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## **TAC's Counties at the Capitol Features Speaker Dade Phelan, Sen. Bryan Hughes** *County Officials Join Virtual Event Amid COVID-19 Pandemic*

AUSTIN – The Texas Association of Counties (TAC) held its Counties at the Capitol Legislative Day with Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan and state Sen. Bryan Hughes speaking to county officials gathered virtually from around the state.

The event is part of TAC's continuing mission to provide county officials with timely information about legislation that affects county government and connect them with members of the Texas Legislature.

"Counties at the Capitol underlines TAC's role as a communication and education arm for counties, and as a bridge between county officials and state legislators," TAC Executive Director Susan M. Redford said. "There is strength in numbers, and counties are better when we work together."

In an interview with Jefferson County Judge Jeff Branick recorded the week before the state's historic winter weather event, Phelan, R-Beaumont, called COVID-19 "a kind of disrupter" that "showed us our weaknesses and our strengths throughout Texas." One of the weaknesses exposed by the pandemic, Phelan said, "is connectivity, whether it's telemedicine or whether it's public education."

Gov. Greg Abbott designated broadband internet expansion an emergency legislative item in his Feb. 1 State of the State address. The issue is a priority for Texas counties, both rural and urban.

"It's an issue. It has to be confronted. And this is the session to do it," Phelan said. "I would say the most bipartisan issue right now we're probably going to have is a broadband plan for the state of Texas."

Branick and Phelan have worked together over the past several years to help Jefferson County withstand and overcome hurricanes, floods and a chemical plant explosion, as well as the coronavirus pandemic. Their discussion also touched upon treating mental health and moving beyond the stigma often attached to mental health issues, the economic impact of COVID-19 and local control.

Hughes, R-Mineola, also discussed broadband expansion in his remarks.

"We've been beating that drum for a long time," he said, "but a lot of folks didn't really see the need. I don't have to tell you that now, after COVID-19, with relying on internet for school and for work and for so many other things, that every Texan has got the message now that broadband, rural broadband, is important."

As chairman of the Senate State Affairs Committee, Hughes leads the panel charged with many top issues for Texas counties. He thanked county officials for their response to last week's storms and power and water outages and reassured them that he would be seeking their input on a variety of issues this session. In addition to broadband expansion, Hughes specifically mentioned election reforms, COVID-19 liability protections, redistricting, and police procedures and funding.

Because of COVID-19, TAC took this year's Counties at the Capitol day online via video conference. More than 400 county officials from across Texas registered for the event.

For more information about TAC, visit [www.county.org](http://www.county.org). For more information about TAC's Legislative Services, visit [www.county.org/legislative](http://www.county.org/legislative).

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*The Texas Association of Counties was established in 1969 to provide services to Texas counties and to promote the value of county government statewide. TAC is the representative voice for all 254 Texas counties and county officials. Through TAC, counties communicate the county perspective to state officials and the citizens of Texas.*