

I and several members of the city council, along with some city staffers just returned from the annual Texas Municipal League (TML) Conference. It was held in San Antonio this year, so luckily, we didn't have to drive very far. If you've ever been a part of any large professional association, you're familiar with these kinds of affairs. There's always a cavernous exhibit hall filled with vendors trying to sell everything related to your industry or profession.

At the TML exhibition, they had pot hole patches, playground equipment, street sweepers, garbage trucks, fire trucks, police cars, and traffic signal lights. And that's just scratching the surface. There were consultants and engineers for everything you could possibly need to run a city. It's like a gigantic indoor carnival midway spread over several acres, and the vendors are all trying to get your attention. One has to learn not to make eye contact with any of the vendors, otherwise they'll grab you like a fish in a gill net, and you'll never get free. They'll hook you with a wheel of fortune game, or a putting contest or lure you with gigantic bowls of bite-sized Snickers.

Sure, there are things that are interesting, new, exciting and worthwhile, and we owe it to our constituents to at least stay informed on all this stuff... so we trudge on through the giant maze in search of something that might be useful in our fair city. As we trudge, we fill the official exhibition shoulder bag full of stuff like cheap pens, key chains, stress balls, note pads, and of course, a few of those bite-sized Snickers. I have no idea when I'll use all those mini bottles of hand sanitizer, not to mention the combination mirror and nail file. When I got home, it seems the only things worth keeping were the Snickers. However, this year, I did procure a pretty decent bottle of hot sauce and a pizza cutter that might be useful. We suffer through it all just for you, folks.

To be fair, the exhibits are only a small part of the 3-day event. In reality, the biggest part of the conference consists of various workshop sessions that deal with specific problems that we as city officials all face. Things like finance issues, economic development, downtown revitalization, debt mechanisms, the Open Meetings Act, innovative land use options, and population density. The hottest topic though, was the outright war on cities that has been declared by the Texas Legislature. I wrote about that last year, and it's not getting any better.

They held the workshops 4 at a time concurrently, so you could have a choice of what session to attend based on your interests and needs. What I experienced was very enlightening and affirming. Several times, I found myself choosing a session, and finding out that we were pretty much doing the right things. This is particularly true in our approach to implementing our street and infrastructure maintenance plans. What I found out is that every single city, large or small, is virtually overwhelmed with the problems of deteriorating streets and infrastructure. It's not just us, folks.

What I find reassuring, is that unlike most cities, we at least have a plan, and you can visibly witness its effectiveness throughout the city. I know it's hard to believe for some of you, but we are way ahead of the curve if you compare our efforts to most cities in Texas. The bad news is that no matter how effective we are, the job will never be complete. Our city is very old, and was neglected for decades. The costs are extreme, and the problems are endemic. However, the neglect is over, and we will do the best we can with what we can afford.

I also found we are way ahead of the curve in our approach to economic development, city planning, uniform codes, and quality of life issues like population density, our parks system and parks planning, our Main Street program and downtown redevelopment.

Yeah, I enjoyed the Snickers, but what I enjoyed more was knowing that for the most part, we are doing the right things, and contrary to the opinions of some local curmudgeons, we are envied and admired by many people throughout the state.

Gosh I love this town!