

# Austin American-Statesman

## New Williamson County Judge Bill Gravell bringing ‘conservative business’ approach

Austin Sanders

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Bill Gravell has spent nearly a lifetime admiring the building where he will now preside over Williamson County government as county judge.

Born in Georgetown and raised in Round Rock, he recalled walking by the “awe-inspiring” historic Williamson County courthouse as a child. Located on Main Street in Georgetown, the courthouse symbolized for a young Gravell the importance of justice.

“I knew important work was being done there,” he said. “And I knew that one day I wanted to work there.”

As of Jan. 1, when Gravell was sworn in as head of the county’s Commissioners Court, that dream has become a reality. The move has ended his tenure as Precinct 3 justice of the peace, in which he was elected in 2014.

He will fill a seat held for 12 years by county stalwart Dan Gattis. Gravell acknowledged that Gattis left big shoes to fill, but said he was “honored to have the opportunity.”

Gravell’s philosophy on the role county government plays in the average citizen’s life was cemented during his time as justice of the peace. He said working to make the government more efficient and transparent was a major goal.

He recalled an effort he led in his office to go paperless — a difficult task for any bureaucracy, but an especially difficult one for Gravell’s court, which was among the busiest justice of the peace courts in the nation.

By making some of the paperwork citizens need when interacting with the court available online, Gravell said his office helped make the court more accessible.

“County government intersects people at some of the best times in their lives and sometimes in the worst times of their lives,” he said. “So, to make that process easier is good for everyone.”

Now Gravell is preparing to take his approach — what he calls being “conservative business-minded” — in the policy-oriented role of county judge. He said one of his top goals will be to create “an atmosphere of unity” within county government and the people of Williamson County.

“If we can stop the infighting over petty issues, we can spend more time on the issues that matter to people,” he said.

One of those issues will be the continuing rise in county property taxes. Although the Commissioners Court lowered the county tax rate in August, residential property taxes are expected to rise due to growing property appraisals in the area.

“The only way I can relieve the property tax burden is through economic development that’s smart and wise,” Gravell said. “Which is why I plan to be practical but aggressive in reaching out to businesses interested in moving here.”

Gravell spoke glowingly of the Commissioner Court’s recent deal with Apple for its Northwest Austin campus, which is expected to bring over 5,000 jobs to the county in the next 15 years. He said bringing businesses like Apple to the area would have a positive impact on the county by creating jobs and more opportunities for development.

Another of Gravell’s goals is preventing the county from becoming what he called a “sanctuary.” Although there is no legal definition for “sanctuary county” — or its relative, “sanctuary city” — they are generally seen as governmental entities more protective of undocumented immigrants who are arrested for offenses such as driving while intoxicated.

For Gravell, the issue of illegal immigration is one of public safety.

“Everyone who enters (America) and lives here should do so lawfully,” Gravell said. “The drug cartel is strong outside of the U.S., and I want to keep Williamson County safe. Everyone in America came from somewhere, and I just want people to do that lawfully.”

A study published by the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, found that in Texas, undocumented immigrants were convicted of crimes at a rate of 50 percent below that of native-born Americans. Documented immigrants in Texas had a conviction rate of 66 percent below that of native-born Americans.

Despite a midterm election that saw the election of two progressive Democrats in Williamson County — James Talarico in House District 52 and John Bucy in House District 136 — Gravell said part of his support from voters came from his stance on illegal immigration.

While Gravell won his election by 6 percentage points — compared to Gattis’ 27-point lead in his 2014 race — he said he is confident his conservative perspective will be valued by county residents.

“I’m going to take credit that I won, in part, because of my stance on (sanctuary counties),” he said. “I have a problem with people who commit crimes, and they will be held accountable.”