

**SUBJECT:** Authorizing county branch offices in unincorporated areas

**COMMITTEE:** County Affairs — committee substitute recommended

**VOTE:** 8 ayes — R. Allen, W. Smith, Casteel, Coleman, Laney, Naishtat, Olivo, Otto  
0 nays  
1 absent — Farabee

**WITNESSES:** For — Cynthia Dunbar, W.A. "Andy" Meyers, Fort Bend County  
(*Registered, but did not testify:* Jim Allison, County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas; Van York, Borden County)  
Against — None

**BACKGROUND:** Chapter 292 of Local Government Code authorizes county tax assessor-collectors in most counties to maintain branch offices only in municipalities.

**DIGEST:** CSHB 571 would authorize counties to establish a branch office in their unincorporated area. A county would be able to buy, refurbish, or lease space to serve as a branch office.  
  
Any county officer could maintain an office at the branch office. Services provided at the branch office would have to be in addition to services already provided at another location required by law.  
  
The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2005.

**SUPPORTERS SAY:** CSHB 571 would allow tax assessor-collectors to better serve rapidly growing residential neighborhoods in unincorporated areas. The law should be updated as county populations increase and place more responsibility on counties to provide services in unincorporated areas. Many residents of suburban developments must travel to a neighboring

municipality to obtain services provided by tax assessor-collectors. Getting information about their taxes or about vehicle and boat registrations, for example, can be difficult because of the distance between their homes and the neighboring municipality. More branch offices would improve access for rural taxpayers as well.

Counties may locate branch offices for other officials, such as constables and justices of the peace, outside of a municipality, and CSHB 571 would give the same authority to county tax assessor-collectors. The bill is needed because some counties already have established and are maintaining tax assessor-collector offices in unincorporated areas.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

HB 571 would authorize counties to establish any type of branch offices in unincorporated areas. This could create a false sense of need for such offices in those areas. High-growth areas certainly need and can afford more auxiliary facilities, but other areas may not. The bill could unintentionally expand county responsibilities beyond capacity. It also could decentralize services, generate higher administrative cost and inefficiencies, and decrease oversight.

**NOTES:**

The original bill applied only to counties with populations of 350,000 or more. The substitute would apply to all Texas counties.