

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Robert Ellington Hebert

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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

Location: Rosenberg, Texas



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Interview length: 30 pages



Today is January 23, 2023. My name is Karl Baumgartner, and I am conducting an interview with Mr. Bob Hebert in Rosenberg, Texas. This interview is being recorded on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

Mr. Hebert previously served as Fort Bend County Judge for sixteen years, and he and his wife, Pat Hebert, have been involved in leadership capacities in multiple county activities for many years. Serving in his first leadership role in 1968, at age 27, Bob was elected president of the Alief School Board, and has served our community continuously ever since.

BAUMGARTNER: Bob, please give me your full legal name and date of birth.

HEBERT: My full legal name is Robert Ellington Hebert, and I was born November 18, 1941.

BAUMGARTNER: We're going to start with your personal background and move from there to your leadership roles and civic activity. What was your place of birth? Is it where you grew up?

HEBERT: I was born in San Bernardino, California, but my mama always told me that, son, you were conceived in Beaumont, Texas. She was a fifth generation Texan. She considered herself a displaced person living in California. My dad was with the Santa Fe Railroad, and they transferred him from Beaumont to San Bernardino just prior to the start of World War II.

BAUMGARTNER: What were your mom and dad's names?

HEBERT: My dad was Walter Hebert, and my mother was Doris Ellington prior to her marriage and then Doris Hebert. She was a registered nurse.

As soon as the war was over, we came back to Texas. Amarillo was my home for eight years, then a couple years in Tyler, Texas, finally we moved to the panhandle in Pampa, Texas. If I have a home spot, it's probably Pampa. I have happy memories of Pampa for the most part, and I finished high school there. My brother finished high school there.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have other siblings?

HEBERT: I have two, Ken Hebert and Jeannette Lynn Hebert.

BAUMGARTNER: Was Pampa a good-sized town?

HEBERT: It was 21,000 when I lived there. The population went down a few years ago to about 10,000, because the oil dried up in Pampa. I think it's up now to around 16,000. They liked to say they were the second largest city in the Panhandle, which is true. Amarillo was 150,000 people, Pampa was 21,000. Everything else in the panhandle was 3,000 to 4,000.

BAUMGARTNER: What kind of economy did they have?

HEBERT: When I grew up It was an oil town of sorts, a quiet oil, ranching, and railroad town. But now Pampa is starting to grow again because they've become a solar power and a wind power center. But it was just a small town then. We had 900 kids in high school, 220 kids in our senior class.

BAUMGARTNER: That's pretty good sized.

HEBERT: It was a pretty good size. We were a 4A school and we're still 4A. We never went up to 5A or 6A because the population would not support it. We played football in the old 3, 4A district-- Amarillo and Pampa, Borger, Wichita Falls. Lubbock, Plain View. It was a great time to be a kid.

BAUMGARTNER: That was probably pretty good football, wasn't it?

HEBERT: It was good football. Wichita Falls was the powerhouse because Wichita Falls was 100,000 people but with only one high school.

I didn't get to play after 9th grade because we transferred around too often with Dad's railroad jobs. The rules of the UIL Scholastic League prohibited it; in those days if you transferred schools, you had to lay out a season. Well, I had three different high schools. I did 9th grade in one school, 10th grade in another school, and then another school in my last two years.

BAUMGARTNER: What did your dad do with the railroad?

HEBERT: Well, he was a switchman, foreman and then a yardmaster. And with the railroad, you go where the jobs were. When later he got enough seniority, he bid the Foreman's job in Pampa to get out of Amarillo and get into a smaller yard and he retired as yardmaster in Bolger.

So, I didn't play football after the 9th grade because I was ineligible. I took a course in journalism and became the sports editor of the newspaper. I wrote the sports columns and traveled with the team and kept my hand in it; it was fun to write sports for the school paper. I had lived in Amarillo for eight years and had left a lot of friends in the community. Moving to Pampa, most of the kids there had grown up together, started in kindergarten together, so there was the issue of breaking into a settled group.

BAUMGARTNER: That's kind of interesting because I remember talking to Pat about her background growing up, and she made a similar comment about her family moving from one community to another and it was a challenge getting roots along the way.

HEBERT: Well, there's a lot to be said for roots. I enjoy watching my daughters keep in touch with kids that they went to school within the 1st, 2nd, 3rd grade.

BAUMGARTNER: And so, Pampa is where you ended up graduating from high school?

HEBERT: Pampa Harvesters. I still keep in touch with a lot of those kids today.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, really? That's neat.

HEBERT: The Internet helped us get back together. Got on the website. We communicate back and forth. It's nice to follow.

FOLLOWING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

BAUMGARTNER: So, what did you do after graduation?

HEBERT: I finished up in Pampa and enrolled at LSU. But that lasted about six weeks. I realized that my parents didn't have the money to put me through LSU and I didn't have a clue about getting a job and going to work. I was 17 years old when I got out of high school. So, I decided I'd just go in the Navy and grow up. I was a minor so I had to convince my mom to sign me up, and I enlisted in 1959. It's probably the smartest thing I ever did. It was good for structure and organization, taught me a lot. I felt like I was doing something worthwhile.

One thing about the military, they treat you like you're an adult whether you are or not. Once you get through being treated like a kid in boot camp, they start treating you like an adult, and they expect you to do your work. So, I enjoyed it. It was a great experience.

BAUMGARTNER: Why did you pick the navy? Was it family?

HEBERT: No. My family had no military background. My dad didn't serve; he was too old for World War II. He was 28 years old and was employed in a critical skill position, the railroad, so he wasn't drafted.

I picked the navy because of the education. I wanted to learn a skill. I didn't want to go out there and just learn how to fire a weapon per se. And I thought I'd join the Navy and see the world (laughter).

BAUMGARTNER: How long did you enroll for? Was it four years or six years in those days?

HEBERT: It was what they called a minority enrollment. I enlisted at 17 and I was going to be discharged the day before my 21st birthday. But while I was in boot camp, I scored fairly high on the test scores there and they wanted to send me to an electronic school. It required extending my enlistment, and actually I had about four years and two months of active duty.

BAUMGARTNER: So, what did you do in the service? Aviation? Didn't you fly for a large portion of your enlistment?

HEBERT: I was an air crewman. I went to basic training in San Diego, then went to Memphis Tennessee for basic electronics and radar school. I volunteered to fly in a new program in Glynco, Georgia and was stationed there and trained as an airborne air controller. I was given a new rating called Aviation Electronics Technician Early Warning (AETW).

From Georgia I was shipped off to the fleet. Fortunately, I finished first in my class, so I got to choose my duty station, and my choice was Hawaii. The home base from which we were deployed was Barber's Point, Hawaii. Every fifteen days we would fly to Midway Island out in the Pacific and would fly patrols every other day to the Aleutian Islands chain westward of the Alaska Peninsula.

Editor's Note: For more info on the USN base on Midway Island, please [click this link](#).

BAUMGARTNER: What were you doing when you were flying?

HEBERT: We were surveying the north Pacific by radar. It was a surveillance route to prevent Russian flights from aerial surveillance. Every four hours a plane would fly up and back. It was a circle route; we would leave Midway Island and return, flying 2600 miles circular route at 180 miles an hour. The patrols lasted 15 to 16 hours.

BAUMGARTNER: Isn't that a tremendous number of airborne hours you were accumulating?

HEBERT: It is, in a relatively short period of time; but we were flying long missions regularly. The Navy gave me my 2000 hours flight pin shortly before my discharge.

I served in the squadron from early 1961 until the end of 1963, basically for about two and a half years, and I had five months off at the University of Texas on temporary duty. They tried to make an officer out of me but after about three months of that, I realized I was wasting my time. I enjoyed the Navy, but I didn't want the Navy as a career.

BAUMGARTNER: So, they sent you to school at UT for a period of time?

HEBERT: They sent me to the University of Texas in Austin. I had applied when I went out to the squadron. I was selected for the program, and they sent me to UT in September 1961, but I disenrolled a few months later.



Bob on the left with friend, Ted Kaczmarek on the right in Jacksonville, Fl in January 1961.

I disenrolled at the end of January 1962 and received orders sending me back to squadron in May. So, I was out about seven months, I guess. By May I was back with my squadron in Hawaii, and I finished up my enlistment.

BAUMGARTNER: So, when you were in Austin during that period, that's when you met Pat?

HEBERT: That's when I met Pat and I decided to ask her to marry me. We got married in April 1962 and shortly thereafter I was sent back to the fleet. By July, I had Pat flying out to Hawaii. So, we spent basically our first year as husband and wife in Hawaii, which is not bad.

BAUMGARTNER: Hawaii, that's pretty exciting.

HEBERT: We had more money than a typical sailor Navy family because Pat is very frugal. She weighed about 94 pounds back then, so she didn't take much to get by. For two weeks of the month, I would be gone; I was out at Midway Island flying my mission. We lived in an apartment project in Hawaii, and she had friends there, basically military people, so she was well taken care of and she didn't spend any money. I was making \$140 a month, she was making \$135 as allowance for a married couple, I got another \$8 in sea pay and then \$45 in hazardous duty pay. It all added up to about \$400 a month.



Pat and Bob Hebert on their wedding day in April 1962.

BAUMGARTNER: Pretty good in those times.

HEBERT: Yeah, we had a brand new one-bedroom apartment that cost \$70 a month, just been built. We had a ball.

BAUMGARTNER: So, your experience with the service was positive?

HEBERT: Absolutely. I considered myself a Navy guy and I felt like I gave them four years honorably. The hardest adjustment was when I got out of the Navy, and Patsey had been born and Pat was pregnant with Shelley, and then she had to live with me full time. Suddenly we were back in Bellaire, Texas, and we're living together full time and we've got a baby and another one on the way and does she really want to do this, but she's stuck. She kept me. So, it worked out well (laughter).

RETURN TO UNITED STATES

HEBERT: We came back to the States in November of 63. Pat came back in August because she was pregnant with Patsey, my oldest daughter.

BAUMGARTNER: That was right around the John F Kennedy assassination, wasn't it?

HEBERT: I had been back just about ten days when he was assassinated. I was out mowing my father in law's front yard because we were staying there while we looked for a place to rent, when Pat came out of the house and said Bob you need to come and watch TV, the president has been shot. So, I turned the mower off and went in there and sat and watched the whole thing for the next few days

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah. Everybody remembers just what they were doing when JFK was killed.

HEBERT: That's right, I remember exactly what I was doing that day. Exactly. You don't forget things like that.

Patsey was born October 1963, and Shelly was born in September 1964. Shelley had been due in December, fourteen months behind Patsey, but she was born three months early, she was a preemie. Cindy, our third girl, came in '68 five years later.

BAUMGARTNER: This is slightly off the subject, but I've got to ask you anyway. My older son Michael has got three children, three daughters, and they're now eight, six, and four. So, what's it going to be like for him to raise three girls?

HEBERT: It's great. Daughters are great to have. We had three girls, and then our girls all had boys. They had five boys between them.

BAUMGARTNER: And no daughters?

HEBERT: No daughters. Three girls who then had five boys! Five grandsons. And now, we just recently had our first great granddaughter. And we'd already got three great grandsons. Now we have a great granddaughter and I keep telling people you don't want to know her when she is grown up because she's going to be spoiled rotten. My daughters don't have any experience raising girls and they are all involved with our new little great granddaughter and her little feet will not touch the ground. But girls are great. One thing about girls, they



Pat and Bob with their daughters and sons-in-law.

don't involve their fathers a lot with the things that really matter. They lean on their mother more than boys.

ESTABLISHING ROOTS IN HOUSTON

BAUMGARTNER: What did you do when you got settled in at Houston?

HEBERT: Well, that's a long story. I went to work for Xerox Corporation when I got out of the Navy. They were the darlings of Wall Street then, with their xerographic copiers, and they recruited me as a technical representative. In 1966 we bought a home, and I was going to night school three days a week. On one of my off nights, I was laying on the couch watching TV and Pat came in and she said, Bob, why don't you get off that couch? They're creating a homeowner's association tonight. They're having a meeting. That's just two houses over across the street. Why don't you go to that meeting? We own this house now. You ought to take an interest.

Well, my parents never owned property; we had always rented. I hadn't ever thought about homeowners' associations. Pat said, well, you ought to go. I agreed to keep the peace. So, I got dressed and went over there to the meeting, and they started talking about what they wanted to do and all of that. By the time the meeting was over, I was president of the homeowner's association. 26 years old and president of the homeowner's association.

BAUMGARTNER: And what did they want to do? Like, deed restrictions?

HEBERT: They wanted to enforce deed restrictions. They wanted to prevent the annexation of the area by Houston if they could. And they wanted to make sure that the community was maintained well by the property owners to keep the values up.

I had no problem with any of that. I later found out that they wanted to assert themselves in a few other areas of government, like the school board. The final year I was serving as president of the HOA they asked me to run for the school board and I said, okay. Well, I got my hat handed to me in the election. So the next year I ran again on my own just because I didn't like losing. And I won. 27 years old and I'm elected president of the school board.

In the interim I had left Xerox, and I was working for an engineering company, where I was vice president of marketing. At night school I had finished getting my associate degree at South Texas Junior College. My intention when I enrolled at South Texas was after finishing there I would go directly into South Texas Law School and stay on the GI Bill and get a law degree.

That was my goal; get a law degree. Well, just before I graduated from South Texas, the legislature changed the law to stipulate that a four-year degree was required in order to enroll in any law school in the State of Texas. So, I couldn't go into law school at this point.

BAUMGARTNER: What were you doing at the engineering company?

HEBERT: I had gone to work for this engineering company as their VP of marketing. You deal with clients such as mechanical engineers with a lot of discussion involving the interrelationship of engineering and taxation. Spent a lot of time meeting people around the state and talking to a lot of associations.

BAUMGARTNER: That must have been a pretty instructive period for you, wasn't it, as far as learning about business issues?

HEBERT: Yes, and I was meeting a lot of people. I started learning more about utility districts. Then at one point some guys came in and talked to me and said, we have a problem with our utility district. The operator of the district was put in business by the developer, but he doesn't see his job as maintaining the utilities of the district. He sees his job as getting water meters installed for new houses. So, he isn't taking care of us residents. Could you help find somebody else to take over as operator?

I said sure I will take a look. But really, I didn't find anybody out there that was doing it any different. The developers were just finding someone with a backhoe who knew how to put water lines in; they would hire him and make him the operator. And that guy saw his job as keeping the developer happy, not the residents, because the developer was the one who had hired him.

But it wasn't working for residents of the developed utility districts who wanted city level service and weren't getting it. I know that the district that I lived in went four days without water once because the well went down late Friday, and the operator didn't get out there to look at it until Monday morning. They couldn't find him, and without a state license nobody else could go on the property and do the work.

I looked for an operator and couldn't find anybody. I told them I couldn't find anybody. They said, well, why don't you become the operator.

STARTING A BUSINESS

BAUMGARTNER: This is when you started thinking about going into business for yourself. Had you ever considered opening your own business?

HEBERT: That's a big decision. It always is. By the time they asked me that question, I was aware that my current job had no guarantees and was likely to shut down by the end of the year. So I said, Well, I'll tell you what, I'll take a look at it. So, I researched it. We of course gave it a lot of thought.

We made the decision to go ahead.

In order to operate a utility district in Texas, the primary initial requirement is to have an operator certification.

BAUMGARTNER: The operator certification--is that for operating a water district, or sewer plant, or both?

HEBERT: Both. In the state of Texas, even back as well as today, you have to be certified by the state of Texas to operate any potable water system, and likewise, you have to be certified in wastewater treatment to do any work at a wastewater plant.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you couldn't open a utility district business in Texas without an employee with those qualifications.

HEBERT: I didn't have the certification, and it required at least twelve months to obtain it; you had to be in business for a year before you were eligible.

We elected to go ahead. So I located a young man in the business who had the certification and engaged him and he turned out to be a real good employee. He worked with me for three years before he went on to something else.

We decided to start the business and enter into a contract to operate a utility district containing some 2300 connections and with about 5000 residents. We began planning our starting cash flow and management requirements, and eventually named our company Southern Utility Management Company, which became Eco Resources, Inc. when we later incorporated.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. When did you start?

HEBERT: We started the business, and actually created the business entity, in December of 1972. And we opened our office to operate, and took over the contract to operate utility district WCSD, #94, on April 1, 1973. So that was the first day we actually operated the business. We incorporated in 1975.

BAUMGARTNER: That's exciting! What were your capital requirements? What kind of funding did you need?

HEBERT: We had to sell my house and move into an apartment with our three kids to raise initial capital. I paid \$13,600 for that house in 1966. I sold it seven years later for \$21,000. I then had \$7,000 in my pocket and I borrowed \$12,000 from a bank. So, I had \$19,000 to get started.

I knew I would have cash flow 30 days after starting operations. It's a relatively low margin business, but it's a very predictable income because you get paid on a contractual basis, a monthly fee per utility connection. Plus, you get paid for maintenance work off the parts and labor schedule that you provide as part of your contract. Maintenance was extra income because you made money on that. You just didn't know how much you would make at any given month.

BAUMGARTNER: Pat must have endorsed the whole plan, I guess.

HEBERT: Oh, absolutely. I couldn't have done it without her. We were a team, and still are. Pat was great. She was there.

Expenses and fixed assets were not hard to control. I had to rent an office. I had to hire and pay my new operator for a couple of months to work setting everything up. I had to lease my office space to buy some office furniture. I had to buy a couple of trucks.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have to buy backhoes or heavy equipment or anything like that at this stage?

HEBERT: At that stage, I contracted for all of that. I had two half ton pickup trucks that were old HL&P {Houston Light & Power} service trucks that we sanded down and painted yellow because they were pretty beat up, and put a yellow flashing light on top so people could see them at night.

BAUMGARTNER: Much of your company's responsibility right off the bat was maintenance and repairs at the utility district. What were Eco Resources' responsibilities for overseeing the operation?

HEBERT: In addition to equipment repair, we maintained the water plant, produced the water, kept the well running, maintained adequate ground storage, and made sure the proper chemical treatments took place.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you do something like that? What did you know?

HEBERT: Well, the operator understood the process. He was certified to make any adjustments or repairs or maintenance operations necessary to preserve up to the level of his skills. If it was an electrical problem, he had to call in a licensed electrician, but he could oversee it and sign off the repair. So, the operator who I hired was basically the person with responsibility for seeing that portable water was delivered to the homes and businesses of the community, and likewise, the wastewater operator was responsible for seeing that the sewage system worked, the wastewater treatment plant operated properly and the discharge into the receiving stream was in compliance with Environmental Protection Agency permits.

BAUMGARTNER: And it was your responsibility to ensure that, overall, everything was in compliance.

HEBERT: Right. I didn't understand all the finer points of operating a utility system, but I understood it from a big picture standpoint. I was lucky because the operator was a blind hire and he turned out really well.

BAUMGARTNER: Initially, if a water main broke or there was a sewer problem, how did you know what to do?

HEBERT: Well, we had the engineering drawings for the utility district that showed us where the pipes were supposed to be. Problem was, they were never built according to the plans. If there was a broken water line and you needed to turn the valves turned off, you'd have to go find the valves.

BAUMGARTNER: So, a lot of times you were just winging it.

HEBERT: Yeah, you had to wing it. I worked out a line of credit with a company that's still in business in Houston that provided parts for water and wastewater motors, pumps, motors, and such as that.

BAUMGARTNER: What about personnel requirements, hiring decisions?

HEBERT: The week we started, after three days I decided I needed a laborer. I interviewed a young black man, Laney Brown, who had just lost his job but he seemed to sincerely want the position and I hired him. On his first day at work, we had a water main break under a street, and he spent 5 or 6 hours with me on the jackhammer breaking the street out to get to that water main. We finished up about 3:00 in the morning. Pat got up when I came through the door and said, how did Laney work out? I said, well, if he shows up for work at 8:00 in the morning he will probably be here forever. He showed up, he slept in his car in the parking lot so he wouldn't be late for work, and he just retired a couple of months ago after some 50 years.

Pat still tells this story. We were putting in 80, 90-hour weeks with all the work that had to be done. Finally we got a little bit ahead and we were invited to some deal and I said let's go get a babysitter and have a night out, and she said OK and got out her gown and her high heels. We start trucking down Bellaire Boulevard, got to Wilcrest and I look down and see a big hydromatic flushing truck that's sitting there. One of our subcontractors was clearing clogged sewer lines. I said, Pat, let me stop and see what's going on. So, we stopped and there was a crew there but they came one man short. They only had a driver and it took three guys to make it work because somebody had to be upstream, somebody had to be downstream, somebody had to be on the truck. I can still remember that we sent Pat in her gown and her high heels with a flashlight to the downstream manhole while I helped out upstream. She's standing with a flashlight over a manhole in her evening gown. We didn't make it to that ball.

BAUMGARTNER: You mentioned your operator stayed three years?

HEBERT: He stayed three years before he left. I worked under him that first year until I got my own certification, called a "C certificate." It basically meant that I could oversee anything that smaller utility districts were doing. About the time that the first operator moved on, I hired an "A operator" to handle training of operators and more complex lab work, who stayed with the company for many years.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you get your backhoe and heavy equipment work done?

HEBERT: I had identified a fellow who lived in Alief that owned a backhoe and portable pumps and did sewer and water systems repairs. He was very capable and never let me down. After three years I had my own backhoe and crews, because we grew.

EXPANDING THE BUSINESS

I started out with one utility district, WCSD #94. Before long, we took over the contract for another. Then another. Pat did good work and really helped keep growing the company. She directed the girls in the office and worked with me upgrading our documents and paper flow. We were a great team, and still are.

In 1979, I decided the balance sheet and income statement were getting more complex. I thought I needed a little more experience in management at a higher level. So, I enrolled in the Advanced Management program at the University of Texas Graduate School. It was basically set up to train professionals who didn't have business degrees -- engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants -- in the finer points of managing a business. It immediately helped me improve our management skills and helped increase the bottom line.

Based on my performance at UT, a gentleman with Pepperdine University contacted me to recommend that I consider enrolling in their MBA program which was taught here in Houston.

BAUMGARTNER: Pepperdine University out of California?

HEBERT: Pepperdine in California. Pepperdine had run an MBA program in Texas for about eight or nine years. They offered a full graduate curriculum, with profs flying in every week. It was what I was looking for and I spent fifteen months in class. I got my MBA from Pepperdine 1981 followed in 2004, after five years of hard work, by a PhD in Management from California Coast University.

1985 – THE SALE OF ECO RESOURCES

ECO kept expanding. And then in 1985 I decided to sell. I had a company that had been chasing me for a year, so I finally let them catch me and cashed out. I had one district when I started and sold the company thirteen years later, by which time I had 64 districts.

I sold ECO to a publicly traded corporation in 1985, Southwest Water Company. Southwest Water Company is still headquartered in Sugar Land. They were headquartered in Los Angeles when I sold it to them and expanded to Florida. But over the years, they grew across the nation and changed ownership, and it just made sense for them to move their headquarters to Houston.

It worked out quite well. Terms of my sale to Southwest Water Company included a five year non-compete clause. They sent me a check every year for the non-compete. But when the five years was

up, they were in trouble. When I sold them the company, it was a \$6 million company. But when I came back in, it was still a \$6 million company after five years of their management.

I actually ended up selling them two companies because at the end of the five year non-compete, I started another little operating company. I thought okay, I'll run a small operation to cover my overhead and train somebody to run it for me. But then my old company came in and said, what would it take to buy out your new company? And I threw them a number I thought was ridiculous. And they said, okay. But only if you'll come with it as a consultant and help us run Eco.

And I said, that I would come back as a consultant, and I sold it to the same publicly traded outfit. I served as an executive consultant to the president and basically did a lot of work there, keeping their hand in the market. And the company grew up. And when they sold at the end, it was a \$100 million company. So, we did all the growth once I came in as a consultant.

OTHER CAREER ACTIVITY

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, you did great. What then?

HEBERT: We had moved to Sweetwater in 85, following the first sale of the company. We lived there for seven years and then bought a home out in Foster Creek Estates in west Fort Bend County. We lived there for 30 years.

After selling my first company I formed a consulting company and for a period of time around the 90's I was retained to help two Fort Bend County municipalities, Rosenberg and Arcola.

Rosenberg was struggling during that period. Following the slowdown in the petroleum industry, large numbers of the population were moving away.

I entered into a six-month contract with the City starting July 1, 1989 and extended it until December, 1990, serving as City Manager for eighteen months. Their street paving process was extremely inefficient and a major financial burden. Working with Commissioner Bud O'Shields we negotiated a cost-sharing, street-paving deal with the county. Over the years it has increased productivity within our smaller towns while saving an extensive amount of tax payer money. Then in 1994, the State of Texas appointed me as Temporary Receiver for the City of Arcola, a little town in southeast Fort Bend County that was going broke. The government had placed it in a receivership, which is a governmental form of bankruptcy. In 1994, Herb Appel, who was then the executive director of the Fort Bend Economic Development Council, asked me if I would consider taking over its municipal operation.

It was a little town without financial resources and all city services had stopped. The current receiver had run up a bill in excess of \$300,000, and of course they were never paid. I agreed to step in to try to stabilize the town and restore its services. Using government financial tools and grants, I worked for eight full years because there wasn't a lot of money to throw into it. In January

2003, I met at my last Arcola city council meeting and got the judge to approve the dissolution of the receivership, leaving the city free of long-term debt with \$500,000 in the bank.

FORT BEND COUNTY JUDGE

During this period, I had continued to work with Southwest Water Company as a consultant right up until a major change took place in my life. Towards the end of 2001 I became involved in running for the office of Fort Bend County Judge.

BAUMGARTNER: Had you been considering a political position?

HEBERT: I had no intention of being a politician. In my late twenties I had served a term at Alief School Board and served one year as its president, and I'd realized then that, you know, politics wasn't really my game.

But I was sort of socially oriented, I liked to be involved, and so I stayed involved and worked locally with different boards and chambers in the county. I served on the board of the Fort Bend Chamber for eight years and served three years with the Richmond/Rosenberg Chamber of Commerce Board. I was vice chairman with Fort Bend County Development Council for a number of years. Nationally, through my consulting business I had started, I became involved with the National Council of Public- Private Partnerships in Washington, DC and in fact served two years as its president.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you get involved with running for Judge?

HEBERT: By accident. I was exposed to the position due to illness of then current County Judge Jim Adolphus, a personal friend. Jim was finishing up his first term and had filed for reelection in December 2001. Three or four days after he filed, he had a heart attack, and he was in the hospital. I was at breakfast with a couple of other guys who were involved with the city and also concerned. We were talking about Jim's situation; we noted that his situation might be serious, and we decided to look around to see if we could find somebody that might run for that office.

The following week the three of us met again. I observed that I knew a lot of people in the county who I thought could make good county judges, but they all had kids in school and they're making a good living and they had no desire. The other guys said much the same thing. Then they both looked at me and said, well, why don't you do it?

BAUMGARTNER: So that's how you got involved.

HEBERT: That's how I got involved. I said I'll talk to Jim about it, and I called up to the hospital and talked to him. I said, Jim, you know I have already endorsed you. I don't know if you're going to stay in the race after this heart episode, and if you do, you've got my support, but if you decide to step down, I would like you to know that I will step up and run. He called a day later and said,

come up to the hospital. Once there he told me, Bob, I'm going to take you up on your offer. I don't think I am going to have the stamina or energy to run a good race. And he passed away a year later.

BAUMGARTNER: I vaguely remember when he became ill. Didn't he live in Pecan Grove?

HEBERT: He lived in Pecan Grove. He was a former Missouri City Council member and then he moved to Pecan Grove, and he became Justice of the Peace, Precinct 4 for a number of years, and then was elected County Judge. Probably, had he been healthy, he would have been reelected, but he couldn't serve.

So, I went and filed and the only blessing is I didn't have a lot of time to worry about the election. It was January; the primary back then was held in March, there were only sixty days until election day. I think I won by ten points, 55-45, something like that.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you had to scramble putting a campaign together. It wasn't like you had a lot of political experience.

HEBERT: I knew a lot of people and a lot of people knew me and I got a lot of support.

BAUMGARTNER: I bet Pat was a strong supporter, wasn't she?

HEBERT: Pat was active in the Republican Party, and this was her Republican Primary. She had served on the executive committee, so I got the support of the party. The party actually cannot endorse you in the primary, but I got the support of most of the precinct chairs, the support of the business community, plus the membership of the chambers that we were familiar with. I did very well on the east side of the county, in Sugar Land and Missouri City and that carried me.

I won Pecan Grove by one vote.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? It might have been me.

HEBERT: I don't know. I won by one vote. I guess any individuals that voted for me can say that. It was their one vote victory (laughter).

But countywide the race was over very early, and I had no opponent in November. The democrats didn't offer a candidate, so I went into office. I didn't know that over the years I would continue to win and would serve four terms. I guess records are made to be broken, but I'm the longest serving County Judge in the history of the county by about four years. Two individuals that served twelve years each are Jodie Stavinoha and Judge Josh Gates.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Jodie was legendary. This was like your first political experience where you had to raise money on your own behalf, wasn't it?

HEBERT: I disliked raising money. In other races where I had been involved in money raising it was only in support of someone else. But now that I'm retired I'm perfectly happy back in the private sector; it is more comfortable here.

RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

BAUMGARTNER: Bob, would you mind sharing with our readers what it's like for a citizen to run for office? It's a considerable undertaking. It's not like you were a seasoned political veteran or anything. You were essentially a first-time candidate.

HEBERT: Well, it has changed immensely from 2001. Although the basics are still the same, the dynamics of campaigning have changed because there's so much money involved now.

When I ran in 2001 the competition was in the primary, because no democrat filed for the race. It was an intra-party fight. The campaign only lasted sixty some odd days before the vote, and my opponent and I had 33 opportunities to debate. It was like every other night for two months. I made 32 of them. My opponent, Annette Hoffman, made 32 of them. Wherever there was an opportunity to stand head-to-head, we stood and talked to the public.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. It'd be nice if we experienced a little of that today.

HEBERT: That doesn't happen anymore. For some turnouts we had only a few people, but we usually had more and we had some crowds with 400 or 500 folks because they wanted to know what was going on. The county judge race was a very important race and there was no straight ticket vote. Voters tried to follow all the races and cast an intelligent vote.

In 2018, by contrast, I realized after the fact that nobody was paying any attention to the county judge race. It was all straight ticket voting. The state had moved on regarding its voting tendencies. I'm hoping it's swinging back today.

BAUMGARTNER: Was straight ticket voting good or bad?

HEBERT: I think it will be very good to get away from straight ticket voting. The main race in 2018 was the campaign driven by Beto O'Rourke against Ted Cruz. It was a straight ticket vote. O'Rourke's team didn't tell people to vote for Beto; his team just told all voters to vote the straight party. That meant that every vote that Beto got also went to my opponent. Nobody paid any attention to me or to my opponent KP George.

BAUMGARTNER: Nobody had ever heard of KP George.

HEBERT: He was a school board member who put his name on the ballot and there wasn't much campaigning.

Today this community is diverse in many ways. One of the things now is you can't tell who's going to win and that's the reason I'm glad the straight ticket is gone. It gives folks a chance to choose if they want to between candidates at the JP level, the judge level, the constable level. They can vote for who they believe is the best person rather than voting straight party based on who's at the top of the ticket.

IMPACT ON PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE

BAUMGARTNER: How does running for office impact a candidate's family life and personal life?

HEBERT: Well, it can be very disruptive. The campaigning is a lot harder on the family than it is on the candidate because the family can't do anything but be supportive. But they see the issues; they hear the negatives.

Pat and I were better able to handle the disruption because we were empty nesters when I ran. And Pat had been involved in the Republican Party politics at the grassroots level for years and was familiar with the turmoil. She was an asset. I think she brought a lot of votes to my side of the ballot. It worked out well.

But for a family, whether it be the husband or a wife who isn't politically active, to become involved with the other spouse's candidacy, yeah, it can be very painful. It's hard work. It's exhausting. You have to get out there and talk. You have to be available. There's always somebody that wants to do an interview. There's somebody that wants your campaign to run a video. There's some donor who might give \$500 to your campaign, that you have to talk to right now. And you might always suffer a loss.

And it's got to be even a lot tougher on families where a young man is running and is trying to get into office to start a stairstep career in politics with the goal of moving on to higher office. I hadn't even thought about running for county judge until Jim Adolphus had a heart attack. There were times I was miserable one way or the other, but I enjoyed serving. I think we accomplished quite a few things with the county.

BAUMGARTNER: I've lived here 40 + years in Fort Bend County, and in my mind, you were a very well-regarded public official, and I was very surprised when you lost. I mean, it didn't really occur to me that you might lose, and I think a lot of people were the same. You may have lost votes because too many people assumed you would win and didn't bother to place a vote.

HEBERT: I think people saw me in a very positive light. That's exactly true. But a lot of people didn't see me at all because they just weren't involved in politics and Beto's folks knocked on the door and asked them to vote for him, and that was it. Straight Ticket. James Patterson was very effective. Commissioner of Precinct 4. He was defeated in the same race despite being very popular.

BAUMGARTNER: That was very surprising, too.

HEBERT: Ed Emmett was a very effective county judge in Harris County. We all went down.

BAUMGARTNER: Judge Emmett losing. Another shocker. He was so respected. Who beat him?

HEBERT: A young lady who hadn't been in the country that long, Lina Hidalgo. She's very bright and obviously politically motivated and fully capable of arguing her points, but her inexperience has been obvious.

NEW CITIZEN RUNNING FOR OFFICE

BAUMGARTNER: Is it a good idea to have somebody become judge who hasn't grown up in the United States, and wasn't a citizen originally? Many residents have misgivings about the current Fort Bend County judge.

HEBERT: Well, I may not be the best to answer that question because obviously the current judge beat me in 2018 and took over the office. But I think it is difficult for someone who is a first generation American, someone who's born in another country, to really understand our country and how our government and our society operates. They may end up focusing on things that are not the most important with respect to the community they serve, because they can only talk about the things they understand.

But it depends upon the individual. It's unfair to throw that blanket over every first generation American. I personally know some folks that came here as teenagers or young men who have naturalized over the years and have become potentially outstanding leaders. They want to feel like they're immersed in America and they want to competently represent their constituents in an elected office. It's more important to evaluate people based on their ability to understand how America works and their commitment to public service.

You have to judge each candidate as an individual. You have to understand whether they're running for a high executive office or a legislative office, for commissioner's court or for county judge, for mayor of the city or city council. They're running to solve problems. That's what local elected officials are supposed to do.

THE ROLE OF COUNTY JUDGE

BAUMGARTNER: So, you were elected County Judge. Could you describe our commissioner's court? I don't think people around here really understand Fort Bend County Commissioner's Court or the role of the county judge.

HEBERT: Well, I will explain it to you the way it was explained to me in the hospital room by Jim Adolphus. I said, Jim, if I win, I'll try and be a good judge. He said, Bob, you'll win, and you'll be a

great judge as long as you remember one thing. You can do anything in the county you want to do as long as you can count to three.

BAUMGARTNER: Yes, I think I've heard that proposition described in this manner.

HEBERT: Every county in Texas has four precincts, which by law are each comprised of approximately 25% of the county population. The commissioner's court is actually a committee. It is comprised of five people--the judge and four commissioners. Its members are elected. The judge is elected by the residents of the entire county and each commissioner is elected by the residents of his precinct. Each of the five members has one vote. The judge has no more votes than each commissioner. One.

Under Texas law the county judge is termed in the Constitution as the chief executive officer of the county, but in fact, he's the chairman of the board. He's got to convince other board members to vote with him in order to get something done. He doesn't run the highway department, for instance; he doesn't have a highway superintendent that reports to him.

BAUMGARTNER: So, he's really not exactly in a chief executive role.

HEBERT: That's exactly right.

BAUMGARTNER: And action by commissioner's court requires at least three of five votes.

HEBERT: It takes three. It's a delicate job because the commissioners must each look out for the interests of the residents of his or her precinct. The roads, the drainage facilities, the libraries, etc. — each precinct has its own needs and priorities for its residents. So, there is an ongoing competition for scarce resources at the commissioner's court level.

A county judge who tries to tell the commissioners what to do will be a very ineffective county judge, because even if they agree with what he wants to do, they will join with the others to show he can't tell them what to do. It can make for a very bad relationship. The County judge has to be proactive, has to work with all of them. Democrat or Republican, the judge has to try and find consensus on every issue. He needs to look for unanimous votes whenever possible, because that means it's probably a pretty good idea.

That's what I tried to do. I tried to bring everybody involved in the decision-making process, keep everything transparent and allow every commissioner to have their say, even though in my own mind I already felt that I knew how everybody was going to vote. Though you can never be 100 per cent certain you know the mind of another individual. You can guess at it, but you just don't know it until you see how they vote.

MAIN FUNCTIONS OF COMMISSIONER'S COURT

BAUMGARTNER: What does the court do?

HEBERT: Categories include the following.

Roads and Drainage. We have a unitized road system in the county. There is a road commissioner, an employee of the court who oversees the roads and bridges in the county that are not part of the state highway system. The commissioners decided to unitize because of tremendous economies of scale and it has been extremely successful.

The county drainage engineer and his staff handle drainage issues. We're very blessed in Fort Bend County. We have one drainage district that's county wide for Fort Bend County. This is very unusual; Brazoria County, for instance, has four separate flood drainage districts and they each have to agree because you can't just drain water through a segment of an area, you have to take it all the way to a receiving stream that will take it to the gulf. And so that means that they have to work on rules and regulations that are going to be beneficial to everybody. But here in Fort Bend County we don't have that problem. We have been able to set rules and regulations and standardized our approach to drainage. We constantly reevaluate everything we have done after each flood incident to see if there are ways we can improve.

Emergency Operations: Commissioners court has emergency operations management responsibility for the total county. The new Emergency Management Operation Center (EOC) was on the drawing board when I left office in 2018 and is about to be finished in this last session. The county judge is the emergency management director for the county. He basically has dictatorial powers during an emergency, but once the emergency is over, those powers go away.

Other Services: We have a medical director for Fort Bend County that reports to the court. He or she has to be by law a licensed physician. We have a facilities director now and a facilities department in the county because of the large number of facilities it takes to properly provide services to the community, especially our Justice Center, the Fort Bend County Jail, sheriff and training academy complex. People don't realize how large the county is now. We've got 4,000 employees.

Parks Department: The parks department oversees the fairgrounds and all the parks.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that Darren McCarty? He did a fine job running the Rosenberg Parks Department for many years before he moved over to take over the County job.

HEBERT: Yes, he is in charge of overseeing our twelve county parks. Good man.

Elections: We have an elections administrator who runs the elections and basically runs elections for all the local contents. We have to offer election services for all local government entities, but

they don't have to take them and the vast majority run their own elections now. It's reduced the cost and increased the effectiveness of the county elections as a whole.

Budget: Commissioners Court makes a budget. Each department creates their own budget and submits it to the court-- the elected officials, the district clerk, the county clerk, tax assessor collector, the sheriff, the constables, they are all independent elected officials who do not work under the control of the court. And then the court does the fine tuning; we can either leave their items in or take them out until we get it right. You want to handle issues diplomatically, resolve issues, and keep everybody happy. That's the way it works.

BAUMGARTNER: So, Commissioners Court, over which you presided as judge for sixteen years, was truly the governing body of the county. The Court's responsibilities included the full gamut of civic activity. Areas included physical construction, such as roads and bridges and provision for offices and operating responsibilities; financial responsibilities including issuance of bonds and setting the tax rate and overseeing the budget; multiple administrative functions such as running elections and entering into agreements with other local governments or entities; safety net social services, generally funded by state or federal government, but managed by the county.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' ROLE

What kind of characteristics does a county commissioner need to be effective?

HEBERT: Well, I think to be a good commissioner, one thing, he has to like people. He has to be comfortable around people.

They have to be service oriented. They have to be the kind of person who gets things done.

They can't be too deeply partisan. That means they have got to realize that, though they may be a Republican, that doesn't mean a Democrat who they work with can't have a great idea. They need to listen and work with them.

You can't write that other person off because they are in the other party. If you try you won't have the dialogue that you need to effectively address complex issues.

BAUMGARTNER: County Commissioners is a full-time job, right?

HEBERT: A lot of folks run for the office, and they think it's like city council. It's not. It's a full-time job. You have an office, you have a staff, and you're expected to be there to talk to the citizens that want to talk to you. And if you don't do that, you'll do one term and then it's over.

THE COUNTY JUDGE ROLE

The county judge, in order to be a truly effective county judge, has to understand where each commissioner is coming from and has to understand what has to transpire for the county to move ahead. And it's very complex. It takes a while to learn.

I can tell you when January 1, 2003 came, and I took the oath and went up to my office, saw my name on the door, I told Pat, well, I guess I am county judge. Now, what the hell am I supposed to do?

But even if you're just starting out as a new county judge, your department heads are always there to help. So, you can invite them to explain the issue under discussion and you can get a little insight there. I was very fortunate because I inherited Jim Adolphus' people. He had a good team and I kept them all. The only people I lost in the sixteen years I was in office was to retirement.

It took me six months to become what I thought was an effective county judge, and it probably took me half of my first term before I really felt that I understood how everything fit together, all the personalities involved, and gain the confidence required to really move the county ahead. As county judge, if you don't engage and start showing that you have a grasp of the complexity of the issues, you start to lose your department heads and other elected officials. And it's the department heads and other elected officials that run the county day to day, not the commissioners.

BAUMGARTNER: Who makes up the team of the County Judge?

HEBERT: For me it was my chief of staff, office manager, receptionist, agendas coordinator and grants coordinator. These are the five primary members of the team.

My de facto chief of staff was shared by D'Neal Krisch the first several years until she left to have her third of four children. Beth Wolf moved into the role and served until I left office at the end of 2018. Ann Werlein was my office manager. She'd been there under Judge Adolphus. So, she explained background on issues to me regularly until I got up to speed.

My agenda coordinator had a huge job. That was Donna Ospino. She was there when I came through the door, and she was there when I left sixteen years later. And she was just outstanding at the job, easy to work with, would ask questions in a non-aggressive way to get answers and she constantly pushed for a complete actionable agenda. Jenetha Jones was my Grants coordinator, and worked to assist all departments pursuing state or federal grant opportunities.

BAUMGARTNER: Does the judge have a lot of influence over determining the agenda?

HEBERT: The Judge can to some extent control the portion of the non-precinct agenda, but you can't block anybody in the county from putting an item on. Any department head or commissioner

can put an item on the agenda. But on items like calling a bond election, those were really my calls.

BAUMGARTNER: Didn't you, as the judge, have to spend a fair amount of your time talking out of court to the different commissioners regarding the pros and cons of different issues.

HEBERT: Our ability to communicate has been restricted to some extent by the Open Meetings Act, specifically by what is called a constructive open meeting. If I talk to two commissioners about the same item, even though I talked to them separately, that constitutes a forum, and that violates the Open Meeting Act. And it is a crime in the state of Texas.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh wow.

HEBERT: We didn't want to be accused of violating anything. That's a big hurdle to overcome and still provide efficient government.

I had to overcome the communications constraints quickly, but at the same time for the first four years I didn't push anybody very hard either. We had a lot of problems in this county. We were way behind the power curve. We were threatened by a huge surge of population growth that was approaching, inadequate roads, inadequate office space, inadequate facilities, and scattered courthouses. We had courthouses and buildings all over the county; you had to have a roadmap to find a court because we were in four or five different buildings. Putting all those things together and in initiating series of bond elections that we held, it is noteworthy that we never lost a bond election. That was a favorable reflection on our performance. I think the way the community votes is a reflection on whether voters feel that elected officials are getting the job done.

BAUMGARTNER: Has there ever been a period where there were for instance five Republicans on the court, or has it always been split up somehow between the two parties?

HEBERT: To my knowledge, there's never been a situation where there were five members of the court belonging to the same party since the Republican Party regained its first commissioner in the 1980's.

BAUMGARTNER: That wouldn't be good?

HEBERT: It wouldn't be good today. Actually, I think it would be impossible to achieve today in Fort Bend County. I don't think you'll ever see the time where there will be five from the same party in this county. If it does happen, it won't be the norm; it'll be a temporary condition. I served sixteen years, and for eight of those years, we had two Republicans and two Democrats.

BAUMGARTNER: And you were the third Republican.

HEBERT: I was the third Republican vote that people like to say, gave Republicans control of the county. Well, it's been my observation that I can't remember a vote on a major service in this county that came down to a party line. There were split votes from time to time, but when the votes were split, I'd look around and it'd be one Republican and one Democrat going one way, and one Republican one Democrat going the other. And I'd have to figure out which way we wanted to go and break the tie and make the decision.

BAUMGARTNER: That's a delicate line to walk, isn't it?

HEBERT: Well, the commissioners better know you're doing the best you can. If they think you play favorites, then you're in trouble. You could make all of them mad. So, you have to keep your lines of communication open. You have to deal with all of them and respect the fact that they have one vote just like you do.

The state did not intend for the county judge to have executive control. They wanted to place that executive control in the court so that there were some kind of checks and balance. Two-party governance is probably a very good thing.

I still believe that diversity is a strength in this county. We're going through a turbulent period right here, but over time it will all settle out. We're going to end up, in my opinion, where we can very easily have three commissioners elected from the Democratic party a few years from now while having a Republican commissioner and a Republican judge elected by the same county.

The county judge race is not the same as a precinct race, it's county wide. The dynamics of that election are significantly different from the dynamics of the precinct. Pecan Grove doesn't worry about issues in Needville, and Needville and Pecan Grove don't worry a bit about what's going on in Missouri City.

BAUMGARTNER: So, in your opinion, should the County Commissioner's Court be characterized as a fair institution?

HEBERT: Yes. It is fair, because remember the way it is set up. You have these four commissioners who are competing for the interests of their own precinct, their own constituency. So, they're going to look at everything that is done as, "How does this impact the people I serve?"

During the period I was in office the projects and the bond elections were designed such that they wouldn't benefit one side of the county over another area. Road Bond elections, the Emergency Management Operation Center, new library construction—all were balanced as best we could. For instance, we built a lot of libraries and those were always well received, and we always offered a couple of libraries on both sides of the county to balance a bond initiative.

BAUMGARTNER: One thing that's really impressed me when reflecting on county commissioners court, is how uniform the structure is statewide. I mean, every county has got four precincts, four commissioners, a judge, four-year terms, etc.

HEBERT: That is in accordance with the State Constitution. Another example is the requirement that each of the four precincts must represent as closely as possible 25% of the population. You can readjust this five years after the census; if it really gets out of balance, the court can easily come in and redraw for balance.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah, but that surprises me when a political structure is logical and works.

Would you agree that most residents do not really understand how the Commissioner's Court functions?

HEBERT: I think the large percentage of residents don't understand Commissioner's Court. Just one example. You have so many people in Fort Bend County with a corporate lifestyle different from what our residents have previously had, and they're moving into to the new subdivisions, Sienna, Cinco Ranch, Weston Lakes, Fulshear, Cross Creek Ranch. These people work for large corporations and they're doing two or three years here and then gone to Cincinnati, Seattle, or wherever for their next job. So, they're extremely mobile and they don't sink roots because they know they're not going to be here that long. A significant amount of our population turns over every four years. And the new folks coming in don't really understand the way our county works.

I can't say it's a majority, but a significant number of folks in the county don't have a clue how the court works.

BAUMGARTNER: Is the expense of running for office of county judge getting inappropriately costly?

HEBERT: At the county level it takes \$200,000 to \$500,000 to run for county judge, sometimes even more. I know that in Harris County they spend millions to run a campaign.

BAUMGARTNER: What about the commissioners?

HEBERT: The commissioners will spend less, but it's still six figures. And a lot of time and a lot of effort. They're talking to a smaller constituency, so it's easier for them to reach their constituency. But each commissioner is serving over 200,000 citizens, so it's still a large undertaking.

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COUNTY

Judge, sometimes over the years you have been asked to take on some civic management responsibilities that were outside the judicial realm. For instance, two of those responsibilities that

you accepted were leadership roles with the Brazos River Authority, and the Meals on Wheels organization.

Would you please touch on your involvement with these two organizations?

BRAZOS RIVER AUTHORITY

HEBERT: In 1989 I was appointed to a six-year term on the board of the Brazos River Authority by Governor Bill Clements. At the time the issue that I saw with the BRA was the fact that It hadn't progressed and hadn't improved its management operations in a number in decades. The River Authority was basically living in the 19th or early 20th century. I thought that the BRA had to basically be modernized so it could react with the necessary technology to properly address all the issues that it would confront moving forward. The six years I was there we went through a lot of transition, and modernization.

BAUMGARTNER: Over the years you became known throughout the area as an expert on water issues.

Editor's Note: For more information on the Brazos River Authority, [click this link](#).

HEBERT: During that general time frame I got involved with the National Council of Public-Private Partnerships in Washington DC. and actually, ended up serving two terms as president of that organization. A large part of their business was focused on the water industry and the needs of the water industry because many water projects require a public- private partnership. The government entity just doesn't have the wherewithal to do it all on their own, so they have to bring in a private partner that brings the expertise and some funding to the table to make it all work.

I became more and more involved once I was county judge. My interest was naturally towards water and drainage, water and wastewater infrastructure and drainage infrastructure because my business experience was gained in that on a local level. And as judge we faced two big problems in the water area, other than the floods we had obviously. One was our levee systems that we use in a major part of the county. The federal government agreed to undertake a rework of the floodplain maps for the county. We invested one million dollars to fund an electronic aerial mapping of the Brazos River Basin, which is known as a LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging).

Editor's Note: For more information on LIDAR, [click this link](#).

We significantly improved our base maps of the river and its watershed by virtue of the LIDAR mapping that was done, but that raised the 100-year flood elevation throughout the county.

So, we had to raise our levees. That was a problem that required extensive political negotiation with our levee districts, Congress and the Corps of Engineers. We had to convince all of our levee systems to incur the cost to raise their levees, the Corps had to permit the improvements, and Congress had to recognize the value of those improvements.

BAUMGARTNER: That was a financial hardship for a bunch of entities.

HEBERT: Well, we ultimately got it all done, but it was a challenge to get it worked out.

MEALS ON WHEELS

BAUMGARTNER: At our appointment this morning we met at the county headquarters of the Meals on Wheels operation. How did you end up in charge here?

HEBERT: Well, in 2019 Meals and Wheels was having some substantial problems, not the least of which was they were almost broke. They made a change and the Board hired an interim CEO, but a health issue came up and they thought of me. So, they engaged me for six months. That would be four years ago in July.

They wanted me to help stabilize the organization and turn it around financially. We got that done and I would have been gone two years ago if Covid had not hit. But it's really stretched my tenure out. Throughout Covid, we would deliver those meals and set them on the door of our seniors and we kept them fed. But during the heights of COVID we had to jump through multiple hoops to get that done.

BAUMGARTNER: Meals On Wheels is a local charitable service that provides free meals to senior citizens who reside in Fort Bend County. How does a senior citizen become eligible?

HEBERT: We have to do certain things to qualify for federal funding to assure that the seniors that we serve are eligible for service. If there's something that keeps them homebound and doesn't allow them to access meals, they apply to us for help. We are more than happy to give it to them. And there's no financial test for this. Eligibility is strictly based on senior's ability to provide themselves with food.

For more information on Meals on Wheels, [click this link](#).

We deliver Meals on Wheels to the home. We actually deliver about 1025 meals a day, almost 400,000 meals a year and those meals go directly into the home. So, there's a lot of folks out there that are benefiting from the work we do.

BAUMGARTNER: How much is your annual budget?

HEBERT: In the \$3.8-million range. About a third of that is the actual cost of preparing meals and getting them delivered out to us. The rest of that money is spent in maintaining our fleet of 8 trucks, and the payroll for our employees, insurance and business overhead.

Our delivery of meals is quite complex. We have a vendor in Houston that prepares our meals every morning. They bring them out to us in bulk. We break them down and distribute them in large quantities to our distribution centers around the county. Volunteers come in and break those meals down into the individual packets and give them to other volunteers who take them to the homes.

We have over 400 volunteers working with us on a scheduled basis. Some of them work every day of the week. Most of them work one or two days a week and a few of them work a day a month. We have 13 full-time employees. We have 25 part-time employees. We have part time drivers and congregate center supervisors.

We also operate our congregate centers for seniors who are mobile but still need nutrition help.

BAUMGARTNER: What is a congregate center?

HEBERT: It's a residential facility that typically provides food and other social services to our more mobile seniors; we provide meals there within the facilities. We have congregate centers in Rosenberg, Needville, Missouri City, Sugar Land, Four Corners and Jones Creek Parks. We also have a center in Brookshire, Tx.

We get some funding through the federal government. About 50% of our funding comes through various federal programs for nutrition. The George Foundation and the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation really help, and Fort Bend County give us an annual allocation towards operations. We have other charitable foundations that donate and today we get about \$246,000 from United Way. Then we have personal donors and private donors that generate about 15% of our income. We receive personal donations as small as \$5 up to \$5,000. Every now and then we'll get a check from a family here in Fort Bend County for \$10,000.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, really? What does the CEO do for Meals on Wheels?

HEBERT: Chief executive. He or she runs the show for the board of directors. Signs all contracts and all documents, hires and fires, certifies tax returns or nonprofit statements, signs all the reports into the various agents we deal with. Over time they become the face of the organization.

BAUMGARTNER: Well Bob, congratulations, this sounds like quite an operation for a short-term part-time employment deal that you entered into.

HEBERT: COVID hit and disrupted the ability to really get out there and find a CEO

for several years, but I have told them, the sooner the better. So, In December they appointed a search committee, and are starting a formal search for a CEO and that's good.

BAUMGARTNER: It sounds like you're still plenty busy but not as much as when you were presiding over Commissioner's Court. So, what's it like to no longer be in the public eye 90% of the time?

HEBERT: It's delightful. I can do my own thing and I have the best of all worlds because I can't get blamed for anything. But I have a lot of people come up to me and thank me for my time as county judge. They let me know that they thought I did a good job. So, I get a few accolades every week moving around out there, and I don't have to go in and make tough decisions, determine how to vote or how to get something that's hung up moving again. And the biggest thing is I don't have to try and raise campaign money!

BAUMGARTNER: Do you still maintain contact with the commissioners you have dealt with over the years?

HEBERT: Oh yes. And I have the greatest deal of respect for the representatives whom I served with. I thought all the Democrats that I served with were very competent, very interesting. Of course, they looked at some issues differently than I did.

I take this from Grady Prestage: "You know, there's not a Republican or Democratic pothole out there. They're all potholes and they need to be fixed." That's what we're here for, so let's get the job done.

I never worried about running for higher office during my tenure. That was not on my radar scope at all. I didn't worry about it. I was just happy being county judge, and I had sixteen wonderful years doing it.

BAUMGARTNER: You enjoyed it, didn't you.

HEBERT: Absolutely. I enjoyed the office.

BAUMGARTNER: Thank you, Bob. I learned a lot.



Judge Bob Hebert and wife Pat