

**NELDA LUCE BLAIR**  
**Chair of The Woodlands Township**  
**natural-born and home-grown leader**  
by Richard Varr

Nelda Luce Blair is not a mayor, or even a councilmember, although she has many of the same responsibilities in her role as chairman of The Woodlands Township Board of Directors.

“The Woodlands Township is not a city at this time, yet our board operates much like a city council and my position functions somewhat like a mayor,” she admits. “For many people, it’s difficult to understand what we are if we’re not a city.”

“In fact, new Houston Mayor Annise Parker long ago decided to nickname me tsarina,” she adds with a laugh. “I’m not the tsarina,” Blair continues, “but if that’s what she wants to call me, then I’m very happy about that because we have a great relationship with Houston and look forward to having a good one with her administration as well.”

Blair, an energetic and outgoing attorney and community leader, has played a key role in The Woodlands’ transformation into self-governance – a historic process energized more than a decade ago and continuing on course to possible incorporation as a city in 2014.

“We can handle ourselves and be independent because we have the commercial and corporate base that a lot of communities our size don’t have,” Blair notes. “Quite frankly, that’s a great basis for some of our property taxes and sales taxes, and that’s why we can make it on our own.”

As board chairman, Blair leads an 11-member body, soon to become seven members, that sets policy and municipal responsibility for a township of about 100,000 people and 2,000 businesses. The board became The Woodlands’ central governing body on January 1, uniting a series of homeowner associations into the one township government – everything from employees to services – stripping homeowner associations of any governing power.

Under the board’s direction, the township provides municipal-type services, including fire department and EMS, waste disposal, and park and pathway maintenance. The township does not provide its own police force or road maintenance, instead contracting with the county. The board cannot create ordinances, but it can enforce covenants important to the community.

“We’ll be making policy just like governments do, and we’ll be where the buck stops when

something governmentally involved needs to be done,” Blair explains.

Through an agreement with Houston, the transformation also releases The Woodlands from Houston’s ETJ (Extraterritorial Jurisdiction). “So we’ll no longer be threatened or subject to annexation,” says Blair. “That’s what’s so unique. There’s never been an agreement in the history of Texas and maybe the U.S. wherein a community of 100,000 extracted itself from the ETJ of an adjoining city by agreement with that city.”

In addition to serving as the township’s board chair, Blair is also chairman of the Board of The Woodlands Convention & Visitors Bureau, on the University of Houston Board of Regents and a real estate attorney with her own law firm. So, what drives her to take on the extra responsibility to lead The Woodlands’ first centralized government body, a volunteer and non-paying position?

“This is my home. Montgomery County is where I was raised, where I’ve always lived, and with the way it has grown in the past few years, it’s pretty unusual to be a native of Montgomery County,” she points out. “So, I care greatly about the area. That may sound a little trite, but it’s absolutely true when it comes to why I do what I do for my community.”

“The growth has turned us basically into our own municipality, and it’s very, very exciting to be in a position to contribute to that growth and to what The Woodlands is becoming,” she adds. “I’m a lawyer by trade, a leader by trait – always have been. I’m very interested in politics. It was absolutely the right fit for me. It’s not an easy job, but it’s very exciting and worthwhile to The Woodlands right now.”

Although the fervor for self-governance started in the late 1990s, the actual transition started after voters in The Woodlands overwhelmingly approved the idea in November 2007. With the transition, the quality of life continues – so smooth, in fact, that the three-year transition period was reduced to two years.

“The transition was just something that happened, and few people even realized that it was happening. Everything remained so smooth – the same phone numbers, people they worked with and where to go for their services. The garbage pickup is still the same, and the parks still look good,” said Blair.

Self-governing has also created a feeling of independence.

“It arose really from the master planning and how well The Woodlands was put together,” Blair points out. “It’s not just a big residential suburb of Houston or a bedroom community

of people who live here and work in Houston. It's much more than that. There are so many opportunities for employment in The Woodlands – corporate headquarters too numerous to mention, commercial places, the town center and more than five million square feet of shopping, dining, hospitality and entertainment businesses.”

“It's almost like The Woodlands is a small city itself, next to a big metropolitan city that helps us develop on our own,” she adds. “It's not so much breaking away from Houston but saying we're grown up enough to have our own seat at the regional table. We want to be a partner with Houston and the surrounding cities and counties.”

Self-governance has helped The Woodlands create even more of its own identity, Blair points out.

“It's a pride not only with independence, but in how well The Woodlands has developed. It's a quality of life that's very difficult to describe until someone actually comes and experiences it.”

And, self-governing doesn't only mean electing representatives.

“You have to be able to pay for yourself and support yourself,” Blair continues. “You have to have enough in your community that people can look to their community for what they need – living, working, playing and having fun. And we do.”

The Woodlands, with its popular slogan, “Worlds Away, Minutes from Home,” is a case study of sorts, winning many national and even international awards for community development. Representatives of research groups, associations, municipal governments and special purpose districts have held conferences in The Woodlands to learn more about its unique system. Just in January, the International Economic Development Council held its Leadership Retreat at The Woodlands Resort, attended by 350 economic development professionals from all over the U.S., Canada and England.

“They ask: ‘how do you do this? How can we do this? How can we make our people excited? How can we make one government? How can we become a Woodlands?’ “It's very, very difficult to find the right combination, the perfect storm to make that happen. We have yet to see another one,” said Blair.

According to Nick Wolda, president of The Woodlands Convention and Visitors Bureau, two unique phenomena are happening. The first is what he calls reverse commuting – people coming to The Woodlands to work rather than going into Houston because of success with

corporate relocations.

“Whether they’re coming from Houston, Humble, Kingwood or Conroe, they’re coming to The Woodlands to work because of the relocations here over the last few years,” says Wolda.

Secondly, there’s a new generation of people born in The Woodlands that are going away to college and then coming back and starting their careers and families. “That is something brand new to us just within the last few years and something that is shaping our community,” adds Wolda.

So, what makes The Woodlands so appealing?

“The reasons people flock here, I think, are because of the variety of things there is to do and the natural beauty in the midst of all of this,” explains Blair, mentioning the “tremendous shopping” and the amount of choices for dining. “There are loads of activities for the kids, world champion golf courses for moms and dads, the waterway and boat cruises for grandparents and all ages,” she continues. “And, of course, we have the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, which is consistently one of the top five outdoor amphitheatres in the world.”

“The first and foremost thing people say, whether they’ve lived here 30 years or whether brand new to the area, is ‘you certainly have a lot of trees, and the trees are beautiful.’ That is our trademark, if you will – the number of trees that we’re able to keep, the number of corporate headquarters, fast food restaurants, million dollar homes and apartments behind those trees. It’s mind boggling when you get a peek into the forest,” she said.

“It’s very difficult to describe to people that you can have the harmony of nature with a downtown and a community of 100,000 people. They just can’t picture it until they see it,” Blair continues. “I think it’s the harmony with nature, our “woodlands,” that actually makes it so difficult to visualize and gives it such a uniqueness.”

The Woodlands CVB estimates more than 20 million people visit the Center area and expects over \$1.3 billion in retail sales this year. The CVB, in conjunction with the South Montgomery County Woodlands Chamber of Commerce, has a Visitor Services program and personally met over 82,000 people last year at two locations. Their information revealed visitors from 665 zip codes, all 50 states and 67 different countries.

“It’s amazing, when you look at our visitor reports on a map, how far people will come to visit The Woodlands,” says Blair.

In addition, cultural diversity is high, with 98 countries represented in about 35,000 households.

The township's budget amounts to \$78 million, with business generating over 50 percent of the revenue budget. The township charges a two percent sales tax on items where a state tax is charged. The budget includes contracting with Montgomery and Harris County for law enforcement services at a cost of \$7.5 million.

The Woodlands has 110 parks and is fully connected by 180 miles of pathways. Total development amounts to 28,000 acres, with 8,000 acres left to be developed. While there are an estimated 430,000 people living in Montgomery County today, some projections show grow to 700,000 within the next several years.

"Growth is coming to Montgomery County," says Wolda. "It depends on how that growth is managed."

Despite the hard work and her many jobs, Blair says serving on the township's board is very rewarding.

"We are really going somewhere right now," she points out. "Things are happening that are going to forge the future of The Woodlands and Montgomery County for many years to come. And to have a hand in that – particularly to be leading it – is amazing."