

ACC/Bastrop: A Brief History of the Annexation Initiative and Alternatives Examined

History

The current initiative to bring Austin Community College (ACC) to Bastrop has its modern roots in discussions that began in February 2000 as a part of the **City of Bastrop's Comprehensive Plan** community forum. Participants in that forum expressed a need for "Locating a junior college campus in Bastrop for people who cannot get to Austin and need higher education opportunities."¹

One very important premise for subsequent efforts to identify such opportunities has been and remains to develop more affordable and accessible higher education resources in Bastrop County.

In 2003-04, officials with the Bastrop Economic Development Corporation (Bastrop EDC), the Bastrop Chamber of Commerce, Bastrop ISD, ACC, the Bastrop Education Fund, Texas State University and others came together as the **Bastrop Higher Education Project** to explore ways to provide residents of the Bastrop-area greater opportunities for participation and success in higher education. The **Project** conducted several surveys, including one of the community-at large to determine its interest in more higher education opportunities and related issues. The sample included 243 people who responded to the internet-based questionnaire; the majority of responses indicated an interest in having programs that address the first 2 years of college courses, continuing education/vocational courses, dual credit high school courses, and/or adult literacy courses. Many also indicated an interest in programs addressing the last 2 years of college courses or graduate courses. Respondents indicated that the biggest challenge to pursuing a higher education was "money/cost of attending college"; a majority of them indicated they would take advantage of an ACC Bastrop program and would support a tax to lower costs. As a part of this same study, the 2003-04 **Project** surveyed area businesses; a majority of the 36 business respondents indicated they experienced difficulties in hiring and suggested a variety of training needs in Bastrop, led by needs for computer literacy and software training and leadership and management skills.

Action to deal with the issues identified by the **Project** was ultimately postponed, in deference to the need at the time to address the overcrowding problems then facing the Bastrop school district.

In 2008, the City of Bastrop and the Bastrop EDC endorsed a study effort by an ad hoc group of citizens from Bastrop, Elgin, and Smithville to examine the need for and opportunities for additional higher education resources in Bastrop County. At about the same time, Bastrop County sponsored a planning effort by *The Bastrop County Citizens' Advisory Committee*, which published a report that concluded that the "...consistent support throughout the public input process for higher learning suggests the pursuit of joining ACC might be desirable."²

In late 2008, the work of the ad hoc group of Bastrop, Elgin and Smithville citizens led to the formation of the *Bastrop County Friends of Higher Education*, which group has pursued the annexation of the Bastrop, Elgin, and McDade ISD areas to the Austin Community College District. What would have been a countywide effort was abandoned when the leadership of the Smithville community indicated that they were not interested in pursuing annexation at this time. The City, the EDC, and several civic groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, endorsed the work of the Friends of Higher Education. Another year of study and community conversations then occurred

¹ **Bastrop Comprehensive Plan 2000-2020**, adopted by the Bastrop City Council, May 8, 2001.

² **Opportunity Bastrop County**, see:

http://www.co.bastrop.tx.us/ips/export/sites/bastrop/downloads/Opportunity_Bastrop_Revised.pdf

that led to a decision by the *Friends of Higher Education* to proceed to put the matter before the residents of Bastrop, Elgin, and McDade. In the Bastrop ISD area, the local *Friends of Higher Education* conducted a petition drive beginning in mid-November 2009 and extending through mid-February; this more recent “survey” yielded almost 2000 signatures of area residents interested in having an election on the question of joining the ACC district.

Even more recently (Spring 2010), the Bastrop Chamber of Commerce and Bastrop Economic Development Corporation completed a survey of area businesses to determine challenges and opportunities in the community that affect business expansion and retention decisions (i.e., the *BEAR Report*). One question asked the business audience about the weak points of doing business in Bastrop; *the single most frequently cited concern was about the quality and availability of a skilled workforce*. Another question asked the business owners/managers their opinion about the potential impact of more higher education opportunities in Bastrop; *all who responded to the question* said that ACC would be a great benefit to the workforce or community in general.

Alternatives

Universities

Over the course of the last decade, several avenues for creating more higher education opportunities have been examined, as have the various facets of the county’s need for these opportunities. First, with respect to 4-year universities, discussions were held, as reported in 2004 and again in June 2008, with senior officials of Texas State University in San Marcos, which school has been a favorite university destination for Bastrop students. These officials indicated a definite interest in offering the university’s standard distance-learning options, but indicated they were not in a position to invest in creating a campus to deliver on-site instruction. There was some indication of interest, though, in pursuing the question of offering upper division and/or graduate courses in Bastrop, if it developed that ACC created a suitable site with the appropriate infrastructure to support such programs.

More recently, Texas Tech University has also indicated an interest in serving the Bastrop area, but has indicated that it too would have to depend on a partnership with ACC to support any upper-division or graduate courses they might offer.

An ACC Out-of-District Option

With respect to 2-year schools, ACC is not only legally charged with serving the Bastrop area, it is also the “school of choice” for most of Bastrop County’s residents and recent graduates of Bastrop High School. Discussions have been ongoing with ACC, at least since 2003, concerning how the Bastrop area might obtain more accessible and affordable higher education services. Initial efforts were focused on expanding the Bastrop Center programs now offered at the high school. However, there are several issues that impair the ability to greatly expand the Center for the community at large. The Bastrop Center can offer only limited ACC programs and services - far less than would be available at an ACC Bastrop Campus. For example:

- The center must schedule classes outside high school operating hours. Adults needing day classes have no options in Bastrop.
- Many college courses and programs, particularly certain “workforce training programs” require specialized facilities or equipment not currently available in a high school setting.
- ACC Bastrop Center students have limited access to college science classes because of differing standards between high school and higher education facilities, fixtures, and equipment.
- Support services are limited due to staffing and space limitations, while noncredit options such as Continuing Education are absent.

For example, this coming Fall (2010), there are only five classes scheduled at the Bastrop High School site for the general public: [ENGL 2327 American Literature: Beginnings through Civil War](#); [GOVT 2305 United States Government](#); [HIST 1301 United States History I](#), [MATH 1332 College Mathematics](#); and [SPCH 1311 Introduction to Speech Communication](#) --- hardly the kind of curriculum that would enable one to complete a degree in a timely fashion, particularly since several of the courses are offered at conflicting times in the evenings.

Even if existing local facilities could be utilized for more ACC activity, such an alternative, alone, would not make these programs more affordable for those who would otherwise want to enroll. The out-of-district tuition rate, which is several times greater than the in-district rate would still be in force and would still be a deterrent for many.

Blinn College

Some who participated in the early discussions raised the question of inviting Blinn College to serve Bastrop, in lieu of ACC. If this were legally possible, which would require a change in state law, it was determined there were at least a couple of overriding issues that made such an alternative undesirable. First, ACC is already the “college of choice”, even though Blinn’s out-of-district tuition rates are lower than ACC’s; Bastrop is very much a part of the Greater Austin community and economy and students have already “voted with their feet” on this issue (Five times as many Bastrop County students attend ACC than do Blinn.). Additionally, there is little chance that Blinn would ever permit annexation; historically, it has maintained its governing district within Washington County.

Other Models

Other communities’ approaches were also examined. For example, In Taylor, Texas, which is situated in the Temple College service area (but not in the Temple College District), the City of Taylor, the Taylor Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and other area entities have worked, since 1997, to bring higher education to Taylor and the surrounding area³. The non-profit Temple College at Taylor (TCAT) Foundation and the community of Taylor entered into an agreement with Temple College to provide a facility for the college to use to conduct classes in downtown Taylor at an abandoned grocery store building. In 2003, additional space in the old grocery was renovated with assistance and money from the City of Taylor, the Taylor ISD, the community generally, and with grant funds from the federal Economic Development Administration and the Meadows Foundation. However, the community quickly outgrew this facility (approx. 30,000 sq. ft.) and in 2007-08 instituted plans to create a larger campus at the intersection of Loop Highway 79 and FM 973, at the southwestern edge of Taylor.

To develop the new campus, the City of Taylor had planned to underwrite the expense of extending utilities and several entities in the community, including the City, the Taylor ISD, and the Taylor EDC pledged financial contributions to pay for bonds to be issued for the Phase I improvements. This plan has yet to be realized, however, primarily because the bonds that the local contributions would have serviced have not been successfully marketed. As of July 2010, Temple College and the other higher education partners continue to operate from the grocery store building, while the community of Hutto has now made a bid to draw the Eastern Williamson County higher education enterprise to that community. Temple College is apparently unable, if not unwilling, to shoulder the facilities costs for centers outside its taxing district.

³ This information about the Taylor, Texas initiative is derived from a site visit and interview with Mr. Jason Ford, President/CEO of the Taylor Economic Development Corporation, conducted on December 18, 2008, and from follow-up contacts with Mr. Ford and others, as well as various news accounts.

Temple College students at the presently overcrowded Taylor facility also now pay a higher fee than do students who live in the Temple College district and a much higher charge than Bastrop students would pay ACC, if Bastrop were in the ACC district; Temple/Taylor students will pay \$1208 for 15 semester credit hours in the Fall of 2010, while in-district ACC students will pay \$870 - a significant difference. ACC's covenant with its in-district taxpayers is that it will not build facilities or charge in-district tuition to those, such as present-day Bastropians, who reside outside the district. It is also unlikely that either the City of Bastrop or Bastrop ISD would be able or willing to devote their tax funds to support a local college campus for such an option as Taylor or Hutto have proposed.

For-profit Schools

Some observers have suggested that private, for-profit trade schools are the appropriate remedy for Bastrop's workforce needs. It is not apparent that these companies, even if they would choose to locate in Bastrop, would meet the affordability test for most potential Bastrop-area students; it has been reported recently that the average annual tuition and fees for these schools is \$14,000, which is considerably more than ACC charges (or UT Austin or Texas A&M University, for that matter)⁴. Time Magazine also has a recent article about the business practices of the for-profit schools that is revealing and disturbing⁵.

Conclusion

Since the active exploration of higher education opportunities for Bastrop began in 2003-04, the need for affordable and accessible post-secondary education programs in Bastrop has grown as the costs of attending area colleges have increased. The average amount of tuition and fees for undergraduates at UT Austin, Texas State University, and Texas A&M University has increased by 64% at UT and by more than 80% at TSU and at Texas A&M during this time-period⁶. While tuition and fees for non-residents of the ACC district (including Bastrop County residents) have grown at a lesser rate than the average for these universities, they are nonetheless 50% greater than they were six years ago⁷. As one result, college enrollment rates for recent Bastrop High School graduates and for area residents, generally, remain lower than they might otherwise be.

These higher costs for Bastrop residents to attend area colleges have contributed to the fact that Bastrop's high school graduates are not going on to Texas colleges at rates anywhere near the State average or the rates for graduates of other area school districts, such as Austin ISD. Bastrop County residents, of all ages, are also not found enrolled in college at rates comparable to the state average or other Austin-area counties and Bastrop's overall educational attainment rates are similarly lower. *Bastrop has not realized its full economic potential as a result.*

Based on evidence reported here and elsewhere at this site⁸, joining the Austin Community College district presents a practical, affordable, and desirable opportunity to enhance higher education opportunities in Bastrop County, both in the near term as well as for the long run.

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⁴ See The New York Times, at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/business/14schools.html?src=me&ref=homepage>. And, see: http://www.trends-collegeboard.com/college_pricing/pdf/2009_Trends_College_Pricing.pdf

⁵ See Time Magazine at: <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2000160,00.html>

⁶ Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, at: <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/Reports/PDF/2010.PDF>
Rates of change in tuition and fees are calculated for the Fall 2003 to Fall 2009 time period.

⁷ Texas Association of Community Colleges, at: <http://www.tacc.org/tuitionfeesurvey.htm>

⁸ Bastrop County Friends of Higher Education, at: www.bastropcountyfhe.org/home