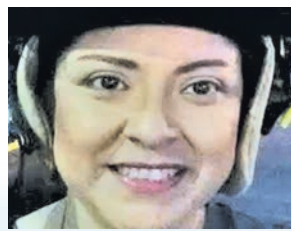




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Looking ahead in 2020:

County judges project progress for coming year

Arnulfo Luna, Frio County

Joel Rodriguez Jr., La Salle County

BREYANA SEGURA
Chief Staff Writer

As he begins his fifth year at the bench, Frio County Judge Arnulfo Luna revisits the successes and challenges of 2019 and shares his vision for 2020.

Although 2019 came with the normal run-of-the-mill infrastructure projects, Luna touts the county's success in purchasing the former adult daycare center on the north end of Pearsall.

"We are going to turn that into the Camino Real Center, a place where the handicapped can work," the judge said in an interview this week. "I believe after the renovations are done it will be up and running within six months."

Luna admits the county was plagued with ongoing county jail issues and does not foresee the facility opening in the near future.



"The commissioners and I have done our part," Luna said. "But that jail is not go-

ing to open anytime soon. There is still a lot of work to (See LUNA, Page 4)

MARC ROBERTSON
Editor

Road and bridge repair with state funding for more such work are at the top of the priority list for La Salle County government in the new year, and Judge Joel Rodriguez is keen to see progress at the most demanding sites in the immediate future.

Over the past ten years, La Salle County has seen a gradual and often critical deterioration of its roads and bridges under the weight and unprecedented volume of energy industry-related traffic, including a cavalcade of 18-wheel trucks that had previously never been seen in the county's outlying areas. Almost all of the county's roads suffered as a direct result of the energy industry boom, and several unpaved ranch-access roads quickly became impassable. Tax revenues, state funds and bond



sales helped the county keep up with some demands - including complete reconstruc-

tion of several heavily used roads - but others continued (See RODRIGUEZ, Page 4)



County Judge Joel Rodriguez, county commissioners and first responders accept the annual South Texas Energy and Economic Roundtable award at a recent ceremony in San Antonio.

La Salle earns 2019 STEER Eagle Ford Excellence Award

The South Texas Energy and Economic Roundtable (STEER) has named La Salle County and its first responders as winners of 2019 Eagle Ford Excellence Award for Community Achievement in Safety.

La Salle County was honored for its collaborative efforts with the oil and gas industry to "work diligently to protect the environment, making safety a top priority, and for building community outreach," according to a prepared statement for the end-of-year award, presented in San Antonio.

Accepting the award for the county's dedication to community safety were La Salle County Judge Joel Rodriguez Jr.; County Commissioners Noel Niavez, Joa-

quin Alba, Erasmo Ramirez Jr. and Raul Ayala; Fire Chief Daniel Mendez and Battalion Chief Gilbert Martinez; and Soteria Solutions' CEO Michelle Joseph.

"Life-changing in a rural area"

-Chief Don Smith
Travis VFD / Soteria Solutions

STEER cited La Salle County for improving the quality of its emergency response through collaboration and partnerships with industry. The county now supports a full-time, fully staffed professional fire department that can respond to any type of emergency, including advanced life support services.

The county has also built two state-of-the-art facilities equipped with training and housing for its employees. La Salle's first responders' fleet has grown from one

(See AWARD, Page 4)

DPS reports holiday travel was safer this year

MARC ROBERTSON
Editor

The Highway Patrol has reported no fatality accidents in Frio or La Salle counties for the recent holiday travel period and is noting that there have been no serious incidents on the region's principal thoroughfares.

While the statistic may indicate travelers were observant and took adequate precautions, the Highway Patrol is also crediting a heavy patrol presence on the interstate as playing a part in reducing the number of life-threatening incidents.

"We are putting every officer out there

that we can," DPS Sgt. JD Rodriguez said this week. "We know that people are traveling through South Texas between major cities and beyond at this time of year, and we know that there is a serious potential for distraction and other hazards. I believe that our patrol coverage has been effective in keeping travelers safe."

The Highway Patrol sergeant said dry weather conditions have also contributed to overall road safety in recent weeks, as the South Texas winter has been mild so far. He also noted that an apparent reduction in the number of freight trucks using IH-35 has

(See TRAVEL, Page 3)



NEW YEAR'S BABY - The first baby born in Frio County in 2020 was delivered at 6:11 a.m. Saturday, January 4, at Frio Regional Hospital. Lucas Jesus Castillo is the son of Loren Maldonado and Jesus Castillo of Pearsall, delivered by Dr. Valentin Ugwe, tipped the scales at 7 lbs., 14 oz., and measured 21 inches in length. He is welcomed by sister Carolina Castillo; and by aunts and uncles Michelle Maldonado, Lysette Maldonado and Ray Maldonado. Maternal grandparents are Lorena Maldonado and Ray Maldonado; paternal grandparents are Francisco and Claudia Castillo. (CURRENT Photo: Tony Perez)

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Beatrice Vasquez

FRIDAY	82F /48F	Mostly Sunny	PRECIP 20%
SATURDAY	67F /37F	Sunny	PRECIP 0%
SUNDAY	70F /47F	Mostly Cloudy	PRECIP 0%

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^Luna (Continued from Page 1)

do and the Texas Commission on Jail Standards has to approve it.”

According to the judge, the facility requires new plumbing and security cameras.

“There has also been a lot of turnover in staff over there,” the judge said. “This year we had a near closure, numerous visits of the commission.”

Luna says he recognizes that Frio County includes more than just Pearsall and Dilley, so he plans to put more spotlight on Moore and Bigfoot in the year ahead.

On the heels of recent vandalism the court approved lighting at the Brummett Cemetery in Moore; the court has also directed legal counsel to investigate the ownership of an old gymnasium in Bigfoot.

“Once Joseph [Sindon, legal counsel] finds out if the county owns that building, we want to turn it into a community center for the citizens of Bigfoot,” Luna said.

The Texas heat has brought an opportunity to the county’s tax base through the potential construction of three solar projects.

According to Luna, the county has been approached by companies who have identified three prime areas for the solar panel projects.

“They want abatements,” Luna said. “That is something the commissioners and I need to look into.”

Should the county offer abatements, each project would employ over 100 employees for a minimum of two years during construction. Once completed, two employees would remain for daily operations.

In 2020, Luna wants to revisit the budget, reevaluate contracts, tackle county road improvements and provide better housing for county offices.

The county judge has placed an emphasis on hiring a grant writer, a position that is currently being advertised.

“We need one,” the judge said. “This would open doors for the county; there is a lot of opportunity out there.”

Through a grant writer, Luna hopes to “get rid” of the FEMA trailers used to house six county departments and build an annex building. The FEMA trailers currently house employees for the Veteran’s transport service, women’s shelter, drivers’ license, ART bus transport and the community council department.

“I also want to work on fixing all the county roads inside the city limits, like Sand Hollow,” Luna said.

When it comes to the budget, Luna admits the county is fiscally sound, but predicts budgetary constraints.

“We did not increase the taxes, yet some people got bumped up by ten thousand dollars on their salaries,” the judge said. “We need to look at the budget. I also think that the county does not need a full-time engineer.”

In revisiting the budget Luna hopes to collaborate with the municipalities to restructure the emergency medical services contract. In 2018, county officials chose to take full financial responsibility for the funding of the emergency medical services contract when the two municipalities were in financial distress.

“We agreed to help them out,” Luna said. “But I think we need to go back and talk about it.”

A family man himself, Luna has added improvements to the community fishing pond to his list of goals for 2020. The pond is currently replenished only by rainwater; Luna wants to install a water well.

“It is stocked each year by the Texas Parks and Wildlife department, so we need to make sure the pond has water,” Luna said.

The county judge summarizes his projections for 2020 as focused on new development and improvements to the county’s facilities.

^Rodriguez (Continued from Page 1)

to crumble.

In 2020, La Salle County Judge Joel Rodriguez expects commissioners to focus on at least three of the county’s most heavily used roads that cater not only to the energy industry but also to local residents, ranchers and hunters.

Bids will be let soon on the work to repair pavement and bridges on Valley Wells Road, after which funds will also go to bridge repairs on the Cochina Ranch and Holland Dam roads.

In all, the first projects of the year are tagged at more than \$8 million, which will be paid with county reserves and funds generated through bond sales and tax revenues.

“We have approximately twenty million dollars left for those kinds of projects,” the county judge said this week, adding that contracts are also soon to be let on the repair of Ledwig Road, near the Frio County Line, for approximately \$800,000. A portion of that expense, he said, may come from contributions by energy industry companies whose vehicles travel frequently in the targeted area.

Judge Rodriguez also said he believes La Salle County will receive funding from the Texas Department of Transportation’s next round of awards, which will go to counties most affected by the impact of the energy industry on roads and bridges.

“The final ruling on \$250 million should come down from Austin soon,” the county judge said. “There should be some good funding for us there, especially to work on county road bridges.”

Judge Rodriguez said he believes La Salle County stands to receive between eight and ten million dollars in the state’s next fund disbursement.

In other road-related updates for the new year, the judge points to the new Cotulla Loop opening soon and helping to relieve the downtown area of heavy traffic. Now several months past its original projected completion date, the loop includes a railroad overpass from the IH-35 access road a short distance north of Cotulla, and a four-lane parkway traveling past the Cotulla - La Salle County Airport as far as State

Hwy 97 and the intersection with FM 624 near the Cotulla High School campus. Newly opened frontage for property development along the loop is expected to attract commercial and residential development, ultimately boosting property tax revenues.

For the people of La Salle County, however, the judge sees 2020 as a year in which many will have better roads on which to travel and will find relief from heavy traffic after a decade of logjams and damaged pavement.

“There is a lot of energy industry infrastructure in place now, including pipelines and operational wells,” Judge Rodriguez said. “We are not going to see as many of the trucks as we saw before. Eventually, better roads and bridges will mean better access for all.

“There will finally be some stability, and that’s what we wanted,” the county judge said. “Economic predictions are hard in the Eagle Ford Shale region. The wells are drilled; it’s not going to be a boom. We are going to see our tax base begin to plateau.”

The judge noted that an overwhelming proportion of local residents have seen property tax breaks, as rates have decreased, but business property taxes have risen.

Improvements in La Salle County residents’ quality of life

will extend beyond new pavement in 2020, and a projected study in water quality will be undertaken in cooperation with Southwest Water Research, according to the county judge, as concerns remain that local drinking water may contain trace elements of chemicals.

“We need to ensure that there are no fracking fluids in the water supply,” Judge Rodriguez said. “We are pleased that several oil companies share this concern and have indicated they are willing to share some of the costs of the study.”

Judge Rodriguez looks to 2020 as a year in which the county government continues working closely with city governments, law enforcement, civic and community groups for the overall and long-term betterment of life in South Texas. He points to good working relationships between the entities in the past as indicative of the year ahead, and reminds his constituents that it is today’s affluence, employment, tax base, infrastructure, business development and proactive planning that represent much of what the region expected out of the Eagle Ford Shale boom a decade ago.

“This is what we wanted,” he said. “This is where we wanted to be and how we expected it to pan out. We are in a position to plan effectively and to take care of our peoples’ needs.”

^Award (Continued from Page 1)

truck to a fleet of three Class A pumpers, four brush trucks, three advanced life support service ambulances, and an aerial ladder that can be used on multistory buildings, including hotels.

“The founding members created STEER to develop Eagle Ford’s energy resources in a manner that is mutually beneficial to the industry and communities,” Michelle Joseph said. Soteria Solutions LLC is the nation’s leading authority on emergency response planning for county and city governments. Joseph works with retired Travis County Fire Chief Don Smith to provide expertise and resources counties need for

comprehensive emergency planning.

“Soteria Solutions connects elected officials with the stakeholder communities they serve,” Joseph said.

“La Salle’s first responders now offer advanced life support services such as administration of IVs, whole blood, and much more,” La Salle County Judge Rodriguez said.

La Salle County is one of only a handful of fire departments in the nation approved to administer whole blood, which provides severe trauma victims with more than three times the survival rate.

“This is life-changing in a rural area, where every second gained saves lives and pre-

vents further damage,” Chief Don Smith said. “City residents can now expect help in less than five minutes, with a countywide response average of eighteen minutes.”

Through collaboration with the oil and gas industry, La Salle County formed a Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) that acts as a clearinghouse for safety and best practices while establishing constant communication to keep the region safe. The county is developing agreements with McMullen, Webb and Frio counties for joint-rescue efforts.

La Salle County recently received a \$1.6 million FEMA SAFER grant designed to add

15 firefighter/EMTs or paramedics to meet NFPA staffing standards. La Salle County Fire Rescue is fully staffed, 24 hours a day, year-round. The county also received a grant through the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to help the LEPC and the industry create a joint response team with a fully equipped trailer dedicated to HAZMAT emergencies.

Improvements in emergency response have enabled the county’s ISO rating to rise from a low grade of 9-1- to the superior level 5, with expectations of a level 3 rating before the next evaluation when a new dispatch control center opens in 2020. The ISO safety rating lowers insurance premiums for residents and businesses in a county.

“We are very pleased with these results of the work being done to improve safety and emergency response throughout the county,” Judge Rodriguez said in a telephone interview this week. “A lot of credit goes to the untiring efforts of Chief Smith and our local responders, especially for their continued awareness of the immediate needs in emergency preparedness and with securing the appropriate equipment and resources to handle any emergency. At the same time, we are acutely aware of new developments, and Soteria Solutions is helping keep us ahead of the curve.”

STEER is the leading Eagle Ford Shale resource in the region and is the primary coordinator for communication and public advocacy surrounding the oil and natural gas industry in South Texas. The organization serves as the bridge connecting the industry and communities throughout South Texas to ensure positive collaboration and communication regarding the activities associated with energy production in the Eagle Ford Shale. Partners include Marathon Oil, Chesapeake Energy, EOG Resources, Conoco Phillips, XTO Energy, Pioneer Natural Resources, DEVON, Murphy Oil Corporation, Mobil Energy and several other energy companies doing business in the Eagle Ford Shale.

Comptroller’s Office Encourages Homeowners to Take Advantage of Homestead Exemptions

One of the easiest ways a homeowner can lower his or her property tax bill in 2020 is to file a homestead exemption. A homestead is generally the house and land used as the owner’s principal residence on Jan. 1 of the tax year.

Homestead exemptions reduce the appraised value of your home and, as a result, lower your property taxes. To apply for an exemption on your residence homestead, contact the Frio County Appraisal District.

Available homestead exemptions include:

* **School taxes:** All homeowners may receive a \$25,000 homestead exemption for school taxes.

* **County taxes:** If a county collects a special tax for farm-to-market roads or flood control, a homeowner may receive a \$3,000 homestead exemption for this tax.

* **Age and disability exemptions:** Individuals 65 or older or disabled as defined by law may qualify for a \$10,000 homestead exemption for school taxes, in addition to the \$25,000 exemption available to all homeowners. Also, any taxing unit may offer a local option exemption of at least \$3,000 for taxpayers age 65 or older and/or disabled. Older or disabled homeowners do not need to own their homes on January 1 to qualify for the \$10,000 homestead exemption. They qualify as soon as they turn 65 or become disabled.

* Taxing units may offer a **local option exemption** based on a percentage of a home’s appraised value. Any taxing unit can exempt up to 20 percent of the value of each qualified homestead. No matter what percentage of value the taxing unit adopts, the dollar value of the exemption must be at least \$5,000.

* **Partial exemption for disabled veterans:** Texas law provides partial exemptions for any property owned by veterans who are disabled, surviving spouses and surviving children of deceased disabled veterans. This includes homesteads donated to disabled veterans by charitable organizations at no cost to the disabled veterans and their surviving spouses. The exemption amount is determined according to the percentage of service-connected disability.

* **100% Residence Homestead Exemption for Disabled Veterans:** A disabled veteran who receives 100 percent disability compensation due to a service-connected disability and a rating of 100 percent disabled or of individual employability from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs is entitled to an exemption from taxation of the total appraised value of the veteran’s residence homestead. Surviving spouses of veterans who qualified for this exemption or who would have qualified for this exemption if it had been in effect at the time of the veteran’s death are also eligible with certain restrictions. The residence homestead application must be filed if this exemption is claimed.

* **Surviving Spouses of Members of the U.S. Armed Services Killed in Action:**

The surviving spouse of a member of the U.S. armed services who is killed in action is allowed a total (100 percent) property tax exemption on his or her residence homestead if the surviving spouse has not remarried since the death of the armed services member.

* **Surviving Spouse of First Responder killed in the line of duty:** (Tax Code Section 11.134), you may qualify if you are the surviving spouse of a first responder who is killed or fatally injured in the line of duty; and you have not remarried since the death of the first responder.

For more details on homestead exemptions, contact us at:

Frio County Appraisal District

815 S. Oak
P.O. Box 1129
Pearsall, TX. 78061
830-334-4163

Visit the State Comptroller’s Website at comptroller.texas.gov/taxes/property-tax

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