

Brown County Justice of the Peace

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All four of the Justices of the Peace come before the Commissioners to seek approval of a one-time award to the clerks of our court. The award will cost the County taxpayers nothing and does not come from your budget.

The Texas Legislature established a fund many years ago called the Technology Fund for use only by the Justice Courts of each county. The fund is not part of the County budget and is maintained solely by monies collected from Fines as part of the "Court Costs" on each citation. Prior to September 1, 2019 these funds could only be used by the Justice Courts of a County to update and maintain technology used by the JP Courts of the County, but during the Legislative session in 2019, a proposal known as Senate Bill 1840, passed which allows the Fund to be used to provide increases/benefits to court staff only. It cannot be used as a substitute for a salary authorized and approved by Commissioner's Court, but can be used in the manner desired by this request.

The Legislature enacted this Bill, knowing that another Bill passed by them increases the duties and jurisdictional limits of the Justice Courts. On September 1, 2020, the limits of all lawsuits filed in our courts increases to \$20,000 – double what the amount has been. The theory and hope being that it will ease the caseload in the District Court, the County Court at Law and the County Court. When the law was passed its "starting date" was intentionally delayed until September 1, 2020 to enable the Justice Courts to prepare for the influx of new cases based upon the increased limit.

No one anticipated the Corona Virus, nor its disruption to the Courts. Since March our Courts, like all of the courts within the State have been operating under rules established by the Governor' Emergency Declarations and the Texas Supreme Court. All of the existing cases, criminal and civil, have been in suspension due to the virus. New cases had to be accepted, but Plaintiffs and Defendants were cautioned that no action could take place until certain criteria was met and approved by the Administrative Judge for our District.

District Judge Ellis successfully achieved that approval and the Justice Courts are now reopened and will proceed accordingly. The court staff has had to undergo change with these new limitations and has had to expand their knowledge base to accommodate video hearings and telephonic appearances of participants. Every case has had to be rescheduled, keeping in mind the requirement for social distancing and masking.

We have three support staff for all four Judges. They have gone above and beyond, to maintain the schedules for all four courts. While the office was shut down to the public at Noon, the staff remained to try and keep the papers needed flowing to all litigants. All parties had to be apprised of the ever-changing dates. The staff on their own initiative, also began working some Saturdays to keep up with the workload which currently stands at 3,347 cases They realize that in 72 days our workload will all change again.

June 15, 2020
(Exhibit #7)