Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Matt Salazar, who is a Democratic candidate for Harris County Judge. Matt, thank you for speaking with me today. Let me start by asking, why are you running for this office?

Matt Salazar

Really, if you wouldn't mind, can I just explain who I am first or are we going to get into that?

Charles Kuffner

We can get into that, but if you want to incorporate that into this answer, go ahead.

Matt Salazar

At my core, I'm just a Harris County resident. I believe government should work the same way we expect any serious organization to work and that's clarity, and accountability, and respect for the people that it serves. I'm a husband, I'm a father, and that's a lot of what got me into this is why I'm running.

I only operate a small business here, which means I live every day with the consequences of public decisions that be school taxes, infrastructure decisions, safety, and cost. That experience has shaped how I think about leadership, not so much as a performance, but as a responsibility. Running to make a statement, I'm not running to make a statement or to climb a ladder.

This isn't me seeking any other higher office, but I think Harris County is ready for a more disciplined and more transparent style of governance.

Charles Kuffner

Tell me more about your background and experience in politics. How have you intersected with government, especially at the Harris County level in the past, and what activism have you had, if any?

Matt Salazar

I've worked for non-profits. A lot of that based on helping individuals get a leg up. That's a lot of middle-class work. I've worked for Memorial Assistance Ministry on their communications and marketing team.

I studied political science in college. I read *The Gospel According to RFK* in 2006, and it really just instilled in me that there's a transcendence to what politics is, and it's going to be this universal language that's spoken about in that book. It got me interested in politics more so than what I was originally wanting to do, and that was to get into church work.

With this, I've gone the route of politics. As far as activism, it's really just been on the non-profit level. I haven't been a chair like you have, but I keep up with my politics. I make sure to stay informed when I'm voting, and I obviously support the democratic agenda.

Charles Kuffner

Have you, in either your line of work or in other aspects of your life, intersected with Harris County government?

Matt Salazar

I mean, not outside of just owning a small business. I think a lot of that would be taxes and the opportunity of doing business in my area and how much that costs me in specific, so I'd say that's where I intersect the most is business ownership.

I think I've seen a lot of hurdles in that for what small business owners have to overcome to get their business rolling and to maintain it.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. At a high level, what is your view on how Harris County's government, county judge, county commissioner's court level, how is it operating? Where is it doing well? Where do you see room for improvement?

Matt Salazar

So, since 2019, the Democrats have had the responsibility of governing Harris County, and I think it's fair to say that there have been real efforts to expand services and address longstanding needs.

The intent, I think, has largely been positive, and where I think we're struggling now is with, not with values, but more with the execution and clarity. Too often we measure success by whether a program exists, and I think we've seen that a lot, but not whether it's delivering the outcomes people can actually see and understand, so that's what I'm seeing so far.

Charles Kuffner

Yeah, you talk on your website about, you know, one county, one future, and this idea that seems to be sort of a, maybe not merging isn't the right word, but a more unified approach towards county governance. Can you talk a little bit about what you have in mind there? Assuming I'm characterizing it accurately, please correct me if I'm not.

Matt Salazar

What I'm seeing is I think Commissioner Cortney needs to be more of a coalition, not five semi-independent actors working together, like working just in the same room. Does that make sense? So that's really it.

I think we see it with the PACE study that just came out. You've seen some unity there, and that's been so much like, the process was there, right? The intent was correct, the execution was flawed, and so you've seen some unity in that, and I think we can rally more of that unity amongst the different parties at a local level to make sure that we're getting the results out in a measurable way that people can understand in a realistic presentation to them format, I guess.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, each county commissioner is themselves an independently elected official, and I think they would say that they serve, that while they do serve the county as a whole, they also serve their individual constituencies, their job involves a lot of infrastructure and items like that within the area that's designated to them. So that perhaps clashes a bit with your idea. So how would you approach them to get them on board with the vision that you have?

Matt Salazar

The biggest thing for me is that we gotta figure out where there's overlap. Like you said, Baytown's not Cyprus, right? And so we have to figure out what in the agenda and what in the budget can fall into what we can take care of as a collective, where those insights need to be precise and oriented towards their specific precincts, and obviously address those, but then work as a bigger whole, not scoring political points against each other, but really working as that coalition of four different precincts with the county judge working more so as a, I'd say, a system designer than anything else.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, and you talk about zero-based budgeting on your website, kid. Harris County, in part because of an expansion of services, as you alluded to, in part just because of inflation, in part because of things that the state and federal government have done, Harris County is running into a bit of a constraint on its budget. It's having to deal with spending more than it is taking in right now and having to balance its budget. How do you think, how would your approach help with that? And just more at a higher level, what do you think is your, what is your plan to ensure that Harris County is on a solid financial footprint?

Matt Salazar

So with zero-based, I think we've struggled on connecting our investments to measurable publicly understood results. I wanna make sure that the zero-based budgeting does that. Each dollar is coming out of that zero-based and explaining why. And sometimes it looks like sunsetting a program or merging a program and not letting things just live in perpetuity because they have before. And I think you get a lot of that with the rollover type budgeting that we have currently.

Charles Kuffner

Do you, you know, when people talk in terms of possibly sunsetting programs, one wonders if they have something in mind for that. Do you have any particular programs in mind that you think perhaps have outlived their usefulness or is this something where you're just gonna go where the data takes you?

Matt Salazar

I think it's important to look at the data first, but I think with this in any budget that's healthy, you look at it privately or on a government level, you have to just be realistic with what's working and be able to measure those, like measure their performance. So yeah, there's nothing in specific that you need to say

is gonna be cut before because that decreases morale just within your own agency. But it needs to be understood that proficiency is gonna be the desired outcome for the county as a whole.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, a significant portion of the county's budget is in law enforcement, criminal justice. And, you know, to some extent, you only have so much control over that. And in fact, as you know, there's a bit of upward pressure on that budget in part because of the pay raises that HPD received for its staff. You know, agencies do compete for employees.

What's your vision for the criminal justice and law enforcement portion of Harris County's budget? Again, understanding that the sheriff is his own elected office and has his own discretion over the budget. So what's your vision for that?

Matt Salazar

Yeah, I mean, so like you're talking, we're discussing, you know, like the mandatory discretionary, you know, flexible, that's always there.

Really it's, you want to discuss just talking about the pay parity. With that, you're creating issues there that is Harris County becoming a training ground for HPD and going to a higher paying job, right? Where we're footing the cost of training and getting the experience for these officers and then they're going somewhere else. So that then lowers the amount of experience that we have in our department.

So it's really trying to get past that. I mean, we need to evaluate how we're gonna get the raises. I think they need to be there or at least evaluate how we can get there in a considerate way that is gonna, you know, let the constables and sheriff's department know that we care about, you know, their pay and their desire for that parity, but also just being considerate to how that looks with the optics.

Charles Kuffner

We can't talk about criminal justice and law enforcement in Harris County without talking about federal immigration efforts, ICE, which, you know, tends to intersect more at the city police level, but, you know, there is still a lot of, you know, a lot of activity at the federal level to come into places that may not really want them and round up a bunch of people who, you know, may or may not be here illegally, may or may not have committed any crimes, may or may not have done anything wrong. I think it's fair to say that a lot of people, certainly the vast majority of Democrats don't like this and would like to see our county government stand up to Donald Trump and ICE. What's your take on this? What will your position be as county judge on this matter?

Matt Salazar

I think this is just a really sensitive topic. Like it's really just how do we administer the law and cooperate with federal law while at the same time being considerate of our immigrant population, which is, you know, a significant part of this community and makes up a large part of why this place is such a great place to live. And so like, this is just, it's a tough way to answer this, you know, this on the record, and I'm

trying to put this all right for you, Charles, so give me a little bit of time to word this correctly. I personally do not agree with the policies of Donald Trump, right? But I can't always allow my personal disagreement with him to be my sole factor in how I govern.

But I think we need to have a clear understanding of what our law enforcement is gonna cooperate with and why they're gonna cooperate with that, because there's a level of discretion in law enforcement and in policing. So I think if we can understand where law enforcement's coming from on whether or not they wanna cooperate, we can at least as a governing body communicate that to our constituents and our community on how we can best serve them and help protect them in this situation.

Like you said, you know, the sheriff's office is its own office. And with what the police department here in Houston's doing, I can't say I agree with any of it, but we have to figure out a way to stand up to Trump in a way that's gonna hold some muster legally and then protect our citizens in the best way possible and our immigrants that are in this community, so.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, the county also has to deal with other government systems, some of which are more antagonistic to us than others. Let's start at the state level. You know, the county is essentially an arm of the state. You know, the county government cannot do anything that it is not explicitly allowed to do in state law. Current state government in Texas is especially antagonistic towards the big urban counties that tend to be Democratic.

What's going to be your approach towards dealing with state government, assuming that, you know, we don't get something good in the next election and we still have to deal with the state government that we have now? What's going to be your approach to that when next time the legislature convenes?

Matt Salazar

I mean, like, is there anything specific that, you mean, or just a broad?

Charles Kuffner

A broad general overview. What's your strategy for ensuring that Harris County gets what it needs and doesn't get what it doesn't want?

Matt Salazar

Well, like, so, I mean, when you're dealing with this, currently, you're dealing with basically a version of Trump in policy with Abbott. So, I mean, with where our county is, I think that we're making, currently making good progress. I don't think this is a whole full reform, but I, and it's just, this is a tough one for me, Charles, Charles, sorry.

Charles Kuffner

All right, well, let me shift then. I mean, at a more, you know, at a closer level, the Harris County also, government also has to deal with the City of Houston. That's Houston encompasses about half of Harris County. And, you know, the county cooperates with the city on some things, does some things, the city doesn't and vice versa. In recent years, I would say that the, Harris County and the City of Houston have had a pretty good relationship.

It's perhaps a bit strained right now between Judge Hidalgo and Mayor Whitmire. What would, what is your vision for Harris County's relationship with the City of Houston? And, you know, how is it going and where do you see room for improvement under your administration?

Matt Salazar

You know, I think the biggest improvement is just gonna be kind of avoiding this political infighting. It's not setting a healthy tone for dialogue to begin with. And, you know, I'm not gonna say I completely disagree with everything that's being said by the current administration, but we're gonna need to just, I think, focus more on how we can complement what strengths are allied with Houston right now. And then just move forward with that, kind of not focus on how big the disagreement is currently, but really focus on what strengths we can play to, to assisting the residents of the community.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. And, you know, County Judge Hidalgo is in now the final year of her second and what will be final term as County Judge. I think it's fair to say her election in 2018 came as a surprise to a lot of people, just because the previous Judge, you know, was reasonably popular and had over performed in elections in the past. How do you evaluate County Judge Hidalgo? How do you evaluate her time in office? How would you be like her or not like her as County Judge?

Matt Salazar

I'd say, so currently what I've seen is the, there've been a, the strategic plan that was put forth in 2024 has been extremely healthy. I like that the office has done that during her time. And I'd like to really just execute on getting those metrics out more clearly to the voters. I think that initiative has been really good and is putting the county in a direction where the Commissioner's Court can really move forward with more of what they're getting out of that process.

So I'd like to continue on with that. And I think really everything for me, the improvement is gonna be focusing on the, you know, zero-based budgeting, figuring out the why we're spending the money and then putting the right processes into place to make sure that, you know, the county's functioning at a high level for everybody.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. I think a big focus in Harris County is, right now, is this upcoming election. You know, 2024 was not as good for Harris County Democrats as 2020 and 2016 had been. There was some, you know, some blue areas that shifted towards President Trump. There's been, you know, the atmosphere, this year is a lot different than it was in 2024. There's a lot of optimism that this is going to be a good year.

And that is needed both in terms of, at the national level, taking back Congress and at the state level, you know, at least making some progress in getting more Democrats elected to state office. So I'm asking everyone I interview, you know, what will you do as a candidate and or as a person to help get Democrats elected up and down the ballot in Harris County and wherever else in 2026?

Matt Salazar

Right now, I think it's just get the message out. I think as a county, as a state, as a country, we're just kind of at this point where we know leadership needs to be better. You see it in the candidates that we have, not an endorsement for either, but just two headline ones. You have Tallarico and Crockett that I believe are incredible Democrats and are using their platforms the correct way and getting their message out and getting the vote out further.

So it's supporting things like that that are organized well and making sure that those voices are expanding and growing the base into that moderate that we're really looking to bring over. Because I think we have a strong Democratic base right now and it's really getting the moderates that would help us on a state level and on a national level for those campaigns.

Locally, I think it's door knocking in conversations. Being able to get out and talk to your neighbor, I think is something that we're missing as a whole. If we can get out there and discuss what the message is that the Democrats are pushing, which I think is just counter to what we're seeing, it's a stronger community, a stronger middle class, an actual middle class that's gonna make it, not just have programs made for them that help them get a certificate but don't take them anywhere.

So really it's pushing our agenda forward and making sure people understand it clearly, answering questions that they have about that and getting them to the place where they feel like they could really vote for a Democrat and see that they really are the best option, not just in this county but the state.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, and you have your own election to get through first in March. There are two other candidates running for the nomination for Harris County judge.

When people go to vote in March for the nominee to be the next Harris County judge, why should they vote for you and not one of your opponents?

Matt Salazar

I just, sorry, this has meant a lot to me. This is a big step for me and I'm gonna promise the transparency that this county needs. I'm gonna follow through with that. People are gonna have metrics that they can

understand and have available to them. You're gonna have programs like Harris Starts and Three Generations that really pull the community in and grow the community and make it in a real substantial way that's not just a talking point or a good campaign promise but work that's gonna be done on the ground floor within all the 34 communities of this county to make us a more prosperous, more stable and just an overall safer place.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, Matt Salazar, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Matt Salazar

Thank you, Charles.