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**Grassroots America Opposes a November 2017
Smith County Road Bond Election and Opposes Elements of County Budget, saying,
“The Smith County Commissioners Court has a credibility problem,
and it won’t be repaired by November 2017.”**

Smith County, Texas – Today, Grassroots America issued a statement in strong opposition to the Smith County Commissioners Court potentially calling a bond election for November 2017. The organization cited several initial reasons for its opposition. **Each of the cited reasons was discussed with County Judge Moran prior to the release of the statement.**

- ◆ **Smith County Commissioners have a credibility problem they refuse to address.** The investigator’s report about the executive sessions they were all a party to in the ATS Traffic Camera scandal showed multiple violations of the Texas Open Meetings Act in all three meetings for which the former County Judge was indicted. **He wasn’t in those meetings alone.** Although some of the Commissioners continue to call the entire sordid mess a “witch hunt,” facts show there is a wide gulf between what some of the Commissioners stated in media accounts and what evidentiary emails, reports and videos clearly demonstrate. The Commissioners never formally apologized to their constituents for the part they played, nor for the legal bills they continued to rack up for taxpayers – even recently when they voted to appeal Judge Jack Carter’s order making the trial documents and videos public. Commissioners, fixated on the temptation of traffic camera revenue, displayed a cavalier attitude toward citizens and helped break the public trust, and now they want those same citizens to vote themselves a tax increase to write the Commissioners Court a “check” for \$100.1 million (principal only).
- ◆ County Judge Nathaniel Moran was sworn into office just over a year ago to fill the vacancy left when Joel Baker was forced to resign. Although we appreciate improvements Judge Moran has made to court proceedings and meeting agenda transparency, we don’t believe he has been in office long enough for the Court to rush into a November 2017 bond election before he stands for his first election in March 2018. Judge Moran has the potential to be a good county judge and a strong leader. His stated goals for streamlining and cost-savings are good, but Judge Moran needs some time to demonstrate that he can deliver on the taxes the county is already collecting and do so in a way that builds public trust.

- ◆ The County continues to sit on an excessive 31% budget reserve or \$34.5 million, across all funds. Unless the County can produce at least a five-year cash flow report that proves the County is in jeopardy of missing payroll or being unable to pay bills on a repeating basis, we believe a 17% reserve fund called for in county policy is sufficient. According to the proposed FY 2018 budget, the General Fund, which funds most of the county's operations, has \$22.4 million in reserves. Elements of the \$100.1 million bond package should be funded from that reserve. For the last several years, Grassroots America has objected to the county "holding" excessive taxpayer dollars in reserve. **They should use the funds to pay cash for some of the highest priority road improvements, to fund needed Sheriff's Office patrol vehicles, and some of the short-term road maintenance measures included in the road plan. The County should not finance short-term fixes with long-term bond debt.**
- ◆ Given the continued upward trajectory of school and municipal property taxes, we sincerely doubt folks who live inside the City limits of Tyler (and other municipalities) will be eager to vote themselves a tax increase for county roads they rarely, if ever, use. In fact, **City of Tyler residents will pay twice for animal control services and for fleet management if Smith County continues on its current path.**
- ◆ After talking to Tyler Mayor Heines and City Manager Broussard, we recommended to Judge Moran that he fully investigate working with the City on shared animal control costs, rather than continuing to dig the hole deeper on a separate county downtown animal control facility, whose rehab and retrofit costs sit at \$1 million and whose operations are nearing half a million dollars a year. We are sure there are cost savings available if the City and County can work out an inter-local agreement on animal control.
- ◆ We also recommended to Judge Moran that before hiring a county fleet manager and staff, that he fully investigate opportunities where the City of Tyler and Smith County can work together for **effective shared fleet management services and related volume purchasing.**

Since 2009, Grassroots America has called for the Smith County Commissioners Court to move toward long-range planning for Smith County in the areas of rural transportation infrastructure, Road and Bridge operations, proper fleet management – especially for Sheriff's Office Patrol, facility maintenance, and technology. **The goal should always be to produce the highest quality core functions of county government at the very best price, but reaching that goal requires a steady and sustained focus.**

Judge Moran is just beginning to shape ideas for this kind of planning. We urge him to put the brakes on a road bond election for now. He has plenty of opportunities to prove himself to the people of Smith County. They need a County Judge they can trust to lead the Commissioners Court into credibility. **We urge him to build that trust first.**

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