



HOW TO START A FRIENDS OF THE NIGHT SKY ADVOCACY GROUP

HINT: T'AIN'T THAT HARD!

September 2020

An experiential presentation by the Blanco County (Texas) Friends of the Night Sky (BCFNS).
This is how we did it but there are endless variations on the theme and no one has a monopoly on good ideas!

CAVEATS

- No “One Size Fits All”
- The best organization for you is the one you get up and running while **enthusiasm** exists
 - Plenty of time to refine it later



TYPICAL SCENARIO

One or two night sky enthusiasts

- Astronomers or just folks who enjoy the night sky

Actions:

- Informal Coordination
- Letters to the Editor

Results:

- Little accomplished
- Abundant frustration

WHAT TO DO?



Organize!

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Meade



Organizational vs Individual Action

- More credibility with authorities
- More chance of attracting like-minded individuals in common cause
- Shared talent and resources
- Mutual support and encouragement

FIRST STEPS (Mental & Attitudinal)

- Take an Optimistic **Long View**
 - Patience pays
- Thicken your **Skin**
 - Tree Hugger or Protector of the Rural Environment?
- Sharpen your **Diplomatic Skills**
 - Be prepared to build **Coalitions**
 - Keep **Politics** out of it!
- Get **Smart** about night sky preservation

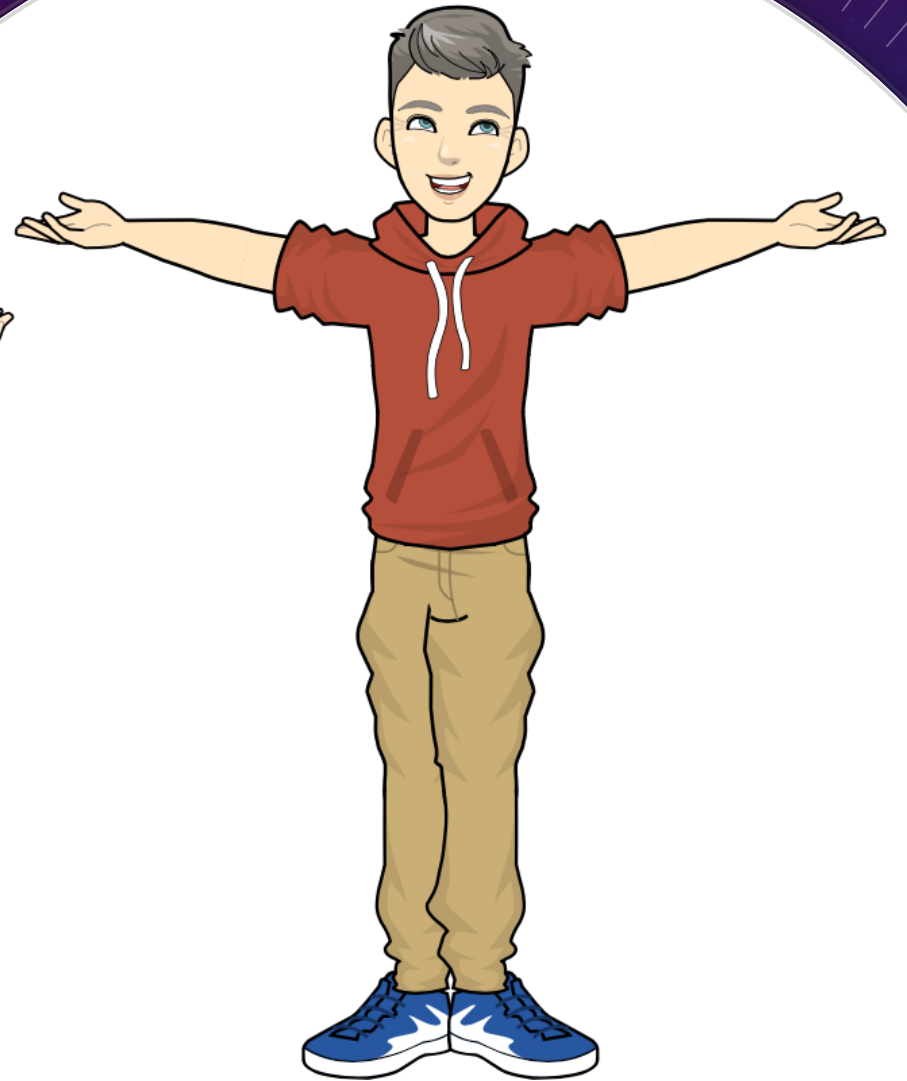


WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

- Critical question
 - Why should others care?
- Different audiences = **different motivations**
 - Motivated by: Health, Environment, Astronomy, Religion, Mysticism, Economics
 - Or a combination
- Don't assume all people share your motivation



SO, HOW DID
THE BLANCO
COUNTY
FRIENDS OF
THE NIGHT
SKY DO IT?



PLAN INITIAL PRESENTATION

- Assemble a PowerPoint **Presentation/Demonstration** on Night Sky Preservation and Light Pollution Abatement
- Get booked at a community venue
 - Announce that it will be of **two parts**:
 - Learn why the night sky should be preserved
 - Consider organizing a small group to work to do that
 - Make sure the **Press** is present or plan for a **Press Release** with photo

MAKE INITIAL PRESENTATION

- Make the **Presentation**
 - Don't overwhelm
 - Stay generic but but focused on the mission
 - Be entertaining and enthusiastic
- Conduct the **"So What Do You Think?"** Session Immediately
 - Let people sign up to learn more about how they can help
 - Announce a date, time, and location for organizational meeting...quickly
 - **Publicize** it!
 - Encourage those who signed up to spread the word
 - Follow-up with emails

ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING



Decide the group's mission

Draft a Mission Statement



Select a name for the group



Elect officers

Keep it simple



Decide about dues

Decide how to fund initial group operations



Brainstorm

A logo for the group
An initial group activity.

NEXT STEPS

- Go to the county clerk's office, get a **DBA** (Doing Business As), and register the group as a non-profit
- Get on the IRS website and get an **EIN** (Employer Identification Number)
 - Form SS-4, Non-Profit Tax ID
- Take both documents to the bank and open a bank **Checking Account**
 - Register at least two signatures
- Take both documents to the Post Office and get a **Post Office Box**
 - Register at least two signatures

ICING ON THE CAKE

- Go online to the Office of the State of Texas Secretary of State
 - Register as an “Unincorporated Nonprofit Association”
 - Obtain a Texas Sales Tax Certificate
- After these steps, you can say that you are a “registered non-profit with both the county and the state”
- Pursue becoming a federally-recognized 501(c)(3) non-profit later

501(c)(3)

- Federally-recognized non-profit status
 - **The Good:**
 - Enables contributions to be a possible tax write-off for the donors
 - Opens up grant opportunities
 - Enables Amazon Smile designation
 - Adds to organizational legitimacy and credibility
 - **The Bad:** Can be costly and time consuming
 - **The Ugly:** Hard to do so easy to procrastinate

AND THEN?

- Ask for two volunteers to draft a set of **By-Laws** including a refined **Mission Statement**
- Consider whether to/how to set up a **website, Facebook page,** and possibly **other social media**
- Plan an **initial event**
 - Keep it simple
 - Go for success!
 - Get publicity
- Brainstorm and innovate!

Mission Statement

- **One paragraph** to tell what the group does
- Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky Mission Statement:

*Our **mission** is to promote and encourage the preservation and protection of the Night Sky in Blanco County and beyond; to support communities, businesses, and organizations within Blanco County to obtain and sustain various Night Sky Friendly designations; and to provide education and information to citizens of Blanco County of all ages in support of long term night sky preservation and light pollution abatement.*

Basic Contacts

- All group officers should join:
 - The Hill Country Alliance (**HCA**) Night Sky Team
 - No dues...lots of information and help
 - The International Dark Sky Association (**IDA**)
 - \$35/year dues
 - Hook into the **Texas Chapter of the IDA**
 - Integrate into the network
 - Share ideas, challenges, and accomplishments

Other Essential Contacts

- Chamber of Commerce – **Key Ally**
- Newspaper Editor
- Schools
 - School Superintendent
 - Principals at every level
 - Science, English, and Art Teachers
- Political Contacts
 - Mayor and City Council Members
 - County Judge and County Commissioners
 - Texas State Representative
 - Texas State Senator

City Contacts: Details

- Mayor and City Council Members
- City Administrator and/or City Secretary
- Planning and Zoning Members
- City Utility Department
- Preservation Commission Members
 - Night Sky Advisor to the Historic Preservation Commission?

Other Contacts and Stakeholders

- Electrical Utility Co-op
 - PEC has designated a senior “Night Sky” official
- TxDOT
 - 1999 Texas statute
- Master Naturalists
- Other Local Civic Organizations
 - Rotary, Lions, Keep X Beautiful, etc.

Astronomical Partners

- Amateur Astronomical Organizations
 - Austin Astronomical Society
 - San Antonio Astronomical Association
 - San Antonio League of Sidewalk Astronomers
 - Hill Country Astronomers – BCFNS's **Key Partner**
 - **Star Parties** – big draw
 - Night Sky Preservation (sunset)
 - **Stellarium** Presentation (twilight)
 - Telescopes (night)

Dues

- Individual or Household Memberships?
- Simple or tiered
 - \$X/year; all the same
 - Or \$X for basic; \$XX for one level up; \$XXX for next level; etc.
- Length of Membership
 - X months from payment for each member?
 - 12 months from a certain date for all?
- BCFNS: \$20/year/household (cheap)
 - Renew in last quarter and be paid up thru the next year

LOGO

- Keep it simple and easily recognizable



LOGO DECISION:

- Leverage other groups or be unique?



BUILD THE BRAND

- Use the logo consistently and as often as possible



COMMUNICATIONS

- Webpage – the Group’s “Library” ...with news feed
- Facebook – the Group’s “Newspaper”
- Newsletters – Monthly update to members and interested others
- Newspapers – Letters to the Editor; Editorials; Event Publicity; Paid Ads
- Events – Direct communication to select audiences
- PowerPoint Presentation/Demonstration -- **Tailorable** to the audience

POWERPOINT PRESENTATION & DEMONSTRATION

- The Group's "**Bread and Butter**"
 - Must be able to tell why the night sky is worth protecting, how light pollution threatens it, and what can be done about it
 - Lots of presentations are available; can modify to own needs
- Best if also have a **physical demonstration** of good and bad lighting fixtures
 - Better still if audience can be "hands-on"

ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR THE STARS

- Event **Partners**
 - Cooperate with Local Astronomy Clubs for Star Parties
 - Chamber of Commerce Events
 - Hill Country Alliance Events
 - Texas IDA Events
- **Solo events:** County Fair; Market Days; School Events

EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES: Some Ideas

- Night Sky Art Contest
- Night Sky Essay Contest
- Night Sky Song Contest
- Night Sky Poetry Contest
- Information Booth at Chamber of Commerce Mixers
- Information Booth at County Fair

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES: More Ideas

- International Dark Sky Community Program – The “Golden Ring”
- Night Sky Friendly Business Recognition Program
- Night Sky Friendly Neighborhood Program
- Night Sky Friendly Contractors Program (in development with IDA)
- Outdoor Lighting Evaluations and Retrofits
 - Lighting Assessment Training (thank you, **Cindy!**)
 - Hotel Occupancy Tax (HOT) funds – special legislation

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES: Still More Ideas

- Sky Quality Meter (SQM) Monitoring of the Night Sky Darkness
 - Handheld SQM-L vs SQM
 - HCA's permanent SQMs to come
 - Real Ale in Blanco and Science Mill in Johnson City
- Bulb Exchange Program (under consideration)

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

- Focus on the Long-Term **Vision**
 - Light pollution abatement
 - We can do this in our lifetimes!
- Prioritize the **Mission** Requirements
 - “When you’re stomping on alligators, its hard to remember that the mission is to drain the swamp.”
- Anticipate Increased Organizational **Complexities**
 - Database
 - Bylaws
 - Policy & Procedures Manual



OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

- Fundraising:
 - Dues
 - Donations
 - Grants
 - Sales
- Communication:
 - Members
 - Stakeholders and Allies
 - General Public (Segmented)



OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

- Workload Distribution
 - Various levels of Expertise, Energy, Enthusiasm
 - The Board is the Organizational Keystone
 - Beware of **Burnout**
- Acquisition, Care, and Feeding of **Volunteers**
 - Training and follow-up on assignments
 - Volunteers are volunteers
- Plan for **Continuity**
 - Consider a Policy and Procedures Manual



ADDITIONAL HELP AND IDEAS

- The International Dark Sky Association (IDA)
 - www.darksky.org -- IDA is the nexus for the worldwide fight to save the night sky and has a ton of resources on its website
- The Hill Country Alliance
 - www.hillcountryalliance.org/NightSkies – lots of information focused exclusively on the night skies of the Texas Hill Country
- Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky
 - www.blancocountynightsky.org has lots of practical information
 - Anyone is free to use anything we have and we can even modify our logo to fit your organization if you choose to go that way



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