

County Parks Are Voudouris' Passion

Job Requires More Finesse As Official's Role Changes

By JOHN SUTTON
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Mention parks to Johnny Voudouris, and he'll show you the better part of 2,000 acres of parkland he's enjoyed, maneuvered or "scrounged" for the county.

Talk to Johnny Voudouris about the changing role of the county commissioner, and he'll tell you the change has been drastic and that he depends on the loyalty and dedication of his staff to keep up with the multi-faceted job.

And ask Johnny Voudouris about politics, and he'll tell you politicians are human beings — with human frailties.

At 36, Voudouris, Pct. 3 Travis County commissioner, has seniority — he's serving his seventh year — on the youngest county commissioners' court in decades.

For the most of his two terms of office he's been in the minority vote as often as not. But with the retirement of County Judge J.H. Watson and Commissioner N.L. Gault, and their replacement with men half their age, the average age of the commissioners court dropped by 10 years, and Voudouris moved into the majority vote.

"The difference is you've got a judge (Mike Renfro) who votes now."

Before Renfro took office, Pct. 1 Commissioner David Samuelson was usually the "swing vote," siding with either Gault and Watson, or Voudouris and Richard Moya on the close votes. But Voudouris says he never could count on Samuelson's support on an issue until the actual vote was taken.

Voudouris says all he has ever asked of his fellow commissioners on a vote is to look at his proposals and make up their minds whether to go along with him. "But I expect them to vote the way they tell me they will."

That's what Voudouris liked about former Pct. 2 Commissioner Gault. The two usually voted differently on the close ones, but at least they understood each other.

"He's from the old school, all he needs is your word," Voudouris says of the 78-year-old Gault. "He was a hell of a nice gentleman — he still is, but he's just not on the court now. He was outdated and knew it. I respect him for that."

The changing role of the county commissioner is one of the reasons Voudouris says he decided to run for the job back in 1968 when long-time commissioner Bob Barker retired.

"Every Monday morning while I shaved I'd listen to the KOKE 'Bulletin Board' announcing the weekly county commissioners meeting, and one day I decided to go down to the courthouse and see what they were doing," Voudouris reminisces.

The big issue that morning was insurance rates for county employes, and Voudouris went away from the meeting with the realization that the rates he had gotten for his 300 employes in his janitorial business were better than the county's — and the county probably had more employes than he did.

At 20, Voudouris said he felt he might be considered too young for the job, so he went out to visit Barker to seek his advice. Barker told

him the days when a county commissioner spent the whole week building roads were ending, and the time was coming when a commissioner would be at the courthouse every day, Voudouris says.

So Voudouris ran in a field of "seven or eight" candidates, came in second in the first primary, and won in the runoff.

The commissioner of the largest of the four county precincts says being a county commissioner has indeed changed from the days when he spent a half day on Mondays at the courthouse. The job requires almost a full day on Mondays and Wednesdays now that the

attending a preview of a television special on the American Bicentennial.

At 7:20 a.m. at his precinct headquarters at McCarty Lane and U.S. Hwy. 290 — just below historical Convict Hill — Voudouris aide Brenda Cooper maps out the plans for the day.

Voudouris hangs an extra jacket on a hanger in his office before he sits down to peruse the plans. "I usually bring a couple changes of clothes to work with me, depending on where I have to go during the day," Voudouris explains.

The light wood-paneled, beige-carpeted office is just big enough for the wooden desk, couch and credenza Voudouris has in the room. On one wall, almost hidden from view are action shots of Voudouris and friends racing his off-the-road dune buggies.

In one photo, Voudouris and Wier, decked out in racing togs, smile into the camera.

Although he hasn't raced in the last couple years, — "The cost is just too much right now" — Voudouris holds the speed record at the Texas International Speedway in Bryan.

He had an offer in 1972 with Western Auto to race with part of the tab picked up by them, but three days before the filing deadline for county commissioner, three opponents signed up, so Voudouris canceled his dune buggy racing plans. He won, the only incumbent commissioner to win that year without a runoff, he says.

Ten minutes into the work day, Voudouris grabs his leather jacket to go out before his first appointment and look over a new truck that had just arrived, but half-way out the door, Brenda calls and says the man Voudouris is scheduled to see is already there.

Rehanging his coat, Voudouris first talks with his assistant road superintendent about renumbering the parking spaces in the new courthouse parking garage.

court's agenda has been expanded and agenda items are discussed at weekly work sessions.

With more and more time required for administration of the county, the commissioner's traditional top priority — road building and maintenance — has been placed in the hands — quite able hands, Voudouris will tell you — of Voudouris' boyhood pal, James Wier.

The two grew up together — Voudouris was born and raised in the Deep Eddy area where his mother still lives — and even did some bulldozing together. Four years ago, Voudouris talked Wier into quitting his job with the state highway department and going to work for the county.

Voudouris says he tries to spend at least one day a week on precinct roads with Wier, checking out resident complaints and overseeing new road building and old road maintenance.

"We usually start planning to do that on Tuesday, and somehow get around to it by Thursday," admits Voudouris. "Sometimes, we wind up doing it on the weekends, or even at night," he says.

On this particular Thursday Voudouris planned to spend the first half of the day on the road, and the afternoon at meetings and

Before Stephen Froehner comes in Voudouris' office to see about paving an 800-foot stretch of Swanson Ranch Road, the commissioner explained what has to be his most exasperating problem — dedicated roads.

There are three types of roads out in the county — dedicated roads, county-accepted dedicated roads, and "public" roads, says Voudouris.

Before the county may accept a road, it must meet the specifications of the county engineer, Ian Morgan.

Only those roads that pass inspection and are accepted by the county are the commissioner's responsibility.

But the roads often don't meet the county's standards.

"It happens all over this county. The developer knocks down a few cedar trees and 'dedicates' the road to the county, even though we don't want it," complained Voudouris.

Such is the case with the stretch of the Swanson road: a quagmire in the winter, a caliche dustbowl in the spring and summer — and merely the first of many examples brought to light during the day that point out the commissioners' reasons for seeking legislation for county "home rule."



COMMISSIONER JOHNNY VOUDOURIS REMOVES A NOTE

"It makes it all worth while to get one little note."

Roads with ravines washed out down the middle because no ditches were dug alongside them; practically straight-up roads dead ending into cramped "circles"; a paved street with a tree left in it; and a development whose only access is via private property roads, were only a few of the glaring examples pointed out later on in the day during the precinct roads tour.

"Although it's had the contractors have gotten better," Voudouris says. "Ninety per cent are darn good but there are still some who try to jackleg us around."

Cooperation from the contractors is an absolute must, says Voudouris, because of the spiraling costs of road building — it's up to \$25,000 a mile. "The county has enough money for preventive maintenance, to keep roads up, but we can't afford to build more roads. If contractors don't help, the time may come when we may have to pass a bond issue to build roads," warned Voudouris.

Voudouris apologized to Froehner for the delay in seeing him, and promised to build up the ranch road with crushed rock by mid-March, and to oil it when the weather turns warmer.

It's 7:45 a.m.

Voudouris makes a note to give written notice to Froehner about the Thursday meeting, returns a few calls left over from the day before

and goes over January's expenses. "I'm the only commissioner who gets a monthly printout of precinct expenses from the county auditor," says Voudouris.

The cost for running Pct. 3 for one month is \$11,840.03. His yearly budget totals almost \$1 million.

Voudouris pauses over a \$499 expenditure for automobile mileage. "That can't be right, there's only \$750 budgeted for the entire year," he muses and instructs Brenda Cooper to find the mistake.

An explanation that he usually asks his precinct residents to submit a signed petition and description of daily road travel when asking for a new road is cut short with an 8:15 a.m. call from Bill Henry, the county emergency unit fire control operator.

Voudouris tells him the commissioners' court has approved \$2,000 for maintaining the unit — an increase from the \$1,200 appropriated for last year.

The vehicle is the county's emergency medical unit that is available in addition to ambulance service the county contracts for with Austin Ambulance Service.

At 8:20 a.m. Voudouris picks up his papers, including a letter with requests for street signs in a Manchaca development, and climbs into his blue Lincoln to drive into Austin for a haircut.

On the way, he pulls into the Optimist Ballpark adjacent to his precinct headquarters. Voudouris says he has built six ball parks at that site with dirt he has cleaned out of ditches in his precinct. His men do the initial spring clearing of the fields, he says, and then during the summer season, empty the innumerable 50-gallon trash cans that have his name and precinct number stenciled on the side.

Parks are Voudouris' passion. He teamed up with the City of Austin to build Garrison Park in his precinct, and maintains Optimist parks in Rollingwood, Oak Hill and Westlake Hills, a 42-acre park on Lake Travis just above Mansfield Dam, and 1,600-acre Pace Bend Park on Lake Travis in far northwest Pct. 3 off of Ranch Road 2322.

Voudouris says he places park expansion on an equal priority with road building in his precinct. "I promise you, you're going to see more and more county participation — at least in my precinct — I've just got the natural terrain for it."

Multi-acreage, rural parks are not the only type Voudouris is interested in. He says he is also working on building parks near the schools in his area and some five to ten acre "mini-parks" like some he has seen in Florida.

Last year he spent most of the \$30,000 allocated to each precinct for park maintenance and development and this year Voudouris was instrumental in raising each precinct park budget to \$50,000, plus whatever amount was left over from the previous year.

But there hasn't always been even that much money available for parks. Both the parks on Lake Travis are owned by the Lower Colorado River Authority, and the 42-acre site at one time was maintained by all four precincts.

When LCRA started to make Pace Bend a state park some years ago, Voudouris said he convinced the authority to let him make a county park of the 1,600 acres. "They asked me what kind of park budget I had, and I told them I could handle it."

Until he had an official park budget, Voudouris simply kept two members of his road crew at the park, maintaining the roads and emptying the trash. "I tell you, you've got to scrounge. If you've got a way to lease the land or can get it for nothing, do it," he says.

Now he has two budgeted, full-time men at the park, 150 picnic tables, and Monday will award a contract for eight permanent restroom facilities to be constructed at Pace Bend.

His plans for the park include paving the rest of the main loop through the center of the park, building restrooms, cleaning out the immediate

area around the picnic tables — "We rent the spots people pick out and put tables there" — and leaving the rest of the park in the natural state.

On any given night, an hour or so before dark, Voudouris claims you can spot a hundred deer, but 38 whitetails were all he could produce last Thursday — all quite tame.

At 8:45 a.m. Voudouris pulls in at BJ's hair styling shop, a little early for his bi-weekly appointment.

A quick shampoo, a trim, a little ribbing from the stylist, hair blown dry and styled, Voudouris is back on the road by 9:15 a.m.

He meets Wier at the Country Corner Feed Store in Manchaca, across from the fire station there and the two take off in Voudouris' Lincoln to inspect the ditch clearing nearby before meeting with Clarence Vole at 10 a.m. to inspect a possible 12-acre spot for a park and new firehouse in Manchaca.

At the ditch-digging site, the need for control over construction in subdivisions is pointed out again. Houses were built in an area which floods when it rains; to protect their lots, the homeowners filled up the ditches, making it worse when the rains came.

"That's why we're trying to get some bills passed," says Voudouris. "To exert some control over contractors. You can tell your kids to mind, but if you don't whip them, it doesn't do any good."

Back at the feed store at 10 a.m. and off again with Vogel to inspect the park site. The price seems right for a long-term lease, and the location good, so Voudouris asks that negotiations begin to get the land.

It's 11 a.m.

Voudouris and Wier compare a diagram of a Manchaca subdivision pointing out locations where signs are missing to the actual area, make notes to replace them — "Wild Turkey and Running Squirrel street signs are popular" — and then move on to Westlake Hills where part of the work crew is building a short stretch of road.

Voudouris warns some of the residents were upset because he had to remove a tree, but is pleasantly surprised by a "Thanks for fixing our road" sign taped to the road grader at the site. "It makes it all worthwhile to get one little note," he says.

At 12:30 p.m. Voudouris drops off Wier so the road superintendent can go to Marble Falls to negotiate a load of gravel. The gravel is chipped granite, and prized by Voudouris because it lasts well, is triangular-shaped (so it sticks better to asphalt) and is safer (because it is rougher and doesn't slide like pebbly gravel).

Voudouris checks in with his precinct at 1:05 p.m. via a car radio — he has 14 units dispersed among his employes, and is the only precinct that is radio-linked to his road crew and supervisory personnel — and stops in at Rosie's Tamale House on Hwy. 71 for a quick lunch.

Back on the road by 1:20 p.m. and en route to the LCRA park by Mansfield Dam to check on another road grader crew, Voudouris comments on the voters in his precinct.

"It takes a magician to please them all," says Voudouris. His precinct encompasses part of the University of Texas area, the Clarksville area in West Austin, Lakeway and the rural "cedar-chopper" regions. His voters ranges from "cedar-choppers to students to hippies to working folks to the moneyed-man to movie stars."

Voudouris says he makes the speaking rounds at Crockett and Westlake High schools, and finds the students are most surprised when he admits politicians make mistakes and are willing to talk about it.

He says he's satisfied with his job as commissioner and cannot understand why some people consider it a dead-end or lower-rung elected position. Voudouris says he turned down \$23,000 in donations to run for county judge last election because he is pleased and comfortable with doing what he's doing.

Although he says he was re-elected with 68 per cent of the vote in 1972 and that he will keep running as long as he is able to win, "Getting re-elected scares the hell out of me."

The job has become more worthwhile monetarily since Voudouris first took office. It now pays \$20,535 a year plus \$295 a month car allowance.

"If I ever do lose, though, I'd like to be the county's first parks director," he says.

The blade crew hasn't made it to the LCRA park yet, so Voudouris heads for Lakeway World of Tennis to find out when engineers there plan to start work on a road at the resort that was scheduled to be finished by spring.

It's 3:40 p.m. and he obviously can't make it to town for the television screening, so Voudouris calls in to his precinct to confirm that he will be represented by aide Jack Payne.

At a visit with a Lakeway engineer Voudouris is told plans for the resort are not completed, and "I'm sorry, I can't even give you a date."

The afternoon pretty well gone, it seems a good time to check the sites for restrooms at the Pace Bend Park.

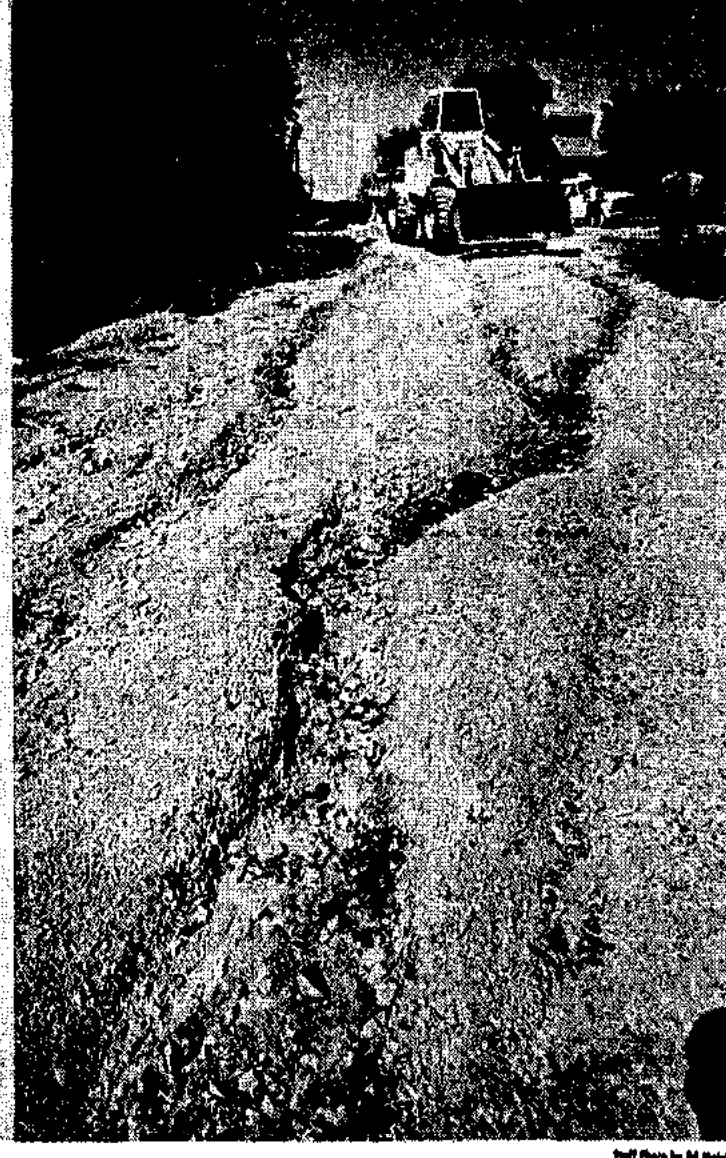
As dusk falls and the deer count rises, Voudouris talks about off-the-road racing at Baja, Las Vegas and the Mini 400.

He predicts the mini-pickups are the coming thing in racing, but he won't be doing any racing of his own this year.

It's dark now, and heading back to the precinct headquarters Voudouris built on a six-and-one-half-acre site after he took office, the father of four stops in his home driveway to talk with his wife Sharon via his car telephone. He declines going in just yet, because she is hosting an Optimist wives party, and Voudouris still has some work to do at his office, waves at her through an open window, and heads back to work.

Back at the office, Brenda Cooper has laid out on his desk a stack of letters and call slips for Voudouris. A note explains the \$408 car mileage notation had indeed been a mistake.

Voudouris says he'll come in party Friday to sign the letters. It's 9 p.m.



TREES LEFT IN THE ROAD AND RAVINES CAUSED BY POOR ROAD CONSTRUCTION ARE REASONS COMMISSIONERS ARE PUSHING FOR "HOME RULE"

"A developer knocks down a few cedar trees and 'dedicates' the road to the county even though we don't want it."