



WORKING PAPER

SUBJECT: How to Form a Friends of the Night Sky Group in the Texas Hill Country (or anywhere else)

PURPOSE: To briefly outline how the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky (BCFNS) was formed in order to suggest ways to transform a group of individual night sky advocates into an effective organization.

NOTE: The following thoughts are a summation of actual experiences of the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky (BCFNS), written one year and three months after its formation. It is hoped that others seeking to form a similar group might find these notes helpful. Every organization, of necessity, will be tailored to its local situation. There is no set, “one size fits all” way of organizing a night sky advocates’ group. The best organization is the one you get up and running while enthusiasm exists. Modifications and refinement can come later.

EVOLUTION OF AN ORGANIZATION:

In the Beginning. Approximately 15 years ago, one individual in Blanco (Night Sky Advocate #1) became interested in preserving the night skies. He began writing letters to the editor, articles for the local newspaper, and talking with members of the Blanco City Council. His efforts received a tremendous boost when, as a result of a series of Town Hall meetings sponsored by the Texas Historic Preservation Commission, night sky preservation emerged as one of the top two things residents wanted to preserve as the small community of Blanco continued to grow, the other being its rural character. Subsequently, night sky preservation was written into the City’s Historic Preservation Action Plan and the Comprehensive Master Plan.

Interested Others. Several other night sky advocates (NSAs) emerged (NSA # 2, 3, & 4) and, together, this informal group was able to convince a major service station chain (Stripes) to change out its aberrant outdoor lighting. This gave a boost to the whole issue as people began to see that change was possible, even when dealing with large corporations.

Chamber of Commerce Interest. The group engaged the Blanco Chamber of Commerce and began Blanco’s Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Night Sky Friendly Business Recognition

Program. The Chambers' primary motivation was to encourage the conditions for astro-tourism, thereby bringing tourists to Blanco to see the night sky, spend the night, and help the local economy.

City of Blanco Engagement. Work also began to revise the City's existing Outdoor Lighting Ordinance. Several code enforcement actions were pursued under Blanco's 2006 Outdoor Lighting Ordinance. The Blanco City Government initially took little interest in this effort, though this would dramatically change over time. In 2018, the Blanco City Council approved a comprehensive revision of its 2006 Outdoor Lighting Ordinance and the Blanco Historic Preservation Commission now has an official Night Sky Advisor. It should be noted that working in a small-town environment is completely different and probably much easier than setting up a similar organization in a big city as the bureaucracy is less and relationships more personal.

The Great Lull. Unfortunately, NSA #1 took a job overseas and, as there was no formal organization, NSAs #2, 3, & 4 became inactive for several years. The Chamber of Commerce's Night Sky Friendly Business Recognition Program went dormant. The momentum for night sky preservation was lost. The interest was there but no one stepped up to make things happen.

The Great Awakening. When NSA #1 returned to Blanco, he realized that he would not be able to continue on his own and determined that some sort of organization would be necessary to move forward. He was invited to give a night sky preservation talk at Blanco's Gem of the Hills Community Center. It was well attended, and he announced that he wanted to form an organization of night sky advocates to preserve the night skies we have and, through light pollution abatement, actually regain the darkness that had been lost over the last 75 years. Several of the attendees expressed interest in helping.

Brainstorming. A brainstorming meeting was held, and a Board of Directors was formed. The critical first decision was what the group was to call itself. Several Board members noted the success of various "Friends" groups such as the Friends of Blanco State Park, Friends of the Blanco Library, etc. So, the group became the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky. "Blanco County" was added to the name to indicate that this was to be a county-wide organization because it was recognized that the problem of light pollution was a county-wide problem (and indeed, an area-wide problem). Care was taken that the Board include individuals from throughout the county.

Organizational Details. Bylaws were written and adopted. A bank account was opened. Initial dues were collected. To encourage membership, it was decided that dues would be only \$20/year for an entire family group. Anyone joining after June would pay only \$10. Anyone joining in October, November, or December and paying the full \$20 dues would get credit for the entire next year.

The group established Board positions as President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

It was felt that it would be too costly and time consuming to immediately file for 501(c)3 status as a federally-recognized non-profit. Instead, the group filed as a Blanco County-recognized non-

profit. A short time later, it gained recognition as a State of Texas-recognized non-profit. However, as it lacked the 501(c)3 designation, it could not apply for most grants and any donations made to it would not be tax free.

A year into its existence, the group decided to pursue the 501(c)3 designation. A Board Member secured the pro bono assistance of an attorney. He advised that the group's bylaws had to be amended to add certain requirements for a 501(c)3. As of January 2020, this was an action in progress.

Branding. The group wanted to establish itself as a recognizable entity in Blanco County and determined to establish a strong, positive "brand." A logo was devised, and business cards ordered using it. Polo shirts were ordered with the logo embossed on them so members could be recognized at night sky preservation events. Nametags were designed with a modification of the logo. A tablecloth with the logo and organizational name was ordered to be used at night sky education events. The logo was used routinely on outgoing emails to draw attention to the organization's web site.



Communication. As the organization saw itself primarily as an educational group raising awareness of light pollution and night sky preservation, a means of getting the message out on a consistent basis was needed.

Facebook. One Board Member volunteered to start a Facebook Group, even though he had no prior experience with *Facebook* (this went very well). The *Facebook* page developed to having two or three "news" items each week. There were gleaned from various sources, one being a Google News feed with the key words "light pollution." The group came to view the *Facebook* page as its "newspaper." It also included organizational announcements and happenings. In a short period of time, *Facebook* followers climbed to almost 200.

Web Page. A Board Member volunteered to develop a comprehensive web page (www.blancocountynightsky.org). The web page came to encompass more than 25 tabs of information ranging from light pollution info to night sky fashions. The group came to view the web page as its “library.” In addition to information, however, the web page served as the membership portal whereby individuals could join the organization and pay their dues online. Provision was even made for them to set up regular annual dues payments, thus avoiding the hassle of remembering to renew each year.

Board Meetings. Regular Board Meetings were established with a set date, time, and location. A permanent notice of these was placed in the *Blanco County News*, the *Johnson City Record Courier*, and on the group’s web page. Reminders were put out on *Facebook* and via email.

Newspaper Articles. Care was taken to make personal contact with the editors of the local newspapers to facilitate publication of articles and photos of various BCFNS events and presentations. For consistency, one BCFNS member was designated to write the articles and cutlines.

PowerPoint Presentations. An important aspect of outreach to the community was developing a basic night sky PowerPoint presentation that could be tailored to various audiences. Experience showed that such a presentation was most effective if it was accompanied by a visual demonstration of good and bad outdoor lighting. Therefore, a stock of various types of lighting fixtures and bulbs was compiled and became a standard part of the presentations. Key to this was showing the advantageous effects of using flat bottomed LED bulbs with color temperatures of 3,000 Kelvin and lower.



Sister Organizations. Liaison was established with the International Dark Sky Association, the Texas Chapter of the International Dark Sky Association, and the Hill Country Alliance's Night Sky Team. Additionally, a relationship was developed with the Fredericksburg-based Hill Country Astronomers for their help with Star Parties. Collaboration with these sister organizations was one of the best moves made by the BCFNS in that information could be shared and more resources brought to bear on the common problem of light pollution and night sky preservation.

Kick-Off Party. A few months after formation, the group decided to host a Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky Kick-off Party. This was done at a Board Member's ranch halfway between Blanco and Johnson City (about 7 miles from each city) to encourage participation from both communities. The Hill Country Astronomers signed on to have a Star Party as part of the event. Attendees saw a short PowerPoint presentation on night sky preservation followed by a demonstration of good and bad outdoor lighting. Snacks and beverages were served. Tables were manned for attendees to sign up to be members and/or to volunteer for various projects.

As a result of the party and subsequent recruitment, the organization quickly grew to having 45 paid memberships and some 60 total members. Later, it was decided to send old style, snail mail thank you letters to each new member and to each renewing member.

Activities. In its first year of existence, the BCFNS conducted numerous events. Some of these were:

Night Sky Art and Photography Contest.

The contest was run at the Middle Schools in Blanco and Johnson City. Sixty art entries and one photograph were entered. Cash prizes were awarded. It was decided later that this would be an annual contest but for art only.



Night Sky Essay Contest. Although initially aimed at high school students in both Blanco and Johnson City, only Blanco High School ultimately participated. Cash prizes were awarded. The Blanco High School principal arranged for the BCFNS to talk to the entire 400-member student body (in four separate sessions) about night sky preservation. Support such as this from key school officials is key to getting the night sky preservation message out to students and will pay long term dividends.

Night Sky Song Contest. Local songwriters were challenged to write original songs about the night sky and donate their efforts to be included on a CD as a fund-raising effort for the BCFNS. The CD's name, *Deep in the Dark of Texas*™ was trademarked. Ultimately, 13 songs were included on the CD. A second contest and CD was planned for the following year.



Ken Frederick, who reports that he lives between Kendall and Fredericksburg, plays his original song, *Hill Country Night*, written and performed in defense of the night sky. The Nov. 22 event in the basement of Liz on the Square in Blanco drew more than 70 attendees. (Contributed photo)

Songwriters unite in support of Blanco's Night Skies

By Wayne Gosnell

Thirteen area songwriters gathered on Friday, Nov. 22 in the basement of Liz on the Square in Blanco to perform original songs for the "Deep in the Dark of Texas"™ songwriting contest, sponsored by the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky.

The more than 70 attendees were treated to a real "Blanco Happening" as the mostly local performers wowed the audience with song after original song extolling the virtues of the night sky or lamenting the light pollution that threatens it.

Performing their songs

were: Jim Geistfeld, *Starless Sky*; Chris Curbow, *Give Back the Sky*; Stacia Woods, *Dark Skies*; Melanie Van Aken, *Welcome in the Night*; Lina Hybner, *Always Look Up in the Stars*; Brenda Freed, *Dark Skies*; Rebecca Greathouse, *Night Sky Song*; Alan Cooper, *Prayer for the Night*; Stanton Rhyne, *The Artificial*; Dan Gilroy, *Look Up*; Nelson Broyal, *Stars Over Blanco Town*; and Ken Frederick, *Hill Country Night*. Caroline Welton, away at college, could not attend but sent her entry, *Stars Change*, via cell phone. Rebecca Henricks

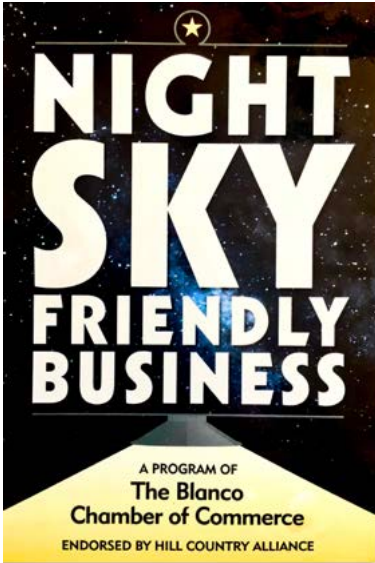
was also unable to attend but part of the group had previously heard her excellent song, *Dancing with the Stars*.

The Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky plans to compile the best of the songs onto a CD as a fund raiser. The CD, to be cut at the Los Senderos Recording Studio located between Blanco and Johnson City, will be entitled *Deep in the Dark of Texas*™, Vol 1.

More information of why and how to protect the night sky above Blanco County can be found at www.blancocountynightsky.org.

Night Sky Presentations. Presentations were made and booths were manned at numerous events throughout the year with BCFNS Board Members, dressed in their BCFNS polo shirts with logo nametags, participating. One BCFNS Board Member created the character, *Wizard of the Night Sky* to motivate others to help him protect the precious natural resource that is the night sky. The costume was subsequently modified to add stars, moons, etc. to make the Wizard less foreboding. He proved a hit with both kids and adults.

Night Sky Friendly Business Recognition Program. This program was revitalized in Blanco with a BCFNS member working it in cooperation with staff member of the Blanco Chamber of Commerce and with the Hill Country Alliance. A total of 24 businesses were quickly recognized with others in the offing. An exportable information package was put together to encourage other communities to set up similar programs.



Night Sky Friendly Neighborhood Program. Working with the Hill Country Alliance, this program was set up primarily to recognize developments outside municipal boundaries that agreed to include night sky provisions in their deed restrictions.



Member Involvement. One of the challenges of running a group of night sky advocates is keeping the general membership informed of activities, initiatives, and events. The BCFNS tries to produce a periodic Newsletter and Report to the Membership. However, as this is a volunteer organization, the newsletter appears sporadically. The organization does, however, have a General Membership Gathering and Star Party once a year.



Initiatives List. The group eventually found that it had so many things going on that it was necessary to build an Excel spreadsheet listing its numerous initiatives (including but more numerous than those articulated above). The spreadsheet captured key points of contact, commitments, and timelines and helped prevent things from falling through the cracks.

Cooperation with Local Government. Cooperation with the local governmental entities in the City of Blanco, the City of Johnson City, and the County Judge and Commissioners Court of Blanco County was essential. Additionally, the support of our Texas State Representative, Texas State Senator, and U.S. Congressman was sought. These relationships proved invaluable for securing support for the BCFNS's various initiatives.

International Dark Sky Community. The driving impetus for much of the group's activities was the desire for Blanco and Johnson City to be designated International Dark Sky Communities by the International Dark Sky Association. The Blanco Mayor, City Council, and Chamber of Commerce

jumped on the band wagon and supported this effort in numerous positive ways. The quest for this designation provided a focus for the group and soon became a recognized community goal. See: [International Dark Sky Communities](#)

Help for Others. The Board of Directors of the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky has offered the organization's assistance to any similarly minded group that wishes to form a Friends of the Night Sky-type organization. The BCFNS logo can be easily modified for use by other groups if they so choose. We can share details about business cards, polo shirts, tablecloths or anything else we have. In addition, any resource we have on our website to include the latest Night Sky PowerPoint presentation can be used with our blessing by anyone seeking to preserve the night sky anywhere in the world.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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[Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky Web Site](#)

[Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky Facebook Page](#)

[International Dark Sky Association](#)

[IDA: How to Start a Local Dark Skies Group](#)

[Hill Country Alliance/Night Skies](#)

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