

Thanks, But No Thanks: Cook's Plea Denied by Governor Abbott

It has been a difficult year in 2020. COVID has caused many inconveniences for individuals, putting their livelihood on hold across the state. No one may understand that better than Thomas Cook.

Cook, the executive director of "Rehabilitation for Texas", was denied his request for a \$1.6 million contribution to the "Texas Rest Area Maintenance Program", by Governor Greg Abbott.

In a release from the Governor's office, Abbott publicly praised the organization. However, Abbott was honest about the feasibility of such a request.

"The work being performed by the staff of Rehabilitation for Texas is exceptionally important and admirable," expressed Abbott. "However, I cannot ask for our state's workers to take pay cuts so that we might have cleaner rest stops along our highways. It's just not practical."

The Texas Department of Transportation also could not pledge any more funds. However, Secretary Ruth R. Hughs voiced her support for Cook and Rehabilitation for Texas.

"As it stands, we are unable to assist the group with any additional funds, but we will continue to support Mr. Cook and his efforts to petition the governor for additional funds for rest stop maintenance" said Hughs.

The program, "Texas Rest Area Maintenance" served to employ disabled workers. It had become quite successful and popular with the state, as it was seen as a positive way to get opportunities for honest work and contribution to disabled individuals.

"The goal of our organization is to provide the best-maintained roadside facilities in the nation and to provide maximum opportunities for citizens with disabilities. To this end, we've been very successful. In 2019, we received feedback from visitors to Texas' rest areas, indicating our rest stops have been among the best in the country in terms of cleanliness, safety and quality," said Cook, as he gave his speech.

The cutting of costs also appears to be costing the rest areas in general. According to Cook, the rest areas have seen an increase in crime and overall maintenance issues at these sites where jobs were cut.

"The State Highway Patrol reported a 400 percent increase in the number of crimes perpetrated at these rest stops, ranging from muggings to property damage. The highway patrol also noted that graffiti had strongly increased at these sights, vending machines had been broken into and toilets had been left to overflow," Cook explained.

It remains to be seen, but irreparable damage or further decline of the program could be on the horizon. The future of the Texas Rest Area Maintenance Program is in dire need of support.