

City Business
Time to Fish or Cut Bait
by Michael Leamons

Due to Spring Break, the Council Meeting has been postponed until March 19th. As most know, the local economy is bucking strong headwinds. Vacant properties and “For Sale” signs abound. Hico Handrails recently closed, resulting in the loss of some good jobs. An area oilfield employer has, for the time being, shifted a substantial portion of his operations from Hico to South Texas. Enrollment at HISD has been declining, and staffing has been reduced.

To buck these headwinds, as has been reported, the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) worked with TEEX (Texas Engineering Extension Service of A&M) and local citizens to create an economic development plan. The plan provides an impressive array of economic statistics and identifies the three most promising local resources for economic development: Hico’s historic downtown buildings, City Park and the high traffic flows on Highways 281, 6 and 220.

When discussing these findings with one long-time resident, he indicated some twenty plus years ago another study had arrived at the same conclusion. So, is it fair to say the matter has been thoroughly studied? Wouldn’t more studies just be “beating a dead horse?” Knowing what needs to be done, it’s time for action---“time to fish or cut bait.”

The EDC’s plan for that action includes a timeline. It identifies specific, concrete steps for promoting economic development, here and now. One of those steps is to better develop and promote City Park to draw more visitors to town. Currently, Hico is not a tourist destination; rather, it is a place tourists pass through on their way to somewhere else. Generally, to qualify as a destination, a city needs to provide 2 hours of activities for every hour of a tourist’s drive time. A better developed Park could elevate Hico from pass-through to destination status.

The EDC plan calls for improvements to our Park’s RV campground. A local RV enthusiast is preparing a step-by-step plan for upgrading our facilities to attract campers. You’ve seen all the RVs parked outside of Stephenville, haven’t you? Doesn’t our Park offer a much more attractive setting? Why not improve our facilities and attract those and other RVers to Hico? Wouldn’t the grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants, downtown shops and special event venues all benefit from an RV clientele?

Park improvements will contribute not only to economic activity, but also to the general quality of life of Hico’s citizenry. Already, many residents make use of Pete’s Path, the playground and the pavilions. Special events and family reunions take advantage of our current facilities. With improvements, won’t even more find cause to enjoy our Park?

Mindful of the EDC’s park development plans, City staff began researching park grants only to discover the Legislature had eliminated all except the federally funded trail grants. As a trail grant application was being considered, the asking price for 3 acres of pecan bottom strategically located on the Bosque River between two different City-owned tracts was substantially reduced. Initially listed for \$119,000, when the City began to make its move, the price had dropped to \$78,500. After negotiations, the property was purchased for \$65,000 plus closing costs, for a total of just less than

\$70,000 and was wholly funded by the Pete Jenkins bequest. A grant has been applied for which, if secured, will enable the City to extend Pete's Path westward from the current trailhead, along the Bosque River, under Highway 281 and out to Ave B, allowing residents of southwestern Hico to access City Park without having to cross the highway.

Prior to committing to buy the property, the Council took into consideration the EDC's plans for park development as well as the opportunities to apply for a trail grant and to produce more income with the City's \$70,000. Interest rates have plummeted in recent years. At about 1/10% annual rate, the roughly \$70,000 used to purchase the property was drawing about \$70/year in interest. The property came with a 1999 model double-wide which the City is continuing to rent for about \$600/month or \$7,200/year. Naturally, depreciation, maintenance expenses and lost tax revenues need to be factored in, but even then, the income derived from rent will far exceed what was being earned in interest.

After considering all the angles, the Council decided to authorize the purchase. The deliberations and negotiations surrounding the purchase didn't receive as much publicity as most Council action has in recent years, but it can be counter-productive to publicize a real estate transaction before it is finalized. Had the City's interest in the property become a matter of public knowledge, another buyer might have shown up and started a bidding war.

May God bless the City of Hico.