

Charles Kuffner

Speaking today with Chris Ehlinger, who is one of the candidates for the Harris County Appraisal District Board of Appraisers, that strange new elected office that was created last year or in a recent special session we first, I'm sorry, I guess it was in 2023, we first voted on these in 2024 in a weird May election, nonpartisan May election. Chris, before I get into any of that, I'd like to say thank you for talking with me today and why are you running for this office?

Chris Ehlinger

Thank you, Charles. I'm running for this office because it's in my wheelhouse, and I'll say this why. I'm the best qualified and most experienced person who has experience directly with appraisals. That's what HCAD does. They do appraisals of all property in Harris County. As a 20-year veteran of community banking, as a loan officer, one thing I always had to engage, review, and approve was appraisals on all types of property in Harris County, and that plus being a CPA, retired CPA, I feel like I have great credentials to serve on this board.

Charles Kuffner

And you are a Democrat, although I understand, I mean, these spots were not voted on in the primary, and I believe they are going to be a nonpartisan race at the bottom of the ballot. Is that correct?

Chris Ehlinger

That is correct. They are nonpartisan, unpaid and volunteer, and they do land at the very bottom of the ballot.

Charles Kuffner

All right. So my understanding, well, I'm going to ask you to walk through it as well, but my understanding is that the appraisal board has a fairly limited set of powers, the main one being hiring and firing the county's chief appraiser. The board itself does not set tax rates, although I suppose one of the reasons why these elected positions were created was the hope that they would have some effect on county tax rates.

So first of all, am I summarizing this correctly? And tell me what your understanding of this position in this office is.

Chris Ehlinger

So, yes, the Republican-controlled state legislature enacted these publicly elected positions in only the larger urban city counties in the state. So rural counties don't have to deal with this.

Charles Kuffner

That's right. I believe the constitutional amendment specified populations of 75,000 and above, which is a fairly small number, like 30-something counties.

Chris Ehlinger

Yes. So this is a way that they, the Republicans, want to influence our local governing units. And it's a shame that they do it this way.

They're using kind of a backdoor tactic to interfere with local needs and of how our elected public officials run the county and the city and other units. So, yeah, so the appraisal district hires the chief appraiser, who actually acts as CEO of the appraisal district and all the operations. But they also, the board also appoints all the members to the appraisal review board, which is like a citizen's review panel, separate and distinct from the actual operations of the district.

And this is where it becomes very important to be appointed to the appraisal review board, which has a lot of control over what value gets assigned to you. I'm sorry, let's backtrack. The appraisers who work for the district appraise the property. Then if a property owner protests, they go to the ARB board. Those ARB members are appointed by the board. And to get appointed, you must have a majority vote.

But that majority vote must include two of the publicly elected board seats to be in the majority to be appointed on on the ARB. And that becomes very important. Because if Republicans control all of those seats, guess what? They know where their support, their property is. So when you go to the ARB, the ARB has total control over if they lower your value or raise your value.

Charles Kuffner

Right. So in other words, they would, in effect, they could stack the process for people who want to protest their property, protest their appraisal of their property.

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah, they have no control. The appraisal district has no control over tax rates. They don't collect taxes. You never, they never send you a bill. And so I just want to clarify that with all the citizens of all the residents of Harris County is HCAD is just merely a function of appraising the property according to state statute and of course, administration of any exemptions. So, you know, that, you know, a lot of people complain about HCAD is like, yeah, but they're just kind of a cog in the wheel, so to speak.

Charles Kuffner

So the board, you know, the board now has eight members.

Chris Ehlinger

Nine total.

Charles Kuffner

Well, that includes the chair, I guess, right?

Chris Ehlinger

Or the chief appraiser. Yeah, the tax assessor collector.

Charles Kuffner

Right. Okay. So, but I mean, outside of that, there had been five appointed members. Now there are five appointed members and three elected members. What is your assessment of how this board has operated both before and after the the elected members came on?

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah. So I think I think the elected members have provided some public feedback as far as the process goes. And that has probably improved somewhat over the years. It's going to take more input to improve the appeal process.

You know, everything has to start out with getting to get in a correct appraiser appraisal or an accurate appraisal. You have to start off with correct information and that starts on the appraisal side. So if they have wrong information on your property, that can result in big changes to your to your fair value that they assess.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. And, you know, with the understanding that is really not a whole lot in terms of policy that that you as a member of this board can do, what would be your priorities if you are elected to this board?

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah. So the priority to me would be, first of all, accurate information and that that that falls directly on the appraisal on the appraisal side of things directly under the chief appraiser. So everyone there should be a fairly easy and efficient way that property owners should be able to check their account online or go in person and sit down and say, here are all the descriptors that you use to value my property.

And they should be accurate to the extent maximum possible. And that's one, because if you don't have accurate data, your appraisal can be very much off. Second is to make it more accessible to property owners in general to do the process of appeal.

And and I say that if you have an accurate appraisal to start with, there's less appeals are going to happen, which saves money everywhere. And I get it. Appraisals are a double edged sword.

You set appraisals too high, it becomes unaffordable to live in Harris County. It affects everybody. Owners, renters, everybody, even visitors who come and pay sales tax, you know, to the grocery store because the grocery store has to pay property tax.

So the. You know, and then I would say like back-testing when appraisals or when the ARB reviews and either changes the appraisal on that particular property, they can back-test that to see how close that was to what the appraiser said. And that can be running all all the time in the background as far as if how close they're coming to what the appraisal review board feels like is the accurate number.

You know, a lot of people forget that not everyone has a computer and not everyone can get online. And so we need to make it an efficient way to that the public can go in in person or over the phone and there is access over the phone to protest your appraised value.

Charles Kuffner

OK, well, the two powers we've talked about that that this board has includes appointing the appraisal review review board, the ARB and hiring or firing the chief appraiser of the county. So one at a time. What is your opinion of the current appraisal review board? And are there any changes or improvements you would want to make to that board's composition if you are elected?

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah. So the chief appraiser, I think he's I met him the other day at the board meeting and I feel like just reviewing the ongoing meetings online that they they stream those board meetings. I feel like he's very competent in what he's doing. He has a large staff that he has to manage. I believe it's about 700 total staff there.

He you know, he's a professional and he needs to be held to professional standards for for a chief appraiser in a county as big as Harris, the third biggest in the country. You know, we we should demand that the the second part is, again, remind me the board itself.

Charles Kuffner

You talked about the board itself.

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah. So the appraisal review board, you know, there's approximately one hundred and ninety members of it that are appointed for a two year term. So every other year, half of them rolled off.

So you get to reappoint those every each year. There's half of them you get to reconsider. I'm not all familiar with all the names on the ARB, given there's one hundred and ninety of them. But I'm hoping that the due diligence is done on the on these candidates as a you know, I'm not sure I'm presuming that a lot of them get reappointed when they roll off or when they come up for renewal. But there should be a standard as of knowledgeable people who serve on the ARB board. They are paid and they should not have any conflicts of interest in those matters.

Charles Kuffner

OK, well, is there any you know, is there anything else about this job, about this election that you that you want to discuss?

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah. You know, I just I feel like, you know, relative experience really matters in this job. You know, I as a banker for over 20 years, I covered all parts of Houston, Harris County when I was a lender. And I mean, this was back when you had to use a Key Map to go to everywhere.

Charles Kuffner

So I had a Key Map back in the day. They were great.

Chris Ehlinger

They were. And every other year you had to buy a new one because of how expand, you know, how much everything was expanding. And in fact, I remember when the West Belt, you had to drive down a dirt road to go from one when the intersection to the other.

But I, you know, I just I really am concerned about how the state legislature is meddling in local government units. And and I feel that it's over overbearing and how Harris County is run. And like I said, you know, appraisals can be a double-edged sword.

And so, you know, if you don't have enough funding, if if you don't have enough funding, because you the appraisals are too low, guess what? Critical services such as police and fire is underfunded, you know, or even infrastructure, you know, water, sewer roads. I mean, all of us need all those services. I mean, we the whole county, you know, residents need their services. So, you know, it's I understand it as a loan officer.

I'll tell you this. You know, I had to protect the interests of the bank and lending out their money for the shareholders. But also, I also had to, like, understand the customer's perspective. So I knew every time I made a loan, that there was, you know, a person behind that loan.

And there was a few, you know, they were doing like everybody else, just trying to get a little brighter feature for themselves. And I that's always something I kept close to my heart is, I feel like I'm a community banker at heart, and a CPA that happens to be a CPA as well. But it's there's people behind every account online, every property, there's a person tied to that, who's just trying to make themselves a better, a brighter future for themselves or their family.

So I keep that in mind. And, you know, I hope that I, you know, I'm successful, I, I don't consider myself a politician, I consider myself just a community leader who happens to be a community banker for many years.

Charles Kuffner

And, as you said, this is a nonpartisan race, although you are a Democrat. The incumbent in this position is not running for reelection. How many opponents are there? How many other people are there on this? Just one other person?

Chris Ehlinger

So there, there's, in just place two, there are two other candidates.

Charles Kuffner

Are they both Republicans, as far as you know?

No, I believe one is a, well, one is a Republican, one is a Democrat, because I know more about the Republican.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Well, when people go to vote in this race, all the way at the bottom of the ballot, why should they vote for you, and not one of your opponents?

Chris Ehlinger

Yeah, so I'm a longtime Harris County resident. I've been here for many years, since 1986. I feel like I know the community. I'm invested in the community. I've been, I've owned a small business in the past. I've had own, you know, other property, including commercial property.

So I know the burden of, and the, and the results of, of, you know, property values and, and, and I'm involved in the community. I mean, I've, I'm, I've been on the board of my civic club for over 10 years in all kind of capacities. I've worked with the city on projects around the neighborhood. I've volunteered for various nonprofits here in Houston. Houston is my home. I've been here for a long time, and I care deeply about it. And I believe I am the most experienced and qualified person to serve at that board level. And I've talked to several members of the board, and they already said, you're already, already overqualified.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Well, Chris Ehlinger, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Chris Ehlinger

Thank you, Charles.