

OPEN LETTER TO THE CITIZENS OF BLANCO: STATE OF THE CITY, JANUARY 2023

As we enter 2023, I think it is important to give the citizens of Blanco an idea of just where the City is on several important issues and where we'd like to make improvements in the coming year.

OVERALL. First, be assured that despite some very significant challenges that we are working on, the City is in good shape. Our budget is on the way to finally being balanced, and our sales tax revenue is up significantly compared to last year. We have a professional City Administrator, Warren Escovy, and an effective City Staff. We have broad consensus across the City about what we want Blanco to be in the future, that being pretty much what it is now, a small, thriving, rural Texas town populated with an amazingly diverse mix of friendly people who will go out of their way to help their fellow citizens. There is widespread recognition that the Blanco Community extends well beyond the City Limits and the City welcomes the input and support received from both Blanco citizens and all our near-by neighbors.

WATER TREATMENT PLANT. After several years of work, the City's state-of-the-art Water Treatment Plant is about to come online; substantial completion is estimated for February 2023. For several years, we have been dependent on water from Canyon Lake flowing to us on the City-owned pipeline. Thank heavens a previous Blanco mayor and City Council built that pipeline! Thanks to low interest loans and several grants from the Texas Water Development Board, we were able to build the new treatment plant without having to float a bond issue.

WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT. We also have a state-of-the-art Wastewater Treatment Plant that has the capacity to add some 300 new residential users before needing expansion. Here again, the City was able to replace the previous antiquated plant without issuing bonds.

INFRAMARK. Both of these plants are now professionally operated by Inframark, a private company under contract with the City to provide infrastructure management services. Inframark, a company with more than 2,500 employees and 40 years of experience, has similar contracts with some 400 clients in 21 states and can call in additional expertise to come to Blanco whenever it is needed, something the City would not otherwise be able to do. Kudos to Inframark for keeping our water running during the recent freezes!

POTHOLE. But, of course, there are significant challenges facing the City. The pothole problem is high on our priority list. Most of our streets need to be completely repaved. The big bug-a-boo there is that the City's water lines and wastewater lines are ancient and need replacing. Many of these lines run under City streets. Therefore, it wouldn't make sense to repave a street only to have to tear it up again to replace an underground line. But, thanks to the diligent work of a dedicated group of volunteers, spearheaded by Mike Rieken, we now have a fairly accurate map of the City's infrastructure and can start prioritizing its rebuild. This

amazing group's work has resulted in a draft Capital Infrastructure Management Plan for the City, something we have never had before.

However, because our infrastructure has not been properly maintained over several decades, we are now in a serious catch-up mode that will take many millions of dollars to complete. Our City Administrator and Inframark are hard at work identifying grants and low-cost loans to put against this problem. Their first success has been to secure federal money from the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund that, hopefully, can partially fund these projects. (This is, by the way, only one example where a good City Administrator can pay for himself by securing outside funds for the City or by avoiding costly mistakes.)

In the meantime, we are about to let a contract to fill potholes as a temporary measure to relieve some of the pain of driving on City streets. Some citizens would like the City to buy bags of pothole filler and let them help fill potholes. Unfortunately, commendable though this suggestion is, not only are there liability issues but that type of fill is super temporary and would soon deteriorate. Our contracted pothole filling initiative will be much more durable and, hopefully, will smooth things out until we can start replacing those underground lines and actually repave the streets, assuming we can get the funding to do that.

HWY 281 EXPANSION. We all know that expansion of Hwy 281 is right around the corner. TxDOT's intention is that Hwy 281 become an alternative to I-35, with thousands more trucks and automobiles transiting Blanco County. It would be a disaster for Blanco if all that traffic funneled through our historic downtown. It would literally kill our city. Therefore, I have convened a Hwy 281 Expansion Task Force to develop alternatives and will continue to work with TxDOT to minimize the negative effects this expansion might have on Blanco.

DESTINATION, BLANCO. One proposed solution to the Hwy 281 problem is a relief route around the city. Should that occur, some are concerned that that would drain off drop-by business from the City's merchants and reduce the City's sales tax revenue. That is a legitimate concern and is an important issue. That is one reason I am so excited about two recent designations that Blanco has acquired. Blanco is now a recognized gold level *Texas Scenic City* and an officially recognized *International Dark Sky Community* (one of only 35 worldwide). The Blanco Chamber of Commerce is actively using both of these designations to promote Blanco as a destination city. The Dark Sky designation in particular is important for attracting overnight visitors who will stay in our hotels and B&Bs, eat in our restaurants, shop in our shops, use our service stations, and avail themselves of other facilities...all generating income for the City. If a Hwy 281 relief route is built one day, Blanco will have already established itself as a recognized destination city and the economic impact of a relief route will be minimized.

RURAL HERITAGE. But tourists don't want to come out to the Hill Country and find themselves in just another suburb of Austin or San Antonio. They want to experience the small rural town with loads of Hill Country charm that Blanco is now. Not surprisingly, that is exactly the kind of town Blanco citizens want to maintain and preserve. Win-win if we can do it. We know development within and around Blanco is upon us. The City does not have the legal

authority to decide which businesses can and cannot build in Blanco. If another fast-food restaurant or a big box store wants to come to Blanco, the City cannot stop it. We can, however, through zoning, determine where any new business can build within the city limits. The Hwy 281 Overlay initiative and the Streetscape initiative, both of which I support wholeheartedly, are part of that process.

DESIGN STANDARDS. But maintaining Blanco's rural charm goes beyond zoning. It is essential that we have design standards and apply them. Without design standards, chain businesses will build their standard corporate structures every time. Without signage standards, they will erect the largest and most gawdy signs they can. Witness the Hwy 281 corridor in Marble Falls. Charming though their downtown is, that 281 strip is "Anytown USA," exactly the opposite of what we want Blanco to become.

The entire City staff, our Planning and Zoning Commission, our Historical Preservation Commission, and many citizen volunteers are working hard to refine standards and guidelines that will protect Blanco from morphing into just another ugly suburban shopping strip. Additionally, we hired a part-time Community Officer position on City Staff to work with businesses and citizens to maintain Blanco's current level of cleanliness and charm.

SHORT-TERM RENTALS. Last year, the Blanco City Council passed an ordinance to limit short term rentals such as Air B&B or Vrbo within the city limits. All existing short-term rentals were grandfathered but restrictions were placed on new short-term rentals. The logic was to avoid what has happened to many other communities where whole neighborhoods have been converted into short term rentals, changing the character of neighborhoods, driving out residents, and severely limiting an already inadequate supply of affordable housing. The City is cognizant of on-going lawsuits in other localities and may adjust its short-term rental ordinance accordingly once these are settled. In the meantime, the ordinance preserves Blanco's existing neighborhoods and protects its citizens from being ejected from their long-term rental properties by owners, often absentee owners, who want to cash in on the short-term rental market to the detriment of the City.

PARKING. Parking is another pressing problem we have. As more and more people come to Blanco to eat and shop, parking becomes a concern. The City is considering alternatives. We are looking at knocking down the old City-owned Fire Station on Pecan Street and converting the area into parking. If the proposed expansion of the Red Bud Café occurs, this will become an attractive alternative and could potentially generate revenue for the City.

NEW CITY HALL. Looking at other City property, we have finally repaired the roof on City Hall. However, it and the Byars Building occupy valuable space on the City Square that could be used for retail businesses that, in turn, could generate more sales tax revenue for the City. Fortunately, and somewhat amazingly, Blanco's former mayor, Martha Herden and husband, Matt, a former Blanco ISD School Board President, have agreed to donate an acre of their property on Elm Street for construction of a new City Administrative Center. The City greatly appreciates this very kind and generous offer. This opens up the possibility of vacating the two

buildings on the City Square while freeing up parking on the Square. The task remains to figure out how best to accomplish this. Our City Administrator is working on funding possibilities.

POLICE. The City Police Department under Chief Scott Rubin continues to provide excellent safety and security for our citizens. Over the past few years, we have been able to raise the salaries of our officers and stem to a degree the turnover of officers that plagued the City in the past. Chief Rubin, the immediate past president of the Texas Police Chief's Association, brings a degree of professionalism and continuity to the department that is deeply appreciated.

Some have suggested that the Police Department issue more traffic tickets and the City use the money to pave the streets. There are two reasons we don't do that. First, we don't want Blanco to be known as a "speed trap." Rest assured, the police will stop and ticket speedsters, but it is for safety reasons, not to generate funds for the City. Secondly, State law prohibits using money from traffic tickets to fund a municipality's general operations. In fact, all such funds must be sent to the State of Texas that then periodically returns to the City only 15% of what has been collected in fines. The Blanco Police Department has worked successfully with TxDOT to get the speed limits reduced on Hwy 281 and will enforce those reduced speeds. The City will continue to work with TxDOT, the Hwy 281 Overlay Committee, and the Blanco Police Department to develop and implement traffic calming strategies for this busy thoroughfare.

COMMUNICATION. Open and effective communication between the City and its citizens is essential for progress. All City Council agenda and minutes are posted on the City's recently redesigned website, but we realize that not all citizens have the time or inclination to read them. Therefore, I, as mayor, write periodic updates for publication in the Blanco County News as well as for posting on the website. Additionally, Mayor Pro Tem Connie Barron writes an unofficial synopsis of City Council meetings and sends it out to anyone who asks for it, that being several hundred email addresses at present. Our goal is that City business be as transparent as possible and that two-way communications be easy and fluid between the City and its citizens.

To support this, the City also has initiated informal "listening sessions" whereby citizens or area residents can meet with City leadership and discuss the issues facing the City. These gatherings are intended to be a free back-and-forth conversation to exchange ideas and brainstorm solutions to challenges. Unfortunately, no more than two City Council members can be present at these sessions lest we violate the Texas Open Meetings Act. We will try to schedule these sessions at least once a quarter in 2023 though suggestions on how to improve City operations or plans are welcome anytime.

FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY. Supporting the City's transparency initiative, quarterly financial statements will now be posted on the City's website. Those interested in knowing about City's revenues and expenditures are invited to take advantage of this new service. I'd like to thank our hard-working City Finance Director, Sasha Ricks, for making this possible. We

must work hard to keep the City's budget in the black and have 5 to 10-year plans to keep it that way.

UDC. One of the issues that citizens routinely and properly raise concern about is Blanco's Unified Development Code, the UDC. The UDC has been in place for many, many years and apparently was copied from the UDC of a large city, probably Austin. There are portions of the UDC that need adjusting and others that are just not appropriate for a small rural town such as Blanco.

The UDC is a living document and can be changed. Each September, the City's hard-working and underappreciated Planning and Zoning Commission considers changes to the UDC. As changes often have secondary and tertiary implications, it is essential that they be proposed to P&Z as early in the year as possible so they can be studied and refined as required. The City welcomes suggestions from citizens for improvement to the UDC.

CAPCOG. Blanco's future well-being is intertwined with activities and initiatives in our surrounding communities. Coordinating those on an area basis is the Capita Area Council of Governments (CAPCOG). I was recently privileged to be elected to the CAPCOG Executive Committee where I, as mayor of Blanco, will be able to stay on top of initiatives, grant opportunities, and cooperative projects that can benefit both the City and the area in general. I have been able to work with the Governor's Office of Economic Development and have hopes that funds will come our way soon to help reconstruct our dilapidated infrastructure.

ECLIPSES. This coming October, Blanco County will be in the path of an Annular Solar Eclipse (a ring of sun around the Moon will still be visible) and will experience an influx of eclipse watchers from across the nation. Even more visitors are anticipated in April 2024 when the county will be in the path for a Total Solar Eclipse. Literally tens of thousands of visitors can be expected in the county for these events. It can be an enormous economic boon or a total disaster. Accordingly, I have stepped up to be the Chair of a County-wide Eclipse Planning Task Force to get ahead of the curve and make sure we are adequately prepared.

CITY COUNCIL AND ELECTION. With the departure of Councilwoman Deda Devine, the City Council could have simply appointed someone to take her place until next May's election. Instead, the Council wisely opted to advertise for the position and allow anyone in the City to apply. The Council will consider the applications and may make a selection from those who have applied. I sincerely appreciate the hard work Deda did for the City as a member of Council.

In May, we will have an election to choose Blanco's mayor and two members of the City Council, all for two-year terms. Additionally, the Council position vacated by Deda Devine may be up for election to fill the unexpired one year that is left on her term of office should Council appoint someone prior to the May election. The future of Blanco and its preservation as the small rural town we all love will depend on decisions to be made by the City Council. I encourage Blanco citizens to seriously consider filing for one of these positions and, if elected, to work hard to keep the dream alive.

CONCLUSION. In sum, Blanco has a lot going for it. But the City also has an overabundance of challenges to face. Our City government is committed to addressing each of these in as transparent a way as possible, fully incorporating citizen input and earnestly soliciting citizen assistance to bring plans to fruition. It is my great honor to serve my community as your mayor and friend.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rachel Lumpee". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rachel Lumpee
Mayor