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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

## Waco community discussion series to consider issues before Texas Legislature

Carl Hoover

Jan 11, 2025



Waco Walks organizer Ashley Bean Thornton prepares attendees to step off on a tour in 2023 of the 25th Street corridor that included discussion of plans for its redesign.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald file photo

Carl Hoover

**A**n informal series aimed at spurring community conversations on issues before the Texas Legislature this spring will start Tuesday with the subject of water the first topic.

The seven-week series titled Light on the Legislature will feature a city, school or organizational representative speaking on what he or she is following in the Legislature on that subject and what impact it might have locally.

Community advocate Ashley Bean Thornton, who organized the series with several like-minded people, said information and community conversation are the goals of the series, which is structured to avoid partisan wrangling.

Each session, held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at downtown Waco's Performing Arts Community Center, 924 Austin Ave., will open with a 10- to 15-minute talk, followed by small group conversations about the topic, then a closing segment where the speaker addresses any questions raised in the conversations, Thornton said. Snacks and drinks will be sold at the location.

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The topics and speakers for the series are:

Jan. 14—**Water**, Kimberly Gamez, city of Waco watershed protection manager

Jan. 21—**Housing**, Josh Caballero, city of Waco community engagement officer

Jan. 28—**Small Business**, Tim Holtkamp, business adviser at the McLennan Community College Small Business Development Center

Feb. 4—**Animal Welfare**, Cheryl Foster, chair of the Waco Animal Welfare Board

Feb. 11—**Public Schools**, Chris Allen, Midway Independent School District superintendent

Feb. 18—**Child Care and Early Learning**, James Jesse, director of Economic Opportunities Advancement Corp. Head Start; Julie Talbert, child care manager at Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas; and Haley O’Connell, United Way engagement director

Feb. 25—**Health Care**, Fernando Arroyo and Alfred Solano with Waco Family Medicine.

Organizers hope to sidestep political or partisan discussion by having session topics led by non-elected city, school and organizational leaders on their subject of expertise. Certain polarizing topics such as immigration, abortion and transgender policies were avoided for that reason, Thornton said.

Thornton, a Democratic Party precinct chair last year and former Waco City Council candidate, said it is difficult these days to find subjects or platforms where civil conversations from a variety of viewpoints can be held.

“Honestly, one of the hardest things is that people tend to be so isolated in their partisan groups,” she said.

Democracy needs those conversations to function, however, and discussion of issues before the Legislature is a logical place to encourage that, she said.

Thornton is one of the organizers for Waco Walks, an ad hoc group that takes periodic group walks through Waco locations with an eye to the history and culture experienced on the route. That series has attracted a cross-section of Waco residents who have come together for a shared, enjoyable experience, she said.



A crowd huddled around Bevil Cohn bright and early Saturday outside Bell's Hill Elementary School as she told the story of the man who pioneered the early tourist destination that led Waco to be known as "Geyser City," centered partly around what is now the site of the school where the Cohn worked as principal for 33 years.

Waco Walks loosely serves as a model for McLennan Talks, the group sponsoring Light on the Legislature.

"It's all a big experiment," Thornton said. "I feel like we have to get good at talking with each other."

Information on Light on the Legislature is posted on McLennan Talks' Facebook page. For more information, call 254-313-2488.

### More Coverage

Thornton column outlines strategies for civil engagement on state, national topics, see **Page A6**

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By Carl Hoover  
Reporter