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County and District Clerks unveil new online search service

Free online search is now available for information managed by both the County Clerk and the District Clerk in Ellis County.

“On July 1, we began our online service,” said District Clerk Melanie Reed. “You can view case filings that have occurred in Ellis County – you can look them up by cause number or by name.”

Reed said the offices were working hard to get the word out about the new service, which will not only reduce pressure on county staff members but also assist attorneys, title companies, and members of the general public in conducting business with the two offices.

Searchable records for the District Clerk include both civil and criminal cases filed in District Court. The County Clerk’s records include civil and criminal court cases filed in County Court at Law, birth records, death records, marriage licenses, and real property ownership records.

Customers are not yet able to access images of the records. Once that service becomes available, a subscription fee structure will be established for downloading those images. Simple searches are likely to continue free of charge.

“The project we’ve got going right now is the one that takes the index and images back to 1845,” said County Clerk Cindy Polley. “That’s millions of records.”

She indicated most types of records are currently available as far back as 1992.

To access this new service, go to <http://countyinfosearch.com>; or navigate to the Ellis County website at www.co.ellis.tx.us and drop down the menu for “Government.” From there, choose County Clerk or District Clerk, and County Info Search.

“As an attorney, I can say this will be a great resource,” said County Judge Carol Bush. “I think it will help in streamlining our offices.”

In the ongoing redistricting process required due to population growth as shown by the 2010 U.S. Census, Commissioners voted four to one to submit Model Plan 3 to the County’s legal consultant, Michael Morrison, who will prepare documents that will be utilized to obtain pre-clearance from the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Court is required to review Commissioner Precincts after the release of new data from the U.S. Census office every ten years to ensure, first, that the Constitutional provision for equal protection under the law is met – in other words, “One man, one vote.” However, in drawing new precinct lines, the Court must also ensure that they do not dilute the voice of any minority group.

“On July 6, we had a meeting of the Citizens Advisory Board to get their recommendation, and we had a public hearing as well,” said Bush. “Now it is time for us to move on and stay within the time limits for submitting our plan.”

An informal poll taken by Morrison at the public hearing indicated most members of the committee who were present favored Model Plan 3 over Model Plan 7.

Bush noted that incremental changes, or “tweaks,” may still be necessary in order to meet Constitutional and statutory regulations and gain the pre-clearance from the Department of Justice.

Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3, cast the dissenting vote.

“I have to vote no on principle,” he said, noting he did not feel secure the tweaks would be made as agreed upon by individual members of the Court. “Also the process – maps were never given to the committee as a whole to choose from. Only six committee members were here when they were given out.”

Six different Model Plans were presented to members of the Advisory Committee for their review and were discussed at a workshop on June 22. In a regularly-scheduled meeting on June 27, the Court narrowed the choices down to Model Plan 3 and Model Plan 7. Although Sims said he and some of his constituents preferred Model Plan 6, Morrison had indicated that plan posed serious questions about dilution of the minority vote. Specifically, while Plan 6 appeared to increase the percentage of minority vote in a single precinct, it switched that percentage from Precinct 1 (more urban) to Precinct 2 (more rural). Several minority members of the Advisory Committee joined Morrison in expressing strong reservations.

“We need to do what is most responsible and pursue a plan that is not going to make us defend it,” Bush said during the June 27 meeting. “I don’t want a legal challenge to our plan.”

In other business, Commissioners:

- Approved a one-time variance from County of Ellis Rules, Regulations and Specifications for Subdivisions and Manufactured Home Parks relating to road frontage, and two variances relating to the fire hydrant requirement;
- Approved the final plat of Garden Estates on Westmoreland Road in precinct 4, contingent upon receipt of the necessary security documents;
- Approved the final plat of Allison Addition on Campbell Road in precinct 3;
- Approved the Early Voting Schedule and Election Day Polling Locations for the November 8, 2011 Amendment Election;
- Accepted a dedication from the state of Texas of an approximate 1.5 mile section of right of way upon completion of improvements by the state of Texas;
- Approved a work order under an existing interlocal agreement with the City of Red Oak;
- Approved interlocal agreements with the City of Glenn Heights, the City of Ovilla, the City of Pecan Hill, and the City of Oak Leaf.