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©2008 by Robert H. Leos, P.O. Box 92006, Austin, TX 78709-2006
Phone: 512-914-5998 Fax: 512-892-1781; <mailto:report@robertleos.com>

A Town Hall Meeting With Texas State Representative Juan M. Garcia III

It's a beautiful March night in Port Aransas, Texas, a community on the Gulf of Mexico known for its sand, surf, and spring breakers. On this late March evening, however, the vast majority of spring breakers have left the beaches and attention is on community concerns such as the rapidly rising property values and taxes in the area and the increasing costs and lack of availability of valuable windstorm insurance. Members of the community, including the superintendent of schools, a school principal, several school board members, the city manager, several city council members, and other concerned citizens are gathered to hear Representative Juan Garcia's take on the concerns of the community.

This is one of many "town hall meetings" being held during this election year. According to Wikipedia, a "town hall meeting" is "a meeting where an entire geographic area is invited to participate in a gathering, often for a political or administrative purpose. It may be to obtain community suggestions or feedback on public policies from government officials, or to cast legally binding votes on budgets and policy." This meeting in Port Aransas, Texas, with Representative Garcia, gave members of the Port Aransas community an opportunity to meet him and get his opinion on the issues of concern to individuals as well as to the community as a whole. The following is a summary of some of the topics covered during the meeting.



*State Representative
Juan M. Garcia with
constituents at the
town hall meeting in
Port Aransas, Texas.*



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The 2007 Legislative Session

Recorded votes by legislators. During the 2007 legislative session, Representative Garcia co-authored Proposition 11, the constitutional amendment that requires recorded votes on final passage of a bill. The amendment easily passed with 85% of Texas voters voting for the amendment. Representative Garcia informed participants in the Port Aransas town hall meeting that he believes passage of the amendment by such a margin will make it easier to pass a comparable measure to record votes on second reading as well.

The Jennifer Cave Act. Jennifer Cave was a graduate of Carroll High School in Corpus Christi. While attending The University of Texas at Austin, Jennifer was brutally murdered and her body desecrated following the murder. Representative Garcia filed the bill that became known as the Jennifer Cave Act. Passage of this bill toughened the laws regarding mutilation and made this crime a second-degree felony punishable by up to twenty years in prison. Prior to enactment of the Jennifer Cave Act, this crime was a misdemeanor in most cases.

The Defense Economic Adjustment Act Grants (DEAAG). Representative Garcia pushed for economic assistance for communities that were impacted by the military base realignment and closure. Naval Station Ingleside, in Representative Garcia's district, is scheduled for closure in 2010. His efforts resulted in additional support to Ingleside through DEAAG.

In addition to the support for Ingleside, Representative Garcia will have input

on the future of the land where Naval Station Ingleside now operates through his work on the Defense Affairs and State-Federal Relations Committee in the Texas House of Representatives.

In the meeting, Representative Garcia was optimistic about the future prospects for Ingleside and other sections of his district, which includes San Patricio County, a large section of Nueces County, Calhoun, and Aransas Counties. Although Rep. Garcia was disappointed with the decision to close Naval Station Ingleside, he sees the potential for using the state-of-the-art facilities to attract a medical school or other major research institution where research could be conducted in an area with one of the highest rates of diabetes. This would bring additional medical personnel and students and it would have a positive impact on new home construction and would create a positive ripple effect for small businesses throughout the area.



Naval Station Ingleside

Representative Juan Garcia's work in his first term resulted in passage of the Jennifer Cave Act, Proposition 11, and assistance for Ingleside, Texas through DEAAG.

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Work During the Interim

The Texas State Legislature meets formally every other year for 140 days, not including called special sessions. During the interim period between sessions, however, special studies are conducted, planning begins for the next session, and committees meet to address specific topics that were either not addressed completely in the previous session or issues that come up since the end of the previous session. The next legislative session begins in January 2009. Already, the committees on public and higher education have met to discuss initiatives that they hope to bring forward in the 2009 session. In addition, interim studies are part of the legislators' work in the time they have away between sessions. Representative Garcia talked about his work during the interim at the Port Aransas, Texas town hall meeting.

Windstorm Insurance. Representative Garcia expressed his concern over the problems in securing and affording windstorm insurance. In a hurricane and flood-prone area such as the Texas Coastal Bend, residents pay the highest premiums in the United States for coverage. During the interim, Representative Garcia will continue to study this issue in preparation for the next legislative session. He hopes to address the issue from several perspectives including increasing the accountability of the insurance commission and the commissioner. In addition, he plans to make efforts to shore up the resources of the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association and bring awareness to the fact that a major disaster in the Coastal Bend could have a serious effect nationally given the importance of the Port of Corpus Christi in moving goods in and out of the United States. *"True comprehensive windstorm reform is not going to be just tinkering around the edges—it has to be a total rethinking of how we can do this,"* says Garcia.

Swapping Service for Education. Another issue that Representative

Garcia will continue to study during the interim is the concept of exchanging service for education. His research shows that after four years of college most students have up to \$35,000 in student loan debt. The service for education plan will give a young person just out of high school the opportunity to work in an entry-level position for two years, providing a service to the community. Representative Garcia, while praising the work of service organizations such as Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and Vista, made it clear that this is different in that these are real jobs in public service that can make a difference in the lives of Texans. In return for the two years of service, a young man or woman will be rewarded with funds to cover four years of tuition at any Texas college or university.

"True comprehensive windstorm reform is not going to be just tinkering around the edges—it has to be a total rethinking of how we can do this."

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In addition, Garcia believes that a twenty-year-old student who has provided this type of public service will be far less likely to succumb to temptations of binge drinking and drug use so common among freshman college students.

Continued Efforts on Behalf of Veterans. Representative Garcia continues to be concerned with the fact that veterans have to travel two and half hours to a veterans hospital in San Antonio. Veterans from the Rio Grande Valley travel even farther to acquire medical attention. Part of Representative Garcia's effort will involve gathering accurate data on the number of veterans that could take advantage of a south Texas facility. In addition, Garcia points to little-used Navy facilities in Corpus Christi that could provide services to veterans locally. Representative Garcia will continue to push for a much-needed veterans hospital in south Texas.

Red Cross and Disaster Preparedness. During the course of the town hall meeting in Port Aransas, Representative Garcia introduced Omar Lopez of the Coastal Bend Chapter of the American Red Cross. Mr. Lopez informed the audience of the services of the Red Cross, including the 211 service for information and assistance in times of disaster. He also stressed the importance of planning for disasters such as fires and hurricanes. This time of year, with drought conditions in south Texas, is an especially critical time for fires. Mr. Lopez stressed the need to pay particular attention to document safety, such as insurance papers and deeds to property. More information on

the American Red Cross is available at their website: www.cbtreddcross.org.

Representative Garcia has numerous activities planned for April 2008. Please see his website for more information.

www.electjuangarcia.com.

Representative Juan M. Garcia

Representative Garcia is a second-generation naval aviator and attorney.

Garcia graduated with honors from UCLA, where he gave the 1988 commencement address. He earned his law degree from Harvard and his master's degree in public policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1992.

After completing his naval officer and flight training, Garcia received his "Wings of Gold" at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi. Lieutenant Commander Garcia flew 30 armed missions in the Persian Gulf, was the top aide to the deputy Commander in Chief of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe, and served in Operation Allied Force in Kosovo. He was assigned to the aircraft carrier USS Constellation in support of the enforcement of the no-fly zone in Iraq. His military awards include the Joint Commendation Medal, the Naval Commendation Medal, and the Naval Achievement Medal.

In 1999, Garcia was one of 16 Americans selected to serve as a White House Fellow, the nation's premier leadership development program whose alumni include Henry Cisneros and Colin Powell, and worked as a special assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Garcia left active duty in 2004 and continues to serve as an instructor pilot at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi with the Naval Reserves. He practices civil defense law with the firm of Hartline, Dacus, Barger, Dreyer & Kern.

Garcia and his wife Denise, who met while classmates at Harvard Law, have four children, including twin eight-year-old boys, a six-year old daughter, and a three-year old son. They live in Corpus Christi.

(From Rep. Garcia's biographical information on his legislative website):

www.house.state.tx.us/members/dist32/garcia.htm