

Williamson County Commissioner's Court Meeting (9/29/15)

By: Kyle Rearden from [The Last Bastille blog](#)

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One distinguishing feature in a republican form of government is the notion of a separation of powers, which is an attempt at hampering any concentration of power from being established within a segment of the overall tyranny now engulfing our freedoms. By calling itself, “authority,” Leviathan uses all manner of confusing [legalese](#) to deceive, inveigle, and obfuscate its hapless victims into an inactive stupor through [befuddlement](#). If agents of [the State](#) were said to have conspired against your liberty, then it would be that they have insidiously planned to bore you to death.

Texas county government enjoys some rather noticeable idiosyncrasies worth mentioning. According to the eleventh chapter about local government from Gary Halter’s [Government & Politics of Texas: A Comparative View](#) political science textbook, he says:

“In Texas, the governing body of county government is the **county commissioner’s court**. It is composed of the **constitutional county judge** and four county commissioners...[e]ven though this body is termed the *commissioner’s court*, it is not a court but a legislative body. Its duties include passing local ordinances, approving budgets and new programs, and oversight of county government.”

In other words, this “court” is really just a legislature for the county; to add further confusion, [Article 5 § 18](#) of the 1876 Texas Constitution gives the impression that county commissioner’s courts are part of the judiciary, since Article 5 is all about the judicial branch whereas Article 3 is about the legislative branch. Why the drafters of this constitution refused to describe this entity as a county legislature and save everyone some grief, is beyond me. Halter goes onto say that:

“[T]he plural executive structure of county government in Texas is a product of the nineteenth century and the general distrust of centralized executive authority. The plural executive structure lacks centralized authority, and the elected officials can, and often do, act quite independently of each other. While the county commissioner’s court does exercise some control over these department heads, it is primarily limited to budgetary matters. After a budget is approved, elected officials can make many independent decisions.”

Geez, why would Texas county governments have a deliberately weak executive? Might not that have anything to do with [Texans having successfully thrown off Santa Anna and his tyrannical federal government using Committees of Safety](#) back in 1835, would it? Interestingly, Halter says:

“County officials often have very provincial attitudes about the role of county government. The idea of expanding county services is foreign to many county officials. They seem content with the status quo. Prospects are dim for any great change in Texas county government in the short run. Urban counties will continue to face many problems that have only a mild impact on rural counties.”

Isn't that a good thing, though? I would hope these public “officials” were sincerely interested in keeping the government small, limited, and inoffensive to the sensibilities of the Texan people. Besides, those government services that Halter appears to want to have expanded could actually be done both ethically sound and more efficiently through [market privatization](#) (which is not to be confused with either corporatization or fascism, just to be clear).

Since I was curious as to what a public meeting of a county commissioner's court was actually like, I trundled on over to the [Williamson County Courthouse](#) in Georgetown. Despite the later end of morning rush hour, it was relatively easy for me to travel north, given that nearly everyone else was traveling south, at least, until I hit the interstate highway. Once I survived crawling through that gauntlet, the rest of the trip was rather uneventful, if you don't count me completely bypassing the sign with an arrow pointing to the (non-judicial) courthouse.

Arriving at the “courthouse” was unexpectedly pleasant, given that there was free parking easily available. Between normal business hours, you can park for up to three hours at a crack; this was so unlike [the parking situation for the Austin City Council I experienced three years ago](#). Choosing to park at the side of the building enabled me to make a quick exit out of Georgetown, should I need or want one.

Waltzing right on it, I noticed that there were no metal detectors or TSA-like screeners rifling through my bag, unlike the earlier city council meeting. Once I had gotten to the center of the building (which is straight underneath the dome), a bureaucratic flunky approached me, asking if she could help me get to where I was going. After telling her I was there for the weekly commissioner's court meeting, she told me to proceed to the 2nd floor.

At the top of the winding staircase was a police officer of some kind who eyed me as I was getting off the stairs. Briefly scanning the doorways on this floor gave me no hints as to where to go, so I approached the officer and asked for directions, to which he pointed towards the “courtroom.” Odd as it may sound coming from me, of all people, this was singularly the briefest and least dangerous police encounter I have ever had.

Heading right on into the legislative chambers, another bureaucrat motioned to me to grab a copy of the [meeting's agenda](#), which I did. I quickly grabbed a seat, and it wasn't too long until the meeting started on time with both a prayer and *two* pledges of allegiance. The prayer invoked the assistance of "Our Lord Jesus Christ," which reminded me of [Shane Radliff's attendance at a McLean County board meeting last May](#). Following the pledge of allegiance towards [Old Glory](#), there was a second pledge of allegiance towards the [Lone Star](#). According to [Texas Government Code § 3100.101](#):

"The pledge of allegiance to the state flag is: 'Honor the Texas flag; I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas, one state under God, one and indivisible.' "

The commissioner's court followed the law by reciting the United States pledge of allegiance *before* the Texan one, pursuant to § 3100.103, although I was conflicted as to how I should act during all this praying and pledging. Not wanting to stand out, what I ended up doing was standing up, kept my head bowed during the prayer, and then placed my hand over my heart during the pledging, although I kept my mouth shut. Interestingly enough, according to § 3100.104(1)(C), I was expected by Texas law to recite their pledge, although I was unable to determine whether this counted as an act of [civil disobedience](#) or not, as opposed to [Shane's exposé of all those Title 4 violations of Old Glory](#).

Today's meeting got underway rather quickly, much to my relieved sense of impending boredom. Thankfully, unlike my earlier legislative political fieldtrip, there were no violations of the Texas Constitution that I noticed. The "county judge," [Dan Gattis](#), received confirmation that this meeting was being videotaped, but I haven't be able to discover how to get a copy; much like [last night's TAG meeting](#), I doubt any video footage will become publicly accessible anytime soon.

The subject matter of the agenda itself is duller than a wet blanket at a cocktail party, so I will mention other aspects of the meeting I found more insightful with regards to the nature of "local" government, instead. This chamber's architecture was noticeably different from the Austin City Council's chambers, in that instead of a (presumably) post-modern and awkward sharp angles with [television studio lighting suspended from the ceiling](#), there was rather elegant wood paneling *everywhere*, coupled with subdued lighting that appeared to emulate [The Driskill hotel](#) in downtown Austin. The chairs that the commissioners sat in looked exactly like the ones at the Texas Capitol, and the wooden benches resembled church pews, albeit curved ones.

Socially, the environment was subtly cordial. The various bureaucrats and legislators greeted each other warmly, but mostly ignored what hapless citizens bothered to show up. An atmosphere of tense boredom from the audience was evocative of silent desperation. Much like Shane, I did not feel as if I belonged at all, but then again, neither did the rest of the attending citizenry, either. During the two pledges, I couldn't shake the feeling that the atmosphere, temporarily, became much like a government school with all of [the worshipping of the State](#) going on.

I noticed that on the portion of the "courtroom" opposite the commissioners were both designated and undesignated seating for the audience. One of the designated sections was

labeled, “press,” and the people sitting in those two rows were, by far, the most formally dressed people at the meeting, surpassing even the commissioners themselves. This indicated to me that they were the lapdog corporate press, and although I was tempted when I first walked in to sit with them, it would have likely invited all sorts of questions as to which newspaper I worked for, and especially considering that I was not wearing a suit, telling them I was an anti-political libertarian blogger would not help me blend in, so I chose to sit with the other hapless citizens in the undesignated section.

Once the commissioners decided to call for a recess about an hour into the meeting, I decided that I just had about my fill tolerating statism for today. Despite the fact that I am compelled by law to pay a yearly car “registration” tax to the [tax assessor collector](#), I have no other legal relationship with the Williamson County government, at least, that I am aware of; as such, I was already motivated to get out earlier rather than later. Much to my chagrin, the wooden doors I had entered through were locked during the recess, but I had noticed some of the bureaucrats at the back of the chambers leaving through a side door, and they hadn’t returned yet. Going through this doorway led to a small meeting room and another doorway, this one led out to the 2nd floor hallway. Feeling more freedom with each passing step down the winding staircase, I literally walked away from government, and thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it.

Unless you are going up for your three minutes of addressing the commissioner’s court during “citizen communications” at the beginning of the meeting, then attending any session of a county legislature is a rather poor way of spending what time you have left for your remaining lifespan. There wasn’t anything particularly enlightening or intriguing about this fieldtrip other than the lighting and the architecture. Dull [parliamentary procedure](#) can kill liberty slowly because it can disincentivize people from acting as watchdogs against the behavior of “local” government. If there was anything for me to take away from this, it would be that the Austin municipal government and the Texas (state-level, really, provincial) government enjoy far more coercive interference in my life than the Williamson County government does.