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COMMISSIONER PRECINCT 2:
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COMMISSIONER PRECINCT 4:
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COUNTY AUDITOR:
April A. Cantu

COUNTY OF BEE

December 31, 2020

FROM THE DESK OF THE BEE COUNTY JUDGE:

I hope everyone had a merry Christmas and I wish us all a safe and healthy 2021! As we look forward to the end of 2020, I wanted to take a moment to address a few important matters. Before proceeding, here is what this report contains:

- (1) the Bee County Covid-19 Coalition is operated by volunteers (we do not pay our coalition workers); but, employees with the testing contractor from the Texas Department of Emergency Management are paid;
- (2) the 6-days-a-week TDEM regional testing site announcement does not change, except to expand access, the regional approach to Covid-19 that Bee County has always maintained;
- (3) Covid-19 vaccine has reached Bee County through a few approved vaccine recipients (with more entities expecting approval in the near future, including Bee County), but data on future deliveries is not available; at this point in time in the State's distribution scheme, the State deals directly with approved vaccinators, and allocates available vaccine based on the State's own internal determinations; because of this structure and because many approved vaccinators are approved at the corporate (not local) level, there is no method to determine future vaccine allocation to entities within the County, except through the self-reporting of our local approved vaccinators; and
- (4) Covid-19 cases counts are steeply rising in the US, in Texas and in Bee County; you can always check this website for the most up to date publicly-available data on Covid-19 in Texas (including Bee County) - <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>.

— *The Bee County Covid-19 Coalition Volunteers* —

First, it has come to my attention that some confusion may exist as to the Bee County Covid-19 Coalition and its volunteers; so, allow me to clear the air. Since its inception in March 2020, the Bee County Covid-19 Coalition (the "BC3") has operated entirely by volunteers and that remains true to this day.

From the volunteers administering Covid-19 tests, the office administrators handling all the required paperwork, to the medical doctor contacting the folks that test positive for Covid-19, all our volunteers are just that, volunteers. This means that since April 2020, in addition to their paying jobs, they have ensured that Covid-19 testing is available for anyone who needs it (and for most of the year – anyone that wants it) in our County and beyond. The BC3 Drive-through Testing Facility would not exist but for the tireless voluntary efforts of our team of medical professionals. They are not compensated; they have not been compensated; and there are no plans to compensate our volunteers. That being said, the service they have provided has been invaluable to our community; to each one of us. And so, they have my deepest gratitude and my greatest respect. And they should have yours as well.

Recently, the Texas Department of Emergency Management (“TDEM”) has identified certain localities for semi-permanent testing facilities manned by one or more independent contractors engaged in buccal swab (mouth swab) Covid-19 testing (the “TDEM Contractors”). The TDEM independent contractors took over Covid-19 testing from the military which was initially performing the service in our region and frequently here in Bee County. Now, beginning as early as this week, TDEM’s contractors will be providing Covid-19 testing at the Expo here in Bee County 6 days a week. And even though vaccines are in the early stages of distribution, testing will remain a vital component of our Covid-19 response for some time, so having a semi-permanent site adds great value to Bee County and to our surrounding counties as well. This is very good news.

It is important to distinguish between the TDEM Contractors and the BC3 volunteers. BC3 volunteers are not paid; employees/contract labor for TDEM Contractors are paid. Both provide Covid-19 testing, but there is no relationship between BC3 and TDEM Contractors.

So, any hiring notices related to Covid-19 testing to be conducted at the Expo are not coming from BC3, but the TDEM Contractors.

– Hosting a Regional TDEM Covid-19 Testing Site –

Second, there is also apparently some concern regarding hosting a regional Covid-19 testing site at our Bee County Expo. The County is excited to be able to bring this resource to Bee County and the entire region. Thanks to the efforts of our BC3, our Emergency Management team, our County maintenance and Expo departments, and many others, we have developed procedures to allow for high volume testing in a manner that is safe both for the testing workers and for those being tested. Testing will remain an important component of the Covid-19 response, and this new arrangement increases testing availability to our fellow citizens as well as our neighbors in other counties.

Let me be clear – a part of the impetus to create the BC3 was a direct response to reports (back in March 2020) of other counties denying testing to out-of-county people. So, on April 2, 2020, when we first announced our BC3 Drive-through Testing Facility, we also sent invitations to our adjoining counties offering access to both our testing facility and our Covid-19 help line. So, we have always approached our Covid-19 response in an inclusive manner and we firmly believe in providing testing to as many as want it.

One last thing, I saw a few comments on Facebook questioning what benefit the County receives by hosting a regional testing site. Well, apart from the obvious – greater access to free testing on a regular basis – the County has requested and has received no remuneration.

– *Covid-19 Vaccine Availability* –

So far, several entities have begun to receive vaccines for distribution in Bee County. These entities have, separate and apart from Bee County, applied and been approved by the State as vaccinators. The initial distribution effort has been focused on health-care workers and first responders. If you have been following vaccine news, you may have read that only about 20-30% of the vaccine in Texas has been administered. Bee County does not have that same problem. So far, and as far as I know, all vaccine available in Bee County has been distributed and those vaccinators expect to continue to receive additional vaccine in the coming weeks.

Bee County, by and through the BC3, is also applying for approval as a vaccinator. If approved, we plan to be able to conduct vaccination clinics at the Expo and, we hope to receive our new mobile response unit in early January so we can set up remote clinics at various sites around the County (if you can't come to us – then we'll just come to you). Once again, this entire process and the workforce we plan to use is all voluntary.

As it currently stands, aside from voluntary disclosure by in-county vaccinators, there are no reports we are aware of that indicate what future vaccine distributions will come to Bee County or to whom those vaccines will be sent. All we know is that there are several entities currently approved as vaccinators and several more that should be approved shortly, including Bee County itself.

I am so grateful to our current vaccinator entities and to those other entities that are diligently working through the application process for bringing Covid-19 vaccine into Bee County and I hope they continue to have great success in doing so. I know the distribution guidelines from the State are a bit inconsistent (ex. First responders and health-care workers go first, but don't let any vaccine go to waste) and require a delicate balancing by the vaccinators, but I know they are doing their best to ensure (1) vaccine is available in Bee County, (2) distribution follows the State distribution guidelines as best as possible, and (3) no vaccine is wasted. Please join me in giving these entities a big "THANK YOU AND KEEP UP THE GREAT WORK"!!

– *Periodic Update Update* –

I must apologize, at the same time the Texas Department of State Health Services beginning altering how and what COVID-19 data they report to Bee County, I reached a point where I was unable to continue to draft and distribute periodic updates. We are working on finding a more efficient method of presenting COVID-19 data to our community and hope to re-start that process soon. Data is always available at the DSHS website.

As of December 30, 2020, Bee County had 1835 confirmed cases and 288 probable cases and the TDCJ facilities in Bee County had 545 confirmed cases. The DSHS website estimates about 2,370 confirmed cases, 279 probable cases, 45 total deaths, 298 active cases, and 2,306

recovered cases. Yes, I am aware that those numbers do not add up. No there is no solution; we just acknowledge the discrepancy.

Since the last update, Bee County has received notice of 281 additional cases, which averages out to 95/week. So, cases are rising. And the guidance remains the same: wear a mask when you can't social distance or when you're inside enclosed spaces with other folks; wash/sanitize your hands; don't touch your face unless you've washed your hands; use common sense. Our hospital currently has 10 Covid-19 patients (8 from Bee County) ranging in age from 40-80. 2 are female and 8 are male. None are ventilated and none are TDCJ inmates.

— *Concluding Thoughts* —

To those of you who are suffering, who have experienced loss and hurt and pain, may this new year heal your wounds, end your suffering, and may the optimism of a new day compel you to new heights.

To those of you that kept the stores open and the shelves stocked, that kept the gas stations running; that kept the lights, gas, cable, water, sewer and internet working; that took our trash!; that created, implemented and executed an entirely new way of providing education and extracurriculars to our youth in a safe manner (I'm looking at you Teachers, Coaches, Administrators and Staff...!); that showed up for work in any number of "essential" businesses and industries despite credible fears of an largely unknown danger; that never got a time out or break from their young children, while managing to protect and comfort those children during these hard times; that kept our hospital open and safe and our medical clinics and our pharmacies running; that lived in fear of bringing Covid into their own house but still went to work everyday; that offered a weary smile to strangers – we all know the feeling of exasperation of Covid; that donated their time or money for the betterment of our society; the truckers!; the USPS, UPS, FedEx and other mail and delivery services employees – they didn't stop either; to our scientists, public health experts and medical professionals for facing this pandemic and finding solutions – in personal conduct, in treatment and identification, and in formulating and executing a strategy to get past this pandemic; to all our businesses that stayed open; to our public servants that kept the City and the County going; and to all of you and to everyone else that has risked their own health for others this past year, thank you.

Wishing everyone a safe and happy New Years Eve, and a **Healthy and Prosperous 2021**, I remain

yours truly,

George P. Morrill III

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