

Earlier in the summer, Governor Abbott issued Executive Order GA-29 which, among other things, made the wearing of facemasks mandatory. The order listed eleven exemptions, including children under ten, and those with a medical disability. County judges were authorized to request an exemption for their county if there were twenty or fewer active cases of COVID-19 in the county. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, I, with the concurrence of our local health authority, decided not to ask for that exemption. Our active cases have remained under twenty, but our proximity to Taylor County, with their rising number of active cases and deaths, along with the fact that many Callahan County residents work and shop in Taylor County were deciding factors.

Last week, concerned parents and other interested persons began contacting me regarding school-age children wearing their masks in school and difficulties they were encountering. We had received information that all districts were required by the Texas Education Agency to comply with the governor's executive order on masks. Just to be sure, I contacted a local superintendent to confirm that, and he did. It was my opinion, based on this information, regardless of whether or not the county opted out, the schools would have to comply. I shared this information with a parent and she provided an article in which an education commissioner stated that in counties that opted out, the districts would have the option of complying or not. I shared this information with the school districts in the county.

Some of the parents wanted to talk to me about this, and I was happy to comply. On Friday, August 28<sup>th</sup> the meeting was held in the District Courtroom so that everyone who was concerned could come to the courthouse and discuss the issue. One of the callers organized the meeting and provided an agenda. Since the elevator was still out at that time, we arranged to have a computer in the library in the basement set up so people who couldn't get to the third floor could still participate.

A number of people met in the District Courtroom and gave their presentations regarding their personal and their children's experiences. Individuals with medical expertise presented their views and observations. It was a good meeting that resulted in a promise. I told everyone there that I would meet with school representatives, review any documentation anyone sent me, confer with medical experts and render a decision of whether or not Callahan County would opt out of the governor's executive order regarding facemasks. The meeting is scheduled for Wednesday at 1:30 PM.

This meeting was a great example of citizens voicing their concerns to their government officials. Everyone at the meeting conducted themselves with candor, civility and courtesy, just the way conversations such as these should happen.

Unfortunately, everyone doesn't think that meeting in a public forum, presenting ideas, and treating one another with respect is necessary.

On August 20<sup>th</sup>, I met with the Executive Committee of the Republican Party of Callahan County. A few days before, they had requested the meeting, and the chair of the committee sent me a letter regarding the governor's executive orders and their effects. At that meeting, however, I was ambushed. The spokesperson advised me that the committee had met and voted unanimously to censure me for complying with the governor's executive orders and not opting out of the requirement to wear facemasks. They apparently considered these violations of the constitution and the party platform.

This committee, that was alleging a constitutional violation on my part, met in secret, discussed the allegations in secret, developed the written allegations in secret, voted on the allegations but never gave me an opportunity to meet with them to discuss the allegations in any way until the meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup>. This is an absolute violation of my constitutional right to due process. The thing about being a believer in the constitution is this: The whole thing applies to everyone equally.

When I pointed this out, one of the members said, “It doesn’t have to be this way.” In other words, if I complied with their demands, they would not censure me. This is a clear cut attempt to coerce a public official into changing public policy.

When I asked them to continue with the allegations, the speaker declined to go further into the document, citing time constraints. When I asked for a copy of the allegations, they refused to provide one. On August 27<sup>th</sup>, I did receive a document that purported to be the one from the meeting. The document said that it was from the committee, but it was not on committee or Republican Party letterhead, and, more pointedly, there were no signatures on the document. All of these documents were received on my county email and, as such, are public records.

Now, some of you may think that what they did was ok. You may even agree with the manner in which they did it. But threats, intimidation, and attempts to coerce a public servant are not actions I’ve ever associated with our constitutional process. This was one of the most unethical things I’ve ever experienced in my entire career as a public servant.

Throughout last week and into the weekend, I continued to receive information and support for both sides of the mask issue. This week I have been and will continue to monitor news and medical sites, confer with medical specialists, and talk to anyone who wants a dialog. On Friday, I will make a decision and make it public.

Whatever that decision is, it will not be the result of threats or intimidation. When I was elected, I knew I would be expected to make tough decisions. I haven’t been swayed by coercion or political pressure before, and I’m not about to start now.