

The importance of voting based on areas of concerns was discussed. A membership drive is underway as numbers are important in maintaining retired school personnel issues in health care and retirement dividend calculations of the Teacher Retirement System. Retired school personnel are urged to contact a retired teacher for information on becoming a member. Visit [trta.org](http://trta.org) for all school retiree information.

Attending the meeting were Merle Kelso, Charlotte Jackson, Lee and Janet Wommack, Wanda Brewer, Brenda Hines, Leva Self, Margie Butler, Mary Lawhon, William Hood, Glenda Willis, Beth Prather, Merle Kelso, Ann Hamilton, Paul Gothard, Gerald Sandusky and Cristi Bagwell.

Walls to Build

by James M. Decker

My friend Lee Burton is a ranch manager in Albany. He’s also one of the most thoughtful people that I know, in all facets of his life. He spends as much time thinking about the restoration and renewal of rural communities as I do. Recently, he proposed this analogy and I’ve not been able to shake it from my mind.

I have long been inspired by the character and leadership of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. If you aren’t immediately familiar with the details, Nehemiah was a Jewish exile in Persia. While serving as cupbearer to the Persian king, Nehemiah heard from some travelers that Jerusalem was a wreck. The people who remained there were in trouble. The city wall was broken down, its gates burned by fire. Nehemiah was greatly troubled. After a lengthy period of mourning, fasting, and praying, he asked God for guidance on this situation. After a conversation with the king, Nehemiah departed with a mission to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.

Next came a sequence of events that would make action heroes blush. Nehemiah, a man with no engineering, military, or organizational training, arrived at Jerusalem and organized a rebuilding project. Numerous foreign tribes opposed the effort and attempted to stop the rebuilding with intimidation and threats of violence. Not to be deterred from the mission for which he had been called, Nehemiah pressed on. He stationed defenders along the project and the remaining men did all of their work with a shovel in one hand and a sword in the other hand. Within 52 days, the wall was rebuilt. Thereafter, Nehemiah worked with Ezra to repopulate the city and renew the faithfulness of the Jewish people.

There is much that I can say about the inspiration of Nehemiah, but today, the wall building is my focus. In those days, a city’s wall was something very important. A wall secured a city from invaders and other

threats. It provided its citizens with safety and an opportunity for prosperity. A city with a broken wall left its citizens exposed, their fates subject to the dangers and whims of the outside world. A city whose wall had been broken was a city in its last stages of life.

I’ve talked many times about the challenges that are faced by rural America in today’s world, but Lee put this into amazing perspective. Like Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah, rural America’s wall is broken. He’s right. Much like a city with a broken wall, rural America’s fate has been left to the dangers and whims of the outside world, whose people may or may not care about rural America.

Lee challenged all those who heard this idea to take Nehemiah’s lead and become rural America’s wall builders. Rural America may not need a physical wall, but it needs what the wall represented to ancient cities - an opportunity for its people to prosper. Our challenge may be great, but Nehemiah wasn’t exactly dealt a simple task. Despite lack of training, despite the threats and dangers he faced, Nehemiah rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem and helped restore its people.

Will you join us in rebuilding rural America’s wall?

*James Decker is a lawyer, farmer, and mayor in Stamford, and the creator of the forthcoming “West of 98” podcast and website. He may be contacted through Facebook at [facebook.com/james.decker](https://www.facebook.com/james.decker).*

USDA Partners with Texas A&M to help Veterans

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue recently announced a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Texas A&M’s AgriLife Extension Service to help military veterans obtain loans and pursue careers as farmers and ranchers. Secretary Perdue joined local dignitaries, members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and community leaders at the Dallas Farmers Market to unveil the new pilot program.

USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) is collaborating with AgriLife Extension Service on the pilot, which is part of the Texas A&M Battleground to Breaking Ground project. The program makes it easier for veterans to meet federal



**Impromptu Class Reunion!** Several members of the Bronte High School Class of 1980 met Saturday evening, June 2, 2018, at Zentner’s Daughter in San Angelo. Attending the gathering from the Class of 1980 were Russell Johnson, Mark Ball, Miles Brown, Don Hamilton, Kathy Ensor Griffin, Donnie Jackson, Bruce Snow, and Melinda Barrett McCutchen (not pictured). Joey Luckett from the Class of 1981 was also in attendance. The group enjoyed the evening and looks forward to their 40th reunion in early summer of 2020.

requirements to get FSA direct farm ownership loans, which can help provide access to land and capital.

“Veterans retiring from active duty face many challenges, and this effort provides them with hands-on training and financial planning to help them succeed as new farmers and ranchers,” said Secretary Perdue, who is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. “Through this pilot, veterans will learn how to build an agricultural business and how USDA can help them at every step of the way. We are committed to supporting veterans, whether they are starting or growing their farming or ranching operations. This is an important step in our efforts to strengthen the American economy and support our American heroes.”

The pilot program, which will include 15 to 18 veterans, will roll out in three phases: an introductory workshop, a business planning curriculum, and a production curriculum over a period of 12 to 18 months.

Typically, loan applicants must participate in the business operations of a farm for at least three years during a 10-year period. However, as part of this pilot program, participants can combine the certificate they receive with their military leadership or management experience to satisfy this requirement. According to the

U.S. Department of Labor, approximately 45 percent of armed service members are from rural America.

Pilot program applications will be accepted from interested veterans between June 15 and July 20, 2018, until 11 pm, central standard time. Apply online at <http://txagrability.tamu.edu/farm->

ranch. For more information about USDA programs, visit [newfarmers.usda.gov/veterans](https://www.farmers.gov) or <https://www.farmers.gov>.

To learn about other ways USDA is supporting veterans, visit <https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/veterans>, and watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OALqXHUU3w>.




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