

Countywide Polling Place Program

On March 3, 2015 information regarding the Texas Countywide polling place program was presented to the Fort Bend County Commissioners Court by County Elections Administrator John Oldham. This begins the process of soliciting public input and of determining if “Vote Centers” would be a good fit in Fort Bend County. The following information is from that presentation.

Countywide Polling Place Program

Fort Bend County Office of Elections
Administration



What are Countywide polling places ?

The obvious feature of Countywide polling places, also known as Vote Centers, that distinguishes them from traditional concepts of polling places is that voters may vote at any of the county's Vote Centers at any time while the polls are open. This is a benefit for many voters who live in one area of the county, but commute to another area. A voter dropping children off at school could vote at the Center nearest the school. A voter working downtown could vote at the Library on a lunch break. Voters are able to vote according to their schedules and lifestyles.

Why do we have Precinct based voting?

- *Planning: Election Officials historically needed to know how many resources to devote to each poll.*
- *Management: Number of ballot styles could be limited, paper poll books could be specific to a neighborhood.*

Technology frees us from historical constraints of precinct based voting.

- *Electronic Voting Systems allow all ballot styles to be available in each polling location.*
- *Electronic Poll Books allow poll workers to access registration records which can be condensed to laptops or notepads and also allow easy assignment of correct ballot styles to any voter.*

What are Countywide Polling Places?

- *Often called Vote Centers, Countywide Polling Places allow voters to cast a ballot at any polling locations within the county. Simply stated, there would be no wrong place to vote.*
- *In this respect, they offer the convenience of Early Voting, but on Election Day.*

History of Vote Centers

2003 - Larimer County, Colorado pilot program

2006 - Indiana pilot program in 5 counties

2006 - 78th Texas Legislature authorizes pilot and Lubbock County conducts its November Election using Countywide polling places.

2011 - Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Texas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, & Utah have all approved the use of Vote Centers.

26 Texas Counties using County wide Polling Places in November 2014

- Callahan
- Collin
- Coryell
- Eastland
- Erath
- Floyd
- Gaines
- Galveston
- Grayson
- Jefferson
- Lampasas
- Lubbock
- Madison
- McLennan
- Midland
- Montague
- Navarro
- Randall
- Rusk
- Swisher
- Taylor
- Tom Green
- Travis
- Victoria
- Wharton
- Williamson

Neighboring Counties using Vote Centers in 2015

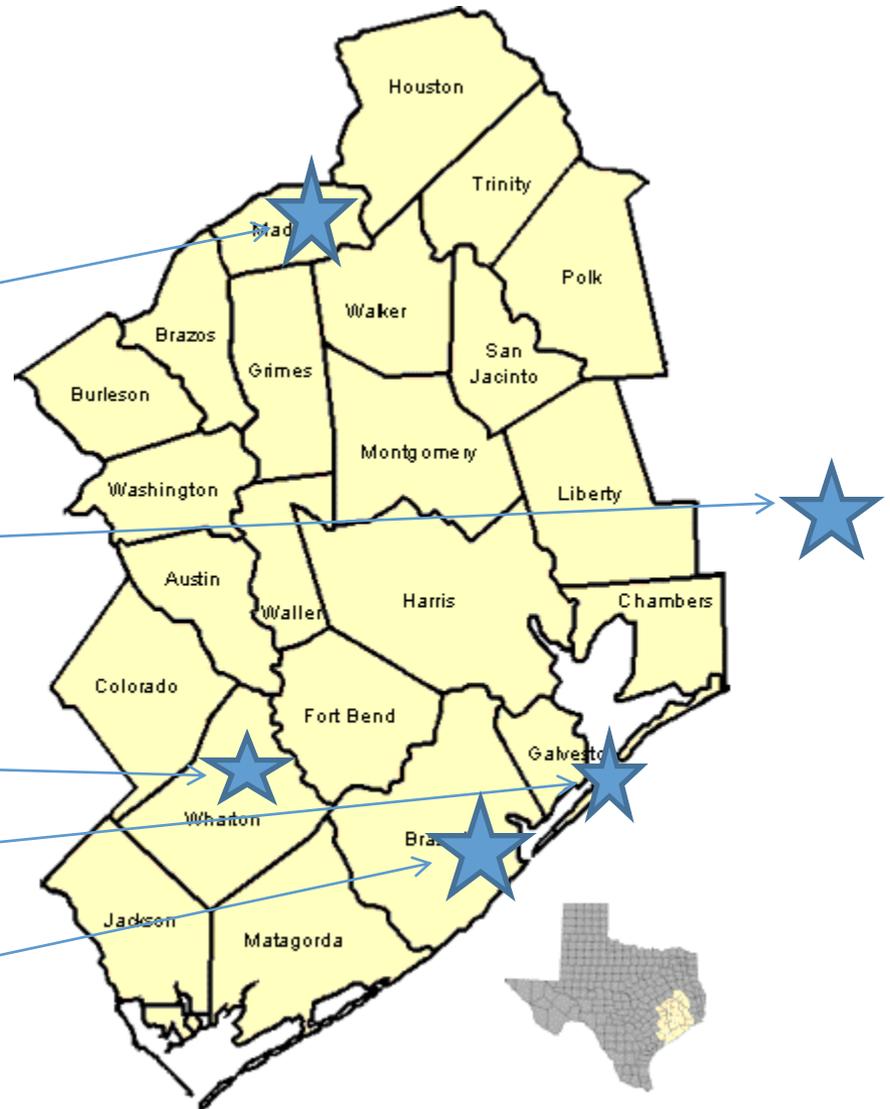
Madison

Jefferson

Wharton

Galveston

Brazoria



Advantages of Vote Centers

- *Voter Convenience - citizens can vote near home, work, or school.*
- *Polling locations can be adapted to meet rapid growth and are not limited by precinct lines.*
- *Future Cost Savings - fewer locations to staff and fewer to equip.*
- *Turnout – Because of convenience, turnout may increase.*

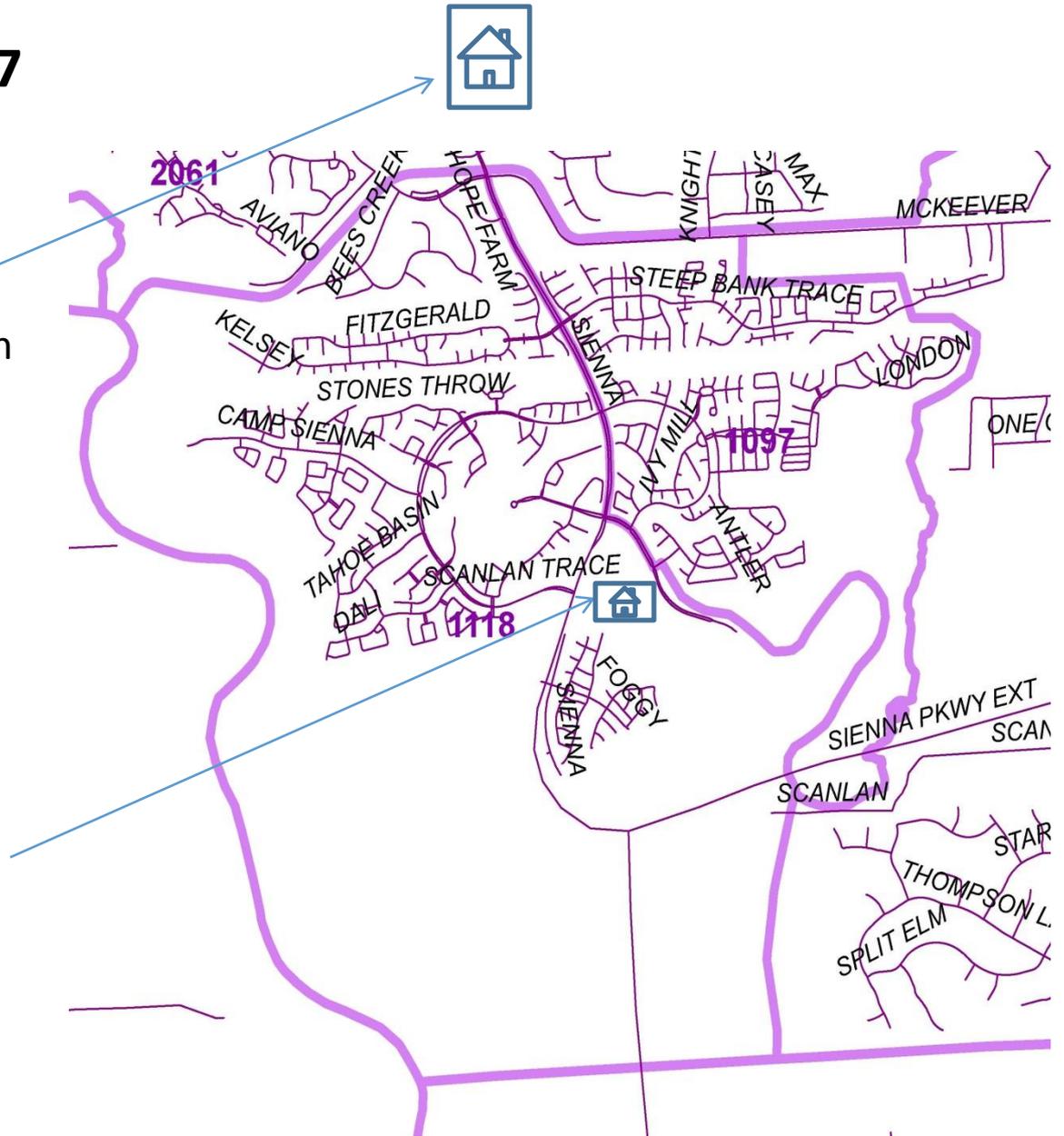
Votes Centers allow for polling sites to be more strategically placed

- Some neighborhoods, such as Sienna Plantation would benefit from a second polling location, but traditional precinct based voting makes that difficult.
- The county can more efficiently respond to fast growing areas of the county such as Fulshear, by allowing a second polling location without dividing a precinct.

Precincts 1118 & 1097 Sienna Plantation

8,084 voters share a common polling place, FBC Library at Sienna.

A second polling location is available but would require voters to drive south to vote which is against the normal traffic pattern.

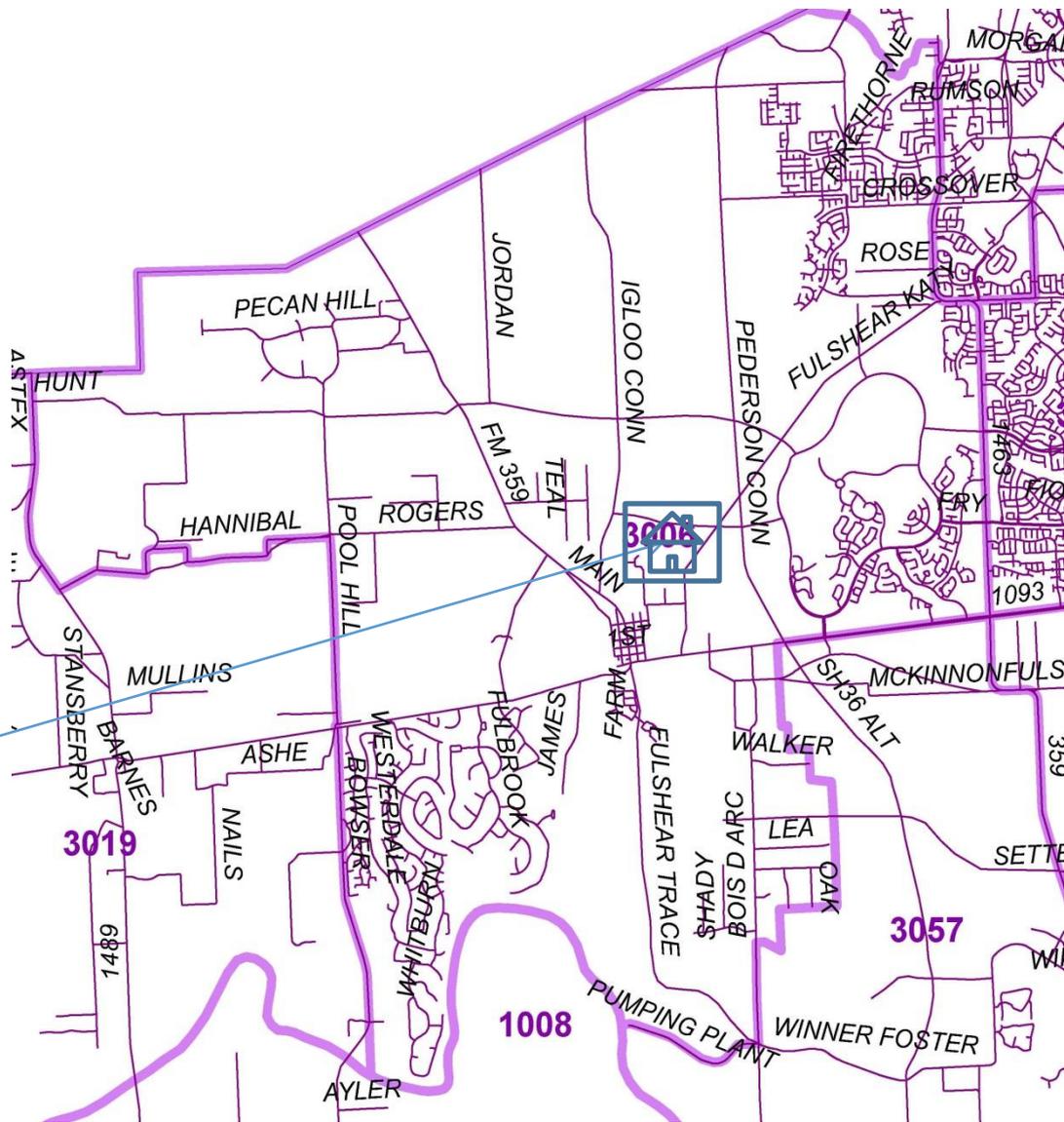


Precinct 3006

In three years this precinct has grown from 5,000 to over 10,000 registered voters.

Under a county wide polling place program, we would not be limited to one polling location per precinct – currently Irene Sterne Community Center.

Polling Places can be added more quickly than precincts boundaries can be adjusted.



Future Cost Savings

- *The County's current Voting System is 10 years old, but is only certified to 2000 standards.*
- *Replacing it with a precinct based system would cost approximately \$5.8 million if population growth were to stop today.*
- *Replacing it in 2022 will cost approximately \$8.5 million (in 2015 dollars) if population growth continues at same rate.*
- *Equipping 60 Voter centers and 25 Early Voting sites in 2022 would cost approximately \$5 million.*

What steps are required to implement a Countywide polling place program

- *Elections Administrator submits a notice of intent to participate to the SOS*
- *Commissioners Court Sets dates for public hearing(s)*
- *Elections Administrator selects members of a Vote Center Advisory Committee and submits to Commissioner's Court for approval.*
- *County holds Public Hearings*

Fort Bend County already has the Equipment and Technology required to implement Vote Centers

- *County uses a direct recording electronic (DRE) voting system.*
- *County uses a computerized voter registration list that allows instantaneous verification that a voter has not voted at another poll.*

Other Requirements

- *County must hold a public hearing to inform and solicit public opinion.*
- *County must develop a methodology to determine the placement of the countywide polling places.*
- *County must develop a plan for giving notice and informing voters of the changes.*
- *County must submit a written application to the Secretary of State along with recording or transcripts of public hearings.*

Suggested Public Hearings to be held April 13-24, 2015

- Fort Bend County Rosenberg Annex
- Sugar Land City Hall
- Precinct 2 – JP Court
- Precinct 3 – JP Court
- FBC Library at Sienna

Public Hearings are designed to solicit input from:

- *Voters*
- *Political Parties*
- *Other Political Organizations*
- *Members of the Minority Communities*
- *Members of Disabled Community*
- *Representatives of Political Subdivisions*

Public Hearings will provided feedback on:

- *Location of Polling Places*
- *Methodology for selection of Election Judges & Alternate Judges*
- *Effective methods of communicating the program to voters*

Polling Locations

- In November 2015 Fort Bend County would be required to have a number of polling places not less than 65% of the number used in the last equivalent election – November 2013.
- If deemed successful, in future elections the County could reduce to 50%.

Polling Locations

- *In November 2013 Fort Bend County opened 83 Election Day polls. Under Texas guidelines the county could reduce to 54 vote centers in November 2013.*
- *The Elections Office anticipate initially opening approximately 70-75 sites until voting patterns determined that a location is underutilized.*
- *The Elections Office anticipate using approximately 60 current sites plus 10-15 new sites.*

What current polling places might be eliminated ?

- *Those that do not meet ADA requirements*
- *Those in close proximity to other sites*
- *Those of inadequate size and inadequate parking.*

Will Election Judge and Alternate Judge positions be eliminated?

- *Currently only 50% of our positions, 145 of 286 positions are filled.*
- *146 Judges & Alternates would be required to staff 73 Voter Centers.*
- *The number of Spanish speaking workers required to conduct an election would decrease.*
- *Votes Center would provide us opportunity to offer language assistance in other languages representative of Fort Bend County.*

In what Elections would we use Countywide Polling Places ?

Once adopted, the countywide polling place program would be in effect for all elections conducted by the FBC elections department.

- Federal and State Elections
- County Elections
- Primary Elections
- Local City, School, and MUD elections conducted as part of a Joint Election Agreement by FBC Elections.