



## TEXAS MIDWEST COMMUNITY NETWORK ISSUES – 81<sup>st</sup> LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The legislative program for TMCN reflects the independence and individualism of our region. As we work to build our communities and economies we are not looking for hand-outs because we already know how to pull up our own bootstraps. If it is the State's job to provide a service, we ask that the State provide that service. If it is our job as local leaders and elected officials to provide a service, we ask to be allowed to do our jobs. If the state is going to partner with Texas communities on projects, we ask that all communities be included in the projects. Things just seem to work better that way.

As the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session gets underway we have two issues specific to the Texas Midwest and six that are important to all of rural Texas. All of the issues we will discuss with our Representatives and Senators are about the economic health of Main Street and our ability to protect it and promote it.

### The two issues specific to our region are:

1. **South Orient Railroad** – In 2001 the State purchased the South Orient Railroad from Coleman Junction to Presidio. The rail line provides a direct link to Topolobampo, a deep water Pacific port. The line is important to Martifer, a company that recently announced a new plant in San Angelo, but TXDOT does not have the \$20,000,000 needed to make rail line and bridge repairs between San Angelo and Coleman without action by the Legislature. The funding needed to completely renovate the line is estimated at over \$150,000,000. Selling the line is recommended by the Sunset Commission. TMCN supports the renovation of the entire line, whether it is done by the state or through the sale of the line as recommended by Sunset Commission staff.
2. **Eligibility for Insurance Cooperative** – TMCN has organized and launched a regional cooperative for small businesses in the region to have access to affordable group healthcare plans. The businesses are eligible if they are a member of a participating chamber of commerce/business association. Many of the chambers of commerce organizations in the region have one employee and do not qualify for group coverage. TMCN is asking for legislation that would allow single employee chambers/business associations to join together as one group and qualify for healthcare coverage through the cooperative. It would only seem appropriate that the chamber/business association employee who is helping local businesses to secure affordable insurance coverage would have the same opportunity.

### The six issues of concern for all of rural Texas are:

1. **Wind Energy** – The Legislature has been asked to consider placing the responsibility of siting wind farms in the hands of the Texas Land Commission or individual County Commissioners' Courts. The current process of wind farm siting is a complex mix of wind speed, transmission line availability, construction costs, market rates, etc. The current process allows free enterprise to decide where to place towers. It is the position of TMCN that free enterprise should continue to decide where to invest its funds, not the State and not County Commissioners, unless such a location interferes with public safety concerns, particularly aviation safety.

2. **Appraisal Caps** – This has been a hot legislative topic over the last four sessions. In a time when housing values are falling, states are crying out for more Federal assistance, it seems wrong to further limit the abilities of local officials to make sound fiscal decisions based upon the unique situations facing their communities. Elected city, county and school district officials are closer to their constituents than any other level of government and the democratic process provides the ultimate power needed to correct any potential abuse by elected local officials. It is the position of TMCN that local officials should be allowed to chart their own community's destiny and appraisal caps are unnecessary burdens on local government.
3. **Community College Funding** - The legislature has been asked to consider providing sufficient base funding for community colleges and to fund community college group healthcare insurance based on employee eligibility. Community colleges currently enroll over 50% of all students enrolled in higher education in Texas, including 70% of all new students entering Texas higher education. Community colleges serve as the state's primary workforce trainer and re-trainer, provide lifelong learning opportunities and play an indispensable role in the economic vitality of the region and state. It is the position of TMCN that the State should provide sufficient base formula funding and eligible employee benefits for community colleges.
4. **State Funding for West Texas AHEC**- The West Texas Area Health Education Center (AHEC) facilitates health care workforce development and supports providers in the western half of Texas. West Texas AHEC provides statewide leadership and a rural focus for AHEC initiatives that rural communities depend on to meet current and future health care workforce needs. Significant federal funding for the West Texas AHEC program ends in September 2009. Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center's Legislative Appropriations Request for FY 2010 and FY 2011 contains an exceptional item request specific to West Texas AHEC's transition from federal to state funding. State funding is already provided to the other two Texas AHEC programs. West Texas AHEC's transition to state funding is essential to the continuation of services in the Western half of Texas and the rural focused leadership provided through statewide AHEC initiatives. TMCN supports this transition. (For further information concerning West Texas AHEC please contact Ronnie Laurance, Director of Special Projects (325) 793-8484 or rlaurance@wctcog.org.)
5. **Rural Economic Development Fund** – Texas' economic development has won numerous awards for its work in building and enhancing the Texas economy, however, most of the work has been focused on the state's urban areas. Rural areas continue to contribute mightily to the Texas economy, but our needs are different than those of the urban areas. Senator Lucio has introduced a bill that would create a Rural Economic Development Fund that would focus on the needs unique to rural areas. TMCN supports this bill.
6. **Affordable Rural Housing** – The programs and rules for affordable housing programs are written with metropolitan areas in mind as the majority of people and housing units are in metropolitan areas. This focus on urban areas makes qualifying for these programs more difficult for rural areas. TMCN supports and encourages the development of affordable housing guidelines and programs that are accessible for all of Texas' communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these issues.

TMCN Legislative Affairs Committee

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