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EYE ON TEXAS LEGISLATURE

Ashley Bean Thornton: Earnest dialogue in Waco vital on state, national issues

ASHLEY BEAN THORNTON Board of Contributors

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The North Bosque River flows through Valley Mills, where nutrient pollution levels have gradually improved over years. A community conversation Tuesday will discuss local drinking water and Lake Waco in the wake of a failed 2023 Texas House bill that would have unraveled regulations on upstream dairies.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald file photo

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Do you remember when political conversations, even political disagreements, were more fun than they are now? I do. I miss that.

After the frenzy and folderol of the recent election, you may think: “Political conversations? No thanks! That’s the last thing I want! I’m ready for some peace!”

Yet I think lively, invigorating political conversations — the kind where we bat ideas around and hear different points of view, and get new information, and sometimes disagree, and sometimes even change our minds — are fun. I also believe they’re a crucial form of peacemaking.

We live in a diverse community, in a diverse state, in a diverse country, in an unbelievably diverse world. Any kind of pseudo-peacemaking that depends on just “going along to get along” is bound to fail when those who have been “going along” finally erupt in pent-up anger and frustration. Any kind of pseudo-peacemaking that depends on one “side” getting strong enough to demand and get their way all the time is bound to succumb to temptations of tyranny.

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So how do we go about living together peacefully in a diverse community? For one thing, we must be careful not to confuse “quiet” for “peace.”

If we want to get better at politics, we need to talk politics — and with people who agree with us and, yes, with people who disagree with us. We don't need to avoid political conversations; we need to practice doing them productively instead of destructively.

It wasn't that long ago that productive, informative, thought-provoking political conversations were common, maybe even the norm. Vinyl records have made a comeback — why not invigorating political talk? I don't even think it would be that hard to do.

Here are some things I think would help.

- 1. Ease into it:** We don't have to start with the most intractable controversy in the headlines. We can start with issues that are important but haven't been fully demarcated into partisan war zones. We can start with ideas that people haven't made their minds up about yet, topics where people might still have a little mental wiggle room.
- 2. Start with curiosity instead of conviction:** We don't have to dive straight into arguing. We can listen and ask questions first, collect and share a little information, develop a common base of understanding. We can start with phrases like, "I wonder if ..." and "How do we find out ..." instead of "Everybody knows ..." or "They should just ..."
- 3. Start at home:** It's easy to overgeneralize about "them" — those other people we don't know, in places we don't live. It's easy to think of "them" as one-dimensional "straw people" who are all good or all bad. We can have better, richer conversations if we start with what's happening in our own community with neighbors we know to be real, complex people dealing with challenges somewhat familiar to us.
- 4. Talk in person instead of typing on a screen:** It's easy to be snarky or even mean when you can't see someone's face. It's easy to misunderstand when you can't hear the tone of voice. Sometimes you need all the tools of face-to-face

communication at your disposal to make a nuanced point or to convey an important shade of feeling — an emoji just doesn't cut it. We need to start face to face, then maybe we can graduate to online.

5. Practice: Every skill gets rusty if we don't use it. We can get better at listening, clarifying, asking good questions and reconsidering our ideas if we practice. We can get better at having fun, productive, thought-provoking political conversations if we practice.

Speaking of practicing ...

I'm excited to invite you to participate in a grassroots effort bubbling up in our community. It's called "McLennan County Talks." The goal is to promote positive, productive civic engagement and a well-informed voter base in McLennan County by regularly offering opportunities for nonpartisan community conversations about issues that affect Waco and McLennan County.

Our first project is called "Light on the Legislature." It's a series of community conversations about how the Texas Legislature impacts our everyday lives. We will meet from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Performing Arts Community Center, 924 Austin Ave. Snacks and drinks will be available for purchase.

Each conversation will focus on a topic that directly affects our community. Here are the dates:

Tuesday — Water

Jan. 21 — Housing

Jan. 28 — Small business

Feb. 4 — Animal welfare

Feb. 11 — Public schools

Feb. 18 — Child care and early learning

Feb. 25 — Health care

We have invited knowledgeable local folks to give us some background on each topic and to tell us what they're "keeping an eye on" this particular legislative session. We'll hear their remarks, then spend time engaging in group conversation. The whole thing will be super casual and hopefully fun.

This Tuesday's dialogue involves water — innocuous-seeming, perhaps, though when a Texas House bill filed during **the 2023 legislative session** proposed unraveling regulations on upstream dairies and what those dairies allow to float down the Bosque River into Lake Waco, our drinking water, our city's civic and business leaders put aside other differences and came together to fight the bill.

In short, we hope to get people with a wide variety of perspectives to come. It will be a great way to learn about important issues in our community, and to learn a little bit about how the Legislature operates. More importantly, we hope these meet-ups will be a terrific way to get to know your neighbors and to practice the art of productive political conversation. Hope to see you there.

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 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.

Civic leader and founder of the Act Locally Waco website, Ashley Bean Thornton is retired from Baylor University and has worked to help organize after-school programs for Transformation Waco. She is a member of the Waco Tribune-Herald Board of Contributors.

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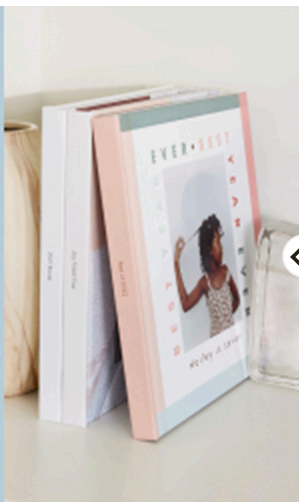
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