

readers to vote early. Keep praying for rain.

Pastor Gary Karschner

P.S. In your youth, if you were paid by check and didn't have a bank account, what did you do? Just sayin'.....



**Recalibrating**

By James M. Decker

A few weeks ago, I unveiled my restatement of principles and ideals in my West of 98 project. If you have not read that essay prior to reading this one, I encourage you to do so. My idea has always been multifaceted. While this idea is borne in part out of my service as mayor of a rural town, it is not just about local government.

In the weeks to come, I am working to re-orient and re-organize the West of 98 website. I threw it together as a simple place to host my writing, with little thought to the descriptions and explanations on the site. I now realize I need to craft those with more care, so that a visitor who has never heard the name "James Decker" gets a better understanding of what this is all about.

I am also going to make my writing much more deliberate and focused. Have you ever read my writing from week to week and thought "does James just write about whatever pops into his head in a given moment?" You would sometimes be right. Some topics marinate in my mind for weeks or months, and a few of them have stewed for years. Other topics are reach inspiration when or slightly before I start typing.

As I wrote in another recent essay, I am working elsewhere in my life to devote more time and energy to my writing. I truly love to write. I will not say that I am "good" at it, but I am mediocre enough at it to persevere and keep improving. It takes a different level of commitment and practice to become a good writer. I do not aspire to just be some goober rambling incoherently about improving rural communities. I aspire to be skilled enough with my words that they reach as many people as they are supposed to reach over the years, be it in Stamford, across Texas, or elsewhere in our country or even around the world. Since I launched the West of 98 Substack site in 2020, my essays have been read in 42 states and 15 countries and on five continents. That is pretty cool.

activists, and intellectuals who profess to speak for rural America without darkening its door. And lest you think that I am targeting one group over another, I am not. This is distinctly intended as a bipartisan insult. Any number of eco-activists scream about preserving wide open spaces and placing limitations on the lives of rural people, but they always retreat to the comfort of their urban life. Some of the loudest voices preaching right now about "rural values" do so from the sanctimony of the ritziest ZIP codes in America and would not spend more than 30 minutes in rural America if their life depended on it.

Wendell Berry left a promising teaching gig at Columbia University in 1964 because he believed he could not fully advocate for rural America without doing that work on the land and in the place he cared about the most. An editor famously told him that if he left New York, he'd never be heard from again. Joke's on that editor.

I am no Wendell Berry, but I am not ignorant of the fact that I am here doing the work. My life in Stamford—serving as mayor, owning a business, and raising a family—has given me much less tolerance for those outside voices who have no personal stake in our future, whether they come from the right wing or the left wing. I am working to raise the profile of West of 98 so that I can do my best to make our perspectives heard by the political class.

With that intentional focus comes an attempt to organize my monthly writing. Roughly, each month I intend to devote one essay to agriculture and the economy, one essay to local culture, and one essay to local government. The fourth essay



**Crash!** An early morning vehicle accident happened on Monday, October 21, at the intersection of State Highway 158 and Humble Road west of Bronte. The semi truck was attempting a left hand turn on to Humble Rd when the Dodge pickup tried to pass. Two people were taken to the hospital by West Coke County EMS after being extracted by Bronte Volunteer Fire Department.

(and fifth, when a month falls accordingly) will be more of a "potpourri" topic that might cover something that doesn't fit neatly into one of the other categories. I am going to tag all my future essays with their specific topic, to make them more easily searched on my website. I will steadily work backwards and tag all my prior essays by category as well.

You might ask why I am not dedicating a monthly essay to the topic of "community." That's because it is all community. Community is a holistic term that encompasses the people, the place, and their institutions. Anyone who attempts to build "community" without building the rest of its institutions is just

creating a fake façade of events and activities that mask over a shell of a place with much deeper problems. You know at the end of "Blazing Saddles" when Sheriff Bart organizes a project to create a fake version of "Rock Ridge" with store fronts and nothing else, in order to distract Hedy Lamarr's outlaw gang? That is the essence of building "community" without strong local institutions.

I am also open to any suggestions or questions from my readership. If there is a

specific topic you are curious about or if you have a question you'd like me to address, please let me know! I am going to add a book review/recommendation tab so I can more thoroughly discuss the books and authors who inspire me so deeply.

I hate to talk about 2024 as if it is nearly done, but alas. We are over 3/4 of the way through with the year. I am going to use the rest of this year to ensure that my dreams for West of 98 come to fruition in 2025.

*(Continued on page 7)*

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