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SPI BIRDING CENTER OPENS

It is the last of the nine birding sites to open in the World Birding Center's network in the Rio Grande Valley. The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center opened its doors on Saturday, September 26, 2009. The site located just south of the Town of South Padre Island's Convention Center, may become one of the most visited centers among the WBC sites for several reasons. The SPI Center will benefit from the island's main industry; tourism, adding another attraction for the thousands that visit SPI

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Executive Summary

POSITIVE BUSINESS IS CONTAGIOUS— SPREAD THE NEWS!

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In today's economy, we all need to focus on the successes of our economy. All around us are innovative business methods and practices, quality in practical products and services. Sharing this news with you, the business leaders of the Rio Grande Valley, is the sole purpose of Valley Business Report. It's all about connecting business leaders from Mission to South Padre Island, Edinburg to Hidalgo.

Five years ago when I co-founded the original Business Times of the Rio Grande Valley, my plan was to provide a means for companies in our four-county area to trade with one another. That's still my purpose today as co-owner of Valley Business

Report and later this month, we will bring to you an online version of the publication with new stories daily. Our website, www.valleybusinessreport.com, will be your home for local business news. At the click of your mouse, you can stay informed of top news stories and sponsors receive multimedia exposure through the print and online version of your publication.

My partner, Kevin Knoch and I believe wholeheartedly in the Rio Grande Valley's resilience to survive and succeed during these less-than-perfect economic times. Our team is dedicated to bringing a multimedia business journal to your mailbox and computer that shares positive economic news encouraging leaders throughout the Rio Grande Valley to trade locally.

Monthly in print and daily on the web, our team of professional writers will keep you informed of business growth articles and insight into our commercial future. We will feature successful or-

ganizations and ventures while highlighting local successful leaders. Our mission is to recognize those responsible for our market's progress and stability, especially during challenging economic times. Progress begins with the right attitude which is the beginning to positive action. Success comes from executing that plan.

Yes, we all have room for improvement and there's a lot of work to be done. Together, we can prove to ourselves, our associates and our country that the Rio Grande Valley is alive and well. We are a tough people. We at Valley Business Report are proud to be your total business source.

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Todd Breland
General Manager
Valley Business Report

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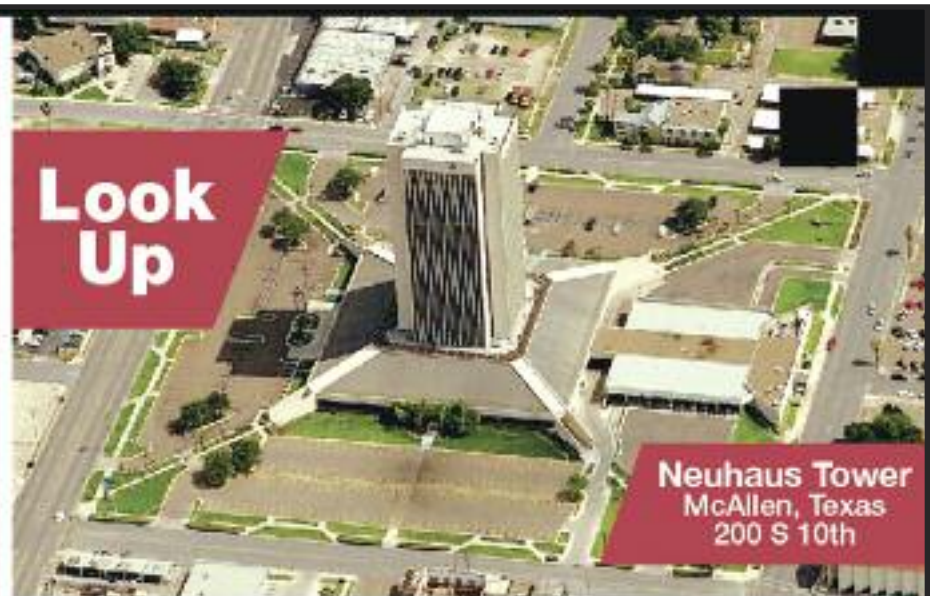
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Cover photo taken at SPI Birding Center grand opening by Sharon Campbell, Valley Business Report.

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Philosophy

We are a pro-business publication committed to reporting business news concerning the Rio Grande Valley's business community. We will strive to create a forum in which business leaders can exchange ideas and information; to providing in-depth perspectives on business trends affecting the community's economy. Our goal is to serve the interests of economic development in the Rio Grande Valley.

Our editorial philosophy is to cover local business news and to bring you relevant state, national, and international news that affects our region. Look for links on our Web Site at www.valleybusinessreport.com to business news and stories pertaining to the RGV from across the country, plus local everyday events and business news. Our print publication will present stories of interest about local business people, businesses, and issues of interest pertaining to our area.

Letters to the Editor

Valley Business Report welcomes letters to the editor. Letters should be e-mailed to editorial@valleybusinessreport.com with the subject line: Letter to the Editor. Letters endorsing or opposing political candidates will not be accepted. Please keep letters to 300 words or less and should include your full name and city of residence.

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Green News

TSTC, GREEN MOUNTAIN SOLAR ENERGY PROJECT

By Dave Ralph

A shiny new solar array at Texas State Technical College Harlingen will empower future graduates in modern careers thanks to a donation from Green Mountain Energy Company.

Professor Dr. Sarah Merrill, who submitted the grant application to Green Mountain, pulled the switch that enabled electricity gathered by an 861-square-foot solar array to supply up about 13,000 kilowatt hours per year to the college's Autobody Collision Technology Building. With "Let the Sunshine In" by The Fifth Dimension as a musical theme, the 60 large photovoltaic solar panels that convert sunlight into electricity became the focus of studies and research at TSTC.

"Green Mountain does a great job with public education about clean, pollution-free energy and it works with its customers to lower their electric costs," Dr. Merrill said. "Some of my students told me about this potential grant so I cannot take all the credit. It gives me a good feeling to know that I am doing what's best for the environment when I pay my electric bill."

College President Dr. Cesar Maldonado called her a "champion of the environment" and praised her for helping establish the partnership between TSTC and Green Mountain.

"Dr. Merrill, who teaches philosophy, serves as a role model for merging science and the arts," he said. "She has helped generate power for TSTC to do new things. The leadership of Green Mountain in 'the greening of America' is invaluable."

The \$88,000 grant for TSTC should save the college approximately \$300,000 on its electric

bills over the next 30 years. Funding came from the Big Texas Sun Club, a voluntary group of Green Mountain customers who promote solar energy. The TSTC solar array located at the intersection of Loop 499 and Raintree Street will offset almost 27,000 pounds of carbon dioxide per year. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas that is a leading cause of global warming.

"This solar energy system should motivate the public to learn more about renewable energy," said Vanessa Montelongo, a senior advisor for Green Mountain Energy. "Interest is growing in the newest solar and wind energy technology. Residential and commercial customers should do research and contact their energy supplier for rebates that are lowering the cost of renewable energy sources. Energy audits and discounts often are available for customers who choose alternative energy." For more information about Green Mountain Energy go to www.greenmountain.com.

TSTC Industrial-Manufacturing Division Director Adan Gutierrez said that Mechatronics Technology students already learn basic skills necessary to become wind and solar energy technicians. Technology programs throughout the TSTC System – which has campuses in Marshall, Waco, and West Texas are modifying curriculum and preparing students for careers in the wind



State Rep. Tara Rios Ybarra, Board of Regent Nora Castañeda, Mayor Chris Boswell, College President Dr. Cesar Maldonado, City Commissioner Larry Galbreath and state Rep. Eddie Lucio III helped celebrate the arrival of solar power to TSTC. (David Ralph)

and solar power fields.

SPI Go Green, which designs and installs energy systems, installed the solar energy equipment at TSTC. Company owner Gianluca Ferrario said that he worked on alternative energy in Europe before starting SPI Go Green in the Rio Grande Valley about a year ago. He expects steady growth in providing renewable energy for clients due to numerous state, federal and industry incentives, such as a discount he offers commercial customers on energy audits.

David Ralph is communication writer for Texas State Technical College Harlingen. He worked as city editor for the Valley Morning Star before joining TSTC



Green Mountain Energy Company mascot Super Earth poses with college, city, and Green Mountain Energy officials helped inaugurate the new solar energy project at TSTC.



New solar energy panels now provide electric power for the Autobody Collision Technology Building at TSTC.

Eco Tourism

SPI BIRDING & NATURE CENTER OPENING CELEBRATED

By Kevin Knoch

It is the last of the nine birding sites to open in the World Birding Center's (WBC) network in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center opened its doors on Saturday, September 26, 2009. The site located just south of the Town of South Padre Island's Convention Center, may become one of the most visited centers among the WBC sites for several reasons.

The SPI Center will benefit from the island's main industry; tourism, adding another attraction for the thousands that visit SPI year round for the beaches, Gulf of Mexico, and the Laguna Madre. The center will draw from the Island's various tourist sectors: locals, winter visitors, summer family vacationers, Mexican Nationals, and a growing number of nature tourists.

SPI has a distinct natural advantage when it comes to birds. The island is located on a migratory flyway for thousands of birds traveling south in the



The ribbon cutting ceremony included South Padre and State officials. From left, Alderman Sam Listi, Alderman Courtney Hayden, Mayor Robert Pinkerton, Jr., Senator Eddie Lucio, Representative Tara Rios, EDC President Richard Franke, Alderman JoAnn Evans, former mayor Peggy Trahan and others.



Large Herons are regular visitors to the wetlands of the SPI Birding Center. (Todd Breland)

late fall and north in the spring. The island lights are an attraction for travel weary birds that have journeyed long distances over water. The birding and nature center will also serve as magnet for birds because of the design of its habitat.

Bird watchers will have nearly a mile of boardwalk and a five story observation tower, to view a variety of birds. The boardwalk weaves through an eight acre area. A unique aspect of the center is it has both salt water and fresh water marsh areas, enhancing the diversity of the bird population. A second floor 4,500 square foot exhibit area and a gift shop are located at the center.

The WBC now stretches 120 miles from the bluffs in Roma overlooking the Rio Grande to the edge of the Laguna Madre. In between, WBC sites are located in the Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, which houses the WBC headquarters. The Edinburg Wetlands at 714 S. Longoria Road, Hidalgo's Old Pump House, McAllen's Quinta Mazatlan, and Estero Llano Grande State Park south of Weslaco are located in Hidalgo County.

In Cameron County, the WBC has a site at the Ramsey Nature Park along the Arroyo Colorado in Harlingen. Joined by the recently opened Resaca de la Palma State Park located just west of the Brownsville city limits off of State Highway 281.

The SPI site may be the last to open, but the idea

of a nature facility has been a desire of island officials for over a decade. Talk of how to combine the natural bird habitat of the isle, with tourism began to coalesce when the SPI Economic Development Corporation became interested in developing a birding center as a project.

SPI/EDC President Richard Franke could not pinpoint when the birding center took on project status. "I know we started talking about it a long time ago. We did a number of studies. We had other people assist us trying to figure out what to do with the project."

The long time island realtor continued, "Probably what pushed us over the edge to actually build the



The Birding Center has a well stocked store full of interesting bird related gifts. (S. Campbell)



The five-story observation tower at the SPI Birding and Nature Center will open early in the day during peak migration seasons for the area.

center was getting that \$1 million grant from Texas Parks and Wildlife. That was enough money along with what we were able to borrow based on sales tax revenue. All of sudden, the project became feasible. It started to come together and we began to receive donations and additional grants.”

Franke told how the size of the center grew, when an unanticipated seller approached the EDC. Originally, the facility was going to face Padre Boulevard right in front of the Laguna Madre Sewer Plant. The property size was roughly an acre and the center was designed to fit on the property with boardwalks wrapping around the main building.

Unexpectedly, an adjacent property owner offered seven acres to the EDC. The EDC board readily accepted the sellers price of \$585,000. “It was an extremely good price,” the EDC President related. “About half of the property was upland and half wetland area. Based on market conditions at that time, we didn’t dicker, we said yes, we want that.”

Asked about the economic impact of the birding and nature center when the project was designed, Franke stated, “It was hard to measure. If you compare this facility to a state park. Visitation at a center like this in the first year should be similar to opening a new state park.” Adding, “The number of people

would be 350,000 people the first year, and it should build from there. So those were the kind of numbers we used in putting our economic feasibility plan together.”

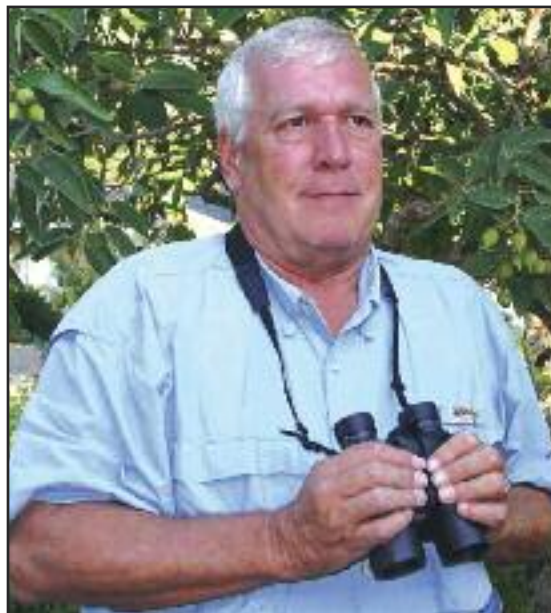
Can the SPI Birding and Nature Center approach those visitor numbers in its first year of operation? “We don’t know how that will play out, until we get it opened.” Franke thinks the attendance numbers are possible based on the quality of the facility. “It is quite a nice facility and there isn’t anything around here that can compare to the quality of the environment, the buildings, the exhibits, and the boardwalks. A real experience, very educational, and family orientated.”

Still the EDC did hedge their bet, making a very conservative income prediction for the center’s first year of operation. “The revenue estimate from entrance fees and the gift shop is \$330,000,” Franke explained. “We just don’t know if we will come up short or if that is a very conservative figure, until we get more into it.”

Admission is \$5.00 for adults, \$4.00 for seniors and \$2.00 for children. The center has automated admission machines that accept cash, credit and debit cards. Town officials want the facility opened everyday but the hours of operation will depend upon the time of the year. During peak migration periods the five story observation tower will open to the public early in the day.

David Dauphin is the acting chairman of the WBC and he is enthusiastic about the prospects of the SPI center. “We are excited about it.” Dauphin points out all of the WBC sites have something different to offer bird and habitat wise. “South Padre Island is going to be the shore birds, gulls, terns and the migrants that come across the Gulf. Species that

- story continued on page 8



David Dauphin, President of the World Birding Centers of the Rio Grande Valley. (courtesy)



Cate Ball, SPI Birding and Nature Center Manager, not only handles the day to day business of the center, she also coordinates all of the volunteers. (S. Campbell)

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other sites don't get. It will be a whole new group of birds. It is going to be a special place."

The WBC Chairman feels the Town of South Padre Island will be pleasantly surprised by the center's popularity. "I think the city is going to be amazed at how many birders already come there, that they just take for granted. They have never had a method of counting them before." Dauphin added he would not be surprised if the SPI site draws the 300,000 plus the first year.

"This is fabulous! I'm amazed at the scope of birds that make their habitat here."

- East Texas visitor Carolyn Flores

Supporting the Dauphin' prediction is island visitor Carolyn Flores, who toured the center ten days prior to opening. Flores from the East Texas town of Big Sandy, wasn't faint in her praise. "This is fabulous! ... I'm amazed at the scope of birds that habitat

here." Asked if the center will be an attraction, and a draw? Flores answered succinctly, "Absolutely!"

The SPI Birding and Nature Center is managed by Cate Ball, who took the position in August of 2008. Previously, she had served as SPI's City Planner for nine years. Ball has been working at fever pitch getting the center ready for the late September opening.

It has been a one person job; Ball will be aided by two maintenance workers when the center opens its doors. The center will depend heavily on volunteers to man the gift shop and serve as guides for visitors. How many volunteers? Ball thinks she, "will never have enough."

United States Fish and Wildlife Marine Biologist Beau Hardegree had a lot to do with increasing the fresh water marsh area. "We were looking for a way to manage the numerous cattails in the area. The solution was to build a levee to control the water levels from the sewer plant. We control the amount of fresh water in the marsh and the cattail population as well," Hardegree related from his Corpus Christi office.

As for the opening, about a decade in the making, Ball declared, "We are looking forward to being open. I haven't heard anyone who hasn't thought the building

isn't magnificent. I will consider it a raving success if people see it and keep coming back and enjoy the programs we have developed."



Extensive and educational exhibits can be found throughout the SPI Birding and Nature Center, and many are interactive. (S. Campbell)

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Festival

RIO GRANDE VALLEY GOING WILD OVER WILLACY

Valley Business Report

It's the time of the year when the festival is held, that makes it unique among Rio Grande Valley celebrations. Staying away from the crowded Spring and Christmas holiday schedule, The Wild in Willacy Nature and Heritage Festival has established a niche for itself. The Raymondville based two day party goes off on the last weekend of October. The event this year starts on Friday, October 30th and runs all day Saturday, Oct. 31st at the Willacy County Fair Grounds in Raymondville.

Although Wild in Willacy has plenty of family style activities, like cook offs, live music, food booths with a variety of delicacies, and a ranch rodeo for entertainment, it is the "Nature" and "Heritage" in the name that has brought interest from beyond the Willacy County line. If you are interested wildlife and want to see what it looks like in Willacy County, then this is the festival for you.

One of the main features of Wild in Willacy is guided tours of area ranches for nature watching and field trips to distinctive county sites like the natural salt deposit lakes, west of Raymondville. New this year, is a Saturday morning trail ride into Raymondville, after an overnight at a local ranch. Trail riders will cook and camp out under the stars.

Billy Snyder, a landscaper, operates Mother Nature's Creation in Harlingen. Snyder has been the guide on many of the Wild in Willacy tours for the past several years. He will be involved in a modified schedule this year.

"This year, we are going to have four tours; two on Friday and two on Saturday. They are going to be early morning and evening tours. This isn't about birds as much as it is about wildlife and those are the best times to see them. We also concentrate on butterflies," Snyder stated.

It is a rare chance to see what is beyond those ranch gates you see from the highway Snyder says. "This is the opportunity to sign up, get into the van and drive in behind that gate. One of the tours is going to where the weekend cowboys are going to ride into the rodeo on Saturday. They are going to camp out Friday night, we are going out to that ranch for dinner with them and come in about dark, watching wildlife."

Snyder related one of his favorite tours is one where cowboys prepare a traditional ranch style breakfast for the visitors. Nearby are the sleeping quarters, authentic bunkhouses with long porches and chairs.

"Sometimes I have had people who really want to get into the woods and look for stuff. Then I have had tours where two vans full got out, ate and sat on those porches for four hours. Because all of the wildlife would come by....It was like a piece of heaven for them."

Elma Chavez serves as executive director of the Raymondville Chamber of Commerce and has been the force behind Wild in Willacy for eight of its ten years. Chavez feels the festival went through a growth spurt when it started to accent heritage a few years back, "When they go into a ranch not only are they seeing that particular species of butterfly or bird, they are also interested in the history of the ranch. Every ranch has a story....We learned a few years ago the history is important."

Wild in Willacy expects to draw over 5,000 people to this year's event. Besides the tours, the county fairgrounds will be buzzing. On Friday, many of the exhibits are geared for school children, Saturday the crowd grows. Admission \$5.00 for adults and \$2.00 for children 12 and under covers all of the




events.

Raymondville officials plan to do an economic impact study of what the two day event does for the community in dollars and cents in the near future. But what they already know is that Wild in Willacy draws visitors from Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and across the Rio Grande Valley during the last weekend in October every year.

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Transportation

ANZALDUAS BRIDGE AIMS TO RELIEVE CONGESTION

By Kevin Knoch

Just over a decade has passed since the United States issued a permit for its construction. The Anzalduas International Crossing will become the 10th span connecting the Rio Grande Valley with Mexico. The international artery is located just over three miles west of McAllen/Hidalgo/Reynosa International Bridge. The concept of a new bridge up river of downtown Hidalgo has been talked about for decades. Reality is here; the Anzalduas link is expected to open for traffic in late November or early December.

A joint effort by Mexico and the United States the bridge and infrastructure represents an investment of \$168 million according to the Mission Economic Development Authority. Partners in the venture on the U.S. side include the cities of McAllen, Mission and Hidalgo. Concessionaria del Anzalduas has been awarded a 30 year contract for the Mexican operation of the bridge.

The opening day ceremony may be a bi-national, star attended affair. Although arrangements aren't firm, McAllen officials have indicated that both Presidents of the United States and Mexico could be in attendance for the event. They would oversee the inauguration of the 2.7 mile long four lane vehicle structure, with accommodation for pedestrian crossing. Local officials hope to have the bridge open by the holiday shopping season.

"International bridges are intended to facilitate trade between Mexico and the United States," stated McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez. The Mayor emphasized nearly everyone using the bridges had experience over crowded conditions while traveling back and forth to Mexico. "This new bridge is going to help with more crossing lanes, and hopefully relieve some of that congestion."

The bridge's location, the Mayor predicts, is also going to influence who uses the crossing. "We think a lot of the users are going to be from the state of Nuevo Leon, Monterrey area. Probably most of the Reynosa people are going to continue to use the Hidalgo bridge and the Pharr bridge. We think we are going to be attracting some new customers and new people to come here."

Cortez stresses convenience is the key; for Mexican drivers headed east. "I think people coming from Monterrey or any part of western Mexico, they are going to cut off at least 45 minutes of travel time." The Mayor points out travelers will avoid

traveling through Reynosa's inter-city streets. Adding, "It is going to be huge in terms of time savings for those travelers."

Cortez does think the link will benefit Mission's retail sector. "I'm sure Mission is optimistic that their retail will be helped. I think Mission will promote retail in the area and benefit from having the bridge, only time will tell." As for his own city Cortez feels McAllen has been growing to the west towards Mission and opening of Anzalduas will contribute to the development pattern.

Initially the Anzalduas bridge will be restricted to use by only passenger vehicles. Commercial truck traffic is barred until 2015, in deference to the Pharr International Bridge. The U. S. State Department permit allowing Anzalduas' construction states; trucks could cross earlier than the six year moratorium at Anzalduas, if the Pharr facility is used by over 15,000 northbound trucks weekly.

The area west of the Pharr International Bridge on US Highway 281 through the McAllen Free Trade Zone and on to nearby industrial parks is often crowded with truck traffic. Hunt Valley Development operates the 1,200 acre Sharyland Business Park adjacent to the Anzalduas span. The commercial truck issue will continue to be debated well after the

opening of Anzalduas.

The development company was important in facilitating the construction of Anzalduas. Hunt donated over 100 acres for the bridge and infrastructure. Bridge builders only had to deal with one property owner on either side of the river. Hunt Valley Development on the U.S. side and Mexican citizen Ramiro Garza Cantu and his Grupo Rio San Juan owned numerous acres on the Mexican side running up to the southern bank of the river.

The impact of the Anzalduas Bridge on traffic flows in the area will not fully take effect for several years. The reason is the construction of what will be known as "Anzalduas Highway." A three and a half mile stretch of Farm to Market Road (FM) 396 south of Expressway 83 running to the new bridge will be transformed into a four lane highway.

Mission Economic Development Authority President/Chief Executive Officer Pat Townsend Jr. explained, "After they finish all of the improvements, it will likely be renamed the Anzalduas Highway, while north of the expressway it will still be known as Bryan Road in Mission."

When the bridge opens Townsend thinks travelers will avoid the construction on FM 396 and take other available routes north from the border. "Hope-



fully the traffic will be spread amongst areas that can carry it. They may choose Shary, (Rd) Conway, or Ware Road. They are going to avoid it until it gets fixed.” Once built he thinks there will be significant use of the Anzalduas Highway as the prime route to Expressway 83.

McGraw Hill Construction reported in a May, 2009 article by Debra Wood, that Ballenger Construction of San Benito, “is on track to complete by late summer a \$24.8 million project on FM 396 in Mission, building a connector between the Anzalduas Bridge and FM 396. It includes new overpasses at a railroad crossing and a road.”

On Monday, August 31, 2009 the McAllen Monitor related in a story by Jared Taylor that TxDOT planned to use, “about \$21 million in federal stimulus funds to pay for road upgrades along Bryan Road.” Expressway 83 will cross over Bryan Road and a new interchange will be constructed. TxDOT will be bidding the work in March of 2010, with construction expected to finish in early 2012.

The completion date on the Bryan Road improvements supports Townsend’s point; Anzalduas’ impact on traffic patterns on the area won’t be in full effect for years to come.

The commercial truck prohibition on the Anzalduas artery could be lifted if all of the players sat down and talked it out. It could be a hard sell, Pharr is a city owned crossing. In the last two years truck crossings have started to decrease in relation to the economic turndown, correspondingly Pharr has seen revenue decrease. There may not be an inducement for Pharr to come to the table.

Recent northbound truck numbers at the Pharr crossing backup the premise, Pharr officials have no incentive to negotiate earlier commercial truck traffic crossing at Anzalduas. The weekly northbound truck numbers at the Pharr Bridge averaged 10,141 in 2007, according to the Texas Center for Enterprise and Development (TCED) at Laredo Texas A&M University.

The TCED reported the weekly average truck crossings slumped to 9,901 in 2008. The numbers have also dipped for 2009. Crossings numbers are available through May, the weekly average in 2009 is down to 8,682. On monthly basis crossings have dropped from 40,563 in 2007 to 34,729 in 2009, a down turn of 5,834 northbound trucks per month.

The bridge that will feel impact of Anzalduas the most, will likely be the McAllen/Hidalgo/Reynosa International Bridge opened only to passenger vehicles. It holds its own with bridge crossing numbers compared to Laredo and Brownsville. In 2008 4,507,049 vehicles crossed northbound at Hidalgo, Brownsville recorded 5,512,292 crossers in



the same year, but the total represents three bridges in the city. Hidalgo topped Laredo’s bridges northbound vehicle crossings by 117,421 in 2008.

Not only will east bound travelers in Mexico have a chance to save time by taking Anzalduas, a cutoff south of Reynosa will soon allow travelers to save crossing time, by routing them via a toll road, east to the Pharr Bridge.

McAllen/Hidalgo/Reynosa Bridger Director George Ramon predicts his bridge traffic will decline, “about 20 percent when Anzalduas opens.” Not concerned by the drop in crossers Ramon emphasizes, “it is about safely facilitating the flow of legitimate trade, travelers by and relieving congestion and giving people other options to choose from.”

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Analysis:

LABOR REPORT SUPPORTS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Eileen Mattei

What better-paying jobs should today's students be aiming for, training for? What skills do employers see as essential for workers tomorrow and five years from now? That information and more is found in Targeting the Future, the 2009 Labor Market Information Report prepared by Tech Prep of the Rio Grande Valley, Inc., and released on September 15.

The annual Labor Market report, known as LMI, has become an essential tool for conscientious school counselors, who use it for an up to date assessment of today and tomorrow's job market in the four county South Texas region. Regional businesses contribute data on salary and jobs outlook and then refer to the LMI for comparisons to other Valley employers. With its professionally compiled and analyzed data, the LMI functions as a credible resource for economic development organizations.

For high school students who are the future workforce, the LMI gives them and their parents access to detailed information on regional career opportunities in existing and emerging fields where employees are both in demand and

well-paid. Primed with data on educational requirements (certificates, degrees), salary ranges and job descriptions, the student are guided to making wise choices about their education. They know what to learn to enter the skilled job market. Tech Prep RGV focuses on Target Jobs, ones where teens can, with education and planning, achieve success in terms of salary and growth potential.

The LMI expanded this year to focus on the link between a skilled workforce and economic development. The report states, "Simply put, businesses need a literate, skilled workforce in order to thrive and continue to grow. An educated workforce is the number one criteria for growing a region's economy, according to some economic development authorities. To sell their city or region, economic development staff must have data showing the presence of capable, skilled talent pool."

The Harlingen EDC, which helped underwrite the publication of the LMI, is spotlighted along with some of its clients. The McAllen EDC and the Edinburg EDC have participated with Tech Prep on job-shadowing and teacher externships, confirming their awareness of the link between a prepared workforce and their missions. Ramiro Garza, Jr, Edinburg EDC, said he uses the LMI when talking to Tech Prep students about career choices. "The other aspect is for business purposes. I share LMI information with companies looking at the area," he said.

Businesses will find the 2009 LMI offers a valuable, vivid demographic and geographic profile of the region. Marc Anderberg, president and chief innovation officer of SkillsNet Foundation, created the 48- page section which examines the trends and external factors that shape the job trajectory into the future. "Looking only at past data is like navigating through the rear view mirror," Anderberg explained.

Anderberg recommended businesses take advantage of green funds, dollars available through the federal stimulus program which are directed at lower income regions. He spotlighted the high employment growth rate in public administration, reflecting surges in Customs and Immigration, Border Patrol, and Corrections, which bring new money into the area.

Nevertheless, civilian job growth comes primarily from small businesses, which he calls employment generators. Of the region's 15,426 employers, 80 percent of them have fewer than 49 workers. Anderberg asserted that the employment in the manufacturing sector started "on a downward trajectory long before the current recession." He does not expect a resurgence there without concerted efforts.

Anderberg admonished Valley businesses to think regionally: "County lines are passé." Development now ignores established boundary, much as the internet does. Currently six sectors account for 71 percent of the region's

employment, with education and healthcare accounting for 49 percent of the workforce (twice the Texas average for those fields.) Of the 10 best prospects for employment growth, the top three are healthcare, education, state and federal jobs, followed by transportation-related positions.

The heart of the LMI is the Job Identification Matrix which provides in-depth information on targeted jobs. Those are jobs with high demand (now or in the future), growth paying enough to support a family. These typically require education beyond high school.

For example, under Biomedical Engineering Technician, a student learns this professional maintains, calibrates, and repairs heart monitors and medical imaging equipment. Six local hospitals and several medical clinics want to hire biomedical engineering technicians. To qualify, students should take high school courses in biology, math, computers and electronics and also enjoy problem-solving. They need a two or four year degree from a Biomedical program which will build on their math, biology, and computer foundation. Average earnings for this career were \$37,000 five years ago.

Students and adults often see the higher salaries offered in Texas' larger cities and think they will be better off outside the Valley, without figuring in the cost of living. According to the LMI, "Both the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA and the Brownsville-Harlingen MSA have a COLA of .86, which ranks them among the ten MSAs with the lowest costs of living in the nation.

Anderberg took the annual per capita income for Cameron County (rounded to \$17,000) and compared the earnings required to live a comparable lifestyle in other Texas MSAs. To match the cost of living in Austin, the equivalent salary would be \$31,531; El Paso, \$19,654; Dallas, \$31,803; Houston, \$30,858 and San Antonio, \$22,724.

"Hispanic people like to be close to their families," said Dr. Anadelia Gonzalez, the Tech Prep coordinator who spearheaded the LMI to publication. Employers can take advantage of the cultural tendency for the younger, educated generation to return home as their parents get older, she said. The COLA data is further inducement.

Tech Prep first shouldered the responsibility of compiling labor market information in 1996 for Cameron Hidalgo Starr and Willacy. Since then, much has changed. In terms of job growth, the Lower Rio Grande Valley now ranks among the top ten MSAs in the nation. Tech Prep collaborates with schools and local businesses to makes education relevant to student by presenting proven career pathways, real-world experience, job market information, and the data needed to confidently make career decisions.

"The LMI is supposed to be useful. Whatever makes it more user friendly is what we want to do," Dr. Gonzalez said. The LMI supplies data you can use.

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My View

DISPLACED WORKERS SEEK BUSINESS OWNERSHIP

by Maria Juarez Serna

Worker displacement is caused by a myriad of factors: Down-sizing, outsourcing, or shut-downs in response to competitive pressures commonly result in lay-offs in the business world. Mergers and acquisitions contribute to forced and voluntary displacements; and, technological advances - while beneficial to society at large, contribute their share to unemployment. Natural disasters also have their say in the arena of displaced workers through voluntary or forced relocations.

Currently overshadowing all of these and other factors, however, is the current economic recession, a slump prompted by the crash of a sub-prime market and characterized by a slowdown of various market segments including, the housing and mortgage (and lending) industry; business closures; and a reduction of workforce in different sectors. Many of these newly unemployed individuals - now “displaced workers”, include those laid off as well as those who have voluntarily chosen to look for employment elsewhere.

Notably, this group of jobless individuals tends to have vast knowledge and skills and may consider business ownership. Eventually, some do transfer their experience to small business ventures. While not all displaced workers are interested or ready to embark on this type of undertaking, it is important to know that assistance is available for those that are interested in entrepreneurship.

Business Planning and Research is Recommended

Research, planning, and analyzing capital needs is a necessity before opening any enterprise, but prospective entrepreneurs are not alone. Many nearby resources offer great tips and information for help through this economic transition. Assistance in researching and planning to make business decisions is available.

Across the United States, individuals can find invaluable business technical assistance providers like Small Business Development Centers, Procurement Technical Assistance Centers, and Trade Centers with business advisors and many more organizations that can help with general and specific business assistance. Any person considering business ownership should also include as part of research the technical assistance that might be available in the area, starting with local universities and colleges, chambers of commerce, and economic development corporations. These organizations are key in the business planning process.

As the planning process begins for a business



Maria Juarez Serna is the Director of the Valley's Small Business Development Center Director (courtesy)

venture, a prospective entrepreneur is advised to do some research on the market to be served and on the requirements for the business start-up. The entrepreneur can evaluate which city, state, or federal permits or licenses may be required depending on the industry; if and which taxes will apply; and what the potential business structure will be as well as what registration requirements apply.

Business planning is important for a business owner in any phase of development. For a start-up, it is highly essential for focusing the business idea, determining capital needs, and assessing the market and the products or services that will be offered to customers. Often, the process of business planning results in a business plan – a written plan for a business that indicates the products and services to be offered, marketing plan and market research, management, operations, and financial requirements. The planning continues even when the business is operational - possible changes in the labor and customer markets, the supply-chain, and in the environment are never-ending considerations for the successful entrepreneur.

Assessing Capital Needs and Evaluating Financing Options

For many start ups, a major challenge is indeed capital. Because the process of planning for a business helps define the scope and the details of the business project, it also indicates the amount and use of the capital; and whether the capital will be that of the

owners or obtained from external sources through various available financing options. Some displaced workers may have access to funds from their former employer if the employer has established a program for retraining, entrepreneurship, or education. In general, while some business owners have regular savings or other assets to invest in a business, some also have retirement funds that can be used to invest in a business venture. Before doing so, however, it is recommended that they carefully review these alternatives, along with the costs and benefits of using retirement funds for a business venture.

If determined that external capital is required to start, it is important to be aware of the available financing options and the requirements for each. There are traditional bank lenders, many of which have tightened their credit standards and loan process. Guarantees from the U. S. Small Business Administration are available on loans that qualify and for which the guarantee is requested by the lenders. There are also non-bank lenders such as Certified Development Corporations (CDCs) and ACCION Texas. In addition, there are some local resources of which prospective entrepreneurs might not be aware or have considered: city incentive programs and revolving loan funds, or possible state programs funded to provide displaced workers with job training programs or other assistance. Business technical assistance providers often have advisors that can help the prospective business owner determine which option is the best.

These advisors can discuss the factors that lenders consider in making a lending decision – criteria important for a prospective entrepreneur to know before seeking financing. These factors are termed the “Four Cs of Credit”: 1. Character – willingness and ability of the borrower to repay the debt as demonstrated by personal financial statements and credit history; 2. Capital – the amount and type of funds that the borrower will invest in the venture; 3. Collateral – the assets that will guarantee the debt; and 4. Capacity or Repayment Ability – the extent to which the debt will be repaid from the business income. All these factors are considered to make the final decision on a loan.

There are opportunities for displaced workers. For some, displacement may mean embarking on the new and rewarding challenge of business ownership. It is important to remember that business assistance for prospective entrepreneurs is available nearby.

Economic Development

EDINBURG RETAIL BASE GROWING

by Adolfo Pesquera

For years, Edinburg residents drove somewhere else to find their retail shopping experience.

Lately, the retail has been coming to Edinburg. But while the opening last year of The Shoppes at Rio Grande Valley gave the city some legitimacy as a buying destination, seasoned observers believe there remains considerable untapped potential.

The national economic crisis may be flashing a yellow light on Edinburg's retail caravan, but Mike Blum, a managing broker at NAI Rio Grande Valley, sees more 'Go' than 'Stop.' For starters, he points to the novelty of positive sales tax revenues.

The state comptroller's office, reporting the latest year-to-date sales tax returns, had Edinburg at almost \$11.2 million, an increase of 7.15 percent over the same period last year. The state as a whole was down 3.4 percent during this period.

"It's pretty good to be on the upside when so many communities are not in this economy," Blum said.

Given the circumstances, it might be understandable

to anticipate a stall in the Edinburg retail surge. Blum would disagree.

"No. They're just getting going good," Blum said. "There is so much room for expansion. The retail is going to keep ticking up. There is capacity and there is population, and there is McAllen."

Blum's reference to Edinburg's powerhouse neighbor is an allowance that Edinburg's growth is not occurring in the vacuum. McAllen's sales tax revenue, down 8.3 percent in the same period, is still four times greater than the Hidalgo County seat.

As the county's commercial hub, there is a synergy between McAllen and its neighbors. It just happens that on the retail front, the exchange is becoming a bit less one-sided.

Blum's company was the broker agent representing First Hartford Realty, the Connecticut company that bought the land that became The Shoppes at Rio Grande Valley. The project at present includes 350,000 square feet of retail space.

The shopping center quickly proved popular with residents who had previously driven 10 miles or more.

The stores just weren't in Edinburg, Blum noted.

JC Penney, Burlington Coat Factory, Academy Sports & Outdoors anchored The Shoppes at Rio Grande Valley. Many other well known retailers followed.

The positive impact on Edinburg's sales tax revenue is primarily due to that shopping mecca, said Ramiro Garza Jr., executive director for the Edinburg Development Corporation.

However, the city is undergoing growth in many directions, Garza said.

The road expansion of West University Boulevard/Texas Highway 107 from two lanes to six has been attracting new restaurants and some new retail in the way of a small strip center.

This year's activity builds on a growth spurt the city enjoyed two years ago when Walmart's second Edinburg location appeared at 4101 S. McColl Road, and a 46,000-square-foot Lack's furniture store opened its doors in the Fairhaven subdivision.

Just north of the city, Garza points to La Sienna, a 750-acre master-planned community. While the initial phases will be dedicated to residential development, La Sienna is intended as a mixed-use community. Burns Brothers Development, the parent company, dedicated space for up to 2 million square feet of office and retail.

Closer to the horizon is the downtown renovation. City Council retained the services of an urban planning firm to help revitalize downtown, Garza said. City Council took the lead by first choosing to build the new municipal building in the city's center.

City Council's intent is to tie the half dozen blocks that separate the courthouse from the University of Texas-Pan American campus by way of a renovated commercial corridor. Synergy on a smaller scale, the idea is to provide attractions downtown that would draw the interest of students and faculty.

"Downtown today is mainly dedicated to office space, with very little retail," Garza said. "There is no activity at night."

Community leaders envision a ring of fashionable cafes and boutiques at the city's center that would continue to draw traffic after sunset.

They are relying on the expertise and advice of Broaddus & Associates, an Austin-based consulting firm that has done planning projects in college towns across Texas - including UT-Brownsville, UT-El Paso, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the downtown master plan for the city of San Marcos, home to Texas State University.

Finding ways to get Edinburg residents and visitors to shop local is hardly new. But older tricks persist and

add another layer of innovation. The Edinburg Chamber of Commerce helped introduce the "I Shop Edinburg" marketing campaign over four years ago.

In the interim, national chain stores have moved in, but local small businesses have their advantages, said Letty Gonzales, the chamber's president.

"We started the 'I Shop Edinburg' campaign before these major retailers came into our area," Gonzales said.

A loyalty program involving discounts or other special incentives, 'I Shop Edinburg' enjoys broad participation among Edinburg's small business community and their customers, Gonzales said.

"People realize that shopping near home has its perks, whether it's a small local business or a large national retailer," she said.

Local businesses have not complained about the new competition, Gonzales added. There remains optimism in the idea that retail growth will lift all boats by keeping people looking closer to home for their buying needs.

And the statistics would appear to support the optimism. Retail research studies commissioned by the Economic Development Corp. conclude Edinburg has an annual gross sales potential of \$1.5 billion. At present, the city's merchants only catch about \$900 million.

"There is about \$500 million-plus in untapped sales," Garza said.

Tenants in The Shoppes at Rio Grande Valley are doing their best to put a dent in the gap, but the city's biggest, newest shopping destination still needs to fill into its own space. Plans are for The Shoppes to mature into 800,000 square feet - more than double what is currently on the ground.

"About one-third of the total acreage is developed," said Paul Rappaport, general manager for The Shoppes.

The major tenants were in place for the 2008 holiday season. Rappaport said First Hartford does not reveal tenant sales activity.

"With respect to sales, all of our stores are doing well, and are meeting the majority of their expectations," Rappaport added.

Despite the upbeat comments, there are no imminent plans to finish out the shopping center. All of the tenants are national accounts and most new tenants would likely be national accounts.

"We get inquiries all the time, and from every sector," he said.

Adolfo Pesquera is a freelance writer living in San Antonio. A former news report with the San Antonio Express News and Brownsville Herald, he has been covering business, government, and crime in South Texas for 25 years. Contact info: (210) 629-2937, or email to ajpesq54@gmail.com

GREEN LIVING FESTIVAL BRINGS NEW IDEAS TO MCALLEN

By Kevin Knoch

The second annual Green Living Festival is being held on Saturday, October 17, 2009 at the McAllen Convention Center. The all day affair runs from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM, and over 100 exhibitors are expected. McAllen Convention and Visitors Director and Vice President Nancy Millar, relates attendees can anticipate a wealth of information about green living.

"We are going to have all kinds of good information on how people can save money, by treating the earth more gently. The information is good whether you are talking about an office or a personal home. You can always save money when cutting back on your electrical use or conserving water. It is really appropriate for everybody," Millar explained.

Even though the economy hasn't been that good, Millar expects this show to be bigger than last year. "It is going to be a great show. We already have a lot of people signed up. We still have some booth space available and can add more booths if need be." The festival will be in the main exhibition hall at the convention center. At last year's

event, 2,000 attended, and Millar hopes the gate number exceed 3,000 in 2009. There is no admission charge.


Starting at 10:00 AM through 6:00 PM a series of 30 minutes discussion sessions will be presented. Subjects include: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle; Solar Energy; and How to Remodel for a More Energy Efficient Home to name a few. The presentations finish up with Alternative Vehicles-What's Coming. Millar noted she has nine of the ten planned speakers confirmed.

Millar encourages children attend the event. "Often the young people have a real interest and feel for going green. We will have interactive activities for people of all ages." The McAllen school district will have an art display about going green, Millar added.

The group behind the festival is a McAllen Chamber of Commerce committee, called the Green Living Committee. Composed of committed individuals, the committee also has city employees who lend their expertise to the panel.

This year's event main sponsor is Shell Exploration and Production. "They have been very supportive," Millar related. "They are the presenting sponsor and will have a booth. This couldn't have happened without them."

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Entrepreneur

VALLEY NATIVE HAS TWO JOBS, ONE IS LOVE OF THE GAME

By Kevin Knoch

Two or three years ago talking about someone who holds down two jobs wouldn't be as common as it is today. The recession has many working two or three jobs just to make ends meet. But few work two jobs because they are passionate about both of them; even fewer toil at one profession for the love of what they do.

Well that is an apt description of what Rio Grande Valley native Yvette Abrego does. She is really passionate about her career in Dallas as a massage therapist, a business she has been building the last few years as an entrepreneur. It is her other job which raises some eyebrows, that she takes very seriously, and that she performs for the love of the game.

Several months a year, Abrego is a standout offensive lineman for the Dallas Diamonds, of the Independent Women's Football League, (IWFL) playing full contact tackle football. The league plays a late Spring into Summer schedule, that includes playoffs and a championship contest in late July. Abrego toils at tackle on offense and has played all defensive line positions during her four year career.

The IWFL was founded in 2000, the league Web Site states, and works as a 501(c) Texas non-profit corporation. "The IWFL currently has over 1600 women playing the sport for 51 teams across North America from Southern California to Montreal and Washington to Florida with consistent expansion into new markets." The league encourages teams to operate independently while combining resources for marketing the league. The key aim of the IWFL is, "creating a positive, safe, and fun environment for women who play football."

What made the Brownsville born, Los Fresnos raised, former Falcon think she could play football? Well the answer was in her high school and college athletic career. Abrego had been a trail blazer in women's sports while in high school. During her

freshman year, Los Fresnos started a power lifting program. Abrego and another girl were the only two participants.

The power lifting team numbers grew to 40 by her senior year. The Los Fresnos team went to the University Interscholastic League state tournament in 1998. The women's power lifting team brought home the only state championship in Los Fresnos High School sports history.

Abrego was recruited by Louisiana Tech University to continue her power lifting. Although Louisiana Tech had had a power lifting program for 25 years, the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) doesn't recognize power lifting as a college sport. The Tech team would participate in amateur competitions. During her three years of participation, the school won three United States Women's Power Lifting national championships. Twice Abrego was chosen as an alternate for the U.S. team to compete internationally.

The idea about playing football was planted in 2001 when she saw a Home Box Office (HBO) special about women's football teams in Minnesota and Houston. "I called the Houston owner and told her my athletic background. She said the league was just getting started. Give it a couple of years and then come play for us. I never thought about it again. Graduated college and moved to Dallas."

It was a phone conversation with her sister-in-law Brandy Mueller several years later that rekindled her thoughts about football. "I mentioned I had thought about playing football while talking to my sister-in-law one day. She told me about the Dallas Diamonds and started asking all of these questions about athletic background, height, weight." While on the phone Mueller had gotten online and signed Abrego up for a tryout with the Diamonds.

Things went well with the Diamonds. Her coach was a Louisiana Tech alumnus and knew Abrego's



Valley native Yvette Abrego and IWFL team mate.

power lifting coach. "I ended up trying out and making it. They put me on the offensive line." A starter for the Diamonds since 2006, the team competes in the Tier 1 division of the league. "I had to learn technique, all I knew was from playing street ball as a kid."

Her teammates and opponents come from all walks of life. "We have students, teachers, correction officers, police officers, mothers, daughters are out there." Players ages range from 18 to the late 40's. Money is not an issue with these devotees, they are playing for the love of the game. Players have to pay for their own insurance and see little or no income.

Playing tackle football won't make her a living. Abrego put her self through school to master massage and now works at Massage Envy in Coppell. "I was always interested in massage, going back to my athletic days," she related. Being a football player has helped her profile in her massage work. "I stay busy, I'm almost 100 percent booked."

Since joining the Diamonds, Abrego has taken home two championship rings. How much longer will she keep her second job? The 29 year old says after every season many of her teammates say the are going to retire, but they keep coming back. "Every year I say I'm going to retire, then I get that itch to play."



Business News

WESLACO WELCOMES NEW RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

By Kevin Knoch

Weslaco recently welcomed two large retail outlets to their community; JC Penney returned after five year absence in early October, and home improvement chain Lowe's opened their facility in mid-September. Both stores are conveniently located on the north side of Expressway 83, facing the access road. The two stores will serve as anchors for a retail development known as The Shops in Weslaco, that will accommodate over 10 additional retail outlets and eventually cover 50 acres.

The stores are similar in size. The new JC Penney will occupy 105,000 square feet and the Lowe's measures 94,000 square feet. The similarities don't end with their physical footprint, both companies have added 120 employees each to the Mid-Valley employments roles. Lowe's is offering 32,000 home improvement items, while JC Penney features a large variety of national brands for their customers perusal.

Hernan Gonzalez, serves as executive director of the Weslaco Economic Development Corporation, feels the development is fortunate to have two quality anchors like Penney's and Lowe's. He stresses, "The biggest story is keeping them as '09 projects and opening in '09, when a lot of projects around the country were falling through the cracks." Gonzalez explained other retail outlets will develop adjacent to the anchor stores and in front of them.

Houston headquartered SDI Realty is the project developer. Ground was broken on the project about a year ago. Before the site preparation work could take place several obstacles had to be overcome. "A drainage canal use to run right in front of the property," Gonzalez related.

"The EDC and the Hidalgo County Drainage District participated in the burying of the canal." The executive director estimated his organization contributed \$2.3 million to the canal project and bringing needed infrastructure to the retail site. The EDC will recover their investment through future tax revenues. Gonzalez noted developing the tract had been talked about for over a decade.

Maribel Jacquez is the store manager for the JC Penney facility. Originally from El Paso, she came to Weslaco from Plano where she was doing corporate training. Jacquez relates her new staff is excited about the opening. "I would say 80 to 90 percent of my employees are from the Weslaco/Mercedes/Donna area."

In fact, four employees worked at the original Weslaco JC Penney on Texas Avenue which was



JC Penney comes to its new location in Weslaco just in time for the holidays. (courtesy Weslaco Chamber)

opened for 30 years from 1974 to 2004. "We are glad to be back in the community," she emphasized.

Jacquez points out Penney's always tries to be involved in neighborhood projects. In Weslaco, they have become involved with the Hidalgo Four H Foundation. The new store will donate \$5,000 from the JC Penney After School Fund to the Four H allowing local children to participate in after school programs.

The Penney's manager estimates about 25 percent of her customers will be Mexican Nationals. "The Super Wal-Mart next to this project has always benefited from Mexican Nationals who are headed to the outlet mall in Mercedes to shop," the EDC administrator noted. Gonzalez stressed the stores will attract customers and shore up sales leakage in Weslaco.

Marketing Director Alicia Aguilar of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce points out, "The Weslaco trade area has more than 200,00 people residing in a ten-mile radius of Texas Boulevard and the Expressway. Money from this population for years has been spent in McAllen and other metropolitan areas for goods and services that can now stay in our trade area."

Gonzalez added, "These stores are very significant. The whole Mid-Valley area receives a boost. Weslaco has been the regional center for shopping for the Mid-Valley area." He feels the sales tax increase for the city from the development will be considerable. Long term the city hopes the development's impact will be felt for decades to come.

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History & Heritage

RIO GRANDE PARTNERSHIP A DREAM OF VALLEY VISIONARY

By Kevin Knoch

The war news from Europe was not good in late September of 1944, Allied forces had come up short in Operation Market Garden. The British First Airborne had been pinned down without relief for nine days near the edge of the Lower Rhine River. The operation was designed to bring European theatre to an early end; with Allied Forces thrusting into Germany through the Netherlands, but stiff German opposition foiled the combined British, United States, and Polish effort.

Cornelius Ryan documented the nine day battle in his 1974 non fiction book, *A Bridge Too Far*, brought to the screen in 1977. On the evening of September 25, 1944, British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery ordered his airborne troops trapped near the west end of the Arnhem Road Bridge evacuated. The withdrawal ended the military operation's proponents dream of ending the war in Europe by Christmas of 1944.

On the same evening, a world away in Weslaco, Texas, businessmen in the Rio Grande Valley decided to formally institute the Lower Rio Grande Valley Planning Board, a decision that lives with the region today. The leader of the group and the planning board's first president was Mission resident Lloyd M. Bentsen. Bentsen, a native of South Dakota, had settled in the Rio Grande Valley in 1920.

Bentsen advocated for a regional organization to promote the RGV and unite citizens behind projects that would benefit the area. The valley in the years before World War Two, was an agriculture based economy. Small cities and towns had farms, orchards and a railroad in common, but little else united the section when it came to projects and issues affecting the area.

Bentsen knew it was time the RGV had such an

organization. Local leaders were aware the war would soon be ending and that numerous native sons would be returning from the Pacific and Europe. The area would face new needs in the near future and beyond. Bentsen expressed his vision of what the planning board could do to advance the Valley in a letter shortly after its creation.

"For a long time public-spirited citizens have spent a great deal of their individual time and effort trying to further projects that were of inestimable value to the entire citizenship of the Valley. ... Up until the creation of the Valley Planning Board the Valley had no such organization to support the efforts of these citizens. ... The Valley Planning Board is non-political and non-sectional, but has unselfishly the interests of the entire Valley at heart and working for every single section of the Valley."

The organization Bentsen campaigned for and spearheaded in 1944, later became known as the Lower Rio Grande Chamber of Commerce in 1947. The group undertook and pushed for numerous projects in the post war years. These include advocating a causeway to connect South Padre Island with the mainland, contributing to the completion of the inter-coastal canal, and securing a state park designation for the 1852 era lighthouse at Port Isabel.

In the 1950s and 60s the Lower Rio Grande Chamber of Commerce worked to obtain funding for numerous agriculture and water projects including the creation of Texas Citrus Mutual. They succeeded in securing air connections into Mexico. They pushed for the Valley to become part of the Texas Tropical Trail, one of the ten scenic routes in the Texas Trail program.

In 1975, the group organized its most successful lobbying tool, "Visit the Valley" inviting legislators to tour the region just before the start of the bi-annual legislative session. The tour concept continues today and has been invaluable in educating lawmakers from around the state about the needs of the RGV.

Strides were made promoting tourism in the late 70s; the group convinced state leaders in Austin to locate a Tourist Information Center in the Valley. The Chamber started the Winter Texan appreciation program in 1979 that continues today. In the same year the organization's name was shortened to Rio Grande Valley Chamber of Commerce.

In 1987, Bill Summers became executive director a position he holds today. Summers is the longest serving director of the organization. The group focuses on environmental and transportation issues, established the Valley Proud Environmental Council in 1990, and



Bentsen and the love of his life, wife Edna.
(courtesy Betty Bentsen Winn)

works on a Regional Mobility Plan in 1992 to plan for infrastructure needs 30 years into the future.

The Bentsen founded group underwent its fourth name change in 1995, merging as The Rio Grande Valley Partnership. The Partnership plays a pivotal role in the Valley securing the Empowerment Zone for the RGV in the mid-90s.

In the new decade the RGV Partnership advocated for the Rio Grande Regional Water Authority. Transportation issues were at the top of the agenda. The Texas Department of Transportation implemented \$500 million in projects advocated by the Partnership. The organization under Summers' leadership is a relentless promoter of the upgrading and funding of an interstate highway connection for the RGV.

Bentsen, was a pilot in the United States Army Air Corp during World War One. He was stationed at Kelly field in San Antonio when a fellow serviceman Ray Landry (father of legendary Dallas Cowboy's coach Tom Landry) invited him hunting. A lifelong hunter and fisherman, Bentsen couldn't turn down the chance to hunt deer in the Rio Grande Valley.

Bentsen fell in love twice on the hunting trip, with the area and the woman he would marry. Bentsen met Edna Ruth Colbath on Main Street in Mission during the visit. Bentsen and Edna were married for 57 years and had four children.

He developed extensive banking, insurance, farming, ranching, and real estate, interests throughout the RGV, before his death in January of 1989. His oldest son Lloyd Bentsen Jr. served as Hidalgo County Judge, represented the Valley in the Congress, and later became a four term United States Senator from Texas.

Betty Bentsen Winn of McAllen recalled her father, "Was a great negotiator. He defined a good deal by everyone getting up from the bargaining table happy... He believed in teamwork. He believed in the Valley. He was pleased to be the Rio Grande Valley Chamber's co-founder and first president."



(Seated- Left to Right) Jack Nelson, Trainor Evans, Bill Summers, Bob Cornelison, Humberto Rodriguez & Bobby Farris. (courtesy)

Opinion

MARKETING MOVES US THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Brian Godinez

It is not that hard to understand what many small business people are thinking when it relates to the state of our regional economy, “How much harder will it hit me, and how do I keep and grow my business.” Many believe that this is the time to cut costs, and that may be the case for many of us. Unfortunately, marketing is the first to go. Looks and sounds good on paper, but it may not be the best tactic. Not now. This isn’t the right move to make during times of a slow economy.

The better strategy is to get smarter with your marketing dollars and spend wisely so as to bring in direct results. Now is the time to approach your marketing as a long-term investment not as a monthly expense. Keep in mind that your competition is probably grappling with many of the same challenges. They may be losing good employees, market share, and more importantly, good customers that you would like to have.

Now is the time to go get these customers. If you slash your marketing budget, you won’t find them, and they probably won’t find you. Don’t stop marketing.

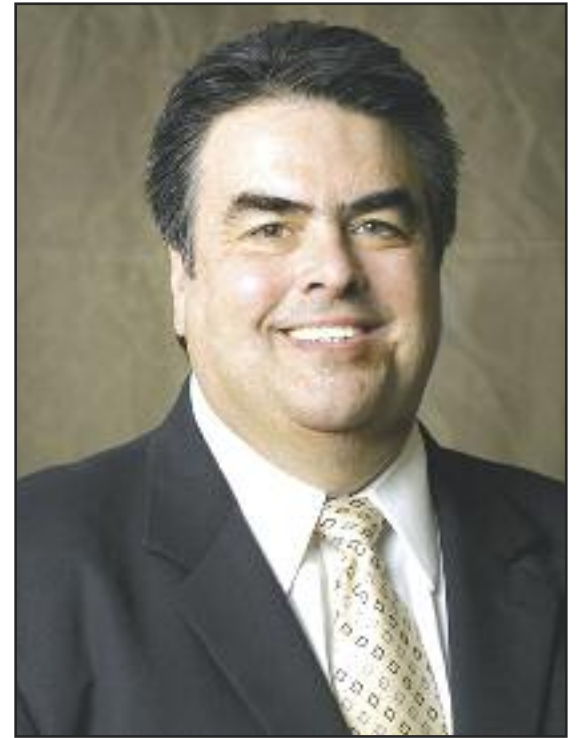
Running your business with good customer knowledge is crucial during these times. Go find out what your prospects and customers are really thinking about today, and don’t wait for tomorrow. They are most likely feeling the same effects that your business is. Create a compassionate message that reflects their pain that is similar to what you may be feeling as well such as generating customer loyalty or retention. Reach out to them and do what you need to do to make them understand that you care about them.

One tactic that I recommend to clients is to conduct your own customer survey using a free online service such as SurveyMonkey.com. It has a simple trial version and can easily be upgraded for less than \$20 a month. Poll your customers and targets on issues important to them, generate some low-cost publicity, and use the information for a better-developed message and marketing program. Ask them to share their thoughts and opinions about spending habits, product evaluation, customer service and loyalty. And while you’re at it, use another low-cost marketing tactic, off-line. Get out of your chair, leave your office, and go hang with customers. You’ll find that each of us have many of the same stories to share.

Today, our marketplace is filled with more risk-adverse buyers making “SAFE” buying decisions. People buy with plenty of emotion tied to their decision, but the good news is that people are still buying. Trust is a big emotional factor when deciding to buy or say “YES” to a purchase. Step up your message efforts to build trust and confidence.

Offer them a lot of value for a reasonable price, and tell everybody you know about it. Include more testimonials and credible references, company kudos, positive reviews and other acknowledgments that validate your message. Use marketing moves that attract the mainstream pragmatics. Do what you can to make them trust you. Once you have them, service them, talk to them, and deliver what you promised.

Historically, economic downturns create unique opportunities that can speed up your



Brian Godinez is a marketing and communications specialist serving the South Texas region. He can be reached at brian@godinezintl.com. (courtesy Godinez Communications)

growth faster than competitors. This means that NOW may be the best time to step up your marketing — at least in quality, not quantity. If you are mass marketing, such as television, radio or newspaper advertising, reduce your mass market tactics to one or two more affordable ones that still keeps you in front of your prospects, yet a bit more targeted and consistent, such as niche-focused magazines and direct emails; and cut the rest.

Focus on getting the most out of every marketing dollar you spend so that you impact every revenue dollar you generate. This will keep your sales pipeline stable and healthy. When the market comes back up again, you’ll be way ahead of the game. Don’t stop marketing.

Focus on practical approaches and affordable marketing tactics that help your business grow such as referral rewards. When customers continue to buy or even send business to you, give them an inexpensive gift. You will be surprised at each reaction. While you’re at it, try another affordable marketing tactic. Take a customer out to breakfast or lunch, and really, really listen to them.

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Business News

ONE11 ART CAFE AND A RIVER COMMUNITY REVITALIZED

Alisa Mendez

Rio Grande City is rich with history dating back to the 1800s when this area was known as a “river community.” It is the seat of Starr County and lies along the Rio Grande on the Texas-Mexico border. With several historical markers in and nearby its quaint downtown, which include La Borde House Hotel, Sliverio De La Pena Building and General Robert E. Lee’s House at Fort Ringgold—Rio Grande City is about to get a jolt of something new.

On September 12, One11 Art Café and Bar, located at 111 Main St., celebrated its grand opening. The new café/bar/art gallery boasts 4,000 square feet of space and inside One11 is a mix of modern, urban and historic elements. The new downtown venue will offer its customers a light lunch menu, gourmet coffee and cappuccino, free WiFi, and an assortment of choices from its wine bar.

Giselle Mascarenhas-Gonzalez, owner of One11, has restored the old “Nye” building, which was originally constructed in the 1970s. She is hoping that her quest to add to the revival of the city’s heart will fuel other entrepreneurs to get involved in the revitalization.

Mascarenhas-Gonzalez, who is from McAllen, Texas, had been searching for the perfect location to bring her vision to fruition. It was almost a year ago when she visited Rio Grande City and immediately saw the potential it held.

“I love the idea of turning something old into something new and fresh, and a place that that everyone can enjoy,” Mascarenhas-Gonzalez said.

“When the idea for One11 developed, I knew I wanted to really make a difference in a community that did not have all of the amenities that larger cities take for granted,” she said. “Rio Grande is a very special place and I really feel that it is the right place for One11.”

Mascarenhas-Gonzalez has over 10 years of experience in the bar/restaurant industry. She opened McAllen’s first wine room, inside Prada Wine Room and Bar in 2001 and was the co-owner of Mint Lounge.

At 36-years-old, Mascarenhas-Gonzalez has become quite successful in her niche and hopes that her children, Gianna Gonzalez, 6, and John Gonzalez, 16, who have been her mini support team, will learn from her experience.

“I want my children to understand how important it is to contribute to a community, not only for the



Giselle Mascarenhas-Gonzalez, owner of One11 Art Cafe, now open in Rio Grande City.

economic reasons, but for the quality of life that can be created,” she said.

Giddy About Giving

Giving back to the community is very important to Mascarenhas-Gonzalez. For this reason, she has launched a campaign to donate to Rio Grande City’s Main Street Program. The Main Street Program, operated by the Economic Development Corporation, supports businesses who want to restore Downtown Rio Grande City.

Early this summer, Mascarenhas-Gonzalez de-

signed her signature colorful, sweet treat—the Giddy Cupcake. The Giddy Cupcake retails for \$4 and \$1 from every sale will be donated to the Main Street Program.

“I received so much support from the EDC and the city during this whole process that I want to do something ongoing to express my support for the Main Street Program,” she said.

One11 Art Café and Bar is open Mon.-Wed. 10 a.m. –11 p.m. and Thurs. – Sat. 10 a.m.- 1:30 a.m. For more information, visit <http://www.TheOne11.com>.

Health

NEW OBSTETRICS MONITOR SENDS DATA BY PHONE

Robin Brechot
Valley Regional Medical Center

Obstetricians at HCA Affiliated Valley Regional Medical Center (VRMC) can now monitor their laboring patient via SMARTPhone. Physicians can access virtual real-time, and historical waveform data of both mother and baby, including heart tracing and contraction patterns. This data is sent directly from the hospital's labor and delivery unit and can be accessed by the doctor's mobile.

Using cutting-edge PDA wireless technologies, Airstrip OB interfaces exclusively with GE's Centricity Perinatal (QS) system to provide obstetricians with the ability to stay in contact with their patients, regardless of physician location. Unlike Web browser applications, Airstrip OB utilizes Smart Client Technology. Even when temporarily disconnected from the internet (i.e. bad cell phone connection), Airstrip OB continues to work offline to deliver vital functionality and data.

"I really feel more secure and confident knowing that even if my doctor's at home he's receiving the most current information about me and my baby", said Guillermina Hernandez.

"I am truly excited about being the local leader in utilizing this advanced technology," said Dr. J. Gabriel Guajardo. "It gives my patients a sense of security knowing that I can check on them anytime, anywhere."

"Innovation and commitment to patient care are the cornerstones of Valley Regional Medical Center," said David Handley, CEO VRMC. "These tools and technologies can help physicians offer the best, most up-to-date care for our patients."

Valley Regional Medical Center continues to be a leader in offering state-of-the-art technology. VRMC recently introduced the Abiomed Impella 2.5, a heart pump the size of a pencil eraser. VRMC performed the first patient procedure in the Rio Grande Valley utilizing the pump, and is the only hospital south of San Antonio offering this procedure.



Dr. J. Gabriel Guajardo of the Obstetrics department, utilizes the phone-savvy mobil monitoring unit now used at Valley Regional Medical Center. Below is a sample read out of data collected.



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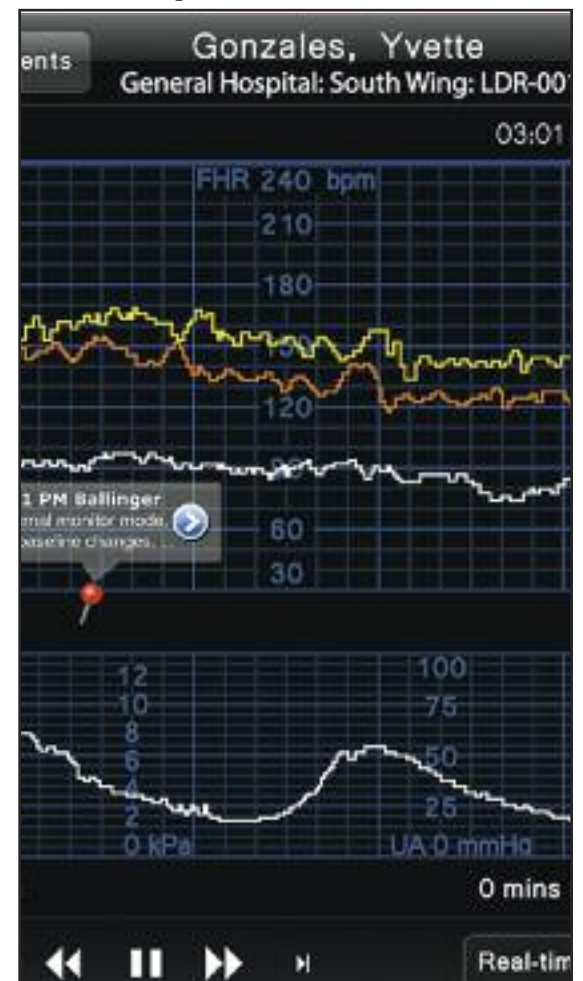
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National Spotlight

NATIONAL REPORT RECOGNIZES MCALLEN MSA

By Kevin Knoch

The national spotlight shined favorably on the McAllen/Edinburg/Mission Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) recently. The Brookings Institute in the September 2009 MetroMonitor; Tracking Economic Recession and Recovery in America's 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, rated the McAllen MSA number one in two categories, employment growth and gross metropolitan product (GMP).

The MetroMonitor takes a look at economic indicators on a localized basis through the MSA lenses, comparing the findings to national trends. Alan Berube is a senior fellow and research director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program and is one of the authors of the MetroMonitor report. Berube stresses the McAllen MSA along with other Texas MSA's have weathered the recession well for a number of reasons.

"One thing that McAllen shares with several other Texas Metros is that you guys largely side stepped the sub-prime lending problem that happened this decade. Home

prices were rising, but not rising at an out of control rate. I think you had less speculation going on in your metropolitan areas and then when nationally housing prices started taking a tumble, you started to see problems ...especially in the big coastal metropolitan areas. In McAllen and Texas home prices have stabilized in the last year."

Berube pointed out the McAllen MSA is the only metro area to add jobs nationally, not only in the second quarter of 2009, but also the first quarter. McAllen is alone as the national number one in this category for the first six months of 2009. "Actually McAllen added jobs in the first quarter, I think a couple of others did it during the second quarter," Berube explained.

The research director clarified one major reason for the upper valley's success in job creation. "McAllen among the 100 largest metropolitan areas by a significant stretch, has the highest share of its workforce in the health related industry. Hospitals, doctor's offices is an industry that has grown over the course of the recession. They have actually added jobs, that has worked to McAllen's benefit."

The upper valley MSA distinguished itself by being one of 20 that showed growth in its gross metropolitan product (GMP) during the second quarter. Additionally the report emphasized, "Just three metro areas-Austin, McAllen, and Washington- surpassed their pre-recession peak output (GMP) by the second quarter of 2009."

The Brookings Report was written based on information at the end of June 2009. The MSA has continued on the same track in July and August, according to Houston based Chief United States Economist Nathaniel Karp of BBVA Compass Bank.

"One thing that is coming out about McAllen, that job creation is still positive year over year basis, even the latest data through August. While the whole country is declining more than four percent year over year, McAllen is still generating jobs in the midst of this recession." Karp pointed to another growing employment sector in the



Alan Berube is a senior fellow and research director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. He is also a former policy advisor to the U. S. Treasury Department. (courtesy Brookings Institute)

MSA; government jobs. In the McAllen MSA, the government sector grew by 11.5 percent in July and 9.1 percent in August.

Global Insight Regional Economist Jim Diffley based in Philadelphia, took a sectional view of why McAllen has been handling the recession so well. "The area from Texas up to North Dakota has been economically the healthiest part of the country during the recession." Diffley echoed the same reason, avoiding the housing crisis as the major one. He stressed a growing population and trade also benefits the McAllen area.

Brookings' author Berube felt McAllen would have looked even better in the report but, "There has been such a pull back in consumption here in the United States. Everything is down pretty significantly from where it was 12 to 18 months ago." Adding, "If trade had been better, McAllen would have been more positive than it is right now."



Nathaniel Karp is a Chief United States Economist, working for BBVA, based in Houston. (courtesy BBVA Compass Bank)

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