

## Navasota: A Texas Success Story

By Dr. Peter Tarlow, Founder and President, Tourism and More, College Station

With **Brad Stafford**, City Manager, Navasota; and **Rory Gesch**, Interim Superintendent, Navasota Independent School District

The City of Navasota has come a long way in a few short years. Even a short visit to Navasota shows that in this down economy, concerned citizens and caring leadership can come together to turn a city around. As recently as five or six years ago, many saw Navasota as a place to make a pit stop, at best. Its downtown was dying, its people had given up hope, and its schools were failing. Now, due to hard work and a concerted effort by citizens and local leadership, Navasota has produced a model that is a beacon of light for smaller Texas cities across the state.

### Navasota—the Last Five Years

As noted above, Navasota was a city beset with problems merely five years ago. Its customer service was lacking, the city was poorly kept and beset by racial tensions, its schools were seen as substandard, and its school district faculty was demoralized. More than anything, however, the many people of Navasota had simply given up on their city. The city suffered from lack of community self-esteem and a mindset of “not.” Navasota was a place that lived in the past, where problems never seem to leave, and anger became inter-generational.

### Three Years Ago

About three years ago, Navasota City Manager Brad Stafford and Dr. Peter Tarlow of Tourism and More met to see if something could be done to change not only Navasota's image, but also its economy. Stafford and Tarlow quickly developed a model for Navasota based on principles.

A blue ribbon committee would be established from a cross-section of the city's population, and the committee would be independent of city government. Navasota's city government tasked the committee with the goals of helping Navasota to choose a direction that would appeal to the majority of its citizens. The committee was to work closely with city government, but not be held to city government. The city manager and mayor chose the initial committee members, who were then encouraged to incorporate other interested community members. The Navasota Blue Ribbon Committee (NBRC) sought out citizens who had complaints and emphasized the fact that committee members were expected to work. Committee meetings were held in the presence of Dr. Tarlow, who assumed the role of both

facilitator and father figure, helping the committee to stay on track and holding committee members accountable.

The NBRC's initial work consisted of:

- Identification of community goals;
- Identifying Navasota's challenges and strengths; and
- Developing positive thinking methodologies so as to permit creative problem solving.

The committee made the decision that this was to be a long-term project of at least one year and possibly three to five years. It also understood that not every problem would be solved immediately and that there was a great need for prioritization. It also came to the realization that it would need to establish close cooperation with the Navasota Independent School District if the city hoped to attract middle- and upper-income families. After some debate, the NBRC decided that its first priority was customer service. Rather than criticize local merchants, a customer service course was developed and was first mandated by the city manager for all city employees. The four-hour course created enough community buzz that local merchants became interested. The merchant's course was offered on the Monday prior to Thanksgiving. Once again, the emphasis was on a sense of community, and the course was given in such a way as to show a direct relationship between good customer service and improved sales. At the same time, the town's mayor and city manager joined Dr. Tarlow in visiting every Navasota merchant, listening to complaints and asking each merchant for advice.

While listening was an essential component of Navasota's search for renewal, the committee soon realized that a wide range of data was needed. The guiding principle was that, rather than take a defensive posture, Navasota would identify problems, bring them into the sunlight, and fix them. Tarlow sent an upper-class, mixed-racial couple to every store in Navasota to act as mystery shoppers and to determine if Navasota had a racial problem. The committee's findings were provided to the public at a town meeting. To ensure full attendance, the Navasota Police Department went door to door speaking to citizens and encouraging them to attend the town meeting.

On the next page is a partial listing of the committee's accomplishments during the last three years:



# Small Cities' Corner

(continued from page 7)

- Filled downtown buildings with new stores and restaurants
- Opened new hotels in the city
- Increased opportunities to hear live music downtown
- Constructed a new municipal building, including associated streetscapes, with a planned completion in spring 2011
- Involved citizens, who now realize that problems brought to the city's attention will be dealt with in the fairest and most efficient manner possible
- Developed an ethnic sensitivity course so that people of all races, creeds, and nationalities will feel welcome
- Developed joint training of NISD and Navasota city employees so that employees of both entities not only know each other, but also know how to work together

Over the last five years, Navasota has made a complete turn-around with multiple accomplishments, from its new football stadium to its Blues Festival, from being accepted by the Texas Historical Commission into its Visionaries In Preservation (VIP) program to downtown beautification.

These accomplishments, which have not come easily, are based on the following principles:

1. Navasota allowed an outsider to act as a "town dad" who demanded excellence while exhibiting fatherly love.
2. Navasota developed good problem-solving techniques.
3. Navasota decided to put its negative image behind it and chose to accentuate the positive.
4. Navasota realized that it would have to work with Dr. Tarlow with a limited budget; therefore, in an effort to cut costs, its citizens have accomplished much of the work.
5. Navasota came to realize that either it controlled change or change would control it.
6. Navasota citizens decided that they wanted to leave a better city for their descendents.

If you would like to learn more about the Navasota miracle, please contact Navasota City Manager Brad Stafford at [bstafford@navasotatx.gov](mailto:bstafford@navasotatx.gov). ★

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