

MINUTES

**Juvenile Crime, Graffiti and Gang Violence Task Force
Town Hall/Public Meeting
Thursday, November 20, 2008
6 p.m. at Ben Milam Elementary School
1215 Rangerville Road
Harlingen, TX**

George McShan welcomed those present to the meeting and stated he was simply a facilitator at this meeting and this was ‘their’ meeting. He stated that every child should have a chance to succeed in this democracy. Along the way there are challenges but also opportunities. One of the challenges was dealing with criminal activity. But they are doing something about that with Mayor Boswell appointing the Task Force. He informed the audience how the task force was started. The following Task Force members introduced themselves to the audience: Dr. Susan Ritter, Commissioner Tom Hushen, and Commissioner Robert Leftwich. He recognized the principal of Ben Milam (Rosie Cobarrubias) for allowing them to use their facility.

Rosie Cobarrubias thanked Mr. McShan, the Commission and everyone present for their attendance at the meeting—in English and Spanish.

George McShan introduced Dr. Steve Flores the Superintendent of HCISD.

Dr. Steve Flores addressed the audience and thanked everyone for their attendance. He commented it was very important they highlight the importance of safety but also how the community can work together. He thanked the Task Force for their leadership and offered assistance on behalf of HCISD in combating these issues.

George McShan recognized Salomon Torres with Congressman Ruben Hinojosa’s office.

Salomon Torres commended everyone for their attendance at the meeting. He stated Congressman Ruben Hinojosa has known George McShan for many years. He recognized Mr. McShan as a true Champion of Education and the audience applauded Mr. McShan’s efforts. He affirmed Congressman Hinojosa’s commitment in making sure everyone received an education. When communities face challenges that threaten their right to an education—then that was the time for action.

George McShan introduced Gabe Gonzalez and thanked him for all his assistance with the Task Force.

Gabe Gonzalez thanked everyone for their attendance at the third public hearing. He stated their purpose was to find out what was happening in their neighborhood. He asked them for their thoughts as to how any problems could be fixed. He advised that the Task Force would be providing a report to the City Commission with solutions to the crime, graffiti, loitering or other issues. He introduced Chief Castillo to the audience.

Chief Castillo thanked Mr. McShan and the other participants on the Task Force. He advised a questionnaire would be provided for them to fill out. He encouraged the audience to share their comments and ideas.

1. **Salomon Torres** approached the podium and stated that a lot of the communities were facing the same challenges but they were not have the community discussions like the City of Harlingen was doing. He wanted to share three thoughts with them today. Two of those dealt with punishment. He thought about that point while at the Soccer Complex Grand Opening held two nights ago. He stated how the City Commission opened up 10 beautiful professional quality soccer fields near the airport. He thought about how to convert youth energy that go into graffiti and bringing attention to themselves and converting that into a competitive type of energy. A few years ago there was an initiative to encourage midnight competitions for basketball tournaments. This fit the schedule of youths and they flowed their energy into getting ready for the next game. He had an idea to develop sports competition among youths. Something that wouldn't cost them money. He suggested a sports competition that would feature the best of Harlingen. Perhaps East vs. West, or other. The idea is to focus the youths energy. His next idea is that Harlingen Chamber of Commerce has an excellent program called Leadership Harlingen. His idea was to have Harlingen create a program that would attract not the youth that would normally sign up for that program but rather the youth that have been identified as having problems in the community with graffiti, drugs, etc. That is the type of youth that should be invited. Of course it might be hard to convince those youths to sit in but that would be the challenge. The third idea he wanted to share is that there are communities that have a point system. Youths that are caught doing graffiti develop a point system. The first time 10 points, second time 20 points, third time 30 points and perhaps by the 4th time a more harsh punishment is given. This process a youth can tract for themselves.

Chief Castillo recognized three individuals that were present at the Cameron County Youth Coalition meeting that was previously held. This coalition was willing to partner with Harlingen to work on solutions. This was occurring throughout the community and county.

2. An unnamed audience member addressed the podium as the Treasurer of the Harlingen Area Crime Stoppers. They work with the Police Department and recognized that Chief Castillo has been very active in providing them with assistance. He wanted to point out to them that they are very concerned with the issues of graffiti and gang violence. They were actively trying to get the police officer that handles the Crime Stopper program to spend more time on those issues. Perhaps they've heard that the Crime Stopper program has been very successful in Harlingen. They do have a large amount of money to give out if someone calls the tips line with a lead (425-TIPS). The Harlingen Area Crime Stoppers is an umbrella not only for the City of Harlingen but also for Combes, Santa Rosa and Primera. They are also active with the Campus Crime Stoppers and this program has been very beneficial at the High Schools. He made reference to the vandalism that occurred in Brownsville, being the young people that caused so much

damage. Unfortunately, the parents, the community and the children were the ones that suffered. Crime Stoppers was there to help them.

Tom Hushen asked how many in the audience were from this neighborhood? He asked them what the types of crime activity was occurring in their area? Someone in the audience stated fighting and graffiti. Tom asked where the graffiti occurred? Someone responded that it occurs along Rangerville Road. Some of the homeowners allowed tagging and graffiti on their own homes. Tom advised that sometimes parents are afraid of their own children and he asked about fighting in the area? He commented that he drives by Rangerville every day and sees speeders, loitering and graffiti. He asked if they saw a lot of those activities? An audience member commented that occurred mostly in the residential area. He asked about burglaries and if that was occurring? An audience member advised that her parrot was stolen but the police were able to locate her pet and many other stolen items. He asked what would help to prevent that from occurring? An audience member stated that parents should be educated to know that the police are there to help them.

Chief Castillo stated that sometimes parents or others are reluctant to report any activity. They want to get the message out that if they want to report any issues, they don't need to give their name. He made reference to the success of the Neighborhood Watch program.

3. **George Merrill** stated that parents are nervous about too much policing. If they could only meet our great Police Chief then they could see how beneficial communication between the Police Department and the community is. Using an inter-mediator connector possibly Crime Stoppers would allow for communication. We are dealing at times with children whose parents are undocumented at the moment. He is a pastor and he sees fear in the Hispanic community. His suggestion is to get Crime Stoppers or another group to facilitate the communication. If we all pull together then great things could happen.

Tom Hushen asked them to bring up any suggestions they might have and not be afraid to bring up issues. When they were at Jefferson School a major complaint was abandoned buildings. The day before he and Mayor drove thru that neighborhood and noticed all the buildings that were abandoned. The City will be looking at codes to get those houses torn down. They would not have known that problem existed if the community hadn't spoken up at the meeting. He asked them to provide feedback and let them know what they needed.

4. An unnamed individual asked what the discipline was for an individual that is caught tagging a building?

Chief Castillo responded that if an institution like a church or school is tagged then it's automatically a state jail felony. From there it was based on the monetary value of damages. With regards to youths it was discretionary left on the judge or magistrate. There's been a long range of discipline from the court depending on the track record of the juvenile. Judge Murray, who was not there tonight, has been very active with the Task Force. They changed the language on the ordinance to target the restitution clause and add more accountability on the parents. If

the restitution involves community service, then the parent is required to attend at least 50% of that community service also.

5. **Rosie Cobarrubias** stated that when she first arrived at Ben Milam she noticed a very strong gang influence in the school. Their 3rd, 4th and 5th graders would come to school wearing the gang colors. They started implementing a very strong character education program and they've seen how things are changing in the neighborhoods and around the children. They are being proactive. It's taken a few years but they are finally at the point where the children respect the school and that's why you don't see graffiti on the school. They are redirecting the children by providing activities such as Girls Scouts. They've connected with community organizations like the Girls Scouts that come in once a month and put together a chess team that competes against the middle school. They have a very dedicated staff that volunteers their time and they have a group of folkloric dancers that meet on Wednesdays. They have 70 girls in the drill team and the Boys & Girls Club has been very active in the community. The police department has been phenomenal and that makes a world of difference. She appreciated the efforts of the Task Force because they all wanted the children to feel safe in their environment.

George McShan commended Ben Milam for being a recognized campus and one of the top elementary schools in this district. It was not like that a few years ago, but with the leadership and staff these children are performing well academically. This is a changing Commission and the Task Force' report will be written in December. This must be ongoing and they must commit to their children. There is a group of former young gang members that want to present a video that will tell a story about gangs. How they got in and why they got out? They have the facilities (School's Channel 17) to use that as a tool to educate people. This will be happening soon. They'll be able to take this to not only schools but also other locations. The perception is not all bad on the police.

6. **Monica Pena** advised that Dr. Ritter was her instructor and she learned a lot from her. Hopefully she'll be graduating in 2009 studying going for police and probational. She's learned a lot about gangs. She doesn't live in the City limits of Harlingen but rather lives in Primera and there are no lights at night there. She sees what these kids are doing at 11 and 12 years old. These kids need their parents involved in their lives more than ever. It doesn't matter if they are just a single parent. She goes to school and works full-time and yet set aside time for her kids. She grew up with gangs everywhere. She tells her kids that the gang life is not the only way to go. She applauds all the criminal justice instructors and they all say the same thing that is you need to be a positive individual.

Gabe Gonzalez thanked everyone for being there and advised that the next meeting will be in December. They will publish the public hearing in the paper and everyone was welcomed to attend. He advised that if they wanted to get involved they could indicate so on the sign-up sheet.

Commissioner Robert Leftwich thanked everyone for coming out and showing their support.

7. An unnamed audience member stated she was a teacher and she's heard a lot of stories from the kids. She asked the school district to make an outreach effort to the teachers. She grew up in Harlingen, went away to college and then came back. There's not a lot to do here as a young person. They should communicate with the teachers because they know a lot of the things that are going on. She was available to assist them in any way.
8. The Crime Stoppers Treasurer (spoke earlier) stated that he and Chief Castillo serve on the Criminal Justice Council and there were a lot of grants that are given out each year. Maybe it would be good if the community came up with a program and then the City could present it to that board for a possible funding source.
9. **Rene Garza** with the Cameron County District Attorney's Office advised he's been attending meetings of the Task Force as a guest for a while now. He listens to everything they are saying. He is the Chief Prosecutor of juveniles along with Judge Murray. Mr. Villalobos who has been elected for another four years as District Attorney cares deeply about juveniles. They've achieved great success with the help of the City of Harlingen and holding people accountable. He thanked everyone for showing up and for standing up with their comments.

Gabe Gonzalez thanked everyone for their attendance.