

Collin County Commissioner, Precinct 3 Republican Primary Candidate Forum

Hosted by the Republican Club at Heritage Ranch – January 20, 2020

Incumbent: Commissioner Darrell Hale

Challenger: Former Allen Mayor Steve Terrell

Each candidate was given two minutes to answer each question:

What makes you the best qualified candidate for Collin County Commissioner, Precinct 3?

Terrell:

I have been a business owner for over 40 years. I have owned my business in Allen, Texas, which is Terrell's Dry Cleaning, for last 30 years... I also have been in the Collin County Republicans since 1986. I'm a big donor to the Lincoln Day dinner.

One of the reasons that I feel like I'm qualified to run for the county commissioner seat, Precinct 3, is because I have been mayor of the city of Allen for 23 years and I know how to guide and control and handle a city growing. We were one of the fastest growing cities in the nation at one time. Now as we grow out, it's becoming a jewel in Collin County. So, I feel like that and taking on a lot of regional things throughout the county. I also sit on the regional transportation commission. I've also been past president of the North Central Texas Council of Governments. I'm also on the chair of the 9-1-1 board for the 16-county region. I just feel like that makes me the qualified candidate.

I'm a conservative at heart. I've always been. I always tell everybody, if I raise your taxes, I raise mine three times because I have three houses—two houses and a business—that I raise my taxes on. There's no reason for Collin County, as long as robust cities are in operation, I see no reason for Collin County to ever have above the effective tax rate.

Hale:

I'm very honored and pleased to be your county commissioner for Precinct 3... I am a West Point graduate. I was a field artillery officer at West Point. I majored in Mapping, Charting, and Geodesy, a Computer Science/Engineering track. Geodesy is actually the study of mathematical applications as it applies to the earth's surface. It's an analytical job.

After the military, I spent 15 years in corporate telecom work handling multimillion dollar jobs—\$10 million, \$20 million contracts... I was responsible for negotiating those contracts. After that I opened my own small business and ran it for five years, grew it up to the largest in my franchise chain, then sold it off and ran for office and was elected by you.

As far as the best-qualified candidate, I have been doing the job. I have held your taxes flat. I have been endorsed by all the other fellow conservatives you admire countywide like Judge Hill, Sheriff Skinner, Representative Candy Noble, and I am endorsed by Texas Right to Life, Texas Home School Coalition, and numerous other conservative groups. Finally, I've been trying to do the job that you would have me do by communicating with you on a regular basis and having total transparency.

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What are your major priorities for the next four years as county commissioner, and how will you work with the county judge, public works, and other department heads to move these priorities forward?

Hale:

First and foremost, the job of the county commissioner is to handle the budget, and that is going to be the first thing we tackle. Inside that budget, we are going to have to look for infrastructure growth as the county continues to grow.

A personal list this coming year is going to be working with Sheriff Skinner on the jail. We've already had numerous conversations about that. As far as public works, our county infrastructure is actually fantastic right now. We're the envy of the state. About 92-93 percent of our county roads are already paved. One of the bigger issues is a lot of our county roads share joint boundaries with cities now that can't forcibly annex. I've already been working with public works and having discussions on how we can work out agreements to balance out that construction, so we can actually start maintaining more of the roads that share these joint boundaries with cities.

I've had probably already a half-dozen conversations with our director of public works just this weekend on things we need to take care of this week. So, it's a steady and continuous stream of communication with other officials. It's also balanced with working with the judges... As we continue to grow and add more to the judiciary, that's something we'll probably start near the end of my four-year term, looking at expanding the courthouse and accommodating that growth.

Terrell:

Within the next four years, we're going to have to deal with the jail system. It's going to have to be expanded, which is going to be extremely costly. It's not the actual expansion of the jail system, it's going to be the M&O, the maintenance and operation side, that's going to cost you a whole lot more money. In my opinion, you have to plan that through the system, make sure you do that in a methodical way, so you can make sure the tax rate stays steady and level.

On the mobility side, we have to deal with the roads. It's not just the asphalt, the gravel roads today, but we're going to have to expand some of those roads to six lanes to carry the traffic throughout the county itself. We're going to have to come up with some kind of a LAR system, which is a limited-access road, that will have to go east and west—380 is one of those examples—to be able to handle the mobility of our county.

Since Collin County was not prepared to get into the 2045 plan this last time, in the COG system, we hope that COG will open that plan back up in the near future and allow Collin County to come into it because that's a loss of billions of dollars to the residents of Collin County, because it comes from the state side.

Do I think I can work with Chris Hill? I've been a mayor of the city for 23 years. I've worked with multiple council members, multiple cities I've worked with over my COG relationship of 16

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years, several different counties. I think I can work with just about anybody and come out with the most successful thoughts for the citizens of Collin County.

What is your position on how Collin County can continue to set its tax rate at or below the effective tax rate over the next four years and still meet the growing demand of county services?

Terrell:

One of the unique things about it is you've got to keep the economic base of the cities growing... they feed the counties. As long as the cities are vibrant and the county is healthy and we've got a great working relationship between the counties and the cities, then the citizens benefit the most... I see no reason why the county can't maintain the effective tax rate in the near future.

I set a budget in Allen for many, many years. We started with a \$0.765 tax rate in Allen, Texas, and today I've dropped it all the way down to \$0.489, which is 28 cents we've reduced the tax rate. We kept up with growth within the community itself. When I took over in Allen, Texas we had one six-lane road and that was 75. All the other roads were two lanes or less. With growth and all the other things... believe it or not, with all those challenges we've had in Allen, we finally missed the effective tax rate in our city by two-tenths of one percent, which is unbelievable.

Hale:

This is an instance where I can have a contrast between myself and my opponent. When I ran for election two years ago, I promised the effective tax rate, and I honored my promise to you and actually delivered on that with the rest of the commissioners court. My opponent has actually raised taxes 157 percent over his tenure, an average of eight percent increase a year. That's the facts.

You don't have to raise taxes to provide great services whenever you have an expanding base. We have 20,000 people moving in a year at least, if not 30,000 or 40,000. Those people pay their own taxes whenever they have their own homes and the businesses that are driven from the migrations of people in. They generate their own taxes that we use to expand the infrastructure, that we use to provide the services. We don't need to raise taxes on all the other people that were already here in order to provide services to the people that are coming, because they're generating their own taxes.

My opponent has had a long tenure. It's been 21 years and there's been some inflation. Inflation was 60 percent over that time, so he's only tripled taxes. It's nice that Allen has almost gotten to the effective tax rate, but they've already raised taxes so much they don't need to raise them any more. I'm going to continue to honor my promise not to raise taxes. The people that are coming to Collin County are going to generate the taxes that we need as a county to actually provide the services people expect.

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How can you improve communication and transparency with your constituents?

Hale:

This is something I think I've been doing a pretty good job on. You can always communicate better. I instituted working through NextDoor early last year, and I send out probably 75,000 emails a week just through NextDoor to communicate what's happening on the commissioners court. I've done polling. We had SB2 and HB2 which was a major issue on capping property tax growth, and that's something I did a poll on. I'd heard from different state reps statewide it was about 70 percent approval. I was wrong. When I did my poll, it was 90 percent approval. That communication with my constituents led me to go down and testify on your behalf at the state house for SB2 and HB2. It was the right thing to do, but it was something that just through communication getting that information from y'all allowed me to be a better representative for you.

My cell phone number is published on my card, it's on my website. People can get hold of me regularly, they can email me, they can text me. I email out my own personal mailing list on what's going on in commissioners court each week, as well as doing a video. I communicate through Facebook, Twitter, just about any way you can think of to communicate, I try to do that with y'all, so I'm up to date with what your needs are.

Terrell:

I would do whatever it takes to maintain good communications with y'all. But cities are a little bit different from that standpoint. We use a PIO office and things of that nature a lot of times and it pushes out on Facebook and everything else. I communicate, I've met many, many times with people one on one and also I've met with groups of people at the same time.

As mayor of the city of Allen, my executive sessions the Dallas Morning News kind of chastised me over a little bit. The maximum I've ever had is 11 executive sessions in one year, so most all of our stuff is done in transparency. Most of it is done in open meetings. We were one of the first cities to put our council meetings live on TV. At that time, very few other cities did that; even the county did not at that time.

I've always thought that transparency, pushing out information, is the key thing to do. But the problem is you need to remember one thing about mayors: we don't make a lot of money, folks. It takes a lot of time to do this push out stuff. Once you get paid for this kind of a job, then at that point you can push things out and it's a lot different. But I do a lot of communication. I probably spend 30 to 40 hours a week as mayor of the city of Allen.

I think the city ought to be transparent and do everything out in the open as much as they can. I think the county ought to do the same thing too.

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Should Collin County spend tax dollars on state lobbyists and organizations that hire state lobbyists?

Terrell:

In the city of Allen, going back in my history, I've always been opposed to putting money into lobbyists. The city of Allen never hires a lobbyist. The only one we do have is TML, Texas Municipal League. I would probably dump them too if I possibly could, but unfortunately I have six other council members that enjoy going to the Texas Municipal League. But I'm not in favor of lobbyists going to the state Capitol... I should be going there myself.

Hale:

Any time you're using tax dollars to actually lobby for or against something, no matter whether you're Republican or Democrat, you're going to be against another taxpayer on the other side. No matter what, we don't need to use taxpayer dollars for that, because you're just spending money to fight amongst yourselves and against each other.

As far as Collin County, we are your lobbyists. You should expect us to go down and advocate for bills that benefit the county, and that's that I've done in the last year, not once but twice. If that opportunity presents itself with the legislature, I'll travel down and speak.

How will development of McKinney Airport and U.S. 380 affect Precinct 3 over the next four years? What can you do to resolve Fairview's issues with the airport expansion?

Hale:

I've already been working with Mayor Lessner and Mayor Fuller up in McKinney, and bringing Judge Hill in. Together we're working in a three-way process that worked towards having the airport, whenever they do runway expansion, expand to the north. Judge Hill offered out of that meeting as a request from the mayors a resolution in support of extending it to the north. I think in that respect we're already doing what you would want us to do by pushing the runway as far north as possible. It's always about money, so we are supporting any kind of avenue that COG or RTC could do part of the dollars to extend that runway north instead of south.

Tied into that, it allows us to not have to bring any traffic south of the airport further. We can actually have more of a direct east-west expansion of 546 or Spur 399 or 380, whatever you want to call it, it would go directly east-west south of the airport before it travels up and hits 380.

Terrell:

I do know that Mayor Fuller and Mr. Lessner are working diligently in commissioners court on this avenue. I do know they passed a resolution not too long ago in support of that. I do think I read it was going to go 1,000 feet to the north and 500 feet to the south, 1,500 total.

As long as the citizens are in agreement and working with that process through it, I think that's the best thing we can do, because it's very difficult when the FAA [??] an airport, you're not going to get rid of it. So, the best thing you can do is buckle down and work with them, try to figure out the best thing you can do. Maybe it's moving some of the flight patterns in different

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directions at different times of day... all of that is possible. You've just got to address it and deal with it and work with it and try to get the best situation you can get out of it.

What infrastructure improvements do you foresee in Precinct 3, and how would you balance those improvements while maintaining a fiscally conservative budget?

Terrell:

That is a very good point. You've got to have a plan, and the plan's got to be stuck to. You've got to work it through and make sure you don't cost it all into your budget at one time. Labor is probably your highest cost, your M&O operations. Putting things in is usually the least expensive thing, but the M&O because it goes on forever.

But I will tell you that the infrastructure and things of that nature, you just put it into the budget, you work it through. You've got to make up a plan, have a system, and you only can spend so much money at one time, so you've got to organize it.

Hale:

The jail is actually in my precinct, so it's an infrastructure piece that we would have to work on. The bonds are already available for us to do that work on the jail. Also, the road and bridge fund that is separate from our general fund, we actually generate enough dollars through the amount of vehicles and registration fees to maintain all the county roads.

So, then we're left with 5.3 cents that we're using for interest and sinking, which is our bond maintenance money. That's going towards the \$750 million in bonds that were approved last year that we're putting towards limited access roadways and also against infrastructure improvement in partnerships with cities.

One of the ideas that I had come up with to help out the smaller cities was to give a greater percentage of match—20 percent for the cities and 80 for the county, or 30 percent-70 percent—to make the dollars that you have in small cities go further whenever you're starting to do these infrastructure projects like expanding thoroughfares or adding new thoroughfares that will actually reduce congestion... We're able to do that at the current tax rate without adding any other dollars to do the work we're doing on 380, the jail, and do infrastructure partnership projects with the city.

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In one minute, convince us you are the best candidate

Hale:

Hopefully I've showed I've got the knowledge, I've been working, I've been doing the job of commissioner for you already. I've been communicating with you effectively, letting you know what's going on. I've been endorsed by many conservative leaders: Sheriff Skinner, Judge Hill, Henry Lessner, Candy Noble. I've been endorsed by all the major conservative groups that are endorsing in this race, including Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, Texas Right to Life, just numerous organizations.

And finally, I've been communicating all this to you while I've been doing it. I promised something, I've delivered on it, and I would hope that come February 18 all of you will be willing to say "Hale Yes" and re-elect me.

Terrell:

I will tell you what I have done. I know everyone here knows what Allen, Texas looks like... that is my pride and joy. I can tell you if I go to the county level, I can bring that to the county commissioners court. I can work with everybody that's up there. I will always be fiscally minded; I will always have a set budget and a plan. I will always be out there to be with whatever the citizens want. I always told everybody in Allen, Texas, I did not build Allen, Texas; you did. You told me what you wanted; I made it happen. And that's exactly what I'll do as county commissioner.

I do enjoy people. I enjoy being the mayor of Allen. Unfortunately, I had to step down as mayor of Allen at this time and I'm running for county commissioner place 3. I would really love to have your vote... I've been endorsed by multiple mayors I have worked with.