

TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

## Watershed protection tax credit plan, strong turnout open Light on the Legislature series in Waco

Michael Haag

Jan 15, 2025

**M**cLennan County Talks' first Light on the Legislature event Tuesday drew an unexpectedly large and engaged crowd that learned about the potential for new tax credits aimed at protecting Waco's drinking water.

The weekly series' next events will focus on other state legislative issues and their local connections, and move to a bigger venue. With water as the focus Tuesday, Kimberly Gamez, Waco's new watershed protection manager, opened the event with a presentation, then answered questions after participants split into small-group discussions, a format that will remain for the rest of the series.



Organizer Ashley Bean Thornton addresses the crowd that took part Tuesday in the opening event for the Light on the Legislature series. The events, continuing the next six Tuesdays, aim to foster discussion of state legislative issues and their local connections.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

Gamez said a bill expected to be filed during the state legislative session that started Tuesday and continues into June would establish a watershed protection tax credit. While the bill is still being drafted, the idea is to provide franchise tax benefits to dairy operators upstream of Lake Waco who haul manure out of the North Bosque River watershed. Gamez said she sees the proposal as a good thing for Waco.

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The North Bosque, Lake Waco's main tributary, has been federally designated as "impaired" since 1998 because of phosphorous pollution that fuels algae growth. The Legislature approved regulatory protections for the North Bosque watershed in 2001, requiring industrial-scale dairies there to secure individual permits for waste disposal that could be challenged in state regulatory hearings. Waco leaders have credited the extra layer of protection with helping the city improve the quality of its drinking water, including its taste and odor, but dairy operators have said it hampers their growth.


A bill that passed the House but died in a Senate committee during the 2023 legislative session aimed to roll back those protections by allowing North Bosque dairies to again operate under less-restrictive general permits.

Since working to halt the 2023 proposal, Waco officials **have been meeting** with dairy operators and industry representatives in an effort to come up with a solution that would allow dairies to expand without harming Lake Waco's water quality.

## CAFO Matrix

- Reviewed by City consultants
- Received by the Texas Association of Dairymen
  - Requested their comments
- The CAFO Matrix is designed to allow the growth of CAFO's without conflict from Waco by:
  - Utilizing a digester: efficiently processing waste
  - Ensuring WAF compliance: Maintain field levels below 200 ppm of phosphorus
  - Removing waste from the watershed: Manure transported out of the North Bosque Watershed
  - No outstanding violations: All operations comply with regulations
- Council approval of CAFO Matrix once all comments received and reviewed

**CAFO = CONCENTRATED ANIMAL FEEDING OPERATION**



WATCH: The city of Waco has provided upstream North Bosque River dairy officials with a "matrix" showing conditions in which the city would or would not oppose expansion permits. Lisa Tyer, the city's director of water utility services, provided more details about the matrix at the Oct. 15, 2024 Waco City Council meeting.

Gamez said it is important for the public to participate in order to shape legislation.

"Only two people in the city of Waco put in an official comment," Gamez said of the 2023 bill. "If people want to see legislation go one way or another, they need to participate. Without public activity, you won't see change."

Organizers of Tuesday's discussion were pleasantly surprised by the turnout, with 45 attendees signing in and likely several more participating without registering.

"We were going to be very excited if we got 20," said Ashley Bean Thornton, a community advocate and co-organizer of the series. "It was very exciting. It made it a little less comfortable but still very exciting."

Folks filed into a side room at the Performing Arts Community Center, 924 Austin Ave., making it clear to Thornton that they will need more space next week. She said they will have the venue's main space for the second installment of **the series**. A separate event scheduled Tuesday forced the first one to stick to the smaller area.

Thornton said Tuesday's session had a collaborative and welcoming atmosphere.



“We wanted it to be friendly conversation, which it was,” she said. “Kim did a great job at threading the needle of giving background context while pushing it into legislation.”



Former Waco City Manager Wiley Stem, left, greets Jim Newkam, right, before Tuesday's event.  
Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

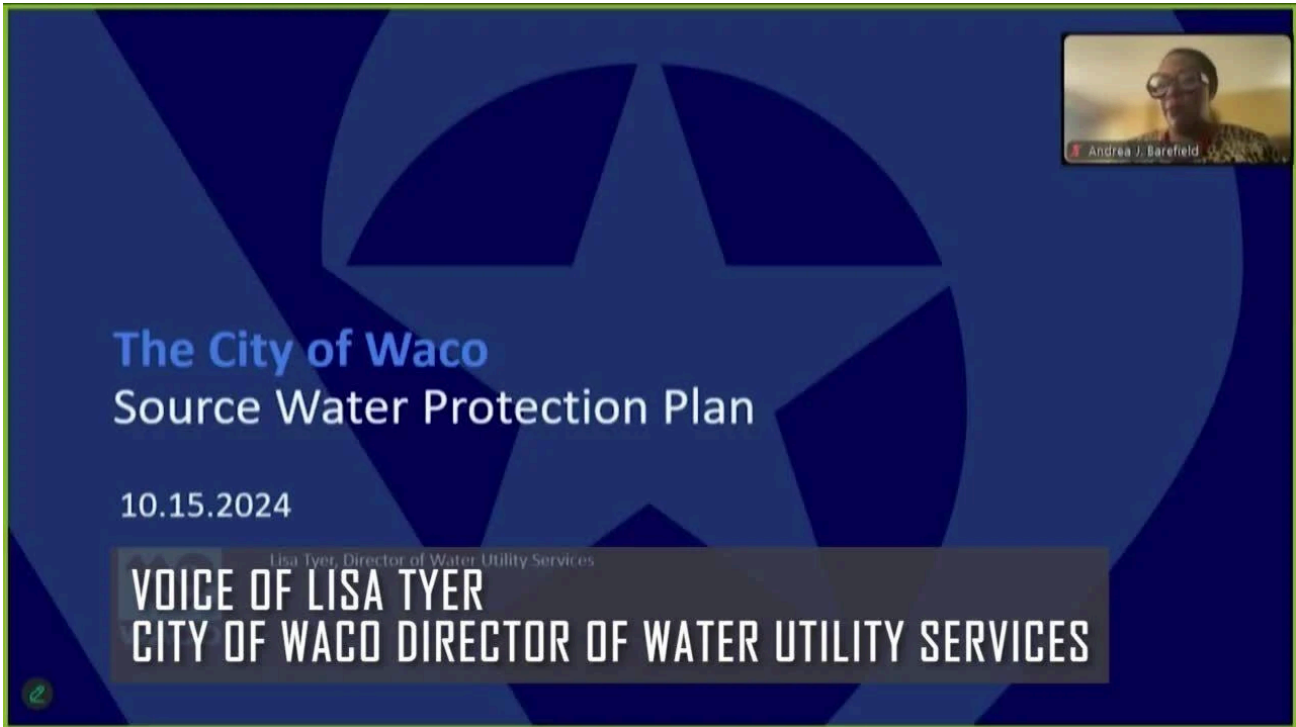
Organizers are eager to build on Tuesday's momentum as they look ahead to the remaining six weeks of the series, she said.

“We just want to keep pushing this along,” Thornton said. “The hardest thing is figuring out how to get in touch with people and keep them engaged.”

Future sessions will cover topics such as housing, small business, animal welfare and public schools, with local experts providing nonpartisan insights. Thornton said she hopes the series will encourage more civic engagement and create spaces for civil discourse.

The next session, focusing on housing, will feature city community engagement officer Josh Caballero. Sessions will continue from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays at 924 Austin Ave., with snacks and drinks available for purchase.

For more information, visit the **McLennan County Talks Facebook page** or call 254-313-2488.



WATCH: View the full presentation and Q&A s Waco City Council members heard about Lake Waco water quality and upstream dairy farms at a work session on Oct. 15, 2024.



Ashley Bean Thornton encouraged members of the audience to wear name tags during Tuesday's event.  
Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald





Liz Ligawa and Jon Singletary share a hug before Tuesday's event.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald






Ashley Bean Thornton, a community advocate and co-organizer of the series, speaks to the crowd before Tuesday's event.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald


## Popular in the Community



Hewitt's Spring Valley Road rebuild...

 **Karl Lauritzen**  
Very short sighted. 3 years and only a turn...


 **Top Comment** 



Retired Waco teachers cheer...

 **John Herbert**  
I always appreciated former Congressman...

 **Top Comment** 

Blake Burleson: Speaking truth to...

 **KENT REYNO...**  
Good words, Blake. If you open the door to...

 **Top Comment** 

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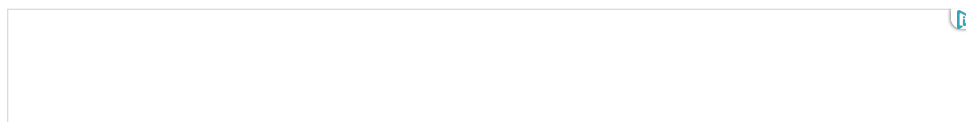
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