

# County Candidates Questionnaire – 2018

## Washington County (Brenham), Texas

**Name:** John Brieden

**Position:** Washington County Judge

### 1. Why have you decided to run for re-election at this time?

In 2006, Judge Dorothy Morgan said it would be her last term and that she would retire January 1, 2011 at the end of her term. At that time a number of people asked that I consider running for Washington County Judge. Running for elective office had never been an ambition and never seriously considered. Then in 2009 at a ribbon cutting someone said, "I do not understand you. You used to be at all the events around town and it seemed like one day you just dropped out." I never dropped out, but for ten or fifteen years I had been heavily involved in state and national issues (many of them affecting us locally), just as involved, but not locally where this person could see. It made me think, been there, done that at state and national level, but serving the community where I live and the community I love is more fun and satisfying. The epiphany was coming to the understanding a person can make a bigger difference on the local level. It became time to seriously consider the requests to run. As County Judge I lead a strategic planning process to give guidance on issues that we were or would be facing. Some of the goals have been addressed or accomplished and some will be worked on in the near future. I am running for reelection to work on those issues identified by the strategic plan and finish the work we started.

### 2. What key competencies do you feel you possess to be an elected official?

a. General background: I am a businessman not a career politician. Being a businessman means meeting the payroll, paying taxes and living with the regulations government institutes. It means understanding what makes a business grow and create jobs as well as what inhibits the growth and job creation. Being a businessman means experience in living with the consequences (sometimes unintentional consequences) of decisions made by politicians. Private enterprise does a much better job than government in creating economic prosperity and quality of life. The job of government is produce and maintain the environment conducive to the entrepreneur starting and expanding business, not to choke it off with excessive regulations or taxes.

b. Financial background: A Bachelor of Business Administration from Texas A&M University in Accounting was the start. I never wanted to be an accountant, but knew that being in business I would benefit from being able to understand the finances and reports. Being self-employed for 41 years has been an on the job learning experience with some lessons learned the hard way. Serving on The American Legion, Department of Texas Finance Committee, the Executive Committee and as State Commander required creating and working with budgets and financial reports. All contracts were reviewed and signed by the State Commander and on the National Level by the National Commander. The American Legion National budget I presided over as National Commander was approximately \$98 million per year. Serving as a Commissioner on the Texas Veterans Commission for ten years (over two years as chair) required budgeting and working with House Appropriations Committee and the Senate Finance Committee for funding levels of those budgets. In addition, I have served as a Director on the Brazos River Authority and a board member on the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, which is one of the largest state agencies in Texas. I have experience developing and working with large budgets as a finance committee member of TJJD for six years.

c. Ability to communicate: Almost forty years ago the public speaking began by doing programs for local civic organizations. Word of mouth spread and new speaking engagements followed. Then radio and television interviews were done as a volunteer promoting a fundraiser or special program or as an “expert” on some current issue. Progressing in The American Legion resulted in being invited to speak at events in surrounding towns, eventually all across Texas and finally across the United States. Radio and TV interviews are normal during these trips. I have done call in radio on NPR and on the Jim Bohanon syndicated radio show and TV call in on CSPAN’s Washington Journal. Serving as the Texas Legislative chairman, as Texas’ National Legislative Vice-Chairman and the National Legislative chairman as well as State Commander and National Commander has resulted in testifying to the legislature and to congress. Because of the developed reputation I am asked several times a year to be the key note speaker at conventions or Chamber banquets and to present at leadership schools and legislative forums around the nation. Over the last forty years I have worked with legislators of both parties on both state and national legislation involving veteran’s issues and business issues. I know many of them personally and have cell numbers and personal email addresses for several.

d. Labor/HR issues: You cannot run a business without becoming experienced in all manner of employee relations and employee issues. However, serving The American Legion at state and national levels and on the boards of three state agencies took the education to a new level. Because of the size and number of employees there were many more issues and potential for liability if not handled correctly.

e. Leadership: Leadership ability has been gained through the Boy Scouts, the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets, five years of active service in the U.S. Army and The American Legion at local post, district, division (regional), state and national levels. Each was a learning experience and a leadership laboratory. Particularly interesting is The American Legion because you are working with volunteers. They cannot be commanded rather they must be informed and motivated. The same things which work with volunteers have been shown to work with employees.

f. Strategic planning: Strategic planning and budgeting are required in my business and it was required with the three state agencies I served for 18 years. With the American Legion strategic planning is an ongoing process, but it also allowed participating with the Department of Veterans Affairs as a stake holder in their planning and goal setting.

g. Local issues: The quality of life comes partly from the location of Washington County and from the natural resources and the beauty. But, the people are the most important part of making Washington County special. The citizens of Washington County are unique and a majority of those who choose to move here realize the uniqueness of the people and adopt it for themselves. Our community does a good job of accepting and incorporating the new citizens into our unique way of life.

### **3. What do you consider to be the top priorities to work on?**

The biggest and most important function of County government is the budget because it is funded primarily by the taxes of the citizens of the county. The first question on any project or item of expense should be “is this worth the money being paid by the average citizen” and the second “is it the best way to spend the citizen’s tax money”. Living within the revenue stream is a challenge and raising taxes is a last resort for emergency situations.

Second is implementing the goals set forth in the strategic plan. The most important of those, at this point, is additional court room space designed with security in mind. The plan is to move forward in a way that will have minimal impact on the tax rate.

Next is growth. Washington County is situated between Houston, Austin and Bryan/College Station and benefits from the location. Some areas have experienced explosive growth that overwhelms the efforts to maintain and expand services and infrastructure. Growth can be a benefit, but also can be a detriment. We have been fortunate to grow, but not at a rate that overwhelms. As the ability to work from home via the internet increases, the desire for our quality of life will quicken the growth of Washington County. Growth requires expanded services and infrastructure, but also brings additional tax revenues. The goal is to stay up with the demands of growth and manage the needs and consequences rather than wait and be overwhelmed all the while doing it without busting the budget and having to raise the tax rate.

Additionally, are the Federal and State governments pushing unfunded requirements to the local government. It is happening more and more. For instance, many citizens have told me they disagree with providing indigent health care. It is mandated that County government budget 8% of the general revenue for indigent health care. It is not optional and it is not debatable so we do it as required. Even more costly has been indigent defense. You've heard "we will provide an attorney if you cannot afford one", but you do not realize how many instances this applies and it is expanding. The state has a grant to reimburse the counties, but last year it covered 9.2% of what the county spent on indigent defense. In a difficult economy the tendency for Federal and State to push to local the costs through unfunded mandates is wrong. Local government is left holding the bag and more and more of the county budget is taken by things that are required and the county has no control over. This can best be fought by a loud and effective voice from the county to confront state and federal officials.

There are more priorities but these are the major ones.

#### **4. What do you consider to be the top issue affecting our local economic growth?**

To allow business to grow means that government keeps taxes low and regulation minimal. The success story of the Economic Development Foundation should be known and perpetuated, not duplicated or convoluted. Started in the 1950's to attract businesses and jobs to prevent the young from leaving the county to find jobs, the EDF has brought businesses to the community and not only provides jobs for local citizens, but for people from surrounding counties as well. Washington County does not depend on government, but instead the local business community promotes the growth. Government's job is to maintain the environment that allows this to work.

#### **5. What could you do as an elected official to help small businesses in the community?**

Local government should not duplicate the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Foundation and the Small Business Development Center, but should complement and support them. The role of government is to foster an environment of low taxes and regulation that allows business to prosper. The most important role of government is to stay out of the way and allow private enterprise to function.

#### **6. What is your opinion of offering economic development incentives to lure capital investment and jobs to the community?**

There are many who do not believe in incentives, but in order to compete with those who offer them we must also. Look at the bidding war going on right now to attract the second Amazon corporate headquarters. The goal is to be consistent and reasonable. We will not always win and must not be tempted to go beyond what is reasonable. However, attracting businesses who provide additional jobs helps everyone.

**7. How important do you feel the relationship is between Washington County government officials and City of Brenham officials, City of Burton officials and the unincorporated communities? How could these relationships be improved?**

Let me start with the City of Brenham since it is approximately 47% of the population of Washington. While every citizen of Washington County is not a citizen of Brenham, every citizen of Brenham is a citizen of Washington County. Therefore, it is incumbent on the two local governments to work together to benefit those shared citizens. It is wasteful to duplicate services or efforts. It is also efficient to share services and efforts. The rub is always who is in charge and who pays how much. Those questions do not always have easy answers and generally have different points of view. When I became County Judge the relationship and communication was strained to the point of breaking. It took more than a year to gain a communication based on mutual respect. It is important that the City of Brenham officials and Washington County officials have regular dialogue. It may be that we do not always agree, but it is important to look at the different points of view and try to find the solution that is best for the citizens.

The City of Burton has a different problem in that providing services is difficult and expensive for a small city. Communities such as Chappell Hill, Independence, Washington and others are not incorporated so they look to the county for services usually provided by a city government. To address some of this is why the Washington County EMS started and has expanded the Advanced Community Paramedic program. Today we have advanced paramedics stationed in Burton and Chappell Hill (and in Washington probably next year) to cut response time and allow medical help until an ambulance arrives. In both communities there have been examples of patients who were saved that would have died without the quick response of the advanced paramedic stationed nearby.

**8. Do you support the Washington County Chamber's "Government Advocacy Policy Statements"?** (The 2017 version is attached.) This will be a key document for our community's advocacy activities at the state level. Does it include any policy statements you do not agree with? Is there anything you would suggest adding to bring to the attention of state leaders during the upcoming legislative session?

Yes, I support the Chamber's "Government Advocacy Policy Statements". No list can deal with every issue and I fully expect situations to arise that require immediate action such as the attack on Blinn College in the 2015 and 2017 legislative sessions. Having worked legislative issues for many years I have learned that just as you have your offense to gain what you want to accomplish, you must also have a defense to work against those things that would be harmful if passed.

# # #