

A Challenge to Change

By **John Philpott**, TML Director of Special Projects; **Dr. Peter Tarlow**, President, Tourism and More, Inc., and Founder, Texas Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA), College Station; and **Brad Stafford**, City Manager, Navasota

In April 2006, the Texas Municipal League conducted a workshop entitled “Insights into an Effective Tourism Program.” Dr. Peter Tarlow, founder of the Texas Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Research Association in College Station, was one of the key presenters. During the workshop, Dr. Tarlow mentioned that he often takes visitors to photograph Navasota’s downtown, but he rarely stays to purchase anything while in town because of objectionable experiences with local merchants on multiple occasions. The Navasota delegation attending the workshop was intrigued by Dr. Tarlow’s comments and decided to invite him to meet with community leaders. At the request of the mayor, Navasota City Manager Brad Stafford set up a meeting with Dr. Tarlow to investigate ways that Navasota might change its image and create the basis for improving the city’s future economy.

Initial Meeting

At the initial meeting between the city manager and Dr. Tarlow, they decided that Navasota needed a “blue ribbon” committee composed of people from different walks of life, and that the committee’s first task was to envision what type of city the citizens of Navasota wanted to leave for the next generation. The committee, the two decided, should represent business owners, community leaders, newcomers to the city, and creative individuals interested in working together to improve the image of Navasota. Dr.



Tarlow pointed out that the city is in an ideal location for growth; it’s on both sides of State Highway 6, which connects College Station to Houston, and is only twenty minutes from the Bryan-College Station corridor. He also noted that Navasota did not have the best reputation at that point and that there appeared to be multiple visions of what type of place the citizens desired.

With the assistance of the city manager and city council, a “blue ribbon” committee was formed. After several meetings and much discussion, the committee decided on four key elements of the direction they wanted to pursue:

1. they thought that Navasota was primed for “low-impact” tourism;
2. they wanted to improve Navasota’s image to potential visitors;
3. they wanted to create a sense of positive customer-service; and

4. they wanted to develop a deeper sense of community pride.

Navasota Insights

Following the initial meetings, the committee, the mayor, and the city manager continued to meet with Dr. Tarlow to develop a plan that would accomplish their vision. After a basic assessment of the city, the committee members determined that several issues needed to be addressed. They thought the city could improve its image. They believed there was poor marketing of the positive aspects of the city. There was a lack of vision for future growth, and several downtown businesses were closing. On the positive side, the City of Navasota sits in an ideal location and has the potential for growth and expansion. However, potential growth can often be a mixed blessing. If the city doesn’t have a plan, the uncontrolled growth could result in more problems

than solutions. If Navasota is able to develop a plan of action, its geographic location can be used as an asset in ways that can help ensure that the city develops in a positive and dynamic manner.

The Plan

To assist the city in reaching its goals, the committee adopted the following plan of action under the direction of Dr. Tarlow. The projects would extend over the course of a year and include the following:

1. **Tourism Assessment** – The purpose of this assessment is to create a baseline of the city's strengths and weaknesses. What does Navasota have? What is it missing? What problems does it face? What assets can it develop? After much discussion, it was decided that Dr. Tarlow should perform both a formal and informal assessment; thus, he goes to Navasota at non-specified times and often arrives unannounced.
2. **Staff Development** – A training course for Navasota's first responders (police, fire, and rescue) and other city employees was developed. These are the people who often come in contact with visitors and are a necessary part of any growth in festivals or low-impact tourism. It is also essential that all city employees be on the same page and know who their colleagues are. Joint training encouraged cross-agency conversations and improved working relationships across city departments.
3. **Citizens' Customer Service Training** – This course was intended for any businesses, citizens, and city employees who wanted to participate. The goal was to make citizens and merchants aware of the value of customer service and how positive

customer service can translate into economic prosperity. Two sessions were held in one day, and 69 participants representing 26 businesses in town attended. The day was a great success. The participants were enthusiastic, and many were disappointed that the sessions did not last longer. Each business represented received a sticker for its window certifying it as "Customer Friendly." A second day is already scheduled due to the demand of businesses that were unable to attend.

4. **Community Meetings** – Discussions are being held throughout the year on how to improve Navasota's festivals and special events. The goal is to seek ways to increase both attendance and profits from regional events and festivals, especially the "blues" festival.
5. **Marketing Navasota** – Discussions are held periodically on promoting and marketing Navasota to potential visitors. The economic development director meets weekly with merchants and interested citizens to develop ways to increase positive exposure of the city's events and festivals.

Changes in Progress

Because the project is only a few months old, it is impossible to judge its overall success at this stage of the game. A few things, however, are already apparent. The training sessions for the city workers were more successful than anticipated. The city employees were willing to listen and to share frustrations. They came to realize that often there are no easy answers, but that no matter what their frustrations may be, a lack of good customer service doesn't make things better; it makes them worse. The local businesses and merchants that par-

ticipated in the community meetings seemed to believe that they were a part of the solution, as evidenced by their contributions to the citywide events taking place.

On October 31, 2006, the Navasota police department hosted "Treats on the Streets." More than 40 local businesses and organizations set up booths along Washington Avenue to give children a safe alternative to "trick-or-treating." Representatives from two Bryan-College Station radio stations were present throughout the evening, and both provided positive media coverage for Navasota. The police department staff directed traffic, assisted pedestrians, and visited with the crowd. Fire department personnel gave away candy and walked the streets assisting families. Many other city employees (all departments were represented) built and manned the haunted council chambers. Other employees assisted with parking, traffic control, and helping children as needed. The citizens were extremely complimentary of the city staffers and the assistance they provided on a volunteer basis.

During the holiday season, the chamber of commerce held its annual Lighted Christmas Parade, which had more float entries than ever before. Once again, city personnel were out in full force, and there was more participation from businesses than in previous years. This type of community spirit is the first ingredient of good customer service. It also appears that the notion of public officials leading by example paid off, at least in these two instances.

In addition to these events, city staff members have increased their visibility to the public, the city has received a lot of positive media coverage, the city council has been able to improve zoning and subdivision ordinances, the city has stronger relations

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Small Cities' Corner

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with the chamber of commerce, and an economic development director for the city was hired.

City Manager Brad Stafford said, "The basic concept of 'be part of the solution rather than the problem' is a major step forward for any city. Navasota has begun its journey, by deciding where it wants to go, and developing an action plan for getting there."



The "blue ribbon" committee is only the nucleus of the change that is occurring. The members represent many diverse occupations, they have different levels of education and income, and they represent newcomers to town and established residents alike. Nevertheless, the key characteristic they all seem to have in common is the passion to get involved and to see the positive changes they have outlined for the city take place.

Where does the city go from here? City leaders continue to involve the citizens and business-owners in the overall vision. They are still working on the marketing plan, they have enhanced the planning for their festivals, and they are attracting new businesses and quality residential construction. They are escalating downtown revitalization and community beautification projects. They have accepted the "Challenge to Change." ★