

work side-by-side with Wyland to create a beautiful indoor mural. Niagara's Whaling Wall is a regional treasure that has helped foster a greater appreciation and awareness for our world's oceans.

Madam Speaker, I want to again commend the Wyland Foundation for their commitment to protecting the world's oceans, and their partnership with the Aquarium of Niagara.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. JEFF MILLER

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Madam Speaker, I missed rollcall Votes No. 136–138 on March 12, 2007 and rollcall votes No 139–141 on March 13, 2007. It was six suspension votes H.R. 85, the Energy Technology Transfer Act, H. Res. 136, Commending the Girl Scouts of the United States of America on the occasion of their 95th anniversary, and H. Res. 89, Expressing the sense of the House that a day should be established as Dutch-American Friendship Day, H. Res. 64, Expressing the sense of the House that the Government of Bangladesh should immediately drop all pending charges against Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, H. Res. 228, Recognizing the 186th anniversary of the independence of Greece and celebrating Greek and American Democracy, and H. Res. 222, Expressing the support of the House for the Good Friday Agreement as a blueprint for lasting peace in Northern Ireland, respectively. I was detained and could not make it to the floor for this vote.

If present, I would have voted rollcall Vote No. 136, "yea," roll call Vote No. 137, "yea," rollcall Vote No. 138, "yea," Vote No. 139, "yea," rollcall Vote No. 140, "yea," and rollcall Vote No. 141, "yea."

TRIBUTE TO HARRIS COUNTY JUDGE ROBERT ECKELS

HON. JOHN ABNEY CULBERSON

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

Mr. CULBERSON. Madam Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute and wish a happy 50th birthday to my dear friend and colleague, Harris County Judge Robert Eckels. Until last week, Judge Eckels was the presiding officer of the Harris County Commissioners Court—the governing body of the county, and the only member that is elected countywide. The position involves executive, judicial, and legislative functions in the third most populace county in the United States. There are 34 municipalities within the county, including the county seat and the fourth largest city in the country, the City of Houston. More than 1.2 million people live in unincorporated Harris County and rely on the county to be the primary provider of basic government services. The term County Judge in Texas is comparable to a County Executive or County Mayor in other parts of the country.

Judge Eckels has been in public service for more than 25 years. He recently retired from

public service after a distinguished career to join the private sector. He and his wife, Jet, are dear friends of mine and my wife, Belinda.

Robert Eckels was first elected to the Texas Legislature in 1982. When he began his service in January of 1983 he was only 25-years-old. Few thought he would have much impact his first year, but he passed 8 of 13 bills in his legislative package. Robert's quiet demeanor frequently led fellow members to urge the enforcement of the "no mumble rule" so they could understand what he was saying, but his understated nature was also key to his success in Austin. He did not care who got credit for passing legislation, so long as it was good law that did not have to fix later. He understands the legislative process, legislative language and the legislative intent as well as anyone I know.

Robert also cared about his colleagues. He would approach Members towards the end of our legislative sessions to ask them how their legislative agendas were coming along. If a Member complained that their most important bill was in trouble in committee or on the House floor, he would help his colleagues amend their priority onto another bill or find some other way to pass their bills.

In 1991 the Texas Monthly Magazine described his character in its biennial article at the end of the Legislative session entitled "The Best and the Worst Legislators." In that piece he was named an Outstanding Legislator for his work in ethics reform and redistricting, "the session's most thankless issues." It said "Eckels wrote a bill that outshone its rivals as silver outshines dirt." Other quotes describe his character, "Eckels is unselfish to the point of being sacrificial. He's the Good Samaritan of the House; he finds hurt people by the side of the road and helps them get well."

In 1994 Robert decided to leave the Legislature, over the protests of many of his House colleagues, myself included, to run for the office of Harris County Judge. He saw an opportunity to work on the issues that were most important to him and his vision for the county he grew up in and served with distinction in the Legislature. He won the election and his opponent in that election later became a member of his advisory group.

TRANSPORTATION

Judge Eckels believes as I do that one of the most important priorities in our county is improving the major transportation corridors so people do not spend hours stuck in traffic jams. Judge Eckels also believes, as I do, that mobility is vital to our county's future. He served as chairman of the Transportation Policy Council for the Houston-Galveston region and was a major author of the 2025 Regional Transportation Plan.

Judge Eckels was also Chairman of the Alliance for I-69 Texas and the Texas High Speed Rail & Transportation Corporation. Texas House of Representatives Speaker Tom Craddick appointed him to the Study Commission on Transportation Financing to look at the broader issues facing the State of Texas. It was Judge Eckels who spearheaded an effort to turn abandoned railroad right-of-way running through my District into major traffic arteries which bring hundreds of thousands of daily commuters into and out of downtown Houston. Today, as a result of his vision and leadership, the Westpark Toll Way, the country's first entirely electronic toll road, is an innovative addition to the Harris County Toll Road Authority.

HOMELAND SECURITY/EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Judge Eckels has always been deeply concerned with hurricanes and other natural disasters and the county's response to crises. He commissioned a study showing the impact of a Category-V hurricane coming into Galveston Bay, and he initiated planning procedures to ensure first responders had the proper training and equipment to take action.

He began to set up an interoperable communications system for Harris County that could be expanded regionally to allow communications among first responders across jurisdictional and disciplinary lines. Building such a system has required a strong leader like Judge Eckels to convince various agencies that rely on mission-critical communication to trust Harris County's Information Technology Department to build an interoperable system which was better than one they could run on their own.

Today, the Harris County Regional Radio System is a model communication system that has grown to support a shared infrastructure with more than 133 channels and 17 tower sites. It currently covers all of Harris County and parts of eight other counties, with the intent to expand even farther. As resources are available it will be expanded until it serves all 13 counties in the Houston/Galveston Area Council's service area.

There are more than 20,000 users from more than 400 different departments/agencies with nearly 2,000 mobile data-terminals and the system is growing quickly. The regional radio system is not only an essential response tool when disaster strikes, it can also be adapted to conform to the needs of the partners in day-to-day operations. Harris County has more than 90 different policing agencies operating in very close proximity. This system allows dispatchers to send the closest officer to the scene of an incident regardless of which agency the responder works for.

In his first State of the Union Address after 9/11, President George W. Bush called upon all Americans to dedicate at least two years of their lives—the equivalent of 4,000 hours—in service to others. He launched the Citizen Corps initiative to inspire and enable Americans to find ways to serve their communities and country. In response to the President's initiative, in August 2002, Judge Eckels created the Harris County Citizen Corps Council. The Council coordinates with volunteer groups such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the United Way to identify volunteer opportunities. The Citizen Corps programs include the Community Emergency Response Team, the Neighborhood Watch Program, Volunteers in Police Service, Fire Corps, and the Medical Reserve Corps.

When Hurricane Katrina caused the evacuation of more than 250,000 to the Harris County area, Judge Eckels coordinated and managed the relief effort to create comfortable, welcoming shelters. Approximately 27,000 evacuees came to "Reliant City," which was created in the facilities at Reliant Park and the George R. Brown Convention Center in a 20 hour period in August 2005. This was the largest sheltering operation in U.S. history.

Thousands of volunteers were needed to assist in the relief operation and within one hour of the initial call for assistance to the Citizen Corps, more than 1,000 volunteers arrived at the shelter. In all, more than 60,000