

From San Antonio Express News August 17, 2006



County clerk getting nod for archival work

Web Posted: 08/17/2006 12:36 AM CDT

Tracy Idell Hamilton
Express-News Staff Writer

For decades, the rich trove of historic documents known as the Spanish Archives languished, scattered and deteriorating, in storage closets around Bexar County.

Since March, the collection, which begins with 16th century records of the Spanish Empire's first mission outposts, documenting Mexican sovereignty, Texas independence and its emergence as the 28th state of the union, has been housed in a climate-controlled vault in the Bexar County Courthouse, with fire-proof cabinets, workstations for document repair and a public viewing area.

Today, County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff, who led a 10-year effort to collect, protect and preserve the archives, will accept an award from the Texas Association of Counties' 7th annual Best Practices Awards, given for programs that save taxpayers money and provide better public service.

The awards will be presented by the association's Leadership Foundation, which was begun in 1999 to help county officials improve operations and efficiency.

The awards help county leaders learn what innovative, money-saving or service-improving programs are working among their colleagues across the state.

Three phases

The effort to protect the Spanish Archives and make them accessible to scholars and the public began in 1996 as a three-phase plan.

- Phase I constructed a facility able to safely house the archives, provide room for restoration and digital imaging, and allow public viewing access.
- Phase II began the effort to professionally restore and repair some of the oldest documents in the archive. Since work began in 2003, 95 percent of the maps, 60 percent of the land grants and 35 percent of the field notes have been completed.
- Phase III focuses on digitally imaging and electronically storing the archive's documents. When completed, this will allow researchers and historians from around the world to access the entire collection online.

An example of a program other counties could adapt is the Collins County Operations, Fusion and Communications Center, which uses a state-of-the-art data sharing system to bring together information from a wide variety of sources for early detection of potential threats, including disease outbreak, weather patterns and terrorism.

Bexar County's award falls under Outstanding Achievement, which recognizes outstanding county leadership and "one-time heroic extraordinary performance that produced tremendous benefit for the county and the public."

Rickhoff credited the "hundreds of people" who made his three-part plan to house the archives in the courthouse such a success, including county and educational leaders.

"Collaboration for the public good," he said, was the key to making the archives accessible to all.

The documents are a window into the past, he said but added they also are a reminder that the human spirit has remained unchanged through time.

"The humor and the humanity" in these documents, he said, "is so similar to what we experience in our own lives."

While he appreciates the award, Rickhoff feels his job is only half-finished.

He said he won't stop working until the remainder of the archives, housed at the University of Texas at Austin since 1899, come back to Bexar County, the place of their origin.

"We weren't before," he said, "but now we're prepared to take them back."