

## 2003 STATE OF THE COUNTY SPEECH: 'CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY'

*Positive reaction from the Houston Chronicle in their February 21, 2003 editorial regarding Judge Eckels' State of the County message: McGrath assisted then Harris County Judge Robert Eckels in preparing his 2003 annual address assessing the state of the third largest county in the United States—larger than 25 states. Click below to read media reaction and the speech itself.*

**STATE OF COUNTY / JUDGE SAYS ADVERSITY HAS MADE HOUSTON AREA STRONGER** | Harris County Judge Robert Eckels delivered an annual State of the County address Thursday that was cognizant of the troubled times. Although his tone was appropriately somber, Eckels managed to convey confidence.

Speaking at a luncheon at the George R. Brown Convention Center, Eckels acknowledged the tragic loss of the seven Columbia astronauts, keenly felt by their Houston—area neighbors. He said Americans rightly exercise the freedom to push back frontiers, but freedom has its costs.

Much of the speech was devoted to issues of homeland security. Eckels mentioned a recently completed drill to test local agencies' ability to respond to a radioactive bomb exploded in the Houston Ship Channel.

The unease of the citizenry perhaps could be measured by the response to Eckels' declaration that this area is lucky to have a fellow Texan in the White House to reinforce government support for space exploration and civil defense. The remark was met first by silence and then by hesitant applause. Ordinarily, the clapping of an audience typical of this heavily Republican county and of events sponsored by the Greater Houston Partnership would have been more spontaneous and enthusiastic.

The judge hailed regional partnerships to operate and increase libraries and parks, and to make police dispatching more efficient. For this Eckels deserves special commendation; before his tenure, interagency rivalry was more common than cooperation.

Although many other government entities are battling acute budget shortfalls, Eckels did not mention that Harris County has amassed a budget surplus of \$172 million. To do so might have reminded citizens of the taxes they pay the county and its affiliates: the port and districts for hospital care, flood control and the spraying of insecticide.

If Eckels' speech had a theme, it was this: Adversity such as Tropical Storm Allison's flooding has made this region stronger — not because of the suffering endured, but because of the ingenuity and unity that characterized the response. Regional preparations informed by common experience will lessen the damage done by a natural disaster or terrorist attack that could soon be making its final approach.

P.O. Box 27701-516  
Houston, Texas 77227

(Office) 713.660.0982  
(Cell) 713.240.6260

[jim@mcgrathbegala.com](mailto:jim@mcgrathbegala.com)  
[www.mcgrathbegala.com](http://www.mcgrathbegala.com)