

My name is Sam Smith. I was Houston Audubon board president from 2019 to 2021. And when I was going to be president, I was very excited because 2019 was the 50th anniversary for Houston Audubon. And I was getting to chair that event and it was a great gala. We had a great time, but then COVID hit, and so I became the COVID president instead of the 50th anniversary president so that –

In the past with Houston Audubon, I was – chaired the Land Conservation Committee. I worked – Flo Hannah is really the one who really got me involved in Houston Audubon on doing volunteer things. And I got to meet Mr. Jim Winn at one of the hurricane cleanup parties in Boy Scout Woods, helping him with the chainsaw one day. I remember that very vividly because that's when I really started getting sucked in – or gotten involved with Houston Audubon and enjoyed the working on different sanctuaries and the things that Houston Audubon was trying to do.

First of all, Flo Hannah in her own way, she's just one of these people you wanted to be around. Flo was just a joy to be around. She's just easygoing, pleasant, smart. And I did a workday with her outside of Bolivar Flats where we planted 1,000 little sprigs of grass very patiently in the mud with her. And from the morning you got there until the lunch break, she's just a pleasant person to be around. And you could understand the vision of where she was trying to get with replenishing this area with the native plants. And you just say, hey, whatever that lady is doing, I want to be part of that. I want to be on her team because she's doing the right thing, and that's how I got involved.

I wasn't a big birder. My wife was a birder. She grew up in the Corpus Christi area and was a birder. And we would go on hikes, and I'd get bored at first when she would stop to look at the – what are you stopping to look at? “Well, there's this warbler, blah, blah, blah.” And slowly I became a birder in there. And when people asked, you know, I was a 40-something-year-old macho guy, right. “You're a birder?” Yeah, when you're out hiking, what are you doing? Just going from Point A to Point B? No, it's the journey. You got to stop, smell the roses, look at the birds, look at the butterflies. That's the joy of being out in nature. It's not just saying I hiked 10 miles today, and I made it from Point A to Point B. Really look around and enjoy it. And when you start doing that, you really appreciate the fact of how important the habitat is to everything we are as humans and mostly, of course, birds. And that's the main message I got from Flo Hannah was without the habitat, all this is moot. So reestablishing and preserving habitat was the main driver that got me involved in Houston Audubon.

Houston Audubon was fortunate to be bestowed a nice gift from Ms. McGovern to do a project on High Island. The challenge is what project do you do? So I did chair a group of people that came together. And we through four or five meetings put together a framework, which established needs, wants, desires of the High Island campus as a whole, and then we specifically talked about Smith Oaks. And it was an interesting process, difference of opinions. There was dissenting opinions from the groups, and we had to work at it pretty hard. And people had to check feelings and dust off and come back the next day and try again to establish where are we going with this? What are we trying to do?

And out of that came the vision of the canopy boardwalk and the design of the canopy boardwalk and the upgrade in the restroom facilities in the Smith Oak area. And what do you do with the pumphouse? Since 1988, I think people have been trying to figure out what do you do with the pumphouse? What do we do with the pumphouse? So we tried to incorporate all that

into a project in Smith Oaks. And then you had to match the balance of what you want to do with the money you have to do it with and the reality of the situation that not everything you would like to do fits in that budget.

And so we had to work through that process with aligning the designs of the canopy boardwalk with our budget because the first pass it was going to exceed our budget that we had to work with. So we had to rethink and refocus our attentions on how did we – I don't want to say trim the boardwalk but adjust the boardwalk design to match the budget, and Richard Gibbons was very helpful in that exercise. And in that process, we had to go through, recycle everything two or three times on what we're going to be able to do with the monies we had.

And the Smith Oaks project was also an eye-opening event for Houston Audubon because running an organization is one thing. But having a capital project and executing a capital project, the organization there was a lot of growing pains for the organization. How do you execute the project? How do you track the project? How do you manage the project? How do you meet expectations, both spoken and unspoken? And so it was a big learning curve for staff and the volunteers working on that.

But at the end, we were able to present Ms. McGovern a project that matched the budget that we had, and it turned out really nice. You can't argue with the results. There were some pain and suffering getting there along the way with every capital project. And there's some things left undone that we would like to do. But we made big strides on, of course, the boardwalk itself is lovely. The restrooms are nice. The pumphouse is still improved but unfinished for the next idea – folks with the next ideas to pick it up and move forward with it.

The pumphouse was – the property of Smith Oaks and the whole High Island was owned by the Amoco oil company, and the pumphouse was literally that. It was a building that had oil pumps with electric motors. I assume they were electric motors that would pump oil that was produced at High Island to the refineries and chemical plants in Port Arthur, Texas. There were pipelines along the ground, and they would cut across the country straight to the refineries in the Port Arthur area. And so literally, there were pumps in the pumphouse. As the oil was collected, it was pumped and that's why it's called the pumphouse.

Being the COVID president or the president at this time, because of technology, our board meetings started to evolve in different things. I remember the first board meeting we had where we had a telecoms phone in the center of the table. And we thought that was – we were just rock-n-roll really slick because at that time we did have some board members that were almost 70 miles away, 80 miles away distance-wise. And it gave them the ability to call in and participate in the board meeting but not being here. And so that was early on in 2018-17 when I was just a board member.

But when COVID hit, we were faced with we had to go virtual. We didn't – we had never – our bylaws were not set up for virtual meetings. We weren't set up with equipment for virtual meetings. And so we had to figure it out as we went with staff help and other people's knowledge. And we went from meeting in person to meeting completely 100 percent online. And the dynamics of a meeting is very different in person than it is online. As I like to say, when you're in a virtual meeting with the board, the louder voices become louder. The softer voices become softer.

And when you're chairing that meeting, you're really challenged with trying to maintain some camaraderie, some spirit of a board, and it becomes challenging. And it was challenging to get the softer voices to speak up, to call them out, not – by definition, most of the softer voices are introverts, and they don't want to participate. And having a Zoom meeting or a Teams meeting allows them to just be observers, but you need them to participate. So you have to call them out. You have to ask for their input, especially on a subject you know they know something about.

And so it required the president chairing the meeting, it required me to be very proactive in identifying people, calling them out, getting them to participate. Sometimes you leave the silence of the meeting, leave it open so somebody will fill the void so that people feel like they're participating, they're contributing. We still are virtually meeting, and it's still a struggle, especially for new members coming on the board, who haven't had a chance to just have a cup of coffee with you in the lobby before the meeting or talk after the meeting about what vacation are they going, have they seen any birds or what it is.

So it's still very much a challenge right now. And for future board members who, if you stay with the virtual meetings, to develop the relationships and maintain the relationships. The things you miss is during a meeting, somebody brings up a subject. You miss the lift of an eyebrow, a squirm in a seat. What are they saying? What do they know that they're not saying? And you've got to see them. Somehow on the screen you've got to be aware of what's going on and get that information out because everybody on the board contributes in some way. That's why they're on the board.

I think it was John Bartos and Ben Hulseby one time when they were talking to me about becoming president. I was like, "Oh, guys, I can't be president. I don't have a skillset like you guys have. You guys – an attorney and Ben being a very successful businessman that he is."

And they said, "No, no. Everybody contributes to the board in a different way." I came with a different skillset. I was a former little city councilman in the City of Spring Valley, so I had that little nuance going for me, an engineer. And it just so happened during the Smith Oaks project the boardwalk and everything we did on that project fit very nicely into my project management skills. Things I've done before in business fit very well. So the point being everybody contributes. But as the president, your job is trying to find a way to allow them to contribute because they are smart people. They're all smart people. They're all smarter than I am. And as a group, we're smarter than we are as individuals. And that's the frustration and the challenge of the virtual meeting is to continue to be a successful organization in a virtual world.

And the challenge too – and that's one of the reasons I thank you for making this video, is in that atmosphere trying to maintain institutional knowledge is very difficult. It's very difficult. There's things that I know that I need to make sure somebody else knows so that 10 years from now when somebody says, "Why did we do this?" you know why we did this. Why does the pumphouse look the way it is today? Well, because this is what we made the decisions two, three years ago.

And passing down that institutional knowledge in a virtual world is difficult for me. And I haven't figured out how, as an organization, we can protect the institutional knowledge of the board in the virtual world. It's something that we're going to have to work on very proactively to

maintain that. It's just not going to happen on its own. It just isn't going to happen. We have to be very proactive in seeking ways to share knowledge, document the knowledge.

You can write all this down on a piece of paper and put it in a book and put it on the shelf. But if nobody knows that the book is there, you've lost the knowledge. So in the short term, I think that's one of the challenges Houston Audubon has is maintaining their institutional knowledge of the last 10, 20, 30 years.

Well especially in today's political climate about diversity, inclusion. How do you do that? How do you reach out? And you can't force people to join you, right? You have to make them want to join you. We've been fortunate over the last couple of years. I didn't come up with the idea, and I can't remember who did. But our YPAC, our Young Professionals Advisory Council, has been amazing. They've just been hitting it out of the park. The things that the YPAC bring to the organization and the energy they bring is a great opportunity for the organization.

The YPAC over the years have had what's called Bird Week, which happens in September. And the programs they have have been hugely successful. I mean, my wife and I went out to one of the YPAC events in Sugarland. It was an organized bird tour. There was hundreds of people there because the YPAC put the energy out and said, "We're going to do this." And people were hungry for it, and so they all showed up to do it.

Trying to bridge the YPAC to the board itself and the organization is key to success. We've had some success. We had an opportunity to bring one of the YPAC-ers on the board. He's done great for us. He's Tony Dang. I'll mention him by name. He's been a great bridge to the YPAC to understanding and helping us. How do we do what we're talking about, bringing more younger people in, different diversity of people? He's helped that greatly. But he's also educated us in that a board meeting... It can be – the reason they call it a "bored meeting" is because sometimes it's boring. You're going over financials. You're dealing with HR issues. You're dealing with the business side of a non-profit. And that's not for every young person. That's not for everybody who's a good birder. Because you're a good birder doesn't mean you want to be on the board because it'll make you – sometimes you want to stick a pencil in your eye. *[Laughs]* It's just you have the business of the non-profit to deal with, and business is the business of it.

And so bringing people into our programs is important and the diversity of bringing them in. But bringing them into our board is also important, but it's a different type of person. It's a different type of expectation. And we're still working on that, on how do we bring the right person onto a board that wants to contribute in that environment and that would truly blossom in that arena, and we don't bring them on there and kill them, you know, put Round-Up on them because we've gone through this.

I've been involved in the nominating committee and bringing new board members on and you always go wisdom, wealth? What is it that you want from a new board member—a certain level of expertise? And when you start looking at younger people with different backgrounds than the oil and gas – most of us come from the oil and gas since we're in Houston. It's just a fact. You have to say is it a good match for them as an individual too? You can't lose sight of that because it is about people, and the worst thing you can do is ask somebody to be on the board and they accept. And it's just not a good fit for them and they're miserable for six years. We just don't want that as well.

So one of the questions that you might get asked when somebody says, “Hey, you want to be president of Houston Audubon?” what does being president of the board mean? And it’s a question that to each president is a little different. But when I became president of Audubon, one of the charges I took upon myself is when you’re president, you’re president of the organization, you’re president of the board. The executive director is the executive director of the organization. And so I took it as a challenge that, as board president, my job is to make the executive director as successful as possible. It’s a subservient leadership role that you’re taking on. Your job is to help the board be a successful project and make the staff and the executive director a successful project, so it’s not about me. It’s about us bringing as a body our expertise and our knowledge from different business backgrounds to making the people that actually work here for a living and giving them the opportunity to be as successful as they can be. I think that’s important that people realize that when they join the board or they’re asked to be president that that’s the charge. In my mind at least that’s what the charge was.

During Bird Week in the interaction I’ve had with the YPAC, first of all, it’s surprising – not surprising. It’s just their very, very bright people with very bright ideas. And they’ve been able to do things without hardly any effort. “Well, we’re going to have a beer named after a bird.” Well, they go out and do it. And I would’ve thought, well, I’d have to have four or five committee meetings before just to figure out who we’d ask, and they’ve already got it done. So the efficiency of this group and maybe the inexperience of, well, you just go do it. You don’t ask for permission. The can-do attitude of the YPAC, I think, has been one of the most amazing things that have come out of it. They just have an idea and they go do it. No talk about it, no blue ribbon committee. No, just go do it.

And I think they’ve opened my eyes to sometimes we get bogged down in the process of trying to accomplish something instead of getting it done. And that energy level and that insight into, as we all get older, forgot that sometimes it’s just go do things. It’s OK. It’ll be OK. And if they try something and it doesn’t work, it’s all right. No harm, no foul. They just get it done. And in a week’s time they’ll engage thousands of people that otherwise Houston Audubon wouldn’t engage with. Like I said, their can-do attitude has just been very eye-opening to me.

When you meet people in general if you go to a bird festival outside of the Houston area like down in the Rio Grande Bird Festival and somebody says – they ask you, “What do you do?” And I say, well, I’m involved with Houston Audubon. And they say, “Oh, well, that’s nice.” And you can tell immediately that a lot of people don’t understand what Houston Audubon is or does. And when you share with people, well, Houston Audubon has 2,600 acres? That sound right? (*actually 4,120 acres*) A great deal of acreage under conservation easements or control or ownership, direct ownership of, it changes the conversation. And so Houston Audubon really is, I would say, a leader in the nation as far as I can tell from Audubon organizations in habitat preservation.

Everybody does good work. Everybody contributes in their way. But the fact that we’re in such a rich bird environment and we work with all our partner—between the Texas Parks and Wildlife, the US Fish and Wildlife Service—to preserve as much habitat as we possibly can is so important, especially with Houston becoming the third largest city in the United States. Very shortly it’ll be the third largest city. The habitat we have and we have to try to protect is definitely the main charge with Houston Audubon.

And the things that we've been able to do over the years and the additional acreage when we were able to finally close the BP land deal and put another 600 acres of High Island of permanent habitat preservation is a huge win. It's a huge win for everybody. And all the birders who come from around the world to High Island during the spring, some of them, I think, they miss the point about how hard Houston Audubon works to protect that habitat that everybody wants to come see. And it takes a lot of energy, a lot of positive energy to do that.

Why would you want to get involved with Houston Audubon? Why would anybody want to get involved with Houston Audubon? It's a fair question. It goes to the core of what are you doing with your life outside your professional life, for example? What's important to you? What do you care about? What do you find value in? You can join organizations right and left. But you have to kind of first like the organization and what their focus is. And you have to like the people and what they're trying to do.

The draw of Houston Audubon is you get people from different walks of life, different professional backgrounds. But when you're out there standing shoulder-to-shoulder after a hurricane repairing damage, hurricane damage, or trying to reestablish habitat in an area, there's a common bond that all job titles are left on the side of the road. All places in life are left on the side of the road. It's just a group of people that have come together for the common good of nature, birds, and people. And that's – if you're attracted to that thing, then you should be attracted to Houston Audubon.

One of the important things, one of the things that really attracted me to Houston Audubon as well and I've seen it many times is Houston Audubon always tries very hard to stay true to their mission statement. It's very easy for organizations to get dragged off into directions that isn't their core mission. But Houston Audubon has always in my experience has always come back to their core mission. Is this the right thing for the birds? Is this the right thing for habitat? Is it the right thing for the people that interface with the birds in the habitat? And 99 percent of the time, the answer is yes, yes, yes. And that's why I've been so glad to be part of Houston Audubon.

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