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Taxpayers in Irion County meet a payroll every year of over \$583,000 by the time all the extra expenses are tallied. Compared to what a few U.S. Senators cost in salary and benefits, the local courthouse crowd is a big bargain of some 30 people to rule over a county 1000 square miles in size and populated by 1626 registered voters that shrink down to 600 or 700 head at election times.

Our county commissioners knock down \$14,900 a year in salary alone, plus hospitalization and retirement benefits. Bad luck at the polls for a Irion County commissioner means he or she is going to be short close to 60 grand the next four years. Further out west in the rich oil sands and fallow greasewood flats, a winning term is worth over 128 thousand bucks, which is approximately 44 times more than ranching returns anywhere in the shortgrass country.

But when the electorate catches the fever to unseat incumbents, the voters forget about the financial hardship they cause. Three years ago, a new county judge and the first lady to serve as commissioner won without so much as an erasure turning up on a ballot. This year's primary unseated two long-time commissioners. If an officeholder's instinct for rewards and patronage are sound during their term of office, they are mighty tough opponents.

After the primary in the spring, I asked several citizens around town why they thought people voted for a

change. I suspected it might be the two-term limit issue. Scribes and wide mouth TV announcers had been blabbing it around all year, embarrassing big league politicians, asking how they stood on term limits. They never shut up long enough to think his honor the senator and her ladyship, the representative, don't want to relinquish their huge campaign chests and fancy secretaries to go back to practicing law in Peoria any more than those scribbling reporters want to be back in the bush league covering Lion's Club broom sales and the new slates of officers at the PTA.

The choices seemed to be hard for the voters I interviewed. Anger and suspicion often set the tone in county politics, so it was no surprise that the squabbles, like the county treasurer resigning last year, seemed to still be on people's minds. The pros and cons of the resignation might not have been as important as the underlying feeling the people's choice had been rescinded and the appointive process had taken over in the form of the commissioner's court. In the South, we still have an elective judiciary, even though we know better. Ever since the Reconstruction days after the War of Northern Aggression, we've been mighty touchy on the sanctity of the ballot box.

Two raises by the county and 11 straight years of ad valorem taxes rising in the school district also were noted. Rarely do tax increases enhance the incumbents' futures. One

of our illustrious congressmen said not too long ago he thought federal taxes were about right. I suspect he will be making a career change one of these days.

I sure wasn't taking sides. Herders have too much at stake to make the county mad. According to the county judge's report last month in the local newspaper, .03 percent of the budget is allotted to agriculture for the county agent and predator control. Another 23 percent of the money goes for maintenance of the roads leading out to the ranches and oilfields.

Just any day of the month, a county grader may go charging up the road coming to this ranch to smooth out a spot or two. Livestock haulers complain every load to the ranch about throwing out top decks, shaking the batteries loose in hotshots, and blowing out inside duals, like tires were as easy to reinflate as bubble gum is to revitalize. The truckers also have a fit over every speeding ticket the sheriff gives them on Highway 67. They ought be grateful that natural barriers like our dirt roads exist to make them obey the law. Mexico has a lot of stuff worse than these avenues of potholes.

We reap other benefits from the county. Ranchers horn in on the sheriff's time, reporting strays and grass fires. On court days, we absorb air conditioning serving on juries just like town people. Part of the expense of heating the courthouse can be charged against us, too, for tramping in

and out of the assessor's office in the winter to pay taxes and registration fees. And I suppose it's only fair to charge back part of the expense of cleaning up the community center after a dance from all the scuff marks boot heels make on the floor.

The judge's report failed to disclose how many dollars point-zero-three hundredths of a percent represented. It sounded more like a rainfall measurement than a budget figure, but as rough as times have been in the outlands after six years of dry weather, any little nudge will look like a bonanza to us.