

...Commissioners Court meeting minutes

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Commissioner Williams made a motion to give Judge Spain the authority to go forward with the Coke County Detention Center property contract and to determine signing this contract as long as it coincides with the guidelines that were established by the Commissioners. The motion, seconded by Commissioner Sefcik, carried.

A tentative date for a grievance committee meeting was set for Monday, August 12, 2019, at 5 pm, at the Coke County Courthouse in Robert Lee, Texas.

Judge Spain adjourned the meeting at 9:39 am.



Downtowns Alive

by James M. Decker

Last week, I began a discussion of vacant buildings. All of our communities have them, usually in larger numbers than we want. Some buildings have been vacant for years, maybe even decades. They stand as a remnant of a town's peak population many years ago or a once-powerful business or industry that packed up and left. Other vacancies are newer: an older business owner finally retired or a new business popped up but didn't make it. Our towns also have many vacant houses: the resident moved away or died and were simply

never replaced.

For better or worse, vacant buildings are something that new visitors often notice right off the bat, especially if they're located in business districts or high-traffic areas. For a long time, this was something I struggled with. I didn't *want* people to notice. Frankly, I hoped they wouldn't say anything about it. "Boy, your town has a lot of vacant buildings" can be a depressing statement to hear, even if it was simply meant as an observation and not a criticism.

But pretending that we don't have vacant buildings is like a youthful Kevin Bacon's character at the end of the 1978 classic "National Lampoon's Animal House," shouting "REMAIN CALM, ALL IS WELL!" as a massive crowd riots around him. You can pretend all you want, but it doesn't make it true. Our rural communities have vacant buildings and that's just reality. You can take it as a negative or you can see it as...opportunity. There are major cities all over the country that are booming, but struggling with a lack of available, affordable real estate (both commercial and residential). With low cost of living, low land prices, and a surplus of vacant buildings, the problem in our rural communities, if presented to the right people, might actually be a solution to someone else's problems.

Just because buildings are vacant doesn't mean they have to stay that way. In the 1970s, downtown Fort Worth was the epitome of "urban decay." DFW was growing, but towards the suburbs and away from Fort Worth's city center. Downtown was dilapidated and infested

with crime. In the late 1970s, a group of community leaders, the Bass brothers, decided to do something about it. Investing significant amounts of their own time, talent, and treasure, the Bass brothers turned downtown Fort Worth on its ear. Historic buildings were renovated. New buildings were built. Restaurants, nightlife, and tourist attractions moved in. Major corporations grew their existing presence or relocated to downtown office space. Today, Fort Worth's Sundance Square district is one of America's premiere examples of urban revitalization and was the model for downtown projects in other cities. There was nothing magic. It was simply a matter of community leaders developing a vision and investing in it.

Closer to home, do you remember downtown Abilene in the 1980s? When offices closed at 5 pm, downtown Abilene became a virtual ghost town. In a talk I heard several years ago, former Abilene mayor Gary McCaleb credited the restoration of the historic Paramount Theatre as the catalyst for the transformation of downtown Abilene. In 1986, the theatre was restored to the original glory of its construction in 1930. Not only did its massive marquee brighten up the downtown streets with its neon lights, but the Paramount gave a new purpose for people to visit downtown Abilene after 5 pm. The revitalization of downtown Abilene has been ongoing ever since (a reminder that these projects don't succeed overnight), but today, a visit to downtown Abilene offers a beautiful theatre, along with retailers, restaurants, and numerous cultural attractions.

You might observe that



Book Signing! Bronte High School graduate, Roma Johnson Holley, signs a copy of her book "Surviving the Storm Through the Wind of the Spirit: My Journey through Grief" for Susan Graves during a Meet and Greet held on Sunday, August 11, 2019, in Bronte.

Abilene and Fort Worth are both much larger in population than Stamford or a similar community where you read this essay. I'd also point out that our downtowns are smaller in size, and thus less expensive to renovate. You might point out that Abilene and Fort Worth have a larger pool of customers from which to draw business. I'd observe that businesses in those communities also have more competition for their customer dollars too. To some degree, it all evens out. The same lessons learned in downtown Fort Worth or Abilene can be applied in smaller communities.

It's time to embrace our vacant buildings. Let's be honest about them. Let's catalog them. Let's start to dream about what they might house in our community's future. Next week, I want to tell you about the restoration of two legendary Texas hotels in smaller communities, a sign that the sky truly is the limit in bringing our vacant buildings back to life.

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.

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