

2026 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR AWARDS



UH Hilton | March 27, 2026 | Noon



Hobby School of Public Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

PROGRAM

UH HILTON | MARCH 27, 2026 | NOON

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

James Davidson (M.P.A. '12)

INVOCATION

Leonard Chan (M.P.A. '09), President, Hobby School Alumni Association

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

James Davidson (M.P.A. '12)

WELCOME

Jim Granato, Dean, Hobby School of Public Affairs

RECOGNITION OF ELECTED OFFICIALS

Sara Donatto, Assistant Vice Chancellor/Vice President, Local Relations and Strategic Initiatives, Office of Government & Community Relations, UH System

KATHLEEN RUBINSTEIN BEST PAPER AWARDS

Peter M. Koelling, Instructional Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Initiatives

PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

Peter M. Koelling, Instructional Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Initiatives

REMARKS FROM THE HONOREES

CLOSING

About the Master of Public Administration

A Master of Public Administration degree from the Hobby School of Public Affairs at the University of Houston provides a high level of training and education for aspiring public servants, public managers and nonprofit professionals to address complex societal challenges and lead organizations innovatively and ethically into the future.

2026 KATHLEEN P. RUBINSTEIN BEST PAPER AWARDS

Kathleen P. Rubinstein (M.P.A. '96) is a senior health care analyst at Norton Rose Fulbright and a former long-term adjunct lecturer in the Master of Public Administration program. Through a scholarship award, Rubinstein recognizes two graduate candidates at the Hobby School who demonstrate a strong understanding of the applicability of their coursework to the real world.



CHRISTOPHER BURBRIDGE, BEST SHORT PAPER

"Addressing the Structures Against Innovation in Public Research Universities"

Master of Public Administration candidate Christopher Burbridge analyzes the role of public research universities as contributors to the public good, incubators of innovative practices and hubs for addressing regional challenges. His paper examines structural factors that may limit the University of Houston's ability to fully realize its newest strategic plan, noting the organizational challenges of aligning academic units with distinct pedagogical approaches around common goals. The paper offers mechanisms for the university structure to better support innovation, including the co-creation of a strategic architecture through committees, a more equitable funding disbursement model, and a robust data infrastructure that enables shared access to student development data across academic units.



SOPHIA ILAHI, BEST LONG PAPER AWARD

"Party Identification and Early Voting Patterns in Texas"

Master of Public Administration candidate Sophia Ilahi examines the relationship between party identification and early voting behavior in Texas during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Using data of likely voters in Texas from a [Hobby School survey](#) and a logistic regression model, the paper analyzes whether Democrats or Republicans in the state were more likely to vote early, while accounting for demographic factors such as race, education and gender. The findings show that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to participate in early voting, supporting the argument that early voting helps mitigate structural and logistical barriers faced by marginalized communities. These results highlight the importance of early voting as a tool for electoral accessibility and help inform ongoing debates about voting equity and election reform.

2026 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR HONOREES

Since 2011, the Master of Public Administration program has honored local public servants who exemplify the highest standards in public service at an annual awards luncheon. The ceremony benefits the scholarship fund for graduate candidates. These exceptional leaders improve their communities through dynamic problem-solving, collaboration and innovative and ethical leadership.



CORBY D. ALEXANDER

City Manager, City of La Porte

Corby D. Alexander is the city manager at the City of La Porte, where he has supported city departments for 13 years. He brings more than 25 years of experience in local government leadership, having guided multiple Texas cities in management and key administrative roles, helping shape effective, responsive city operations in College Station, Jefferson and Bonham.

A native Texan from the city of Henderson, Alexander's professional philosophy reflects a belief in the vital role local government plays in improving the quality of life of and delivering meaningful results for residents. Alexander has been involved with the International City/County Management Association, the Texas City Management Association and Rotary, where he connects with peers to build strong partnerships and advance public service. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and a Master of Public Administration from the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. Outside of his career, Alexander enjoys spending time with his family and participating in church and community activities. He and his wife, Ericka, are the proud parents of five children and grandparents of their granddaughter, Jordyn.



TREY DUHON

County Judge, Waller County

Trey Duhon has served as Waller County Judge since 2015, leading the county through a period of rapid growth while maintaining a focus on fiscal responsibility and long-term planning. As County Judge, he has consistently worked to lower the county tax rate, passing multiple no-new-revenue budgets while addressing expanding service demands. Judge Duhon spearheaded the development of a new county courthouse, a new jail, a judicial annex and a Precinct 4 annex. He also led a countywide salary study that resulted in adjustments to keep Waller County competitive with neighboring counties and support recruitment and retention. In response to infrastructure needs, he championed and secured voter approval of Waller County's first mobility bond to improve roads and transportation.

A former private attorney, Duhon has long been an engaged advocate for local residents, helping to found Citizens for a Better Waller County to oppose the Trans-Texas Corridor, the Waller County Advocacy Group to challenge the proposed High-Speed Rail project, and efforts opposing the Pintail landfill. Judge Duhon serves on several regional boards and lives in Hempstead with his wife, Lisa.



TRENT EPPERSON

City Manager, City of Pearland

Trent Epperson has served as city manager for the City of Pearland since 2023. Under his leadership, Pearland implemented the Strategic Priority Implementation Plan to align council priorities with departmental initiatives and measurable outcomes. He also established the Pearland Experience Team and a people-first customer service culture, enhancing responsiveness, issue tracking and case resolution for residents and businesses. Epperson's career with Pearland spans nearly two decades of transformative infrastructure and capital program delivery. Joining the city in 2006 as director of project management, he helped prepare the 2007, 2019 and 2023 Bond Programs for successful referendums; implemented the Project Delivery Model to improve cross-department execution; launched a web-based platform to strengthen project tracking and accountability; and helped develop Pearland's first five-year Capital Improvement Program budget. Between 2012 and 2022, as a director and assistant/deputy city manager, he advanced 13 transportation projects securing over \$200M in federal and state funding and oversaw major capital projects improving mobility, drainage and quality of life.

Epperson serves on the Houston-Galveston Area Council Transportation Policy Council and is a past chair of its Technical Advisory Committee, Transportation Improvement Program Subcommittee and Regional Transportation Plan Subcommittee. He is also the past president of the American Public Works Association Southeast Texas Branch. Epperson graduated from Texas A&M University with a B.S. in Industrial Distribution.



JULI MATHEW

Presiding Judge, Fort Bend County Court at Law No. 3

Juli Mathew serves as the presiding judge of Fort Bend County Court at Law No. 3. She presides over a diverse docket, including civil, criminal misdemeanor, probate and family law matters, and brings a community-centered approach to the administration of justice.

Judge Mathew is the creator of the Juvenile Intervention and Mental Health Services (JIMHS) Court, an innovative program that has become a model implemented by counties across Texas. Through JIMHS, she has strengthened early intervention, connected youth to critical resources, and reduced recidivism through a compassionate, structured approach.

In addition, Judge Mathew developed two community engagement initiatives. *Chai and Chat* creates an open forum for residents to engage directly with local elected officials. *Kitchen to the Courthouse* empowers young girls by connecting them with women leaders in law and public service leadership. She also founded the countywide *KEEPIN' IT REAL* Mental Health Conference, convening law enforcement, educators, legal professionals and community stakeholders for vital training and awareness. Judge Mathew serves on the boards of the Literacy Council and Boy Scouts of America Archer District and remains committed to justice and public trust in the courts. She was previously a board member of the India Cultural Center.

2026 PIONEER AWARD HONOREE

The Pioneer Award recognizes a public official with a long record and consistent demonstration of working for the public good.



MARTHA CASTEX-TATUM

Mayor Pro Tem and Houston City Councilmember, District K

Martha Castex-Tatum is a visionary leader helping shape Houston's future. First elected to the Houston City Council in 2018, Castex-Tatum has advanced collaborative solutions that strengthen neighborhoods and build trust in government. Her leadership has guided Houston through defining moments, from the COVID-19 pandemic to major disaster recovery. As chair of the Economic Development Committee, Castex-Tatum oversees economic incentives and policies that support tourism, workforce development and job creation. She is a member of the Budget and Fiscal Affairs, Ethics and Governance, Labor and Proposition A committees.

Following prolonged power outages after Hurricane Beryl, she launched the Fill the Fridge initiative with Union Pacific Railroad and local nonprofits, helping thousands of families clean and restock their homes. Recognized for practical leadership, her donation box ordinance addressed illegal dumping citywide and earned her the 2022 Distinguished Local Legislator of the Year Award. Her advocacy also led to the passage of House Bill 3611, strengthening statewide penalties for illegal bandit signs. Nationally, she serves on the National League of Cities (NLC) Board of Directors and chairs the NLC Information Technology and Communications Federal Advocacy Committee, shaping policy on broadband, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

Castex-Tatum is a Leadership Houston Class XXXVI alumna, a life member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and a member of The Links, Inc., Missouri City Chapter. She holds a Master of Public Administration and a Bachelor of Business Administration from Texas State University and is the proud mother of one son, Jacob Paul Tatum.

2026 SPONSORS

PLATINUM SPONSOR

Anonymous

SILVER SPONSORS

Dean Jim Granato

HAWES HILL & ASSOCIATES
LLP



James Thurmond

NETWORKING MIXER SPONSORS

The Honorable Ronald Green



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Koelling

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Sunny Wong



Texas City Management Association
Region VI

