

Listen, Get Educated and Participate in the Process



Lance Gormley is the host of a local program called *Harvey County Talk*; an HCDPodcast (Harvey County Digital Podcast) where he interviews local public figures and elected officials about important issues being discussed in the community. Lance received his undergraduate degree in Political Science from Wichita State University and will graduate with his Master's of Public Administration in May 2023. Lance recently completed an internship with the Newton City Commission where he was asked to do an extensive breakdown of the Newton City Utility Bill. This is one part of a five part series which was recently published in *The Newton Kansan*.

Most people seldom have the time to really dig into the things in their community that cause them grief. I am grateful I was able to have an internship through Wichita State University with the Newton City Commission. What I learned was more extensive than I originally expected. One would hope that change should be simple and quick, but it is just not that simple.

I consider myself a skeptical person and a critical thinker. This internship opened my eyes to the importance federal regulations have on local politics because the implementation falls directly on local elected officials. Compliance is not optional without paying penalties. Federal decisions do have a direct impact at local levels – seldom does federal funding follow. Local citizens are stuck with paying for improvements or penalties. During my internship, I worked directly with Newton city commissioners, the city manager and engineer, the finance director, and other staff. The focus area was the City Utility Bill, including Water, Sewer, Trash/Recycling, and the Water Treatment Facility. It was eye opening, and most Newtonians, and other utilities' customers for that matter, are completely unaware of the complexities of these enterprises. The main focus of this internship was to investigate and understand these entities and how they calculate the balance we see on our monthly city utility bill – just why/how we pay a specific dollar amount for utilities each month.

About two years ago, I filed and ran for Newton City Commission. One major topic of discussion was lowering utility rates, and it seems we are still having this discussion today. After doing my best to tackle this subject during my campaign, it became obvious to me most Newtonians were easily misled into believing that our current situation was being mishandled and that the city was anything but transparent with the situation. The truth is that we currently have a problem that needs to be addressed, and how we communicate on this issue as a community

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One thing that has come to the forefront in my experience is the lack of faith and trust in local government. No doubt, questionable decisions may have been made over the years. Commissioners come and go. Citizens are often perplexed and angry about things and need someone to blame, but it's rarely the current individuals on the commission that should be taking the fall.

I want to issue a challenge to citizens to do something. If you are frustrated with the possibility that a utility may raise rates, it's important to be educated and informed on the topic. One thing that has come to the forefront in my experience is the lack of faith and trust in local government. No doubt, questionable decisions may have been made over the years. Commissioners come and go. Citizens are often perplexed and angry about things and need someone to blame, but it's rarely the current individuals on the commission that should be taking the fall. Another issue I discovered, as it pertains to our utility bill, is that many Newtonians feel our situation is unique and that the city has done a poor job in handling our utilities. In my opinion, the problem is less about utility costs and more about a lack of faith in our local government. I would encourage all my friends and people who read this to take the time to inform themselves about what your local utility is doing and communicate your concerns. Talk to your governing body – and take time to listen to them – get educated about the issues – participate in the process.

will say a lot about what our future might hold. I was allowed unlimited access to city staff and information during my internship. They took the time to answer questions and gave me a tour of all their utility systems. We started with material readily available to all citizens – I was shown city records to verify the data.

I know it's easy to become frustrated and want someone to blame, but maybe it's just not always that simple. Commissioners, Board and Council members have a tough job, one that is definitely open to public scrutiny. However, it has been my experience that our city administrators have been nothing but transparent. While I was not really trying to verify city transparency on this issue, I found that not only was the staff transparent – they made considerable efforts to educate anyone interested. Even if there might be room for discussion about the decisions that have been made, there is no room to say the city hasn't been transparent.

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