crime scenes using the latest scientific techniques. The Chief Medical Examiner must be a physician licensed by the State of Texas and certified by the American Board of Pathology in Anatomic and Forensic Pathology. The position is filled through appointment by the Commissioners Court.

*The  
County  
Judge is  
charged by  
law with the  
responsibility  
for emergency  
planning.*

### OFFICIAL PUBLIC RECORDS

#### *County Clerk*

Record-keeping is an unsung but essential part of county government. The County Clerk, elected to a four-year term of office, is responsible for keeping all public records, those filed by the general public in the county clerk's office and all records of the actions in the Commissioner's Court, the probate courts, the county court and the county courts-at-law. (In Harris County, the County Clerk's office does not record the actions of the county criminal courts-at-law. The District Clerk is assigned that responsibility.) The County Clerk's office is divided into four major departments according to function.

The Records Department includes: the Real Property Division which keeps records that determine the title to and ownership of all real estate in Harris County – such legal instruments as deeds, mortgages, contracts, leases, tax liens and the like; the Uniform Commercial Code Division which maintains records relating to business transactions under the Uniform Commercial Code; and the Personal Records Division, which maintains important personal records, including birth and death certificates and marriage licenses and is responsible for issuing hunting and fishing licenses, among other duties.

The Commissioners Court Department records all official transactions of the Commissioners Court.

The Probate Courts Department files, records and keeps all records relating to estates of deceased residents of the county as well as records relating to guardianships of minors and incompetents, mixed beverage applications and wine and beer permits.

The Elections Department is responsible for many important functions in all special and general elections, including preparation of official ballots, instruction in the use of voting machines for election

officials, absentee voting, and receiving and tabulating all returns. The County Clerk serves on the County Elections Board with the county judge, sheriff and county chairman of each political party.

#### *District Clerk*

The District Clerk's office is known to most Harris County residents because of its role in the selection of prospective jurors for the county's 74 courts. Drawing from a county-wide pool consisting of citizens who are registered voters and/or possess a Texas driver's license or identification card, the District Clerk oversees a process which empanels jurors for both civil and criminal cases. The office also plays a key role in other aspects of county government, including its responsibility for the care and safekeeping of all court records for the county's courts. It also supports the courts by accounting for all funds paid as deposits on civil cases and all funds awarded minors in court action. Finally, the District

### *Frequently requested County Clerk's Office records:*

- *Birth and death certificates*
- *Marriage licenses*
- *Hunting and fishing licenses*
- *Deeds and mortgages, leases, tax liens*

Clerk's office plays a significant role in overseeing the accounting and disbursement of all child support payments for cases heard in Harris County. The District Clerk is elected to a four-year term.

### LAWYERS AND PROSECUTORS

#### *County Attorney*

The County Attorney is an elected official. He must be a resident of Harris County and a licensed attorney and, like other elected senior county officials, serves a four-year term. The County Attorney's office does not handle criminal affairs or cases. Its role is to represent Harris County in general civil litigation. By statute, the office also represents the Harris County Flood Control District and the Harris County Hospital District, each a special governmental district. The County Attorney's office also represents the county in variety of other ways, including rendering legal opinions to county officials and representing them in their official capacities, handling litigation with respect to delinquent taxes, drafting county bills for presentation to the state legislature, participating in cases involving property condemnations, and trying cases involving contested elections.

#### *District Attorney*

The District Attorney's Office is responsible for the prosecution of all criminal cases (with the exception

of municipal violations) occurring in Harris County. In the year 2000, it handled more than 90,000 cases where jail or prison confinement was a possibility and more than 500,000 cases punishable by fine only. Its activities include case screening, representing the state in cases presented to grand juries, prosecuting cases in all criminal courts in the county, investigating special white collar and economic crimes, advising police and citizens on criminal matters and performing special services in cases involving welfare fraud, consumer fraud and failure to pay child support. Its Special Crimes Bureau investigates and prosecutes all types of crime, including homicide and robbery, major fraud such as bank fraud and embezzlement, consumer fraud, and gang and narcotics violations. Its Child Abuse Division deals with the physical and/or sexual abuse of children and with child neglect cases. It is affiliated with the Children's Assessment Center. Its Check Fraud Division is responsible for prosecuting cases involving theft by check. The District Attorney must be a licensed attorney and is elected to a four-year term.

### COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AND CORRECTIONS

The director of the Community Supervision and Corrections Department is appointed by the judges of the county's 37 criminal courts. The department supports those courts by providing pre-sentencing

investigations and special restitution programs. Its staff is paid through a separate state judicial trust fund. Other funding needs are met by support from the criminal court judges and Harris County.

### JIMS (THE JUSTICE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM)

The Justice Information Management System (JIMS), managed by the county's Information Technology Department, applies the latest in information technology equipment and methodology to assist Harris County courts, agencies, and offices in

the administration of justice. It provides technology services that allow those agencies to locate, track, identify, charge, book, prosecute and supervise criminal offenders, to file and process jury cases and to automate jury management and payroll.

**JIMS**  
provides  
technology  
to locate,  
track and  
prosecute  
criminal  
offenders.

## Special Districts, Boards and Commissions

### HARRIS COUNTY HOSPITAL DISTRICT

**H**arris County plays an important role in a number of area districts, boards and commissions that provide and coordinate services throughout the region. That role ranges from having sole appointment power for the board of the Harris County Hospital District to sharing appointment powers for the Port of Houston Authority with the City of Houston and other local municipalities.

The Harris County Hospital District was created by a voter referendum in November, 1965 and gained status as a political entity with taxing authority on January 1, 1966. The District is governed by a board of nine managers appointed by the Harris County Commissioners Court to extendable two-year terms. The Board of Managers appoints the president and chief executive officer of the District who is responsible for administering its affairs. As the cost of health care has risen, the District's budget has expanded to meet the county's health care needs. The projected budget for 2004 is \$670.6 million. Tax revenues (49%) and patient revenues (36%) are the primary sources of funds to support these costs.

### PORT OF HOUSTON AUTHORITY

**F**or nearly a century, the Port of Houston has played a critical role in the growth and economic well-being of Harris County. Connected to the Gulf of Mexico by the 50-mile long Houston Ship Channel, today the port ranks as one of the most important in the United States and one of the busiest in the world. In 2002, approximately 175 million tons of cargo moved through the Port of Houston. The port is governed by the Port of Houston Authority which owns and operates the public facilities located on the Houston Ship Channel and is the ship channel's official sponsor. Public facilities include 43 general cargo wharves and two liquid-cargo wharves, as well as the Barbour's Cut container terminal. The Authority is also responsible for the facilities at the proposed Bayport terminal.

Regardless of ability to pay, any Harris County resident is eligible to receive the District's services. It plays a particularly important role in the delivery of health care to the non-insured and in the delivery of emergency room services. The Hospital District operates three major hospitals – Ben Taub General Hospital, LBJ General Hospital and Quinten Mease Community Hospital – as well as dental and children's specialty centers, and numerous community health centers and school-based clinics. It is also heavily involved in preventive health, health maintenance programs and health education activities.

Admissions to the District's hospitals total more than 40,000 per year while emergency visits to those hospitals total more than 1,000,000.



*Ben Taub Hospital*

The Port of Houston Commission is the governing body of the Port of Houston Authority. Harris County appoints two of the seven members of the commission and with the City of Houston jointly appoints the commission's chairman. The City of Houston appoints two other commissioners and the Harris County Mayors & Councils Association and the City of Pasadena appoint one each. Day-to-day operations are the responsibility of a port executive director and a managing director, each selected by the commission.

### *Harris County-Houston Sports Authority*

In 1997, the state legislature passed legislation creating a sports authority for Harris County with the power to levy certain taxes and issue bonds to pay for the new sports facilities and to hold elections to gain public approval for those actions. Although not stated in the legislation, as a result of negotiations, financing for each new facility involved not only public monies approved by county voters, but also contributions from each of the team owners.

The Harris County-Houston Sports Authority is charged with building new venues and overseeing the facilities for two of the area's three major professional sports teams – Minute Maid Park and the Toyota Center. A \$250 million downtown baseball park – Minute Maid Park – opened in March, 2000, and the \$235 million Toyota Center opened for professional basketball in October, 2003. Harris County appoints six of the twelve Sports Authority board members and, with the City of Houston, jointly appoints the board's chair. The Board selects a chief executive officer who is responsible for the management of the Sports Authority.



### **HARRIS COUNTY SPORTS AND CONVENTION CORPORATION**

The Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation was in charge of the construction of the Reliant Energy Stadium Complex, which includes the \$450 million Reliant Stadium that opened in August, 2002 and Reliant Center, a 1.3 million square foot facility. The Houston Texans football team plays in Reliant Stadium, and it is the venue for performances of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and other major events.

Harris County Commissioners Court appoints the five members of the Corporation's Board of Directors. The Board contracts out the management of its facilities.

### *Joint City/County Commission on Children*

Harris County works with the City of Houston on the Joint City/County Commission on Children. The Commission focuses on the needs of youth below the age of 18 by acting as an advocate for their interests; offering ways in which their needs may be met; and promoting the healthy development of children. Its many activities include monitoring and making recommendations for state and federal legislation and influencing policy makers, business leaders and the public. With respect to children's issues, it fosters coordination and collaboration between government and private programs and develops recommendations for Harris County's children regarding such areas as health, education, security and safety. One of its most important initiatives has been the After School Achievement Program that is funded by the City of Houston. The County Judge appoints five members, and the City of Houston appoints five members of the Commission. Eleven "standing seats" include representatives of the foundation, medical and legislative groups, the United Way, Harris County Youth and Adult Services Division, Harris County Department of Education, Houston Independent School District and MHMRA. The Chair of the Commission is jointly appointed by the County Judge and the Mayor of the City of Houston.

### *Harris County Historical Commission*

Chapter 318 of the Texas Government Code states that counties should appoint at least seven residents of the county to carry out an effective preservation program. County commissioners courts in Texas make the appointments in January of odd-numbered years. The Harris County Historical Commission has from 50 to 55 members. The Commission meets on a quarterly basis. It focuses on approving historical marker applications and the placement of markers. Approval by a county historical commission is required on every application for an Official Texas Historical Marker.

# The Voter's Role



Voter registration and all major elections are handled by the county.

## VOTER QUALIFICATIONS

- Citizen of the United States
- Resident of Harris County
- 18 years of age or older
- Registered voter (Voter registration application must be submitted at least 30 days prior to an election)

## VOTER REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Voter registration is handled by the Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector's Office. Voter registration applications may be obtained and all other aspects of voter registration may be handled throughout the year except 30 days before an election in any one of the following ways:

- **BY TELEPHONE:** (713) 224-1919 ext. 310

- **BY MAIL:**

Voter Registration Department  
Tax Assessor-Collector's Office  
P.O. Box 3527  
Houston, Texas 77253-9974

- **IN PERSON:**

Voter Registration Department  
1001 Preston, 2nd Floor  
Houston, Texas

- **IN BRANCH OFFICES AT:**

701 West Baker Road, Baytown  
16603 Buccaneer Lane, Clear Lake City  
5737 Cullen Blvd., Houston  
121 West Main Street, Humble  
101 South Main, Pasadena  
401 Market Street, Suite B, Tomball  
6831 Cypresswood, Spring  
16402 Clay Road, Suite 5, Houston  
6000 Chimney Rock, Houston  
14350 Wallisville Road at Uvalde  
7330 Spencer Highway, Pasadena

Voter registration is occasionally available in places such as shopping centers by persons deputized by the Tax Assessor-Collector. Times and places may be found in the newspapers.

Voter registration is always free and is permanent in the county as long as the tax office is notified of any change of address. Every two years a new voter registration certificate will be mailed to the voter. This certificate should be taken to the polling place by the voter on election day.

## VOTING PRECINCTS

Precinct boundaries are established by county commissioners court in July or August of each odd-numbered year. The maximum number of active voters per precinct is 3000. Currently there are 913 precincts (January 2004).



*Members of the League of Women Voters registering voters.*

### VOTING PROCEDURE

Each voter must vote in the precinct of residence (number shown on voter registration certificate) as described by the county, city or school district calling the election. Information for precinct boundaries may be obtained from the county tax assessor-collector's office. For county elections, all polling places are listed by precinct number in the newspapers immediately before an election and on election day. On election day the polls are open from 7 am to 7 pm.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires a state with a minority population of 5 percent or more to print ballots in the language of that minority, therefore election materials in Texas are available in

both English and Spanish. In addition, Harris County is required to print its election materials, including ballots, in the Vietnamese language due to the fact that more than 10,000 voters of Vietnamese descent have limited English proficiency.

No loitering or electioneering is permitted within 100 feet of the entrance to the polls, and no sound trucks within 1000 feet.

Voters who have registered by mail and have not provided a copy of their identification will be asked to show another form of identification such as a Texas Driver's License or other form of identification besides their voter registration certificate.

### VOTING BY-MAIL PROCEDURE

By-mail voting is available for voters who will be away from Harris County during the early voting period and on Election Day. Voting by mail is also open to persons 65 years or older and persons with disabilities preventing them from visiting a polling location.

Application may be made to the county clerk's office not more than 60 days before the date of election. During the period 60 days prior to the election and until the beginning of absentee voting, the application may be written from inside or outside Harris County. During the period of absentee voting, the application must include the reason for voting absentee, the applicant's permanent address, the address to which the ballot is to be mailed, and the voter registration certificate number, if available.

Temporary residents outside the U.S., members of the armed forces or the merchant marine, their spouses, and dependents may use a "federal post card application" (FPCA) form, which is acceptable any time during the year of the election and remains valid for a period covering two federal elections (up to four years). Individuals using an

FPCA form are encouraged to complete a new form each time they are relocated overseas.

To receive a ballot within the U.S., the application must be received at the county clerk's office by the 7th day preceding election. When voting absentee from outside the U.S., ballots are mailed as available, no earlier than 38 days or later than 4 days before an election. Ballots originating domestically must be received in the county clerk's office no later than 7 pm on Election Day. Voters voting from overseas must have their ballots returned to the county clerk's office no later than the 5th day after the election and must be post-marked as of Election Day.

Former residents of the state who were duly registered to vote in Harris County, but who have moved within 30 days of the election and are ineligible to vote in another state, may vote absentee for the president and vice president either in person or by mail. In-person voters wishing to vote a presidential ballot may only vote at the main early voting location.

*Harris County is required to print its election materials in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.*

### PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Primary elections are preliminary party elections and are conducted through the political party's state and county executive committees in accordance with the Texas Election Code. Parties polling 20 percent or more of the votes for governor at the last general election for that office must nominate their candidates by direct primary.

To have a candidate's name placed on the ballot:

- Application must be filed with the county chairman of the political party for any county, precinct or single county district office.
- Applications for statewide office must be made with the state chairman.
- Application with filing fee or petition must be filed no later than 6 pm on January 2 preceding the primary election. The amount of the filing fee may be obtained from the party offices.

### PARTY PRECINCT ORGANIZATION

Political party precinct conventions are held at 7 pm following the 1st primary, usually at the voting place, to organize the precinct and to elect delegates to district conventions. Precinct judges in charge of holding party elections are elected every 2 years by the voters in each party and precinct.

The senatorial district conventions meet on the 1st Saturday after the 1st primary to elect delegates to the state convention. One delegate is elected for every 300 votes cast for governor in the last general election in that senatorial district.

### GENERAL ELECTIONS

General elections are:

- held the 1st Tuesday after the 1st Monday in November in even numbered years
- located at the polling place in each precinct as designated by the commissioners court
- paid for by the county
- for all registered voters.

In lieu of fees, candidates may file petitions signed by persons eligible to vote for the office for which the candidate is running. The number of signatures required varies according to office and may be obtained from the party offices. Candidates draw for position on the ballot.

The 1st primary is currently held on the 1st Tuesday of March of even numbered years. It is located at the polling place as designated in each precinct by the chairman of the county executive committee of the party, and paid for by filing fees and state funds.

Persons voting in a primary become members of that party and may participate in its conventions or hold a party office.

If no candidate receives a majority of votes, the top two run in the 2nd primary (run-off election) which is held the 2nd Tuesday in April in even-numbered years. Candidates elected then become the party's nominees in the general election.

The state conventions meet any day between the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays in September in even numbered years to certify the party's nominees, to draft state party platforms and to choose the members of the state executive committees. In presidential election years state conventions are held in June, at which state committee heads and delegates are elected to go to national conventions. The number of delegates is determined by the individual political parties.

Precinct judges in charge of holding elections are appointed each July by the commissioners court. Each judge selects clerks.

Party position on the ballot is determined by the number of votes cast for governor in the last election, position one going to the party getting the most votes. Any proposed amendments to the state constitution are included on the ballot.

No write-in vote for state or county office may be counted unless that person has filed a declaration of write-in candidacy.

*Party position on the ballot is determined by the number of votes cast for governor in the last election.*

### SPECIAL ELECTIONS

Special elections in Texas may only be held on one of these dates: 3rd Saturday in January, 3rd Saturday in May, 2nd Saturday in August, or 1st Tuesday after the 1st Monday in November. Public notice must be published in newspapers not more than 22 days or less than 10 days before the election.

Bond elections may be called by city, county, school district or special district at any time to obtain voter approval for bond issues. A majority must approve the issue.

### ELECTION RESULTS

At 7 pm on election day the polls are closed and the equipment secured by the precinct judge. In major elections the ballots are taken by the precinct judge to the central counting station in the county clerk's office for tabulating as soon as

### ELECTION PROCEDURES

The county judge receives authorization for an election from the governor, the commissioners courts or the state political parties, then relays the information to the county clerk, who sets up the election.

Special elections may be called by the governor to fill vacancies in elective offices or to vote on constitutional amendments.

School district elections are held to elect members of the school district board of trustees. Elections are annual, with two or three members elected each year. Election precincts and polling places are designated by the school board; voting equipment is provided by the county, and additional costs are paid by the school district. Only registered voters who are residents of the particular school district holding the election may vote.

possible after the closing of the polls. The county commissioners court canvasses the election no later than 10 days after the election. The candidates elected assume their duties the following January (except for school boards).

All elections must be advertised. Printers bid on the printing of the ballots. There is no charge for the use of voting equipment, owned by the county, in general and special elections. State law requires that if the county owns voting equipment it be used in all county and state elections.



This handbook represents a part of the continuing effort of the League of Women Voters of the Houston Area to provide governmental information for citizens.

For names of officials elected from Harris County, consult our Voters Key, printed annually.

# Harris County A to Z

## ALPHABETIC LISTING OF SERVICES AND DEPARTMENTS

Information on the following subjects is available online at

<http://www.co.harris.tx.us/>

### A

Adults (and Children) Protective Services  
Agendas  
Agriculture Extension (Texas Cooperative Extension Office)  
AIDS - Ryan White Planning Council  
Alarm Detail System  
Alarm Permits  
Animal Control  
Appraisal District  
Assumed Names  
Auction (online)  
Automobile Registration

### B

Bail Bond Board  
Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership  
Beer and Wine Permits  
Bid Listings  
Birth Certificates (born inside Houston)  
Birth Certificates (born outside Houston)  
Budget Management  
Building Management (County buildings)

### C

Cattle Brands  
Child Support  
Child Support Payment Information  
Children (and Adults) Protective Services  
Children (Commission on)  
Children's Assessment Center  
Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)  
Civil Court  
Civil Court Records  
Civil Filing Fees  
Civil Services Fees  
Commission on Children  
Commissioner, Precinct 1, 2, 3, 4  
Commissioners Court Agenda  
Commissioners Court Meeting Results  
Commissioners Interactive Precinct Map  
Community Centers - Commissioner Precinct 1, 2, 3, 4  
Community Health Services  
Community Supervision and Corrections  
Community & Economic Development Department

Constable Precinct 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8  
Constables Map  
Constables Fees  
Construction Permits - County Engineer  
County Attorney  
County Auditor  
County Clerk  
County Courts  
County Directory  
County Engineer  
County Judge  
County Treasurer  
Court of Appeals  
Criminal Court Docket Reports  
Crime Victims  
Criminal Court Records  
Criminal Courts  
Cultural Arts Council

### D

Death Certificates  
Delinquent Tax Property  
Dispute Resolution Center  
District Attorney's Office  
District Clerk's Office  
District Courts  
Docket Reports - Criminal  
Domestic Relations

### E

Economic Development  
Election Information  
Emergency Management  
Employee Information  
Environmental Services  
EZ Tags (Toll Road Authority)

### F

Facilities and Property Management  
Family and Youth Services  
Family Courts  
Family Filing Fees  
Family Service Fees  
Financial Services  
Fire & Emergency Services  
Flood Control District

## G

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Task Force  
Greater Houston Partnership

## H

Harris County Privacy Policy  
Health Administrative Services  
Health Education  
Health Insurance Program for Children (CHIP)  
Health Services  
HIV - Ryan White Planning Council  
Holiday Schedule  
Housing Resource Center  
Houston - Galveston Area Council  
Hospital District  
Human Resource and Risk Management  
Human Services

## I

Information Technology Center  
Insurance Program for Children (CHIP)

## J

Jail - Booking and Release Report  
Jail - Public Information  
Job Opportunities  
Joint City/County Commission on Children  
Judge (County)  
Juror Information  
Jury Service Date Reset  
Justice Information Management Systems (JIMS)  
Justice of the Peace Courts  
Juvenile Probation Department

## L

Library - Law  
Library - Public  
Livestock Brands

## M

Marriage Licenses  
Mediation  
Medical Examiner  
Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority  
(MHMRA)  
Mental Retardation Needs Council  
Metropolitan Transit Authority  
Mixed Beverage Applications  
Mosquito Control  
Motorist Assistance Program  
(MAP) - Sheriff's Office

## N

National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System

## O

Office of Emergency Management  
On-line Web Services

## P

Parks  
Payment Information - Child Support  
Permits - Alarm  
Permits - County Engineer  
Phone Directory  
Pollution Control  
Port of Houston Authority  
Pretrial Services Agency  
Privacy Policy  
Probate Courts  
Property Information  
Property Management (County buildings)  
Public Health and Environmental Services  
Public Infrastructure  
Public Library  
Purchasing Agent

## R

Real Property Records  
Real Time Traffic  
Rules of the Court

## S

Sheriff's Civil Services  
Sheriff's Department  
Small Claims Court (JP Court)  
Social Services  
Sports Authority - Harris County and Houston  
Storm Water Quality

## T

Tax Assessor-Collector  
Tax Liens  
Ticket Payment Online - JP Courts  
Toll Road Authority  
Traffic Counts - County Engineer

## V

Vehicle Registration  
Victim Information  
Voter Registration  
Voting Information

## W

Weather/Emergencies  
Web Services (On-line)

## Y

Youth and Family Services Division



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The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan organization  
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informed and active participation of citizens in government.  
The League does not support or oppose any political party or candidate.