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CONSTRUCTION GROWTH

Just a few years ago driving around the Rio Grande Valley it would not be hard to find construction work underway. If you looked, you could find projects in various stages of completion. Commercial and infrastructure work along major traffic arteries, school construction in almost every city or town, or acres of land being transformed into housing subdivisions.

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Education News

STC WELDING TRAINING EFFECTIVE FOR GE ENGINES SERVICES MCALEN

By David Ramos

GE Engine Services of McAllen has significantly increased its enrollment in South Texas College's Institute for Advanced Manufacturing Welding Program. Why? The highly technical skills taught through the program have proven to be extremely effective on the manufacturing floor at GE Engines.

"We customize some of the welding courses to fit GE's needs and focus the instruction on T-joints, butt welds, full penetration and stringer beads on corner joints," said Joe Acosta, welding instructor for STC's IAM. "I understand GE's welding specifications are different than other manufacturing companies and I am glad to help them achieve their training goals."

Acosta dedicates his time and efforts training employees in the evenings at

STC's Technology Campus in McAllen.

"The Tig welding courses STC has offered have really helped our employees and have drawn a huge interest within the company," said Carlos Cano, training manager for GE Engine Services. "We are expanding the welding department and we need more

employees trained in this area."

As of December 2009, a total of 160 GE employees have directly benefited from STC's IAM Welding Program. In addition to GE Engines, the IAM currently trains several other partners in the North American Advanced Manufacturing Research and Education Initiative like Hi-Tech Plastics, Springs Global and Palmer Steel.

With these newly acquired skills, employees are able to transfer to other departments or earn promotions.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to get more skills and learn a new trade," said Lazaro Salazar, welder for GE Engines. "I hope to do more training in the future at STC."

STC IAM welding instruction continues to grow, with welding instructors also training employees for maquiladora companies since November 2008 through a skills development grant under NAAMREI. The institute plans to become an American Welding Society (AWS) certified testing facility. Soon GE Engine Services, and all manufacturing companies, will be able to send their welders to test for certification and meet industry standards.

To find out more about STC's IAM Welding Program call 956-872-6222 or visit <http://Manufacturing.SouthTexasCollege.Edu>.

David Ramos, is a Training Specialist for South Texas College's Institute for Advanced Manufacturing



Welding Instructor Joe Acosta (right) tests a GE employee in various welding positions as required by GE Engines Services McAllen. (D. Ramos)

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Green Mountain Energy

Cover: *The Science Technology Learning Center currently under construction. Photos by John Faulk, John Faulk Images + Design, P.O. Box 3636, Brownsville, TX 78523, (956)-350-4516, jfaulkdal@aol.com*

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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.

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Business News

WEATHER WILL DICTATE WORK SCHEDULE

By Kevin Knoch

It is going to be all about the weather, whether or not the first phase of the project is completed on time. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is planning a combination beach renourishment and maintenance dredging work for the mouth of the Brazos Santiago Pass and the Brownsville Ship Channel down to the Port of Brownsville turning basin. The first day of the work was delayed by rain and high seas as the renourishment project tried to get underway on February 18, 2010.

The renourishment; placing beach quality sand on South Padre Island (SPI) beaches, is on a tight time schedule. Weeks Marine will dredge the mouth of the channel near the jetties and pump the sand north in 30 inch pipes to be distributed near one of



The dredge barge working along the Brazos Santiago international shipping channel. (K. Knoch)

the island's erosion hot spots. The tear down and completion of the sand work deadline date is Monday, March 15. The date coincides with the start of Texas Week, one of the busiest times of the year for SPI. The build up of college aged visitors will start two days before on Saturday, March 13.

Ruben Treviño, Coastal Regional Manager for SPI, related plans call for placing, "an estimated 230,000 cubic yards of sand on the beach." This isn't Treviño's first renourishment pointing out last year over 440,000 cubic yards were distributed on local beaches. "We were clearing out the channel after Hurricanes Dolly and Ike." The buildup of sand at the mouth of the Brazos Santiago Pass is a natural occurrence due to the dominance of a southeast wind in the region.

Treviño cautioned the schedule allows for a week of putting the pipeline together, five days of pumping, and another week of tear down and clearing off of the beach. "But that is without weather delays, we are counting on good weather." The target area runs 2,300 feet from 1,000 linear feet south of White Sands Street bordering the Tiki Condominiums on the south, running north 1,000 feet to the La Quinta Hotel directly across from the newly built South Padre Island Birding Center facing Padre Boulevard.

In order to reach the target area, the pipeline will run four miles before any sand is placed on the beach. Treviño added, "The sand will be piled five feet high, and then it is moved around by front end loaders. We want to add 80 feet of beach for a half a mile."

Besides the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the renourishment work is a partnership between the Texas General Land office, the Town of South Padre Island, and the SPI Economic Development Corporation (EDC). According to Treviño this is the 14th beach renourishment project since the early 1990s.

Local incremental costs are estimated at \$840,000 Treviño pointed out. "The costs are what it takes to pump it on the beach, rather than what it would cost the Corps of Engineers to dump the sand offshore." The GLO picks up 75 percent and the Town 25 percent of the costs.

Although finishing up before Texas Week is a goal, the main reason for having equipment off of the beach is the sea turtle nesting season starting March 15th. Spring Breakers will be showing up in late Feb. Access ramps across the pipeline to the surf will be in place matching up with beach access streets for locals and visitors. Treviño indicated 32 crossing points will be available during the beach building work.



The pipe is stockpiled on the beach near the jetty, note how the 30 inch pipe bends. (courtesy)



The barge raises the 700 foot section of 30 inch diameter floating pipe to bring it over the jetty at South Padre Island (courtesy)



The floating pipe is pulled ashore with multiple cranes and then pushed by bulldozers. (courtesy)

Island realtor and long time SPI EDC President Richard Franke stressed the importance of periodic renourishments to the tourism based economy. "They are critical, absolutely critical to the maintenance of the beach." Franke stated the renourishments had the beach growing from the early 1990s until 2005, when powerful hurricane storms, Emily, Katrina and Rita caused erosion to the Island's shoreline.

Once off the beach, the dredging end of the project does not face tight deadlines. Deputy Director Donna Eymard of the Port of Brownsville related the dredger will make its way down the ship channel. The dredger will be taking the channel down to its project depth, "Which is 42 feet plus two feet," Eymard related. "They will work their way in dredging as needed, our turning basin will need work."

Unlike the beach renourishment the dredging of the 17 mile channel should take at least a couple of months

Business News

TYCO EXPANDS OPERATION NEAR HARLINGEN AIRPORT

By Kevin Knoch

Long time Harlingen corporate resident Tyco Flow Control plans to expand their facility in the city. Located east of the city's airport near Harlingen's industrial park Tyco hopes to complete the 33,000 square foot addition during the next year. The valve and flow control manufacture may be adding over 50 jobs to its present work force of 120.

Tyco arrived in Harlingen over 25 years ago in 1984 under the name of Anderson Greenwood Instrumentation. They added Keystone Valve to the front of their name in 1986. At first they operated out of a airplane hanger at the airport, before they moved to their present 80,000 sq. ft location, at the intersection of East Harrison and Farm to Market Road 509. The company presently manufactures two product lines in the Harlingen plant.

Products made in Harlingen can travel around the world. But the main concentration of Tyco Flow Control business is around the Gulf Coast related to the oil and gas business. An economic sector according to Tyco's Vice President of Operations Ed Rushing feels, "is on the upswing."

Rushing stated the new product at the Harlingen plant is used to indicate vessel level in a variety of industries. The Harlingen facility deals with smaller valves used in flow and pressure measurement, Rushing added. "Most of what we do in Harlingen is small hand valves."

Tyco's Harlingen plant General Manager Will



L to R: Harlingen EDC President Armando Elizarde, Tyco General Manager Ed Rushing, Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell, and Harlingen Plant Manager Will Smyth (K. Knoch)

Smyth related the history of Tyco in Harlingen. "When we started, in the hanger, with one valve line," Smyth stated. "We now market under two brand names Anderson Greenwood Instrumentation and Century Valves." The company was bought out by Tyco Flow Control in 1997, kept the brand name but changed the company name. Smyth explained the applications of the valves he manufactures at the local plant.

"The majority of our products are used in the oil and gas industry. Anything where you have a pipe with fluid flowing through it. Basically what our valves do is allow you to tap into a pipeline, so you can attach some kind of pressure measurement equipment on the other end of the valve. So you can use the valve to control the on and off shut off to the pressure gauge."

Adding what he manufactures can be held in one or two

hands. "They are relatively small and light. The valves are mounted into the pipeline on the other end is a pressure measuring device."

While the vast majority of what they make goes into the oil and gas business, whether in the exploration or production end. Why Harlingen? Outside of some exploration on and offshore in the Rio Grande Valley, it far removed from the petrol/chemical plant rich Gulf Coast running from Corpus Christi, Texas to the Mississippi coast.

Smyth summarized, "When you look at Harlingen,



Aerial view of Tyco facilities in Harlingen. (courtesy)



Tyco General Manager Ed Rushing and Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell know the positive effects of growth. (K. Knoch)



Street level view of Tyco Flow Control which will expand their facilities near Harlingen's city airport and industrial park.. (K. Knoch)

it has is a very business friendly environment." He pointed out the cost of living in the city is very low.

Harlingen Economic Development Corporation Coordinator Maryann Villarreal related, "Our cost of living is 20 percent lower than the United States average. We are consistently among the lowest 10 percent in the country." Villarreal cited a U.S. Chamber of Commerce research organization.


The company traces its roots back to the aerospace

business, at least the Anderson Greenwood part, Smyth related. "The company was started by two aerospace engineers Ben Anderson and Marvin Greenwood who worked for Boeing. They broke off and started designing airplanes.... They decide they were going to start a hand valve business. They were looking for a needle valve that would seal off high pressure applications. The first system was for a missile launch system."

The result is what is manufactured at the Harlingen plant today; the H1 hand valve. "The H1 hand valve is the foundation of our business. It is the most common hand valve we sell today. Shortly after the missile work they found out the valve has a lot more applications than just the aerospace industry."

Smyth, a Purdue graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering, hails from Cincinnati, Ohio. He received quite an introduction to his new plant in late July of 2008. Just days after hurricane Dolly past, Smyth arrived to find, "The plant was actually flooded, with no electricity and part of the roof was collapsed." He has been with Tyco since June of 2003.

Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell stated in a prepared statement at the expansion announcement, "Tyco Flow Control is a good corporate citizen and we welcome their continued growth." Armando Elizarde president of Harlingen EDC added, "We take pride in helping existing manufactures with expansions. Bill Martin Chief Executive Officer of the HEDC and Smyth both confirmed the negotiations took just over a year. Tyco qualified for up to \$355,000 in incentives from the EDC based on number of possible job created.



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Cover Story

CONSTRUCTION KEEPING SOME BUSY

by Kevin Knoch

Just a few years ago driving around the Rio Grande Valley it would not be hard to find construction work underway. If you looked, you could find projects in various stages of completion. Commercial and infrastructure work along major traffic arteries, school construction in almost every city or town, or acres of land being transformed into housing subdivisions.

The amount of construction activity has slowed markedly since 2008. Much of the sluggish pace can be attributed to the economic recession. The same phrases reoccur, over built, housing crisis, credit crunch, shedding jobs. The slow down affects all segments of the economy and reaches into the architect, design, and construction sectors.

The value of building permits for commercial and residential work was down \$232.3 million year to date from December of 2008 to Dec. of 2009 in the Rio Grande Valley, according to the RGV Partnership's Business Barometer. A decrease of nearly 26 percent for new work in the construction industry. One sector, new housing construction, contracted by 65 percent in 2008 from 2007 year over year totals.

Eli Ochoa, President and CEO of ERO Architects with offices in Austin and McAllen affirmed construction work locally has slowed in the last two years. "It is definitely a lot slower. We are hoping to see things pick-up." Ochoa added he sees a turn around in local work in the near future.

We found one company busy in the local construction market. SpawGlass Contractors of San Antonio, with a South Texas division, was founded by Rice University graduates Lewis Spaw and Frank Glass in 1953, has completed a number of major RGV construction projects. "We have had a division here for 11 years and have been in and out of the Valley for 25 to 30 years," explained SpawGlass Vice President of the South Texas Region and Brownsville native Rene Capistran.

Projects familiar to local residents include the Los Indios International Bridge Custom's offices in the 1990s, and more recently the upscale McAllen Convention Center. Going further back Spaw Glass built the South Padre Island Convention Center. Capistran added the company has completed several buildings on the University of Texas/Pan American campus in Edinburg.

"The first building we did at the University of Texas/Pan American was a general classroom and computer center in 2001. That was a very special job

for us. Not only was it completed on time and under budget, but we won a national award for excellence on that project." Capistran related the company has built student housing at UT/PA and is currently working on a upper level center for the university at their Rio Grande City campus in Starr County.

The South Texas Vice President revealed his division of SpawGlass has 15 projects under contract currently, with nine jobs in the works right now. Besides their work for Pan Am, they are currently constructing a distinctive project at the other end of the Valley for the University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College on the Brownsville campus. They have started a new project across the street from the campus for the City of Brownsville.

"The job here at the UTB campus is called the Science Technology Learning Center. It is a very unique building for many reasons. It is a research lab; studying various diseases, cancers, heart disease, diabetes, and leukemia. It is very important to the community because these are ailments that affect the community," Capistran related.

Capistran explained the building has several laboratories, that come with specific specifications regarding safety measures and fire protection. "On the north side of the building we have labs. The other side has an area for life/health/science and nursing



Edinburg High School Performing Arts Facility groundbreaking ceremony. (John Faulk)

studies." He noted the third floor STLC is being built with a specific purpose in mind.

"The third floor is going to be an emergency command center, in the case of a hurricane. The emergency center is where the college will go to operate. It has been designed to sustain itself for three days, nonstop. It has a generator, fuel tanks, and water tanks and will not need help from the outside world."

Capistran pointed out another feature of the science building. "It is designed to withstand a Category 4 Hurricane." A Category 4 on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale can generate wind speeds of 131-151 miles per hour and a storm surge of 13 to 18 feet. "On the whole campus this is the only building that can withstand those kind of winds," he noted.

"We feel privileged and lucky to be working on this project. Number one because how the research



McAllen Convention Center. (John Faulk)

ties to the community. Knowing we have researchers in our own backyard working towards cures is great. Having the command center in the building is a point of pride with us.”

The feeling is mutual between the company and the university. Veronica Mendez serves as assistant vice president for planning and construction for UTB/TSC relates. “We first became familiar with them (SpawGlass) during a remodeling project back in 2006, and we were happy with their work.”

Mendez stated SpawGlass contract on the science building is \$22 million. The total build out will cost \$33 million. Mendez added the work is being financed by tuition revenue bonds issued by the state legislature.

The UTB/TSC assistant vice president, commented on the relationship from a building owner point of view. “We find them very professional. Their estimating group gives us good numbers. They work hard to make sure we get the best value for our costs.” Mendez stressed SpawGlass has brought their work in under budget. On the most recent project the university and the company worked under the construction manager at risk construction delivery system.

Capistran related SpawGlass is awarded work in



Eli Ochoa, President & CEO of ERO Architects at the groundbreaking ceremony for Edinburg High School Performing Arts Facility. (John Faulk)

different ways. The most familiar is what he refers to as a hard bid; when companies compete for a project by submitting the lowest cost for completion price. Often, SpawGlass works with a client on a design/build basis, where the company serves as architect and general contractor, with an agreed to negotiated project

cost.

At times a contract will be negotiated with an architect and the building owner and they serve as general contractor. The company receives most of its contracts through negotiation rather than the hard bid process, the vice president affirmed. He stresses the company’s reputation is the key when doing design build work.

SwapGlass won’t have to move very far to start their next major construction project; a new bus depot in downtown Brownsville. Already underway, SpawGlass is heading up the work that will present some exclusive construction barriers. The new terminal will be located across from the western edge of the UTB/TSC campus several blocks west of International Boulevard. The new facility will take up several blocks in the downtown district.

Downtown Brownsville does not drain well, and the engineering team has come up with a distinctive solution. They intend to burrow under the heavily truck traveled International Blvd. through part of the campus, carrying drainage water in a 60 inch storm drain to a horseshoe shaped resaca located blocks to the east. The underground tunneling work would help alleviate a problem that Brownsville city governments

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have wrestled with for over a century and a half.

Just recently they have been awarded the construction of an articulation building planned for Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. The building will house upper level course work from various colleges and universities offering four year degree programs to RGV students. TSTC spokesperson Dave



Members of the SpawGlass Construction Project Management Team.

L to R – Aldo Lemus, Laurel Ehsai, Rene Capistran, Mike Raley, Clayton Frady, Gary Powell, Bert Lozano. (John Faulk)

Ralph stated, “Construction costs are estimated at \$6.7 million. When you include additional equipment the project reaches \$7 million.”

Capistran related SpawGlass is also working with ERO Architects of McAllen and worked on the fine arts centers at the three Edinburg High Schools.

Ochoa of ERO, talked about working with SpawGlass on the Edinburg school bond projects. “In the case of Edinburg they did a great job of managing their bond program.” He mention Williamson Construction of Pharr, Wilson Construction of McAllen, SpawGlass and how well they had preformed under the construction manager at risk program. “It was the preferred delivery method in Edinburg.”

“When you look at the project from the districts point of view you see there is a lot of benefit to approaching it the way they did. The contractor, architect, and owner work together,” Ochoa explained.

“The contractor does their preconstruction services. They assist in making decisions about the project and the costs of the project....by using the delivery method used in Edinburg ourselves, SpawGlass, and the owner are able to approach the project from a holistic point of view. We are all looking at the critical issues to accomplish the project.” Ochoa added the work came in on time and under budget.

Capistran admits construction work is slow in the Rio Grande Valley. “We have been fortunate because the type of work we pursue. You need to maintain a good track record, because the government now keeps a tracking record. If you do not exceed their expectations, you can be put on a probation and not do work for two or three years,” he warned.

He stressed it is about, “developing a customer for life for us. It is about our culture at SpawGlass as a community. One of our goals is knowing what our clients need before they do, staying a step ahead of them.”

Besides customer service and repeat business, he pointed out SpawGlass is an employee owned business. “All of our employees know they have a vested



Rene Capistran, Vice President of the South Texas Region explains an engineering procedure to students from UTB/TSC. (John Faulk)

interest in every job we do. They know they are an owner in the company; it is different when you are working for yourself. At the end of the year when you get a dividend check you think this is great.”

But the atmosphere that the company tries to build doesn't stop there. SpawGlass requires its employees to go through yearly education and training courses. “We call it SpawGlass University. If you want advancement and raises you have to attend these courses.” Capistran estimated he has over 100 employees working for him in the South Texas Region, headquartered in Harlingen..

Long term, Ochoa sees construction work in the RGV starting to increase. “I can see on the horizon it is going to pick-up in six to nine months from now. Owners are starting to work on bond issues, some have already passed new bond issues, all of that is going play out in the construction industry.”

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Edinburg HS Performing Arts Facility currently under construction. (John Faulk)



Students from the Edinburg High School Drama Department recently attended the Performing Arts Facility groundbreaking ceremony in costumes from their current project. (John Faulk)

Health News

VALLEY REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER WOUND HEALING & HYPERBARIC CENTER

*Nora Martinez
Valley Regional Medical Center*

Valley Regional Medical Center will offer a new out-patient line of service, wound care. The Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center (Center) will serve as a hospital outpatient department where doctors and nurses treat people with wounds that may have been present for a long time. The Center's mission is to improve the quality of life for all of its patients. This means aggressively managing wounds to ensure they heal quickly and completely. The Center will provide patients with dedicated and specialized attention, enabling them to return to a full life, free from the pain of chronic wounds.

Every year, millions of Americans suffer from chronic wounds caused by diabetes and other vascular disorders, traumatic injuries, pressure sores, surgeries and other conditions that slow down the body's healing process. Utilizing the latest medical innovations and products that provide for the most efficient healing, the Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center provides a full range of treatments for chronic and non-healing wounds, including: Diabetic Ulcerations, Ischemic Wounds, Venous Stasis Ulcers, Pressure Ulcers, Traumatic Wounds, Surgical Wounds, Radiation Induced Tissue Injury, Arterial and Venous Wounds, all types of acute and chronic non-healing wounds.

According to the Center for Disease Control, Diabetes affects nearly 24 million people in the United States, an increase of more than 3 million in approximately two years. Additionally, 57 million are estimated at having pre-diabetes, a condition that puts people at increased risk for diabetes. Diabetes is the 7th leading cause of death and can cause complications including heart disease, blindness, kidney failure, and lower extremity amputation.

The UT Health Science Center study found a higher prevalence of obesity and diabetes in South Texas than in the rest of Texas or the nation. Of the health conditions analyzed in the study, obesity had the most significant impact on the South Texas population, while diabetes ranked second. Between 2002 and 2005, almost 30 percent of adults living in South Texas were obese, compared to about 25 percent in the rest of Texas. Hispanics in South Texas had a slightly higher prevalence of obesity and diabetes than non-Hispanic whites in the area, but a significantly higher prevalence than Hispanics

in the rest of Texas.

The Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center offers cutting edge treatments and evidence based protocols to ensure patient's wounds heal quickly. When referring a patient to the Center, rest assured that the patient will receive the highest quality of dedicated clinical care from a staff that is specialized in addressing the most difficult wounds.

The Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center, designed with a spa-like atmosphere, has five exam rooms and two hyperbaric chambers with a growth allowance for two more chambers. Flat panel televisions, conveniently positioned above the chambers, allow patients easy viewing. Privacy curtains are available if needed.

The Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center is located in the Valley Regional Medical Center, Medical Office Building, Suite 160. Office hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The staff can be reached by calling (956) 350-7291. Self-referrals are accepted.



The Wound Healing & Hyperbaric Center (Center) will serve as a hospital outpatient department where doctors and nurses treat people with wounds that may have been present for a long time.
. (courtesy)



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Economic Development Update

MISSION ECONOMIC STATUS IMPROVING

By Davis Rankin

At least last year ended on an up note.

The “tough year” of 2009 ended with a new avenue to and from Mexico and the prospect of more Mexican nationals coming here to spend money. Mission leaders see the bridge as aiding development in south Mission and economic betterment for the whole of Mission.

Now, says Mission Mayor Norberto “Beto” Salinas, if bankers will just start to lend money.

The right-before-Christmas opening of the Anzalduas Bridge south of Mission was “much anticipated.” The fact that it was a “soft opening” doesn’t seem to make any difference. Traffic flows are slightly ahead of projections and that’s without a marketing campaign.

How well Mission and environs do in 2010 will depend mightily on what Sharyland Plantation does, say Mission leaders. Sharyland Plantation is a master planned, residential-to-industrial development of about 6,000 acres, north of the Bridge, south of Expressway 83, about 2/3rds of which is in Mission and the remaining 1/3rd in McAllen. Dallas Developer Ray Hunt is slowly turning farmland to homes and businesses and maybe even a car manufacturing plant.

Frito-Lay closed a plant in 2008 so, “starting up 2009, you had the loss of those jobs,” remembers Pat Townsend, a former Mission mayor and now President of the Mission Economic Development Authority. A national distribution center for Vanity Fair had closed, too, so “it’s an empty industrial park and needed to recover and we did that. We have not yet finished, but we’re absorbing the Frito-Lay campus back into other activities now for this year.”

Townsend believes the Anzalduas Bridge “will further transform that area of Mission. We’ve already seen that from Sharyland Plantation. It kind of turned the city, rotated it around, in fact, from a Northwest growth pattern to Southeast and I think this is going to move it along even more.”

Traffic at the new port of entry is better than predicted, according to Bridge Director George Ramon. “That is without any, and I mean almost zero, advertising, promotional activity of any kind.

“In fact, I’ve just completed an RFP (Request For Proposal) that will actually be going out this week to some professional-type marketing for the bridge, actually for both bridges (Hidalgo), but primarily it’ll focus on the Anzalduas Bridge because it’s the new kid on the block.”

Moving along is what traffic is doing from the

bridge, north up Bryan Road, which is being re-christened the Anzalduas Highway. Townsend remarks that from his office on Bryan Road just south of Expressway 83, “You can’t count the number of plates from either Tamaulipas or particularly Nuevo Leon and so even though the road is not completed and will soon go under major reconstruction to complete an expressway-type connection between (the bridge) and the expressway, Mexicans are nonetheless coming straight through the intersection, head north (up Bryan Road) and then find a landmark, which is typically the expressway and then they move on.”

Making it easy for visitors to get to wherever they are going is on the mind of Mayor Salinas, who mentioned the more than \$25 million the state highway department is spending to put an overpass on Bryan Road over Trinity Road, and changing the overpass at Bryan Road and the Expressway so that the Expressway will go over Bryan.

The net affect of the changes, explains Texas Department of Transportation local spokesman Amy Rodriguez, will be to make it easier for drivers as well as to handle more traffic.

“What can I tell you? I think we’re doing fine,” pronounced Mayor Salinas. The city is in good shape financially, said the Mayor, and the opening of the bridge should result in more traffic and that will mean more businesses coming to Mission.

“In Mission we’ve done well with the economy,” said Salinas. “We’ve given everyone a six per-cent raise in our city” and were able to raise police officers and firefighters, in some cases by 13 and 14%. A starting police officer, continued Salinas, is now paid \$40,000 a year and a starting firefighter \$37,000 a year.

The city was still able to end fiscal 2009 with a \$7.2 million fund balance, beamed the Mayor (about three months operations), and decreased the effective tax rate by two cents.

“Of course with the bridge now, our sales tax is going to grow. I see Mission doing very well,” he asserted, “and hopefully with the bridge we’ll probably grow a little bit more this coming year and we have new businesses coming in.”

The city is building a new fire and police station on FM 1016.

Besides serving as Mayor of Mission, Salinas is in the real estate business, primarily residential, he says. “People call me and ask about commercial” and he refers them to other agents. Residential real estate, he offers, is picking up.



Mission Mayor Norberto “Beto” Salinas (courtesy)

What would Salinas not like to see?

“High interest rates. We can keep the interest rates down, we’re going to be in good shape. The housing market is picking up; a lot more people are buying houses and getting low interest rates like 4% and maybe 5.9, 5.5%, 20- and 30-year mortgages.

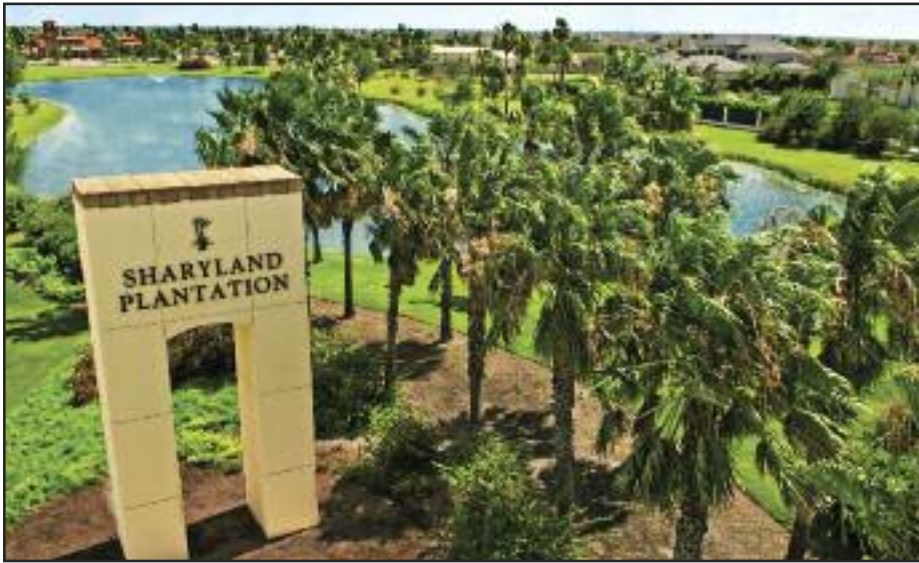
“Real estate lots are moving,” continued Salinas. If we could get the banks to start lending money, it would really take off. “Banks are not lending “the way we would want them to,” he added.

Asked where new residential construction will take place this year, Salinas pointed to the northeast part of Mission, north of FM 495 and south of the town of Palmhurst, and they’ll be higher end homes. Some will be south, in Sharyland Plantation, he added.

Sharyland Vice President Paul Curtain confirms that homes sales in 2009 were not as strong as recent years but “we continue to be active in construction particularly in the \$250,000 to \$400,000 range.

“We believe in the premise that during difficult economic time homebuyers will practice a ‘flight to quality,’ becoming more discriminating in their investment choices. To this end we are breaking ground on a new subdivision just this week to continue to supply this segment.”

As for commercial development in Sharyland Plantation, Curtain said the current market uncertainty will keep them on the sidelines until the economic outlook is clearer.



Sharyland Plantation, a creation of Hunt Valley Development, are careful developers with a long-term vision and the patience to achieve. (courtesy)

The developers of Sharyland Plantation have already positioned themselves for recovery. Plantation developers donated almost 100 acres along Bryan Road to the State for the project and worked with TxDOT engineers on the design of the Anzalduas Highway so that the “maximum commercial potential could be achieved in Mission,” according to Curtain.

A look at a company website www.sharylandplan-

land Plantation is a creation of Hunt Valley Development, which is part of the real estate holdings of Dallas developer and oilman Ray Hunt. Both Townsend and Salinas had praise for “the Hunts” as they put it as careful developers with a long-term vision and the patience to achieve.

“When I came in (as mayor) in 1998,” remembered Salinas, I met with them and they made a commitment

tation/anzalduas-market reveals plans for a two-phase project, Phase I just north of the Anzalduas Bridge and south of the Military Highway, and Phase II further north at the intersection of Los Indios Road. Both plans call for hundreds of thousands of feet of retail and commercial space.

As their website puts it, Shary-

land Plantation is a creation of Hunt Valley Development, which is part of the real estate holdings of Dallas developer and oilman Ray Hunt. Both Townsend and Salinas had praise for “the Hunts” as they put it as careful developers with a long-term vision and the patience to achieve.

to me that were going to invest a bunch of money in the area and they did, they did keep their word and we kept ours by pushing the infrastructure over there. We’ve done it together; they’ve been good partners.”

Finally, although it has been out of the headlines, a car manufacturing plant is still a prospect for the area as is the hefty payroll that would come with it. “The site that’s being examined is not the only one now and was not the only one in the very beginning,” revealed Pat Townsend of the Development Authority, who went on to say “we presented multiple opportunities in Hidalgo County and I think right now I think they’re (the car company) evaluating multiple sites in the Valley so that would include Cameron and Hidalgo, but one in the Sharyland Business Park vicinity is still option that has not been dismissed.”

Townsend says Valley sites are surviving the company’s winnowing process. The Company, from Europe, has been “extremely slow because of the economic meltdown” but has at last lined up “multiple sources” of equity and debt financing.

Such a plant would “ramp up” to 400 jobs and may grow to as many as 700 jobs if the car, which wouldn’t even sell initially in the U.S., finds market acceptance.

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Business Feature

ICE TIME AVAILABLE IN UPPER VALLEY

By Kevin Knoch

It is a business that many wouldn't consider in the Rio Grande Valley. It doesn't work with the weather, especially the triple digit temperatures experienced last summer. Yet it is here and growing. Demands for use of the facility increase all of the time. Odd for as business where most of the local citizens don't know how to use it. Yet more public participation is planned for the near future. Doesn't sound like a good business plan? But still people flock to it everyday.

One of the major sports legends has worked out there. The man is a historic star in his sport and has become an icon in the city where he spent his career. Former professional players stop by all of the time. Professional teams use the facility on an as need basis. Sports oldest and most prestigious trophy was recently on public display at the building. Still trying to figure it out?

The business is the Valley Ice Center located at

201 North 26th Street in McAllen. The only public ice skating rink between San Antonio, Texas and Monterrey, Mexico. The facility is open to the public for skating time, and features several levels of organized hockey. The Valley Ice Center is operated by a McAllen couple Lonnie Geegenheimer, and his wife Betty.

The Valley Ice Center offers skating lessons and a school for the legions of novices in the area. The center offers lessons at various levels of ability. The skating school is operated by Joy Wells and Bill Anderson. Learn to skate packages start at \$120, for eight classes and 30 minutes of supervised practice with each class. Wells from Detroit, Michigan also teaches at South Texas College.

The Valley Ice Center is the second attempt at a skating rink in the same building. A rink operated at the same address for four years, before the new owners took over. The Geegenheimer group owns neighboring real estate. They gave the facility a complete remodeling, with an eye on insulation, bringing the building up to scale with any skating rink in North America.

Geegenheimer related, "We have just taken it over from other owners. It is a new business. We owned the building. We have redone the rink. Redone the whole building to bring it up to par with other rinks around the country." Every part of the facility went through renovation. The owner indicated the remodel work took six months to complete.

Skating teacher Bill Anderson emphasized, "We are still letting people know there is skating in the Valley and that we are now opened." Anderson stated care was taken to improve the building's insulation during the make over. "We doubled it, and put in a special ceiling to trap and keep the heat out." The rink now has a seating area to watch games and public skating.

Anderson pointed out business has real picked up with the rink operating seven days a week. On a recent Saturday youth hockey games started at 6:00 AM and the day closed out with public skating ending at midnight. Anderson went on to classify level of



Bill Anderson, a skating instructor, and Rink owner Lonnie Geegenheimer with the original Stanley Cup, the sports worlds oldest rotating trophy, which visited the McAllen rink in January 2010. (courtesy)

hockey played in the Rio Grande Valley.

"It is pretty good for the kids. You have to remember we have had hockey in the Valley for about five years." The youth league has divisions from 6 to 17 years old. The young teams compete in a far flung league that includes, San Antonio, Laredo, and Houston. Anderson estimated there are about 200 participating in the youth league.

The adult league is a mixture of experience players and some raw beginners. Anderson explained the group has about 90 players, and five teams. The talent is balanced out, by spreading the better class A players to each team, and limiting two A players on the ice at a time. Among those class A players are former professionals, including ex-Killer Bee skaters who liked the RGV and decided to stay here, after their playing careers.

Recently the rink has started Winter Texan Hockey for those 55 and older and the Anderson stated the experience level is high. "Many have played all of their lives, including juniors (18-20 years old highest youth division.) and college. Most of the games are pick-up, next year we want to get a four or five team league started." Anderson indicated the rink is thinking of adding two more Winter Texan skating sessions.

Something else is coming to Valley Ice Center that will interest the adventurous. Anderson related

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“Broom Ball” is in the works. A game for non-skaters, where a game similar to hockey is played with a ball and brooms replace sticks. Skating and skating skills aren’t required. A game open to everyone who wants to get out there.

Anderson comes from an extensive skating background. A Boston, Massachusetts native, he skated for three years with prestigious touring Disney On Ice Show. Anderson arrived in the Valley through hockey. He was a executive with an affiliated professional team in Las Vegas. He worked for Dodge Arena and the Killer Bees before moving over to the skating center with the previous owners.

The Valley Ice Center pro shop is the only place in the RGV for skates and hockey equipment. The center requires hockey players to be fully equipped. Sticks are also available at the rink. Alternative equipment shopping is on-line or through catalogues.

Valley Ice Center represents a lot of firsts for the RGV. Besides the ice at the Dodge Arena, the center is the first full size hockey rink ever built in the Valley. A small ice rink south of Pharr closed two decades ago. That fact has put the rink in demand.

When youth hockey first started at the Dodge five years ago, the availability of the ice was sporadic. Often teams could go two weeks without the ice available, because of events moving in and out of the arena. Ice time was the impetus for the start of the first rink in the area. Now the Valley Ice Center is used by the RGV Killer Bee’s and other pro teams like the Laredo Bucks and Corpus Christi Razz for practice when needed.

Girls are participating in figure skating at the center. “We have a group of 15 to 20 that travel to regional competitions,” added Anderson. He related figure skating program has been active for five years locally.

Who is that famous player who has skated at the Valley Ice Center? It is none other than National Hockey League Hall of Fame Player Bobby Clarke, who spent his NHL playing career with Philadelphia Flyers from 1969 to 1984. Winning two Stanley Cup Championships as a player (1974,1975), he served as the team’s general manager for 20 years after his playing career.

Clarke considered one of the most competitive determined players of his era, also was a three time winner of the league’s most valuable player award. He visits life long friend, a Valley Winter Texan, who also skates at the Valley Ice Center. The left handed center was selected number 23 on the Hockey News selection of the 100 All Time National Hockey League Players in 1998. Clarke captained his team in the 70s, known as the Broad Street Bullies. A team that became

legendary outside the realm of the National Hockey League when they defeated what was then considered the world’s best hockey team, Russia’s Soviet Red Army squad in an exhibition.

The trophy that visited in January was none other than the Stanley Cup, which made a stop at the Valley Ice Center. The cup was on its way to the Central Hockey League All Star game held in Laredo. The Stanley Cup was started in 1893, and was originally awarded to Canada’s top amateur team. Unlike championship trophies in other sports it is not made every year, the cup is the property of the league champion until a new champion is declared. The cup became the official trophy of the National Hockey League in 1947.

Anderson says the Valley Ice Center is a good time for families.

He sees nothing but growth for the center in the



future. “It is an untapped market.”

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History & Heritage

GOOD WORKS LAST FOR DECADES

By Kevin Knoch

It's March, often a month associated with Saint Patrick and the Irish. The size of celebrations around the country usually depends on the concentration of sons and daughters claiming ancestry from Ireland in any given part of the country. St. Patrick's Day celebrations can be large or small, involve parades and often last all day. Dancing, drinking, and singing have come to mark the day; a day that often runs into night.

The Rio Grande Valley has some notable settlers from Ireland in its storied history. Not all was about fun and frolic. This is the story of two strong women whose work turned into something long lasting. Although they probably never met, their efforts became intertwined in the early 20th century. But the story starts over 100 years earlier in Ireland, and their efforts continue today in the early 21st century in Brownsville.



Nora Kelly along with her mother and sister started caring for the aged and blind in Brownsville in the 1890s. (courtesy)

This the story of the Healy and Kelly families and how their desire to care for the poor built a bond that carries on. One lady, was born in County Kerry, Ireland in 1833. Margaret Mary Murphy Healy was a young girl of five when her mother died. The dark shadows of Irish famine were yet six years away when her widowed father Doctor Healy led his extended family to emigrate to the United States, a journey that wasn't without peril.

The family briefly settled in West Virginia, but evidently the lure of Texas fascinated Dr. Healy. The

family moved on but Dr. Healy was to die on the trip while in New Orleans. The group made up of two aunts, two uncles, and Margaret's two brothers continued sailing into the crossroads of history arriving in Matamoros, Mexico in 1846. The family opened a hotel and witnessed the outbreak of the Mexican/American War and its aftermath.

At the age of 16, in May of 1849, Margaret Healy became the wife of one of General Zachary Taylor's volunteers, John B. Murphy, a native of Mallow, County Cork, Ireland, who established a business in Matamoros after the war. The couple soon left for San Patricio County, Texas and settled on a large farm. During the American Civil War he served in a Texas Calvary Unit loyal to the Union cause. After the war, the couple moved to Corpus Christi where Mr. Murphy became prominent in law and later government. He served as mayor of the city from 1880 to 1884. He left office due to poor health and his death soon followed on July 4, 1884.

Mayor Murphy died a wealthy man. Before his passing, his wife had been involved in charitable endeavors in the Corpus Christi area. During the next 23 years, his widow would continue those works. One of them was to cause great controversy, but through adversary came a benefit that would touch thousands.

In 1887, while in San Antonio, Margaret Murphy was moved by a sermon advocating that the Catholic Church reach out and care for the neglected needs of the black community. In 1888, she started St. Peter Claver Church and School in downtown San Antonio, offering education for black children at a time when little was available. Resistance to the school was strong. Faculty was constantly under attack, yet the school flourished. The school had over 200 students (both day and boarding) enrolled in 1892.

In answer to the ever plaguing staff and faculty problem, Mrs. Murphy was given permission to start the first Texas based order of nuns. The Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate started in 1893, with four sisters taking their vows at St. Peter Claver. Mrs. Murphy became Mother Margaret Mary Superior of the Order. Mother Margaret Mary made many recruiting trips to Ireland before her death in 1907.

The Brownsville side of this story was well under way in the 1890s. It also had its origins in Ireland and had its start decades earlier when William Kelly enlisted in the Union Army with the First New York Mounted Rifles in 1861. Although no story of



Mother Healy a native of Ireland, died in 1907. (courtesy)

Kelly's early life has been found, he fits the description of thousands of Irish immigrants of the time. Many joined the army immediately after arrival, lured by meals and a uniform. Things lacking in their native country; especially food in a country that was staggering to its feet after a prolonged and bitter famine.

Kelly's story was different from many of the green troops who where to give their lives in battle. Kelly survived the war. Finishing one enlistment in three years as a lieutenant and reenlisting as an officer. By the wars end in 1865, he was Captain William Kelly stationed at Fort Brown, in Brownsville, Texas, a city he was to call home until his death in January of 1921.

Once discharged, Kelly was to serve his adopted hometown well. He was a well known businessman and community leader. He married Mary Thornham and fathered several children. Kelly was employed by the Kenedy and King Steamboat company after the war. A firm which he purchased in 1874. Kelly was an advocate of rail connections for Brownsville and was involved in banking and insurance. He was instrumental in the growth and establishment of the city's public school system, serving as chairman of the school board for many years.

It was the work of his wife and daughters that the Kelly family will be long remembered for. Mary Kelly and her daughter Anna had started caring for and visiting the poor and blind in Brownsville. Visiting them at their homes became a day's work for the two. They were joined in the 1890s by another sister Nora born in Brownsville in 1872, who had returned from college at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

Soon the three Kelly women convinced Captain Kelly, that they needed one building for the care of the poor. Saint Joseph Home for the Aged and Blind was established in 1901. But according to records from the period, the home cared for more than elderly and sightless. Hardly anyone was turned away; “soon they cared for small children, and working mothers. Also day nursery for hungry homeless children was organized.”

The Kelly women were joined in their efforts, by banker’s wife Mrs. John G. Fernandez and Brownsville Herald publisher and founder’s wife Frances Wheeler. The two women helped the home expand. In 1915, the home became a cause of Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, of the railroad family, who inspected the home during the Mexican Revolution. The donations of the Harriman’s helped establish the Divine Providence Hospital, which replaced St. Joseph Home, located at the corner of sixth and Madison Streets in Brownsville on June 1, 1917.

In June 1923, most of the patients were transferred to Brownsville’s new larger facility Mercy Hospital, now Valley Baptist Medical Center-Brownsville. Divine Providence Hospital became Providence Charity Home. After Captain Kelly’s death, Nora Kelly and

her sister moved to San Antonio to join another sister Geraldine. Nora Kelly remained involved with the home’s operation.

101 years after the birth of their founder in Ireland, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit Mary Immaculate, took over administration of the home in September of 1934. In 1946, the name was changed to Our Mother of Perpetual Help Home for the Aged. The Sisters relinquished their administrative duties in 1995. The home is now run by a management company and a board of trustees, including two Sisters of the Holy Spirit who oversee the home. Sister Jane Francis lives at the convent, tending to residents spiritual needs.

Through the charitable works of two women of Irish Ancestry, Our Mother of Perpetual Help Nursing Home, continues today as a 38 bed facility licensed by the State of Texas. Once retired Nora Kelly returned to her first love, where she died in 1964, in the care



Mother of Perpetual Help facility located in Brownsville in early 2010. (courtesy)

of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, lending truth to the old Irish proverb, “Is Loer don dreoilin a nead.” (Home is where the heart is)

The Valley Business Report would like to thank Isabel Vezzetti of Brownsville for her help compiling the above story. Also Mother of Perpetual Help for providing documents and a booklet from their 75th Diamond Jubilee. The Handbook of Texas Online: Healy-Murphy, Margaret Mary by Sister Bernice Mallory, www.healymurphy.org history, The Handbook of Texas Online: Murphy, John Bernard by Frank Wagner For more information call 546-6745, donations are welcome.

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Business Feature

CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY AFFECT HOME OFFICES

By Adolfo Pesquera

Changing technologies make it easier and easier to run a home-based business. But that doesn't mean every home-based entrepreneur is ready to adopt what is out there.

Gracie Yárritu keeps one foot in the paper and hardware world, the other is planted in new tech. An executive senior sales director for Mary Kay Inc., Yárritu trains 600 cosmetics consultants nationwide from her McAllen home.

Yárritu, 43, refers to herself as "of the generation" that clings to paper. She's not ready to give up paper files and colored markers to highlight account itemizations.

"You should see how many envelopes we have," Yárritu said.

She is aware of young sales reps who are comfortable with a paperless office, but that isn't for her. Still, Yárritu is far removed from the 1980s. She uses cell phones, mini notebooks, high-speed Internet, and her latest techie love affair is with Flip video cameras.

"We use Flip cameras to record training classes. Flip is so easy to edit."

Yárritu, hardly an experienced film maker, can record on a Flip, edit and upload to a Flip-provided Internet channel that can be set up to preserve privacy.

"It's not like YouTube, where everybody can see your work," she said. "And you can load as much as you want for free and set up as many channels as you want."

Yárritu's criteria for adoption has always been ease of use. She frowns on having to memorize a lot of steps to get things to work. Her old laptop, she noted, would not download video from her Sony HD camcorder. But her new laptop sensed the hardware immediately upon her making a cable connection.

"It was like, 'Wow, my computer can talk to my camcorder. I'm very proud when I get something technical working," she declared.

Yárritu says her business is primarily reliant on her people skills. And she doesn't like to travel. A mother of six, Yárritu is a very hands-on mom who is likely to be in the kitchen multi-tasking. There's a wireless laptop on the kitchen counter where she keeps up with business.

She is only dimly aware of cloud technologies that provide record keeping services for small businesses on secured online databases. The online backup subscription known as Carbonite, the Google Docs for small business, and Freshbooks online invoicing are still not part of her vocabulary. But she's getting there.

"About five months ago, we had one of our laptops crash," Yárritu said. "It totally burned."

Yárritu went to an IT technician who was able to salvage some files, but family photographs were forever lost. He advised her to at least get a backup hard drive. She has her little black box now, an HP portable hard drive that duplicates and preserves all her electronic records.

"It's really neat," she said.

Early adoption of new technologies, at least where accounting is concerned, is not very common, said Don Wilson, a certified public accountant based in San Benito. Many small business owners never got away from paper ledgers, Wilson said.

"Most home-based businesses, in my opinion, are not familiar with accounting principles or making use of electronic accounting software," Wilson said. "All they give me is their bank statements. They just use a check-book."

Their use of software depends on their individual level of expertise. Some have adopted QuickBooks, but to the extent that there is a pervasive software out there, it is the Excel spreadsheet, Wilson said.

Internet brings most of these business tools together, and competition among Internet service providers remains healthy. Time Warner, for instance, offers specials to home-based businesses that are distinct from the usual residential hookup.

"The main advantage in using a business package over residential is the cable modem is included," said Jeff Greenberg, Time Warner's vice president of marketing in Texas. "The turnaround time (for troubleshooting problems) is also faster; we guarantee repairs within four hours."

Time Warner offers savings through bundling, putting in telephone and Internet at rates below what they would be individually, Greenberg said.

Victor Leal, an IT technician in Harlingen, runs his company, Cybernation, expressly to bring small and home-based businesses up to speed. In business since 1995, Leal has coaxed entrepreneurs through generations of tech change.

There are three basic component to running an efficient small business, Leal said - the computer, the contact manager and the telephone. The most common contact manager in use is Outlook, which provides email, an electronic address book and calendar.

"Phones today are all about interfacing with your computer. These smart phones - like Blackberry or the iPhone - can receive and send any email that your home PC gets; the phone and PC are synchronized," Leal said.

Sprint revolutionized smart phones when it introduced the Sprint PCS Palm. Prior to that, there were only



Jeff Greeberg is a Time Warner Vice President in Texas. (courtesy)

Blackberries, and they were dependent on mainframe computers run by large corporations. Cost was prohibitive for small business owners.

Blackberry has long since adapted to Sprint's innovations, and Leal uses Blackberry for his own business. Working almost exclusively out of his truck, Leal finds it invaluable. It handles and logs phone traffic and scheduling; he can even invoice customers automatically through an online QuickBooks application that kicks in as soon as he hangs up the phone, he said.

Leal subcontracts some of his work, and the invoicing features are almost too handy.

"When he is leaving the client, he is on his QuickBooks and invoicing me," Leal said. "I go online and pay his invoice online with my credit card."

Leal admits he doesn't always go to his customers with the latest ideas. He learns a lot of innovations from customers and then tailors that new-found knowledge to offer services to others. This is how he became a believer in cloud networks and the virtual offices they create.

"I've got a client that runs a head-hunting business," he said. "He may hire someone in Miami to do a job and that person is working out of his home. These are virtual offices all over the United States, all coordinated through one server."

IT for small business can make the world a small place, thanks to the ability of talent to collaborate from anywhere.

"I can call Microsoft in Seattle to work on a client's computer in Denver, and I'm collaborating with a guy in India ... and I'm in Harlingen."

Business Evolution

THE 21ST CENTURY CHANGES IN THE FUNERAL BUSINESS

By Eileen Mattei

Nothing is certain but death and taxes, and The American way of death is changing.

“Death is a very personal thing. People need guidance and support because a death normally voids the family of all sense of reality and continuity. They are lost and they don’t know what to do,” stated Fred McCaleb, owner of McCaleb Funeral Home. “Ours is very much a helping profession. Our time comes when no one else is able to help the families like we can and be sensitive to their needs.”

Fred McCaleb and his family have been assisting bereaved families for three generations. He and his father Charles came from Corpus Christi in 1963 to purchase the Weslaco funeral home business. While the senior McCaleb had acquired his mortician’s license in 1933, Fred McCaleb became a licensed funeral director in 1964. Fred’s son Mark is also a licensed funeral director and frequently handles funerals. Mark McCaleb also owns and operates the Sacred Park Cemetery and Crematory. Fred’s wife Bernie McCaleb has operated Jenks Florist for 21 years. The floral, funeral and cemetery businesses complement each other.

Fred McCaleb said he may be the oldest active licensed funeral directors in Valley, yet he has no plans to retire. He acknowledged the personal service skills of his four licensed funeral professionals and administrative staff that have contributed to McCaleb’s reputation in the mid-Valley. “They’ve been here a long time and know people,” he said. “One thing we feel makes us unique is that we do not have answering machines. After hours, our calls are monitored and answered by licensed professionals. When you call a funeral home, you want answers. You want to talk to a real person immediately.”

McCaleb Funeral Home, which has been located on Fourth Street for 33 years, is experiencing industry-wide changes, a pattern common to all business owners. “We are seeing less and less religion in the funeral services. There has been a decline in the number of traditional funerals with ministers,” McCaleb observed. McCaleb’s casket display room reveals some of the industry’s latest adaptations, including patriotic and poetic insets that are visible with the casket open. Nevertheless, he said more families are choosing cremations at McCaleb. “It’s a prevalent type of service today.”

Once common, wakes and visitations are declining in popularity, as well. McCaleb expressed regret for the decline of the traditional time of mourning and gathering of the clan. “Families are so scattered that they can’t get back to a funeral.” Too frequently, he believes, survivors are opting for quick disposal of the body and not dealing with the larger

issues of grief and acceptance.

Solemnity and honor prevailed in 1995 when the funeral director accepted a controversial assignment. McCaleb was asked by the Block family of Weslaco to manage the dis-interment of Weslaco native Harlon Block and his re-interment at the Iwo Jima Memorial in Harlingen. Block was one of the men memorialized raising the flag on Mt. Suribachi in the famous Felix de Weldon sculpture. His final resting place is at the base of the statue which dominates the skyline at the Marine Military Academy.

Helping your fellow man and giving back to the community have formed the foundation for McCaleb’s life. Deeply involved in the Weslaco community, he served as president of the Knapp Medical Center Foundation board for four years and is still involved with its major fund-raiser Harvest Night. An active Lion, he is also past exalted ruler of the Elks Lodge, and past president and chairman of the board of Weslaco Chamber of Commerce.

His honors range from the Texas Lions Camp Award and 2007 Elk of the Year, to Weslaco’s Citizen of the year in 2000. As a member of the Marine Corps League, McCaleb

Fred McCaleb is Funeral Director at the family owned funeral business that has served the Mid-Valley since the 1960s. (E. Mattei)



helped promote the establishment of the Marine Military Academy, and then sent his three sons there. He has served on the Board of the Valley Partnership, looking beyond Weslaco. On the lighter side, his face is one of those carved on the decorative palm trunks next to the Chamber.

While McCaleb remembered when Business 83 was the main road across the region, he expressed approval of the Valley’s development over the last 40 years. “I love the progress that has been made. Weslaco is poised to be competitive for its rightful place in the sun.”

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Opinions

BANKER BACKS UNITED BROWNSVILLE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

By Fred Rusteberg

Our comprehensive plan won a statewide planning award last year, the best in Texas, so we know it's a sound plan, but it was not meant to now merely sit on a shelf. It is now our community's responsibility to carry out the implementation phase. Rather than have consultants come in, develop a plan, and then try to sell it to the city and citizens, we had the public and many organizations meet over several months in a formal process comprised of workshops, briefings and meetings. It was designed to be inclusive. I estimate that over 800 individuals participated and helped form the input into the comprehensive plan that will impact the next 10 years.

We are now in the action and implementation phase of the plan. The United Brownsville coordinating board's committees are being formed to begin reviewing, prioritizing and recommending strategies that were developed during Imagine Brownsville. The board has no authority to approve and fund projects. We will coordinate, recommend and track strategies that meet the common vision that was identified in the plan. The public entity representatives will take our recommendations back to their respective public entities for approval and/or action. The creation of the United Brownsville Coordinating Board provides a collaborative, and efficient process to implement the plan.

Each entity has contributed \$25,000 over a one-year period to help with our administrative, facilitation and communications expenses. The public entities will also share in-kind services and help pool resources, like grant writers. Each entity has endorsed this process. Every entity has representation at the table with an unprecedented sharing of information and resources.

United Brownsville provides a comprehensive, transparent process that fosters cooperation and communications, and allows each of our public entities to better understand what we and they are all involved with. When we as a community go to Washington or Austin and ask for money and resources, we will be speaking with one voice and one vision, which will be more persuasive.

During these difficult economic times, it is valuable to pool resources. This applies to funding, including public and private sector financing, venture capital, and grants, as well as the possible pooling of bond financing capabilities.

Although there are short- and medium-term goals, this is also a continual long-term process for the next 10 years and beyond. We see the next several months as collectively reviewing, prioritizing and coordinating several short-term strategies and initiatives to achieve some immediate needs as developed in the Imagine Brownsville plan. Having cohesive strategies that link our infrastructure, economic development, environment, land use and quality

of life are extremely important when we work with the public and private sector to attract the right investment, industry and jobs.

The education component is critical as well. The school district and the university will make strong contributions. History and tourism are equally important quality of life issues. Downtown and its historic preservation are certainly some of the important initiatives we will look at as well.

All of this focus is what will make our city competitive and produce the quality of life we all want for Brownsville. I am confident that we will see a lot of progress from our board and committees in the next few months.

I believe that United Brownsville, and its impact on the Brownsville Borderplex, doesn't end at the city limits. Once we establish and set in motion our implementation process, and begin to produce results, this initiative can evolve into a much more regional effort.

Banker Fred Rusteberg has been involved with the Imagine Brownsville Comprehensive Plan for over three years. Rusteberg, President/CEO of IBC Bank in Cameron County, served as a tri-chair since its inception. Seven Brownsville public entities including the City, GBIC, BCIC, the Port, the PUB, BISD, and UTB/TSC, and seven private sector members, form United Brownsville. The United Brownsville plan was approved last summer by the city commission.

RETAIL SALES STILL STRONG IN RIO GRANDE VALLEY

By Mike Blum

Reviewing retail sales revenues, 2009 was a fairly good year for the Rio Grande Valley. Retail sales collected in Valley cities exceeded \$179 million as compared to \$189 million in the previous year. While this was 5.1 percent decline from the previous year, it reflects a still vibrant retail economy valley wide. These taxes are collected on roughly \$10.3 billion in retail sales that are subject to tax.

The absorption of sales tax collections were materially different in 2009 versus 2008 as new store opening across the valley caused a shift in where sales occurred. Here are some examples of the changes in sales tax collections from one year to the next. The City of Mercedes experienced a 6 percent increase in sales tax collections, a direct result of new store openings at Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlet Mall.

Other retail openings that changed the cities and towns sales tax collection numbers included, Penitas. The old, but

diminutive Hidalgo County town, had a 67 percent increase in collections. A true reflection of the impact a new Super Wal-Mart can have on a small community. Edinburg's The Shoppes at Rio Grande Valley also added retailers to their roster during the year.

In 2010, the absorption of sales tax dollars is predicted to shift to Weslaco even more when the new J C Penny and Lowes stores' sales tax are taken into account. This shift will mostly be felt in McAllen and Harlingen as customers will have a more convenient option to major retailers.

Declines in bridge crossings and housing starts, valley wide have contributed to the 2009 decline in sales tax collections. However, with the opening of Anzalduas International Bridge in the McAllen/Mission area, future sales tax collection in the region are predicted to increase. The new international bridge will reduce travel time for Mexican shoppers by 45 minutes and offers a more direct corridor that leads them directly to shopping destinations with national tenants.

Another way to appreciate the unique nature of the Valley's retail economy is to understand how we compare with other markets. The Sales and Use Tax Comparison Report for the top 20 cities in Texas ranked by 2008 population. Judged by population McAllen comes in 14th, on the chart, but comes number 12 in sales tax collections.

More importantly it ranks 3rd in per capita and per household sales tax collections (total sales tax collected/total population of households). This confirms despite the current economy, Valley residents continue to spend on retail goods. Moreover, it reinforces just how crucial Mexico shoppers are to our economy.

The February 2010 Texas Comptroller reports are out and they confirm the continuing upward trends.

Michael J. Blum is partner and managing broker of NAI Rio Grande Valley, located in McAllen. He can be reached at (956) 994-8900 or at mikeb@nairgv.com

Business News

GREEN MOUNTAIN EXPANDS IN RIO GRANDE VALLEY

By Marci J Grossman

Rio Grande Valley residents will soon see more Green Mountain Energy Company sales agents at local retail stores and events they attend. That's because Green Mountain is making a big push to reach and educate Rio Grande Valley residents about why they should choose to purchase 100% pollution-free electricity from the company.

Green Mountain recently announced that it is making a larger investment in the Rio Grande Valley and a strong commitment to South Texas. The company expanded its presence by opening an office here to help grow its business in South Texas. The office, which serves the entire Rio Grande Valley, is located in McAllen at Commerce Center West.

"This is a huge milestone for Green Mountain Energy Company," said Vanessa Montelongo, a McAllen native who relocated to the Valley in February from the company's Austin headquarters to be South Texas Market Manager. "We are so excited to finally have a home here in the Valley."

In February, Green Mountain held a job fair to kick off its local hiring activities in the Valley. "We had an awesome response to our first job fair," said Montelongo. "Nearly 50 valley residents attended and we received several other resumes through our Web site. We have hired about a dozen people so far and have other job offers pending." The company still has full-and-part-time sales positions open and encouraged interested residents to contact Green Mountain at bestjobs@greenmountain.com.

Green Mountain is hiring dozens of local Valley residents to represent the company at local retail stores such as HEB in Harlingen and McAllen (Pecan Street) starting in this month. The sales agents will also be at fairs and other events throughout the Valley, like the All Valley Boat Show and Border Fest.

"Green Mountain is making this investment to demonstrate how committed we are to this market and be closer to where our customers live, shop, work, play and attend school," stated Montelongo. "We are investing in building a strong team of people so we can grow our business in the Valley and have a broader presence to reach more valley residents about the benefits of cleaner energy."

"The McAllen Chamber of Commerce is always excited when a new company chooses to invest in our community," Steve Ahlenius, president & CEO, McAllen Chamber of Commerce. "We are equally

excited when that company creates new jobs and what that means for families in the Valley. We look forward to Green Mountain being a great corporate partner in this region."

"Since Green Mountain has been selling and marketing in the Rio Grande Valley, it has been clear that Valley residents really care about the environment and purchasing cleaner electricity," said Montelongo. "In fact, our sales in this region have grown by over 50 percent in the last three years. So making this investment to open an office here and hire local residents makes good businesses sense for us and good sense for the Rio Grande Valley."

Green Mountain sells cleaner, renewable energy products to residents and businesses throughout competitive markets in Texas that have a choice in their retail electric provider. The company was the first Texas retail electric provider to offer cleaner energy when electricity competition began in 2001 and has been fully operational in the Valley since then in

areas such as McAllen, Harlingen, Pharr, Donna, Weslaco, Edinburg, and San Benito.

Green Mountain offers the following competitively-priced clean electricity products to Valley residential customers: The Pollution Free product is clean electricity generated from wind and water. Pollution Free - Reliable Rate, customers can lock in their energy rate for 12 months.

"Most people don't know that the traditional production of electricity is the leading cause of industrial air pollution in the U.S.," added Montelongo. "Switching to Pollution Free electricity from Green Mountain is an affordable and easy way for Valley residents to reduce their household's share of carbon dioxide emissions and help make a difference for the environment."

Marci J. Grossman is a communications professional and former journalist with nearly 25 years of broad experience. Grossman is currently a public relations consultant for Green Mountain Energy Company.

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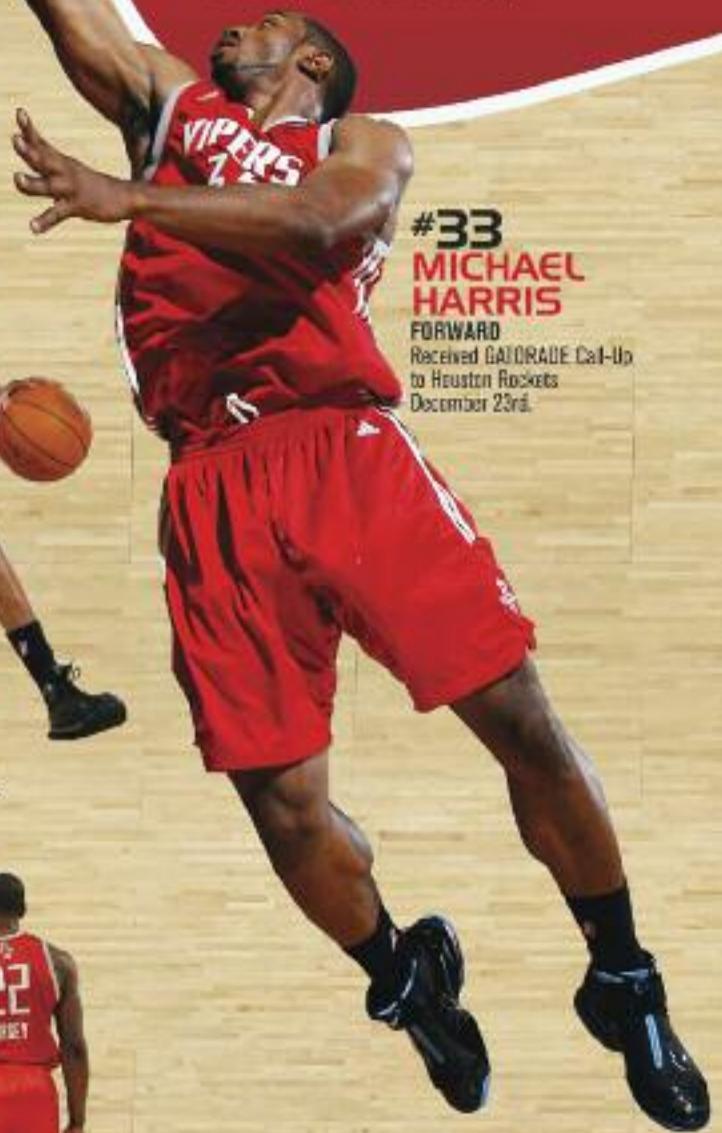
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