

# Huntsville city manager gives state of the city address

**KIMBERLIN MOORE**

*Contributing Reporter*

Huntsville citizens gathered at the Walker County Storm Shelter to hear the 2nd annual State of the City Address hosted by the Walker County Chamber of Commerce and the city of Huntsville on Tuesday.

City Manager Matt Benoit was the keynote speaker for the address and presented the public with useful knowledge about progress the city is making and what to expect in the future.

Benoit reported that within the last year, there had been \$16.8 million in commercial building permits in the community, which is equivalent to 1.31 cents on the city tax rolls.

"That is a very significant level of growth for Huntsville," Benoit said.

Huntsville, compared to other cities within the region, has a considerably low tax rate to begin with. Benoit said in order for the sales and property tax to remain low, there must be people spending money in Huntsville.

Through the city sales tax, 39 percent of that is allotted to the

general fund that pays for the everyday services that go into Huntsville, such as Huntsville Police Department, fire department and libraries.

According to Benoit, the property tax is also dependent on the sales tax. As long as the sales tax is doing well, the property tax will stay low.

Over the past five to six years, the city employee number has dropped from about 280 to 250. The city council took this initiative to be more efficient with the city tax dollars. Although there are less employees, according to Benoit, the employees that remain are working smarter and harder to provide the needs citizens of Huntsville expect.

Currently, the Way-Finding Project is underway, a project designed to allocate funds for signage around the city to direct visitors into Huntsville to shop, rather than just make a quick pit stop on Interstate 45. With the local hotel/motel tax on a 20 percent increase from last year, signage is becoming more of a necessity for the city to be able to capitalize off of visitors.

"There really are some signs that there may be significant growth coming to Huntsville,"

Benoit said.

Additionally, the council has created a strategic plan in which they will complete 26 strategies by the end of the 2014 calendar year.

One of those strategies being to maintain relationships with the entities of the community. Those entities include Huntsville Independent School District, City of Huntsville, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Walker County Chamber of Commerce, Walker

County, Huntsville Memorial Hospital and Sam Houston State University.

Benoit said it's important that each agency knows what is good for one is almost certainly good for all.

SHSU has teamed up with the city to create their Academic Community Engagement classes. In these classes, students sign up for a class and do regular work but are also learning and outreaching in the community. Through these,

students have the opportunity to have input on subject matters of their major interest or simply just play an active role in the community.

The city of Huntsville is also reaching out to the community through bi-weekly newsletters delivered by email, entitled 'This Week in Huntsville.' These newsletters contain all of the latest information and happenings around Huntsville.

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