



Date:
Contact:

July 22, 2008
Joe Stinebaker
Communications Director
O) 713-755-4027
C) 713-503-2610
Joe.Stinebaker@cjo.hctx.net

NEWS RELEASE

CITIZENS TASK FORCE ON ETHICS REFORM CALLS FOR SWEEPING CHANGES IN HARRIS COUNTY ETHICS POLICIES

*Panel Members Call For Ethics Review Board, Lobbyist
Registration and Tighter Controls on Campaign Contributions*

Members of an independent Ethics Reform Task Force appointed by County Judge Ed Emmett earlier this year released their final report today, calling for substantial changes in how Harris County oversees ethics compliance by its officials, employees and contractors.

The five-member task force, appointed by Emmett in February to review "best practices" in government and private sector ethics, completed its work earlier this month. Jim Crownover, the panel's chairman, sent a copy of the report to Emmett, who forwarded copies of the report and its recommendations to the other members of Commissioners Court on July 14.

Board members said they wanted to emphasize the importance of creating a positive ethical culture in the county through education and a set of clear expectations. "There is a limit to how much a legally based code of however many rules can promote ethical behavior," the report says. "Good ethical behavior has to be more than just avoiding breaking the law."

The panel's 15-page report calls for registration and disclosure of lobbyists trying to influence decision-making in Harris County and a one-year ban on lobbying by former county employees. It also recommends barring elected officials from soliciting campaign contributions from contractors during contract award periods and could expand the number of county officials and employees required to file financial disclosure forms.

"The members of this task force volunteered many hours of their time to ensure greater transparency and greater confidence in Harris County government," said Emmett. "I truly appreciate their sacrifice, and I hope we can adopt much of what they are recommending."

The task force called for creation of a "Harris County Ethics Board" composed of nine volunteers nominated by Commissioners Court and civic and professional organizations such as the Harris County Bar Association, League of Women Voters or local universities. The Ethics Board would oversee ethics training, investigate complaints and conduct a running assessment of needed changes to the county's ethics policies.