

Austin American-Statesman

Bastrop County nonprofit works to increase voter participation in low turnout area

Cameron Drummond - October 27, 2020

Increasing participation in the political process is at the heart of **Bastrop Interfaith's** mission as Election Day approaches.

A nonpartisan, multi-issue organization, Bastrop Interfaith is part of a larger organization called **Central Texas Interfaith**, which works to address public issues that affect members of different communities.

Made up of community institutions like churches, neighborhood associations and public school groups, Bastrop Interfaith pulls together community members to address common issues.

A large part of this effort, according to Edie Clark, a Bastrop County resident and leader with Bastrop Interfaith, is developing leaders within local communities so people have the skills and opportunities to engage with public officials about salient topics.

This year, that means informing as many county residents as possible about the issues at hand for the election, and where different local and state candidates stand on them.

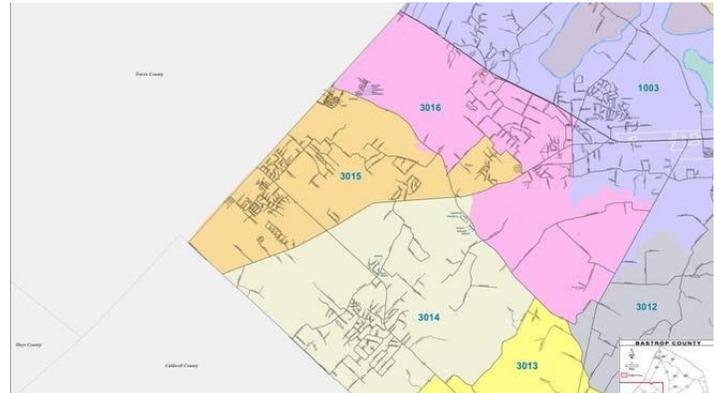
A Sunday afternoon "Get out the Vote" (GOTV) roundtable hosted by Bastrop Interfaith over Zoom allowed Clark and the organization the chance to have candidates respond to issues of importance to county residents.

"We're not going to endorse any candidates, but we think by having this public event that people can hear for themselves," Clark said prior to the event. "They can engage with the candidates and ask them questions and then people will be much better informed to know who they want to vote for, the candidates who will be most responsive to the needs of the community."

The event featured four candidates for local offices: Madeline Eden, a Democrat for state House District 17; Mike Renck, a Democrat for Bastrop County sheriff; and incumbent Molly McClure and challenger Gwendolyn Robinson for Bastrop school board Place 4.

State Rep. John Cyrier, the incumbent Republican state representative for House District 17, said he had a prior engagement and Bastrop Interfaith is pursuing a separate meeting with him.

Incumbent Republican Sheriff Maurice Cook was invited to the event but declined to participate.



Bastrop Interfaith is focusing its voter participation efforts in Precinct 3016. Courtesy Bastrop County

The hour-long event, presented in both English and Spanish, is part of Bastrop Interfaith's larger GOTV efforts ahead of Election Day. Clark said the larger Central Texas Interfaith has organized a non-partisan GOTV campaign throughout the entire region.

Low-propensity voters in 17 precincts across 10 counties in Central Texas are the target of this campaign, which will see about 200 leaders like Clark contact people by email, phone and text to provide them with information about how and why to vote.

This GOTV strategy revolves around "3 Ps" — personal relationships, pews and precincts.

Clark said the organization used mapping to look in detail at voter turnout in different Bastrop County precincts and chose Precinct 3015 to focus its GOTV campaign.

Pressed against the Travis County line in a rural part of southwestern Bastrop County, this precinct includes the Stony Point neighborhood and the Caldwell Road area.

Voter turnout averages between 47-50% in the precinct, which is also where several Bastrop Interfaith leaders and institutions like San Juan Diego Catholic Church reside.

"We're going to be specifically targeting low-propensity voters in a low-turnout precinct, so I think it will make quite a difference," Clark said. "I don't think other people are necessarily going after the voters that we are."

In the past, Bastrop Interfaith used block walks and in-person communication to reach residents about important issues. With close-contact interactions deemed unsafe during the coronavirus pandemic, contact lists of infrequent voters have been created and technology will be used to reach out to family, friends and neighbors about important topics.

On Sunday, Bastrop Interfaith will have a GOTV car parade leaving at 1 p.m. from Stony Point Park.

Flyers have also recently been passed out after mass during religious services in Stony Point with voting information, including locations and times.

Clark said for those residing in Precinct 3015, the closest early-voting location is the Cedar Creek United Methodist Church in Cedar Creek.

Clark said volunteer phone bankers will help call voters in the targeted precinct, and the organization should also benefit from not being affiliated with any specific political campaign.

"We always in our calls identify ourselves as part of one of the trusted institutions that they know, not a campaign. We're not representing any candidate or any campaign, but we just want to talk to you about voting," Clark said. "That way it builds a lot of trust and we're able to assist people. We can assist them with 'What do I need to vote? Where do I vote? Where's the nearest polling location?' Maybe even help getting there to vote."

Community issues

During Sunday's zoom, Clark listed five issues that Bastrop Interfaith is focusing on this election cycle: Access to health care, community safety, COVID-19 response, immigration reform and quality education for all.

These overarching topics were the driving force behind personal stories from Bastrop Interfaith leaders and members that were shared with the four candidates in attendance.

Stories described everything from the educational challenges associated with COVID-19 — specifically a lack of consistent internet access for children to complete online school assignments — to a lack of addiction, food insecurity and mental health resources to help residents deal with fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

A key theme each of these stories returned to was that these issues are often exacerbated in rural parts of Texas, such as southwestern Bastrop County and Precinct 3015.

"This is a community that's really been disproportionately affected by COVID," Clark said. "They're a rural and low income and very marginalized community. They're already impacted by a lot of things, and with COVID, a lot of people are hourly workers so they can't just stay home.

"On top of everything else they're trying to help their kids stay up in school when it's an area where there's just not access to fast and reliable and affordable internet or the technology you need to get on. It's just so many issues to deal with in this little community."

Choosing to highlight these daily challenges for residents harkens back to the way Bastrop Interfaith functioned before the pandemic.

Small group meetings, called house meetings, would take place, not specifically in houses, but anywhere organization members could gather to discuss issues that affected them.

"We bring people together just to listen and talk about what is keeping them up at night," Clark explained.

Past issues addressed by Bastrop Interfaith included shortening ambulance response times, reducing stray dogs near Stony Point and connecting the Stony Point neighborhood to sewage lines.

This allowed the organization to develop relationships with county government officials like Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape and County Commissioner Mark Meuth, although other relationships have proved harder to develop.

Bastrop Interfaith gained exposure in 2018 after organizing a community response to a "zero tolerance" traffic enforcement operation in heavily Hispanic western Bastrop County led by Cook.

After Cook initially denied request to meet with the group about the operation, Bastrop Interfaith leaders held a news conference outside San Juan Diego Catholic Church, with more than 60 people from the Stony Point neighborhood present, calling on the sheriff to meet with them.

Clark said this incident represents a level of distrust between community members and local government, something Bastrop Interfaith hopes to address with its GOTV efforts.

"There are the broken relationships with the county sheriff and the damaged trust the community has," Clark said. "We heard stories of people being afraid to drive to the food pantry for fear of being stopped. People afraid of reporting crimes. Women afraid to report domestic violence. If they're undocumented, [being] afraid they would be arrested or deported."

The relationship between Bastrop Interfaith, elected officials and the public doesn't end after the election.

Clark said this is when the work must continue to make actual progress on the issues addressed and prioritized by community members, something she hopes will already take effect through voting.

"We have some really good records, some data, from previous campaigns in Central Texas Interfaith and we see that the voters we contacted are more likely to vote than they are on the average in the counties," Clark said. "Everyone has a part to play. I just don't want them to feel hopeless. I want them to feel like 'Your vote matters and it's very important for you to be engaged in this process.'"