

Overcoming resistance to key moral issues in Williamson County, Texas

By Kurt Johnson

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The present commissioners court of Williamson County has implemented tactics of governance which are an affront to good government, fair and due process, consideration of public input, transparency, and accountability. While this syndrome crosses a wide range of issues, the most prominent among them are:

The failure of county officials to enforce important provisions of the new landfill contract (approved on March 3, 2009) and to explain how problematical provisions of that contract are supposed to work.

The failure of county officials to answer questions about how safeguards at the T. Don Hutto prison facility will be guaranteed when the federal court oversight of the prison (for immigrant women and children) ends on September 1, 2009.

The failure of county officials to correct or explain the circumstance of having the county judge serve as the county's budget officer despite an opinion from the Texas Attorney General which concludes that this circumstance is a violation of Texas law.

The failure of county officials to reach a settlement in the lawsuit (now on appeal) brought by indigent criminal defendants involving the apparent failure of some of the county-court-at-law judges to provide legal counsel in violation of the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment.

Various citizens and groups who have engaged these issues have met with a great deal of frustration as a result of the methodology used by the county in dealing with concerns at a granular level. The methodology is that county officials don't deal with citizen concerns. On any and all of these issues, county officials generally are silent or, alternatively, the responses they provide for difficult questions are bathed in abstractions and generalizations. They don't respond to inquiries with sufficient detail if, in fact, they respond at all. They don't attend meetings or forums to which they are invited to discuss these issues. They don't respond fully to requests for written explanations. And when open records requests are filed, they resist, procrastinate and postpone, sending objections to the

Texas Attorney General whenever there is the remotest justification. They implement a bunker mentality.

Within the presumed circumstances of a real democracy, politicians take a huge risk when implementing such a methodology because of the likelihood that they won't be re-elected. But the politics of Williamson County is an exception to this principle, at least in the apparent view of current elected officials. They seem to believe that they can implement this bunker methodology and continue to be re-elected. The seeming basis for this assumption is what can be called the "single-lever-pull" strategy. Because all the elected officials are Republicans, and because Republicans have such a significant majority among the county's voters, and because a high percentage of these Republican voters vote a straight-party ticket with a single-lever pull, a presumed comfort zone is provided for these officials, creating their perception that they can implement this bunker, limited-response methodology without fearing an adverse fallout in subsequent election cycles.

So far, the strategy has worked, much to the frustration of citizens regarding the issues itemized above. And so, the obvious question crops up: What do citizens do about it?

The standard and most conventional answer is that citizens should work to elect replacements who will be responsive using traditional political methods of recruiting and supporting good candidates. While that strategy ultimately should be employed, there are two short-term problems with it: (1) solutions take far too long, and (2) the incumbents are so deeply entrenched within the "single-lever-pull" environment that real change might be a long time in coming. While such a long-term answer is prudent, a shorter-term strategy is needed in order to achieve success, especially regarding the four primary issues identified above.

And so, what should that short-term strategy be?

Among all the possibilities, the one with the greatest potential for success involves the Saul Alinsky model. For those who aren't aware of Alinsky work, a brief synopsis is provided below, but for more extensive information, simply Google Saul Alinsky, and a great deal of information is available.

Alinsky (1909-1972) was a Chicago native and graduate of the University of Chicago who demonstrated the success of community organization principles. He was instrumental in improving working conditions for laborers in the Chicago stockyards in the 1930s, and in conjunction, helped clean up the horrid conditions in the surrounding neighborhood. He successfully worked to protect neighborhoods against urban renewal initiatives. He developed the program which caused

Eastman Kodak to adopt fair hiring practices in Rochester, New York. He was successful in organizing grass-roots groups and organizations so that malevolent power structures had to be responsive to the public interest. He developed a response to counter the kind of hunker-down and bunker methodology which now is being exercised by Williamson County officials.

Among all of Alinsky's writings, the one which contains the best explanation and detail of his approach is his book, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

So, would the Alinsky model be an effective strategy to counter the methodology implemented by the Williamson County officials? Yes, it would. The only problem is that the strategy must be implemented with enough horsepower so that it succeeds.

The key to establishing grass-roots organizations which have the horsepower to implement the strategy begins with the attitude of the participants in the grass roots effort, according to Alinsky. The attitude must begin by addressing the question, "Does the end justify the means?"

Succinctly stated, Alinsky says that a compelling issue will create an assessment of just how fervently activists are willing to be in order to achieve an end, to right a wrong, to replace injustice with justice. A good example of the principle is found in the circumstance at the T. Don Hutto prison in Taylor, Texas, in which the federal government imprisons women and children immigrants through a contract with the county. History has shown that the imprisonment has caused abuse of rights (as documented by a successful lawsuit filed on behalf of the inmates) in addition to other negative fallout—such as adverse psychological consequences for the children. Given these human issues, how broad are the options people are willing to consider in correcting this injustice?

One of the rules of ethics stated by Alinsky involving means and ends is that "any effective means is automatically judged by the opposition as being unethical." An example of this response to citizens already has been experienced in the actions of Precinct 4 County Commissioner Ron Morrison involving the landfill issue. After the Hutto Citizens Group, over time, talked with Morrison regarding his position on the landfill, he complained that it did him no good to talk with citizens because they end up reporting what he said in their newsletter. He had sought to convert his own indefensible position on the landfill issue by pillorizing citizens for reporting what his position was. Alinsky would agree that Morrison's response proved that the means used by the citizens was effective.

While the tactics for Alinsky's approach involve the tried-and-true

actions involving mass protests, public statements, use of media, confrontation, and keeping the pressure on in a variety of ways, it is the effects of these initiatives which are the most important, and Alinsky sums those up nicely: (1) The real action is in the enemy's reaction; (2) the enemy, properly goaded and guided in his reaction, will be your major strength; and (3) tactics, like organization and like life, require that you move with the action.

The central point made by Alinsky in describing his approach is that the results to be achieved involving justice must be important to citizens to the extent that they are willing to move beyond the edge of the envelope in bringing the heat to overcome the resistance being provided. Without that kind of commitment, the initiative won't succeed.

On May 1, 2009, upwards of 1,500 people gathered at the state capitol in Austin, Texas as part of the International Workers' Day observance in support of those at the lower end of the economic and social ladder, including immigrants who are experiencing problems as a result of their status in the United States. The entire group marched straight down Congress Avenue from the capitol, crossed the Colorado River, turned west and then north, crossed the river again. The significance and relevance of the event delivered a message of high impact, and in typical use of the hunker-down model, politicians avoided dealing with it by getting as far away from the event as possible.

Can you imagine what would happen if 1,500 people carrying signs and chanting such slogans as “Don't imprison children for money!”¹ showed up at county commissioners court for a regular Tuesday morning meeting? Would that event goad members of commissioners court into a response in which they would have to discuss the moral nature of the issue?

Maybe it would and maybe it wouldn't, the first time anyway. Then there always would be next Tuesday. As Alinsky would say, the ends justify the means if the ends are important enough.

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¹ Williamson County makes between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per month from its contracts with Corrections Corporation of America and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for the imprisonment of women and children immigrants.