



TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF REGIONAL COUNCILS

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Good morning Chairman Coleman and members of the Committee. My name is Wes Suiter and I am the County Judge in Angelina County, Vice President of the Texas Association of Regional Councils and Second Vice President of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments or Region 14 on your map. I have with me Walter Diggles, Executive Director of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments.

Let me start by saying thank you for inviting me to testify here today. TARC and the regional councils look forward to our continued work with the County Affairs Committee during the 83rd legislative session.

The Texas Association of Regional Councils (TARC) an umbrella organization, based in Austin, and focused on supporting and assisting the 24 regional councils of government across the State of Texas. We provide an open forum for the exchange of information and ideas related to regional planning and development. TARC also sponsors quarterly content-rich and timely training sessions for regional council staff professionals in a variety of program areas with a goal of strengthening regional council capabilities.

I have been asked to provide some general background and history on the role of regional councils in Texas. I will do that briefly and also talk a little about their structure, governance and accountability. For those of you who have served on this committee or in the legislature, I apologize in advance for telling you something you may already know.

BACKGROUND

Since the *Regional Planning Act of 1965* was introduced, authorizing regional councils of governments in Texas, regional councils have worked to guide the development of their regions. To achieve this purpose, Texas' regional councils rely on facilitating cooperation and coordination among the cities, counties, school districts, and special districts that make up their regional community.

Statutorily, regional councils are known as regional planning commissions, but they may also be called development councils, area councils, associations of government, planning commissions, or councils of government, (most frequently shortened to the acronym, COG). Under any name, they are a useful, voluntary instrument enabling local governments to determine public policy and provide essential services—and to achieve together what a single entity may not be able to accomplish alone. Regional councils encourage their local government members to cooperate to improve the health, safety, and general welfare of citizens and plan for the future development of their communities.

A color geographic map of the 24 regions is provided in your packet and you will see that the entire footprint of the state is covered by their service areas. All 254 counties in Texas belong to a regional council as well as most cities, school districts and special districts.

Each regional council is established to determine and address the specific needs as agreed upon by the local governments within the region. The political, programmatic, economic, and philosophical

environment in the 24 state planning regions in Texas varies greatly, reflecting the vastness and diversity of our state. Regional councils are given the flexibility under law to effectively represent the uniqueness of the regions, and at the same time, to implement programs and policies for effective statewide coverage. Regional councils frequently partner with state agencies and federal agencies through a multitude of contractual relationships, each with its own work program, budgetary and reporting requirements.

Some examples of programs include but are not limited to the following:

- planning and implementing regional homeland security strategies;
- operating law enforcement training academies;
- promoting regional municipal solid waste and environmental quality planning;
- managing region-wide services to the elderly;
- maintaining and improving regional 9-1-1 systems;
- promoting regional economic development;
- operating specialized transit systems; and
- providing management services for member governments.

As an example of something you appropriate to assist our efforts, I have handed out a report about one program we are involved in as a partner with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the regional solid waste grants program. This partnership and funding is very important to the state, regional councils, local governments and the health and safety of the citizens we all serve.

STRUCTURE: ELECTED OFFICIAL LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Participating governmental members by joint agreement determine the number and qualifications of members of the governing body of regional planning commission. That governing body must consist of at least two-thirds local elected officials from the region's participating counties and municipalities.

Leadership by local elected officials is one of the most important characteristics of the regional councils. Regional councils are capable of bringing together a large number of policy makers with authority, knowledge and a stake in their community's local interests sufficient to bring collaboration on a broad range of programs and services. A regional council is governed by its member local governments; therefore, the first consideration in determining its activities is the expectation of its members as expressed by its governing board.

OVERSIGHT & ACCOUNTABILITY: ANNUAL REPORTING & AUDIT REQUIREMENTS

Each regional council is required to submit annually to the governor, the state auditor, the comptroller, and the Legislative Budget Board the following:

Funding Related Reports

- The amount and source of funds received by each regional council;
- The amount and source of funds expended by the regional council; and
- An explanation of any method the regional councils use to compute expenses.

Productivity and Performance Reports

- A report of the regional council's productivity and performance during the annual reporting period and

- A projection for the regional council's productivity and performance during the next annual reporting period.

Administrative Reports

- A report of assets disposed of by the regional council and
- A report of the regional council salary schedule containing a classification salary schedule for classified positions and identifying and specifying the salaries for positions exempt from the classification salary schedule as prescribed in the General Appropriations Act adopted by the most recent legislature.

Audit Reports

- The results of an audit prepared by an independent certified public accountant.

In addition, the Office of the Governor may draft and adopt rules relating to the oversight of the planning commission and such rules have been adopted in the Texas Administrative Code. The Governor's office has determined that the regional councils shall make the financial audit available to each member of the Legislature. In your packet you will find a spreadsheet developed to outline the regional councils' various reporting requirements.

In the last legislative session Chairman Coleman sponsored and the legislature passed a bill to encourage legislative leaders to participate on the Board of Directors at each of the regional councils. I encourage you and your staff to get involved with your regional council if you are not already. I have provided a list of the regions that you represent below:

Representative Garnet Coleman-Houston Galveston Area Council

Representative Joe Faria-Alamo Area Council of Governments

Representative Mary Gonzales-Rio Grande Council of Governments

Representative Lois Kolkhorst-Capital Area Council of Governments, Houston-Galveston Area Council, Brazos Valley Council of Government, Golden Crescent Regional Planning Commission

Representative Ana Luna Hernandez-Houston-Galveston Area Council

Representative Todd Hunter-Coastal Bend Council of Governments

Representative Matt Krause-North Central Texas Council of Governments

Representative David Simpson-East Texas Council of Governments

Representative Jonathan Stickland-North Central Texas Council of Governments

CONCLUSION

Regional councils are in the business of helping government better respond to the needs of its people. They provide a statewide, multi-functional network for determining the most effective and efficient ways to meet local needs and then seeing that needed services are delivered. Regional councils also want to continue to as effective and accountable partners in helping state and federal agencies accomplish their policy goals and initiatives. Regional councils have for more than four decades worked to secure a better future for Texas and look forward to the challenges which lie ahead.