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AMFELS ECONOMIC IMPACT

Quick question: Who is the largest private sector manufacturing employer in the Rio Grande Valley? We are talking about a privately-held company, not a government entity, like a school district. Large agriculture operations don't count. Nor do maquiladora operations in Reynosa or Matamoros. The query could have some people scratching their heads,

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Education Spotlight

REYNA NAMED TO NIMS NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

In addition to being the first and only college in the entire state of Texas to earn the National Institute of Metalworking Skills Accreditation for its Precision Manufacturing Technology Program, now South Texas College can add a new accolade to its NIMS accomplishments. Mario Reyna, STC division dean of business and technology, was named to the organization's board of directors for a three year term beginning May 1, 2010.

As a member of the 20 member board, Reyna will help establish and refine skill standards, vote on certification of individual skills and accreditation of training programs.

"STC is focused on creating a high-skilled, technology based economy putting the Valley at the heart of rapid response manufacturing and our involvement with accrediting bodies like NIMS not only keeps us at the cutting-edge of industry, but gives us a competitive edge in recruiting new companies to our region," said Reyna. "Serving on this board will be a great honor

for me personally, but serves a larger purpose in providing the Valley a voice in a national program setting the stage for the rebirth of American manufacturing."

By earning NIMS accreditation, STC has met and exceeded national metalworking industry standards for quality of instruction, incorporation of important, high-level industry skills and overall safety. The college earned the NIMS accreditation for the standard five year period, engaging in a reaccreditation process in 2012.

For more information about NIMS visit www.nims-skills.org.



*Mario Reyna, STC division dean of business and technology.
(courtesy)*

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Cover: Numerous drilling rigs under construction at Brownsville yard. View from east side of the Brownsville Ship Channel. (courtesy photo)

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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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Business News

STC HOSTS ENTREPRENEUR SUMMIT

By Kevin Knoch

If you needed direction in your own business, South Texas College (STC) was the place to be April 21, 2010 when the college hosted the Rio South Texas Entrepreneurship Summit: Finding the Capital. The day-long event presented a number of speakers and forums of interest to those willing to take the plunge and start their own business.

One of the main events occurred early in the day when local businessman, Alonzo Cantu, spoke about his experiences and took questions from attendees. Cantu offered a wealth of business insight, drawing from his background in both residential and commercial construction as well as banking. He currently serves as the Chairman of the Board of Lone Star National Bank and is also credited with being a major player in the build-up of Doctor's Hospital at Renaissance in Edinburg.

Cantu is also known for his national political connections, having hosted fund raisers and a United States President (Bill Clinton) at his McAllen home. Cantu was disarming as he told his nationally known success story while stressing some of the simple things that are the secrets to achievement.

He emphasized how important planning is, revealing that he plans every day. His advice to those starting their own business was to "Make sure your plan is relevant to what you are going to be doing."

Dean of Business and Technology at STC, Mario Reyna, asked Cantu what type of jobs we should be training for in our area. Cantu replied, "We need to train for jobs that exist." Taking an example from a field he is familiar with, he pointed to the nursing profession. "It is a need. We require more nurses; we must train more nurses here."

Cantu was insightful when talking about how early life can prepare you for your later business career. When asked who his role models were 30 years ago, the builder quickly stated, "My parents. They had a lot of influence. They taught me how important education is." Adding how valuable the training he received on his first job in McAllen was, Cantu said, "My boss was strict, but fair. Taught us to be on time and do a full day's work."

Besides advice, there was also plenty of direction on what to do when starting a business, whether it is run from your garage or you are looking for major financing for a major medical project.

Business Banking Manager Brent Smith with Wells Fargo Bank in McAllen also spoke on how to

start your own business. He explained that there is a lot to do before you open your doors. "There are about five start-up tasks you have to do right away." The banker stressed the need to define what you are going to be doing; set out how you are going to handle your financing; make the time for all you have to do to get the business started. Construct a clear business plan, and secure enough financing to make sure your business has adequate funding to operate.

Smith emphasized the importance of credit. One's personal credit affects business credit, so it is definitely recommended to keep credit scores high.

After his presentation Smith, was asked if he thought the present business climate was good for beginning a new business. "I would say it probably isn't the best time. However, if you have the right idea and you are in a niche that needs to be filled, you can be every bit as successful as you can in good times."


The seminar also included a presentation for those who are inventors, or who need outside investors to finance their ideas beyond local bank funding. Executive Director Fernando Gonzalez of the Rio Tech



Cantu stated his parents were his role models 30 years ago. (courtesy)

Fund explained the rigors of searching for "Angel Investors" for inventions and high tech projects. Company start-ups often go through a multi-tiered review process. More information can be found at www.riotechfund.com.

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Cover Story

KEPPEL AMFELS LEADING ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTOR FOR RIO GRANDE VALLEY

By Kevin Knoch

Quick question: Who is the largest private sector manufacturing employer in the Rio Grande Valley? We are talking about a privately-held company, not a government entity, like a school district. Large agriculture operations don't count. Nor do maquiladora operations in Reynosa or Matamoros.

The query could have some people scratching their heads, as it might be hard to answer when you restrict it to manufacturing. In fact if you don't ever get over to the eastern edge of the RGV, you may not even know they exist. On the other hand, you can't help but be impressed just driving by their operation.

The answer is Keppel AmFELS, located at the Port of Brownsville. The company plays an integral part in the energy industry by building offshore drilling rigs for the oil and gas industry. This is a Valley company that is involved in a worldwide business, where a drilling rig made in Brownsville can just as easily be found off the coast of Louisiana, Angola, or Argentina. A Brownsville manufactured rig can be found working anywhere in the world.

Often you can see a number of rigs under construction as you travel on State Highway 48 between Port Isabel and Brownsville. Keppel AmFELS is located on the north end of the port abutting the Brownsville Ship Channel. The platforms and their towering legs climbing skyward are easily visible from the highway.

Keppel AmFELS presently employs 1,400 people. But that figure is down from 3,000 three years ago, according to company President G. S. Tan. Tan, a native of Singapore, is an engineer by training and has been working in Brownsville for 14 years. He pointed out, "You have to keep things in perspective. When the Brownsville shipyard opened 20 years ago, we had only 150 employees."

Keppel AmFELS' Brownsville operation is part of Keppel's larger network, headquartered in Singapore. The Brownsville facility is just one of Keppel's network of facilities suitably located and capable of manufacturing all types of drilling operations: drill ships, semi-submersible floating rigs, and jack-up rigs. They also do retro fit and remodeling work on drilling platforms. Jack-ups are used in shallow water operations, and the Brownsville yard has become known in the industry for excellent and on-time construction.



The offshore rig TUXPAN for the Mexican national oil company was christened in March in Brownsville. (courtesy)

Director of Data Services Joseph Triepke of RIGZONE Magazine and Web Site RIGZONE.com explains that jack-ups rigs are usually designed to work in depths of 300 to 400 feet of water. The weekly publication covers the exploration and production side of the oil and gas industry from Houston. Triepke explains that the demand for the jack-up rigs has improved since the slow down of 2008-2009. That is positive news for the RGV's Keppel AmFELS.

"Jack-ups are usually leased on one to two year contracts. The other segment, the floating rigs, are on longer term contracts -- three to seven year terms. When the big downturn came in '08-'09, all of the jack-ups were coming off contract left and right and going idle.

Triepke continued, "Actually the jack-up market is pretty stable. There are about 465 jack-up rigs in the world and about 70 percent of those are working right now. We have held that level for the last three to six months, and it has remained stable. A lot of folks think that demand is going to pick up over the next 12 to 24 months."

The RIGZONE analyst related, "In the Gulf of Mexico the jack-up rig count has recovered nicely. It was in the mid teens and now it has almost 40 units employed -- a real nice uptick in the Gulf of Mexico for jack-up rigs." Rig owners can generally command rental prices of \$85,000 to \$115,000 a day for the shallow water rigs in international markets.

RIGZONE'S Director of Data Services thinks the market will be good for jack-up rigs in the next

five years. "I think the prospects are relatively good, especially with crude oil hovering around \$80 to \$82 a barrel (mid March of 2010). You want to see that price stabilize in the 70 to 80 dollar range.

"There are plenty of shallow water prospects that make sense at levels much lower than that. As long as the outlook for the commodity market is positive, demand for jack-ups will likely continue to improve. You still have another 50 under construction worldwide at this point, but new orders have been few and far between lately."

The radical rocket-like price climb seen in crude prices in early July of 2008, when oil rose to over \$140 a barrel and then declined by well more than half, is not what the industry wants to see. Keppel AmFELS' Tan points out sharp price fluctuations are not welcome. "What people don't understand is our customers supply services to the oil industry. They make long term decisions involving billions of dollars of investments. The planning horizon is very long. More important for the industry is the stability of the price, not the absolute value of the price. If you have too much volatility, a lot of projects will be put on hold."

Fast-paced price shifts tend to slow down long-term projects, Tan emphasizes. A steady price is better. "We see increased inquiries and activity when the price has stabilized for a period of time."

While RIGZONE's Triepke sees the immediate future as good for jack-ups, Keppel AmFELS' Tan describes the last three years as boom times for the

Brownsville yard. “We have built 14 rigs in the last few years. We are not going to see that in the next few years or so.” The engineer did caution, “You can judge the oil and gas market only so far. We are often proven wrong when you go beyond three to five years. All we know is the market comes back.”

One industry expert thinks the jack-up sector may be over-supplied. ODS Petrodata covers the off-shore up-stream oil and gas industry world wide. Thomas E. Marsh is publisher and oversees ODS Petrodata publications in print and online from his Houston office. Marsh feels the jack-up rig market maybe overbuilt.

Marsh’s estimate of the total number of jack-ups is similar to RIGZONE’s. Marsh puts the number in the fleet at 459 around the world. “Out of that number, 312 are actually working right now. Since the beginning of 2008, we have had 56 rigs delivered. A number of the new ones don’t have work. We have another 60 rigs coming in the next eighteen months.”

Marsh pointed out that his company thinks the market is saturated. “Of the bulk of the rigs under construction, there are no commitments for 33 of them. They run the danger of coming out brand spanking new with nothing to do.” Marsh continued,

“This isn’t because of the financial crisis, or the collapse of oil prices a while back. We were saying there are too many jack-ups rigs on order even when oil was \$100 a barrel.”

The publisher was clear that this is not their feeling when it comes to rigs for deepwater drilling, an area he feels has very good prospects in the near future for exploration in the Western Gulf of Mexico. “We are very positive about the deep water Gulf of Mexico market and its future. International oil companies perceive a long term value in the investment in the U. S. Gulf, particularly in the deep water. It is also an indicator of the size of companies with the expertise needed to develop these fields. That is why you see companies like British Petroleum and Amerada Hess taking an interest in the arena.”

Tan related that Keppel AmFELS has work planned. “We have work in the pipeline. We still have four rigs to complete. It is not all a doomsday projection, but we have to work very hard to sign up new orders.”

One major oil player may be sending jack-up work to Keppel AmFELS in the future. PEMEX, is not only close by but in fact is right next door. The last rig to come off the line and be christened at the

G. S. Tan is Keppel AmFELS President and Chief Executive Officer. He has been working in Brownsville for 14 years. (courtesy)



Brownsville yard in March was for a Mexican customer. Keppel AmFELS has refurbished a number of rigs for U. S. customers working for PEMEX.

There are a number of reasons for PEMEX’s continued interest in jack -up rigs. The company doesn’t have the equipment and expertise to work in the deep water of the Gulf of Mexico, a drawback that could leave them out of the current increased deepwater activity in the Gulf.

But supplies of oil and gas are still needed by Mexico. RIGZONE’s Triepke thinks PEMEX is going





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to continue to be a player in the shallow-water rig market. If rumblings in the exploration industry in mid-March prove to be true, PEMEX could soon be ready to place an order for more rigs.

“We understand they are ready to come to market with a requirement for three to five jack-up rigs. We have heard they are trying to target higher spec rigs that can work in a little deeper water, and they are looking to upgrade their fleet.”

Triepeke stated PEMEX in the past had often ordered mat supported rigs. Explaining, he said, “Imagine a large table mat laid on the ocean floor and the rig settling on a relatively flat surface. Very few ocean floors have smooth surfaces across the world, but many are located in the U.S. Gulf and Mexican waters.

“Historically, you have seen them order that kind of unit. they are trying to get what is called independent leg units. Each leg can be independently adjusted to the surface. The rigs are very versatile. What we understand is PEMEX will be targeting more of that kind of rig.”

The RIGZONE forecaster added, “Those are similar to what Keppel FELS is building (using the name of Keppel AmFELS’ parent company). Keppel FELS down there in Brownsville has actually been

building some powerful drilling units for Rowan (drilling company, recent Keppel AmFELS customer) -- very high spec rigs.

“We have heard PEMEX has been targeting some of these higher spec rigs.” He did caution, however, “There has been a lot of chatter and rumors over their requirements. Obviously, they have to go through the budgetary process and get approval. Their precise needs are generally pretty cloudy until the document comes out.”

The company has been looking into diversified projects. Tan related they have been talking to offshore wind farm developers. Each turbine would need a platform for support in the water. The company president has been in talks with developers of the Cape Cod project and the farms planned off the Texas coast, including the one at nearby South Padre Island.

Brownsville Navigation District Port Director Eddie Campriano points out that Keppel AmFELS is a major contributor in the area. The company leases land from the district. “Their impact is huge for the region. When they are blowing and going, they are the largest private sector employer in the region.”

Campriano continued, “They aren’t a minimum wage employer. They hire a lot of highly paid skilled labor, and they employ a lot of professional labor.



Aerial photo of the Ocean Valiant Drilling rig built at the Brownsville yard. (courtesy)

Just don't consider the direct employment of Keppel AmFELS as they also work with sub contractors that support them. The impact on employment and wages is large when you count the direct and indirect impact of the company on our community.”

Keppel AmFELS President Tan is also pleased with the company’s contributions to Brownsville and Cameron County. “We do a lot of charity work. We have consistently been the biggest contributor to the United Way for about 10 years now.” Tan added that he was especially proud of the funds raised by the annual Keppel AmFELS golf tournament over the last several years.

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Business News

FAIR HIRING PRACTICES FOR BEGINNERS

By Helen Escobar

South Texas College's Human Resources Specialist Program recently hosted an event to discuss fair hiring practices for beginners. But why spend time on this issue?

"Very simple – many people don't understand the law," said Jeff Heavin, interim chair of the program who has worked in HR for more than 14 years. "It's not just about ethics, it's about legalities. Many small business people think that if they do what's right and pay taxes, they are covered, but that leaves them open to all kinds of trouble. Knowing the law is the most important first step in establishing sound HR hiring practices."

All employers of 15 or more employees should be familiar with all major legislation, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination Act of 1967, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Acts of 1973 and the Equal Pay Act. The acts protect individuals by ensuring they are treated fairly, have the same consideration for job opportunities and prevents them from being disqualified from employment based on race, color, gender, age, national origin and disability. They level the playing field for all members of society.

How do you ensure you are not violating these acts? One simple step is including an equal employment opportunity notice in all job postings on your Web site and, when possible, in print. You might also consider including a statement of your compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Where can you advertise your positions? There are many more outlets that you may have been aware of, including your in-house company bulletin board, chambers of commerce, employment agencies, the Texas Workforce Commission, through colleges and universities, minority-affiliated organizations, the local newspaper and Internet employment sites. Posting to a variety of outlets ensures you have a wide variety of candidates in your application pool.

When it comes to putting together an applicant packet, there are many considerations. Make sure you request employment history covering the past seven to 10 years. And ask for a certification of truth that the information provided is accurate. You also need to be up front about requests for background checks, drug testing and any other required physical exams. Provide space for applicants to sign if they are willing to submit to this testing. These statements will weed out unqualified applicants.

Once you have established your applicant packet, advertised your position and are receiving applications, track applicants so that no packet falls through the cracks. A spreadsheet is a great way to track packets. One suggestion

for a spreadsheet set up is to include the applicant name, the date the position opened, the date the packet was received, and how the applicant heard about the opening. You will also want to track applicant status, meaning if they were interviewed, when the interview was and when they received a letter of rejection or an offer letter.

"One big mistake companies make is not thoroughly documenting the hiring process," added Heavin. "Lack of documentation can open your company up to a variety of legal problems if applicants feel slighted. You must also be cautious in ensuring the entire interview process is fair."

When interviewing candidates, it's a good idea to write out questions ahead of time and use the same questions for each candidate, as well as to include people from across your company to make up a hiring panel. The panel can help talk through the decision and make a sound judgment as a team. It's also very important to keep all of the records from the interview process, including the list of interviewers, the list of questions, and each interviewer's notes.

Now that you have selected a candidate, it's time to make an offer. If you make a verbal offer, clearly explain



South Texas College held a Fair Hiring Practices seminar April 9, 2010. (courtesy)

the salary and any contingencies. Written offers should explain the salary, any contingencies and include the expiration date of the offer.

For more information and tips on fair hiring practices contact Heavin at 956-872-6226.

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Feature Story

INTERNATIONAL RAIL BRIDGE GROUNDBREAKING IN MAY

By Kevin Knoch

It has been a busy period for bridges across the river in the Rio Grande Valley recently. The long anticipated Anzalduas Bridge opened before Christmas of 2009, shortening travel time from Monterrey, Mexico, to the Mission/McAllen area. A new short span will soon be opened for vehicle traffic between Donna and Rio Bravo in late June or early July of 2010.

As if two bridge openings in less than a year is not enough, there is yet another one on the horizon.

This one is just beginning and probably won't be completed for a year and a half. But this one is different on several counts. It won't accommodate vehicles or pedestrians, and there won't be the toll booths that are common on international crossings. The new crossing will be the first of its kind connecting the United States and Mexico in the last century.

The new bridge is the Cameron County West Rail Bridge, which will be located along US Highway 281 (far west Brownsville crossing in the San Pedro area). The rail-



David Alex serves as chairman of the Cameron County Regional Mobility Authority, the CCRMA has been working on the planning of the West Brownsville Rail Bridge. (courtesy)

only span will connect the Kansas City Southern de México tracks with the Union Pacific switching yard located east of Expressway 77/83 in Olmito. If this project doesn't ring a bell for Cameron County residents, maybe this will.

The words West Rail Relocation Project will perk up the residents of Brownsville. The project will also have a positive effect on traffic patterns in Brownsville's sister city, Matamoros, Mexico. For nearly a decade county leaders have worked to have rail lines and switching yards moved out of downtown Brownsville and Harlingen. Started under former County Judge Gilberto Hinojosa's administration, the project's goal was to eliminate long waits as freight trains passed through rail crossings in the cities and county.

Hand in hand with the track and yard relocation is the building of a steel two-track bridge on the edge of west Brownsville. According to David Garcia, deputy county administrator for Cameron County, work on the new switching yard expansion is a little ahead of the new rail bridge. "The ground breaking for the yard will probably take place in early May." The bridge start-up will follow shortly afterward in June or July. Garcia related that some last minute arrangements for permits are being wrapped up, and the contractor for the bridge will be announced soon.

Cameron County has an experienced international bridge executive working on the rail bridge. You would have to look far and wide to equal Cameron County Administrator Pete Sepulveda's background when it comes to building bridges. Sepulveda's first crossing project was at Pharr, followed by work on the Eagle Pass Bridge. After joining Cameron County, he headed up the East Brownsville's



Union Pacific will own the new bridge, and the Port of Brownsville will be one of the bridge's biggest customers. (courtesy)

Veteran's Bridge project.

Even with Sepulveda's experience, the rail bridge presented some unique hurdles. "Normally with international bridges you charge a toll. You're able to fund the project through revenue bonds. On this bridge, we will not own it. (Union Pacific will.) We won't have toll revenue. It has been difficult getting state, federal and local funds committed to the project. But we were able to do it, and now the project is fully funded."

Sepulveda, who has been on the project since day one in 2001, reminds us that the longer a bridge project takes, the more changes occur in government administrations. An international crossing will be affected by changes in the governments and sub-entities of two countries.

"We have gone through three mayors in Brownsville and four in Matamoros. Not having that continuity can hurt a project, but we have been successful because we have been persistent and have done a good job of keeping the different administrations abreast of the status of the project." New personnel changes in federal and state government in the last nine years also had to be brought up to date on project developments.

Another unique aspect of the project is that both railroads and the Texas Department of Transportation have been involved in every change and step of the way because of public funding issues. Sepulveda added, "There have been a lot of partners in the project and a lot of coordination. Anything we do in the U.S. has a similar process on the

An advertisement for Sara's Pharmacy Gift Corner. The top half features a photograph of a man and a woman smiling together. The man is holding a bouquet of flowers. The text "Mothers Day SALE" is written in a decorative font. Below the photo, there is a list of gift items: "Choose from: Mary Francis Handbags, Beijo Handbags, Harley Davidson Handbags, Jewelry, Journey of Grace Angels, Willow Tree Figurines, Jim Stone Figurines, Perfume, Picture Frames, Circle E Candles and so much more." The Sara's Pharmacy logo is at the bottom left. The bottom of the ad has an orange background with white text: "1300 S. Bryan, Ste 101 Mission • 583-0404 www.saraspharmacy.com".

Mexican side. It has been slow and complex because of the number of agencies involved.” Cameron County’s top administrator pointed out the bridge builders have had 40 technical meetings in the last four to five years.

Sepulveda stressed that working on aligning the tracks in two countries was also a task. Tracks and yards are being relocated from urban downtowns, including Matamoros, to rural areas. The change for drivers and local traffic is considerable.

“On the United States side we are removing 14 grade railroad crossings that are crossed daily by approximately 500,000 vehicles. On the Mexican side they are losing about eight crossings. All of the rail in downtown Matamoros will be coming out.”

Sepulveda related the construction contracts will be awarded in mid-May for both sides of the project. He believes the ground breaking will be held in June, and he expects the construction work to take about 15 months, once started. County documents show the cost of Cameron County’s share of the project should run to approximately \$35 million. A recent funding source for the project was the newly passed stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which contributed \$7.8 million.

Considering the complexities of putting the rail bridge project together, Cameron County hasn’t been going at alone. They have partners, including the Cameron County

Regional Mobility Authority (CCRMA) and the City of Brownsville. “The Regional Mobility Authority (RMA) has worked as a partner throughout,” stated Sepulveda.

Harlingen resident and RMA Chairman David E. Alex affirmed that the project has been around for 10 to 15 years, when talks started in earnest. He related the RMA became involved about six or seven years ago, when much of the routing planning and right of way work was complete.

“The goal was to get the crossings out of the cities. The thrust was to move the track out of the cities and have industrial parks develop near the new yards in Mexico and the United States.” Alex added the RMA recently purchased its last piece of property for the project. When all is said and done, Alex estimated the total project will run about \$100 million, including work on both sides of the river.

What about the Brownsville and Matamoros Bridge (B&M Bridge) that accommodates the rail connection now? The bridge in downtown Brownsville will continue as a major vehicle crossing, but after just over 100 years of rail service, the trains will no longer run on that bridge once the West Rail Bridge is active. Bridge President Jose Galvan related, “There has been talk of a tourist train to continue, but that is all in the future.”


The biggest user of the new rail bridge, beside Union Pacific, will be the Port of Brownsville. The trip for trains

in and out of the port to the border will be shorter when the new bridge is open. The trains from the port will follow the same route to Olmito, but instead of turning south and heading nearly 15 miles to the B&M Bridge in the center of Brownsville, they will go a little further west and cross into Mexico in vicinity of San Pedro on US Highway 281.




Brownsville Port Director Eddie Campirano emphasized, “The new bridge is going to be very important to the Port of Brownsville. It will save travel time, and that is important to our customers financially.”

Cameron County Judge Carlos Cascos enumerates the benefits for Cameron County. “It is going reduce the congestion we have on our downtown city streets and reduce pollution in the city. It is going to be much safer after we have removed 14 crossings.”

On the economic development front Cascos stressed: “It is going to shorten the trip between Brownsville and Monterrey by an hour and a half. That is going to spur some economic development. I’ve said it before... government doesn’t create jobs, but we do bring into existence an environment that is conducive for job creation. This is one of those components of creating an environment that is going to expedite the transportation of goods and service. Transportation feeds commerce, and that is how jobs are created and good things happen.”



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Business Spotlight

ENERGY SAVER PRODUCTS WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE BOTTOM LINE

By Adolfo Pesquera

Mike Johnson, a Port Isabel resident, took the initiative recently to significantly reduce his carbon footprint.

When Johnson opted to build a home in the Pirate's Cove subdivision, he went with a solar panel installation that all but eliminated his utility bill. Through the month of March, he had five air conditioners going to cool a 3,000-square-foot living space on a home that maxes out at 7,500 square feet.

The cool air kept his contractors comfy while they did the finish out, and Johnson waited optimistically for his utility bill.

"The March bill came to \$2.22. I'm very pleased with that," Johnson said.

Johnson first considered wind power. But he wanted a return on investment within the first three

to four years. Wind power didn't come close, but solar did, he said.

Then there was maintenance to consider. But solar panels operate passively. There are no moving parts to wear out.

"It should function well for at least 10 years here," he said. "The only regular maintenance issue is dust getting on the glass panels. I'll need to spray them down once in awhile with a garden hose."

Across the Rio Grande Valley, as throughout the nation, more people are discovering sustainable energy alternatives. There are passive solar water heaters, newer and better insulating roof deck panels, a variety of low-energy window systems, affordable geothermal systems for cooling, bigger and better rain capture tanks and more.



Solar panels on roof of Port Isabel home, reducing the need for public energy (A. Pesquera)

And general contractors are adapting to a more demanding public when it comes to energy efficiency.

Scott Finney of Shamrock Builder in Port Isabel had his crew do the Johnson installation. But Shamrock Builder started out as a roofing and remodeling company. Solar panel and wind turbine installations are services the company only started offering a year ago.

"We trained the existing staff and added some new people," Finney said. "We have guys trained to do specific jobs. One team installs the rails, another brings up the solar panels, and an electrician hooks up the service. We went from four people on staff to eight, plus our carpenters."

Shamrock Builders do a turnkey project. Customers do not have to scout around for other subcontractors to finish some aspect of the project. And Finney has the advantage of a good relationship with Gianluca Ferrario, an Italian immigrant who helped train Finney's staff and oversees the projects.

A mechanical engineer, Ferrario moved to the United States in 2001 to help General Motors get a steering wheel manufacturing plant into production in Brownsville. Once the plant was up and running, Ferrario stayed to run it for six years. At that point, he decided to start a photovoltaic solar panel business.

He designs and oversees installation of solar and wind power systems for residential and commercial properties. To date, Johnson's house has been his largest residential project.

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"We certified it as an Energy Star home," Ferrario said. "It was a big project. We added a deck because the panels did not all fit on the roof."

One of Ferrario's more lasting accomplishments, he hopes, will be the installation he recently completed on the roof of the Electrical Engineering Department and University of Texas-Pan American.

"I designed that in a way that students can interact with the system," Ferrario said. "They can experiment with it in a laboratory, run tests using currently that comes directly from the solar panels or from the storage in the battery array."

A strong proponent of education, Ferrario not only does installations for profit but advocates the training of technicians and engineers in the fields of sustainable power. He helped UT-Brownsville win a grant from the State Energy Conservation Office to build systems on university property that will provide 100 kilowatts of solar power and 100 kilowatts of wind power.

Ferrario's office is in the ITEC (formerly Amigoland Mall) the university's tech center. And he's become an integral part of the center's ambitions as a center for information and development of green systems.

Ray Henry, another tech-savvy energy efficiency expert, got into energy auditing and insulation products several years ago after four decades marketing aloe vera products. His product of choice is an aluminum-based radiant barrier used in attics to reflect 97 percent of the sun's heat.

"I started using this material in 1966," Henry said of the pliant aluminum sheets.

Henry used to live in Florida and worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He worked on developing the lunar landing module and the material was then developed to protect module components from unmerciful sun rays in

space.

"It's two pieces of aluminum sewn together with milar thread. You cannot tear the material. It goes under the roofing deck, or flat atop the existing insulation in the attic, then stapled. It has small holes that allow for the escape of water vapor, so there's no problem with mold."

Henry became a state certified energy auditor. And in situations where energy losses are due to poor roofing insulation - a common occurrence - Henry proposes use of his product. However, Henry finds many other issues in homes that require customers to seek solutions elsewhere.

He may refer people to contractors that do solar screen installations, or suggest they simply dump an old appliance for a more energy efficient one at a nearby department store.

It isn't all retrofit work, either. Henry also works with new home builders to help them design more energy efficient houses.

One might think, with the fierce South Texas summers and growing public awareness, that there would be more demand for these products, but Henry hasn't seen them take off, yet.

"In the Valley, I have one competitor that I'm aware of," Henry said. "We had three last year; two

went out of business."

It may be, however, that the Valley is simply lagging behind the rest of the state and will soon catch up, he offered.


"Radiant barrier insulation products are catching fire in San Antonio," he said. "It's all over the place in Dallas."



Panels on roof of Building at UTPA. (A. Pesquera)



Aluminum foil deflects heat from attic. (courtesy)


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Business Update

ANNUAL ECONOMIC FORECAST SEEKING SUPPORT

By Kevin Knoch

The germ of the idea began in California. One University of Texas/Pan American (UT/PA) professor wanted the university and the Rio Grande Valley to be on par with other areas of the country. What finance professor Dr. Gokce Soydemir desired for UT/PA and the region was a recognized annual economic estimate containing area-specific financial information.

"I was aware of these reports being done elsewhere in the country like California State University Fullerton and UCLA," stated Soydemir. He pointed out the Los Angeles based state school and the Fullerton state branch produced yearly monetary analyses. "UCLA has a project called UCLA Forecast, and Cal State Fullerton has a project for the Orange County area. They have an institute of Environmental and Economic Studies at Cal State Fullerton. I taught there for a while," acknowledged the professor.

Soydemir observed that the reports were generating quite a bit of money for the school. "I found out recently

as much as \$300,000." The money was raised through sales of the report, alumni networking, selling sponsorships and advertising. "Often as many as 3,000 people would attend the presentation of the report."

The South Texas Border Region Business Outlook & Forecast, released in February of 2010, isn't the first document prepared by Soydemir and his fellow author Andres Bello, a PhD. student with the Program of Business Administration/Finance at UT/PA. In fact this is the sixth annual report that has been produced. Soydemir said the work is done on their own time and uncompensated. "It takes about five months to compile the information and about a month to put it together."

Soydemir thinks the Rio Grande Valley financial and development community needs to recognize and accept a report with a local fiscal focus. "Funding raised would go to support student research, support scholarship, and the monies would go back to the school and encourage a networking platform for the alumni. Those are the advantages reaped by the California schools," he emphasized.

When he came to the Valley there was no report

based on statistics or forecasts. What was available was subjective. "Some companies and banks would invite people from other parts of the nation to speak," observed Professor Soydemir. "Individuals would come here and provide their own personal subjective assessment. They can paint a picture that is somewhat biased. We are a third party that doesn't have any vested interest. We are statistics-based and very objective. We tell it as it is. Sometimes good news sometimes bad news, but that is how the forecasts are."

The UT/PA annual forecast isn't produced in a vacuum. The report is broken down into four main sections. Soydemir and Bello lay out the state of the national economy and predict trends for the coming year. The same method is applied to the state's financial system. The longest section of the forecast report is devoted to the Texas Border region. Reinforcing the theory that everything is all related, the analysis concludes with an economic outlook for Mexico.

The professor points out the necessity to remain informed about developments in other markets and to con-

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Authors of the report
Graduate student Andres
Bello and Dr. Gokce
Soydemir of UTPA.
(courtesy)

Bill Martin also serves as the Rio South Texas Economic Council chairman.

Martin is straightforward in his evaluation of the Soydemir/Bello report for use by the regional economic development coalition.

“Yes, the information included in the report is valuable to us in our effort to promote Rio South Texas as a region

which continues to evolve.” Martin continued, “A major purpose of the Rio South Texas Economic Council is to show the power of the region, including the border cities in Mexico.”

Martin went on to stress the strength of the local

stantly update their information. He conceded that subsequent reports have not been as time consuming as the original report. Exposure for the annual work is one of his goals.

Soydemir feels it is time to take the work beyond the presentation stage. He wants Valley businessmen to become interested in the report and to look forward to its publication. “Everyone is going to benefit from it,” he believes. Speaking about the luncheon where the report is unveiled, Soydemir says, “It is not only an occasion to announce the report, it is a forum, a networking opportunity to get a marketing consensus.” The name could be shortened to help brand the work. “It could be called the UT/PA Forecast.”

The Turkish-born professor related he trying to acquire more funding for his work, not only for compilation, but also for promotion. He mentioned the positive response the report has received when presented in the past at groups like Lions’ Clubs or The Rio Grande Valley Partnership. “Right now it is a struggle on both fronts. I never thought it would be this difficult.”

One key entry into the local economic community would be through local economic development corporations. Soydemir related that his department had distributed the report to area EDCs last year. Economic development promoters should be happy to receive specific economic information about their cities as the report can be used to promote the Rio Grande Valley to those outside the area who have shown an interest in possibly relocating to the region.

Over a year ago, the Rio South Texas Economic Council was created to promote the Rio Grande Valley as a region and to present the four county area as one economic entity. Harlingen EDC Chief Executive Officer

population numbers. “By promoting the area as a region with 1.2 million people on the U. S. side and 2.1 million people in the Mexico border cities, we think we’ll be able to get considered for some of the ‘mega-projects’ that usually only look at major metro areas.”

The EDC executive commented the report provides a perspective of our region as a whole that is often hard to find. “A lot of the information is available on a city-wide or county-wide basis, but putting it together region-wide helps to give a better picture of our regional economy. I think this information is very valuable. It would be wonderful if we had access to similar information on the Mexico side as well.”

Pedro Salazar, who took over the leadership of the Edinburg Economic Development Corporation late last year, stated that the UT/PA report does fill one need of RGV EDC’s. “It is so hard to find the region-specific information. The Dallas Federal Reserve, for example, conducts a lot of reports on the border, but for some reason they miss the Valley. Sometimes Valley specific information is hard to find.”

For information about the report or to obtain a copy, contact the College of Business at the University of Texas/Pan American by calling (956) 381-3368, or email Professor Soydemir at Soydemir@utpa.edu.

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Business Evolution

CASA DE NOVIA USES PATIENCE AND BEAUTIFUL GOWNS TO TRANSFORM A BUSINESS

By Eileen Mattei

Two years ago, America Blanco Gonzalez bought Casa de Novia, the Harlingen bridal gown and specialty gown shop her grandmother Ninfa Salinas had started in 1970. The third generation owner had no intention of running the business the same way her mother and grandmother had. While helping the dreams of 15-year-old girls and brides-to-be come true, America Gonzalez is seeing her own dreams come true as well.

Gonzalez has doubled the store's sales in two years and intends to do even better. Today Casa de Novia is a fantasy land of colorful quinceanera gowns invitingly displayed. The initial attraction is the shop's \$599 Quinceanera Package: the girl's dress, free alterations, matching shoes, a tiara, petticoat rental and more.

"People are shopping for good deals. They

want all the colors to match and to have every thing coordinate with their theme. You have to have patience," Gonzalez said. Her patience has resulted in soaring sales as satisfied customers bring in their nieces, sisters, cousins and friends for their bridal and quinceanera gowns.

One busy Monday afternoon, a steady stream of customers flowed through the store. Gonzalez gave her full attention to a bride-to-be whose attention was captured by a sample wedding dress, except

the young woman didn't like a grouping of bows. "We have two seamstresses here and do free alterations. It would be easy to alter the dress," Gonzalez said. She referred the bride to the supplier's website for an early glimpse of soon-to-arrive gown choices, mentioning that fitted wedding gowns take up to three months to arrive.

But it's the popularity of quinceaneras that has driven the phenomenal growth of her business. A family group--- grandmother, mother, honoree, aunt sister, and cousin-- arrived to observe a gown fitting and, of course, offer their opinions. Gonzalez entered the large fitting with the girl who soon emerged transformed and glowing in a silver and black gown with a skirt billowy with petticoats. A seamstress appeared to mark changes on the straps and measure for a shoulder-covering bolero to be worn in the church. Gonzalez showed the family how to achieve the ideal fluffiness of the petticoats and answered all their questions without seeming rushed, despite being short-handed this day with customers waiting patiently for her.

"We always treat customers with respect and listen to what their needs are. They are spending



A bride to be discusses wedding gown with America Gonzalez at Casa de Novia. (Mattei)

a lot of money, so we are very up front with them on what the costs are," Gonzalez said. "We're hands on all the time. We really, really, enjoy doing quinceaneras and seeing new styles in dresses come in. Girls see it as their special day. Everyone leaves here satisfied."

Gonzalez noted that quinceaneras have become competitive, with friends becoming rivals for the most beautiful gown and the event with the most unusual theme. She assisted a teen with her quinceanera gown so the girl is picture perfect before she goes off to sit for her portrait which will appear on the event invitation. A photo album of local girls dressed in lovely gowns is on display. The shop deals with a single gown supplier whose sales rep informed Gonzalez that her shop ranks as one of the busiest in the Valley.

The surge in quinceanera sales has meant an increase in employees. Gonzalez's husband Reynaldo, who works with the Cameron County Sheriff's Department, also lends his administrative skills on his days off, the sole male in a sea of femininity. Still

What is in?

Doing business in Harlingen.

Aloe Laboratories, a producer of health drinks sold in the U.S., Japan and Europe, recently completed a major expansion in Harlingen, Texas.

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the young owner foresees adding more staff as she turns her merchandising and customer care skills to the bridal market. Casa de Novia recently completed a spacious fitting room for brides-to-be with mirrors on three walls and comfortable chairs for the bride's entourage. "This year our goal is to take good care of our brides."

More women entered the shop, one to pick up a mother-of-the-bride dress that needed alternations. Along with numerous alterations, the head seamstress sometimes creates original quinceanera and bridal gowns. Beside her, the junior seamstress is making a Last Doll that matches a girl's gown. Another customer, Elida Garza, said, "I saw her decorations at a quinceanera we went to last weekend. They were beautiful."

As girls, Gonzalez and her sister learned floral decoration and bouquet making while working with their mother. Last year the shop began offering decorating services for weddings and quinceaneras and Gonzalez has become very successful in that arena, too. The shop has two events booked for most weekends in the next 10 months.

And there's more. Casa de Novia is catering to the new Cinconera market, dressy events honoring a five-year-old and usually hosted by the grandparents. And Gonzalez's mother and grandmother have opened a gift shop next door to her called Sister Got Your Purse.

America Gonzalez and Casa de Novia share a vision: making dreams come true.



America Gonzalez helps a customer prepare for her quinceanera portrait. (Mattei)



A Casa de Novia seamstress creates a girl's Last Doll that matches her gown. (Mattei)



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Business Profile

IDEA CHARTER SCHOOLS...THE RIGHT IDEA?

By Kevin Knoch

When school starts next fall, four new educational facilities will be added to their number, bringing the total to 16. In 10 years the student enrollment has grown from 150 to nearly 7,000. Are we talking about a fast growing school district in the suburbs of a major city?

No! We are talking about IDEA Public Schools in the Rio Grande Valley. The Weslaco-based charter school was started in Donna 10 years ago.

There will be two new schools each in Pharr and Alamo for the next year because of recent accelerated growth. In 2007, there were six IDEA Public Schools. Even then, Chief Executive Officer and Founder Tom Torkelson was confidently predicting 22 schools by 2012. Opening 10 new schools in the past three years is, indeed, quite an accomplishment.

Charter schools are public schools, and there is no tuition as they receive state and federal funding. They do not, however, receive local school property tax funding. IDEA Public Schools and other charter schools have to make up the \$1,000 to \$1,500 per student, per year, that other public schools receive from their share of local property taxes.

When IDEA opens a campus, two schools are built on the

property. The schools are broken down K thru 5th grade and 6th thru 12th, with IDEA believing that the ideal enrollment number is 1,200 per campus. Other IDEA campuses are located in Brownsville, San Benito, San Juan, Mission and McAllen/Edinburg. Plans call for a possible Weslaco campus in the near future.

The growth has been extraordinary and noteworthy. In the last three years the student population will have more than doubled from 2,800 in 2007 to nearly 7,000 by the start of the 2010-2011 school year. Just as impressive as the growth numbers is the fact that IDEA Public Schools has an active list of 10,000 students waiting to enroll at their campuses.

What is IDEA doing that has sparked this growth and attracted students? Torkelson stresses it is a combination of things that makes IDEA Public Schools different.

"We have the same demographics everyone else has. We have a few more students per classroom. It is dozens of little things we do at IDEA that all add up to making a big difference." Torkelson, a native of Ohio who now calls the Valley and Texas home, enumerated some of those things IDEA does.

"We have a longer school day, a longer school year and Saturday school. Students are always expected to turn in high quality work. The only courses we offer are college prep courses. It

is all about raising the expectations for all students, and it has made an enormous difference."

The emphasis on college preparation is evident in another area: IDEA's track record. "We have had three consecutive years when every one of our graduates has been accepted into a four year college. They have matriculated, attended classes regularly, and 95 percent of our graduates have persisted by staying in college. That puts our graduates on a par with the most competitive elite public or private schools anywhere in America," Torkelson emphasized.

The first crop of IDEA college graduates receives their diplomas next year. One student, John Sanchez from Donna, is graduating early from college this year as he has been accepted by the Teach For America Program (one of 5,000 out of 50,000 applicants). He will be teaching next school year on an IDEA campus.

Another key way IDEA demonstrates to the students the importance of attending college is through visiting various colleges. Torkelson related many of the students are the first in their family to attend college. "By the time our students are seniors they have visited 25 colleges or universities." This number of visits rivals or surpasses the amount of recruiting visits blue chip athletes often receive. The superintendent pointed out the visits for IDEA students often start during their middle school years.

When asked if there was an area he would like to see improved, Torkelson answered, "We have about 10 percent of our students who choose to leave IDEA every year. We are making a concerted effort to cut that number in half. There are things we can do to improve our retention rate." The charter school has been recognized for its work. Torkelson declared, "Our students here in the Valley are challenging nationwide people's assumptions about what is possible to achieve in our region."

He supported his statement by stating: "Bill Gates gives an annual address on education and he pointed to IDEA Public schools as an example of what is possible. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan, speaking last summer at the National Charter School Conference, singled out IDEA Public Schools by name. The Washington Post ran an opinion piece in January of this year talking about the massive challenges facing our nation's education system. They talked about IDEA Public Schools in the Rio Grande Valley and said if they can do it in South Texas, they can do it anywhere."

Back to that funding gap IDEA needs to address every year. Torkelson explains that this year alone over \$5,000,000 of the money is raised from private foundations and donations. IDEA does hold one local fund raising event a year in the RGV. The charter school founder related he hopes to raise "hundreds of thousands of dollars" through the gala scheduled for May 20th in Mission.

Much of the money raised at the local event goes to financing student college visits. And much of the total comes from the generosity of local event sponsors. For more information about this year's gala, please call 377-8000.

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Health News

FIRST "NANO KNIFE" CANCER PROCEDURE PERFORMED AT VALLEY BAPTIST IN HARLINGEN

By Michael Swartz

A new treatment for cancer patients – which kills cancer cells with electricity while not harming surrounding healthy tissue – has been performed for the first time in the state of Texas at Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen.

Dr. Daniel A. Fuentes, Interventional Radiologist with Valley Radiologists & Associates, P.A., performed the state's first "NanoKnife" procedure which uses electricity – instead of heat or freezing temperatures -- to destroy cancer cells. Valley Baptist is only the seventh hospital in the entire nation to offer the new procedure – with the closest other hospitals being in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Little Rock, Arkansas.

The first patient, Mr. Joseph Wanja, a 68-year-old Brownsville resident, was recovering and doing well following the procedure at Valley Baptist on March 30. The man was only the fourth lung cancer patient in the United States to benefit from the new technology – and Valley Baptist is only the second hospital in the country to perform a lung procedure with the NanoKnife.

Dr. Fuentes also treated a second patient, this one a Hispanic male in his fifties with a liver tumor, on March 31 at Valley Baptist with the NanoKnife. The second patient has also returned home and is doing well.

"This minimally-invasive procedure with the NanoKnife, using Irreversible Electroporation, or IRE, generates an electric current to treat tumor cells in a way that has not been done before," Dr. Fuentes said. The benefit to the patient is that in many cases the surrounding tissue, blood vessels, and organs are left in place and still functioning.

Dr. Fuentes added that since the NanoKnife is a minimally-invasive technique – performed through small needle sticks – there are no incisions.

"In some cases, this technology is an alternative to surgery," Dr. Fuentes said. "The procedure is done with anesthesia, so the patient doesn't feel any pain. With many patients, we're talking about a faster recovery, with less discomfort, and fewer side effects." Some patients treated with the NanoKnife require a brief stay in the hospital, while others are able to go home within 24 hours.

Dr. Fuentes – who is a graduate of the John Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland -- said the precisely-targeted electric pulses may be thought of as "molecular surgery" ... at the level of the cell. "All that the electricity does is to create tiny holes in cell membranes – causing the cells to die," he said.

"Nanotechnology" refers to the technology involved in working on a microscopic level – as small as individual

molecules and atoms. So the "NanoKnife" isn't actually a knife -- but an electric field – that can be precisely targeted to "poke" tiny holes in tumor cells, while not affecting adjacent organs.

Dr. Todd Shenkenberg, an oncologist with Valley Cancer Associates in Harlingen, who referred the first NanoKnife patient, said that in many cases, the new technology will also benefit Valley patients and families by allowing them to stay in the Valley when they need treatment -- instead of having to travel to distant cities such as Houston. Dr. Nabeel Sarhill, also an oncologist with Valley Cancer Associates, referred the second NanoKnife patient.

"Valley Baptist is pleased to bring this exciting new technology to the Valley and to the state of Texas for the benefit of our patients," added James Eastham, CEO for Valley Baptist. "As Valley Baptist prepares to celebrate our 85th anniversary of serving this community, this cutting-edge procedure represents yet another in a long line of 'firsts' for our dedicated physicians and staff."

For more information on the NanoKnife, contact your physician, call (956) 389-1842, and visit www.ValleyBaptist.net.



Dr. Daniel A. Fuentes, right, Interventional Radiologist with Valley Radiologists & Associates, P.A., performed the first "NanoKnife" cancer procedure in the state of Texas on a 68-year-old Valley man at Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen. (courtesy)

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History & Heritage

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE IN THIS RAILROAD STORY

By Kevin Knoch

We've been running photos (notice our April 2010 cover) and writing (see the November 2009 issue) about railroads. In this issue we have a feature about an upcoming ground breaking for a railroad bridge across the Rio Grande in west Brownsville. The project includes the removal of switching yards, tracks and crossings from the downtowns of Brownsville, Harlingen, and Matamoros.

The historical railroad story on the surface is pretty well known. Passenger and freight service first reached Harlingen and Brownsville on July 4, 1904, thus connecting our region with the rest of the United States. The area was opened for commerce and tourism, confident of a safe and dependable mode of travel into the United States heartland.

The next year, an east to west spur line was built west



Richard King,
one of the leaders of the transportation revolution of the lower valley.
(Brownsville Historical Association)

of the now abandoned Sam Fordyce, and that line would serve as the connector between today's Rio Grande Valley cities from Harlingen to Mission. Many of those cities, such as McAllen, did not exist at the time the tracks were laid.

Behind the scenes, local, state, and national politics may have played a significant role in the railroad progress. But animosity also seems to have had a lot to do with the development of railroads along the Texas Border. Grudges and dislikes died long, slow deaths in the late 19th Century.

Vindictiveness was possibly one of the driving forces behind railroad development. Overriding vengeance on the part of the region's early movers and shakers may have put the area 30 years behind the times, arresting any significant development. One noted historian feels the intent was to inflict long term damage on the developed Rio Grande Valley then consisting of Point Isabel, Brownsville, and Matamoros.

Before the rail service, travel to the southern tip of Texas from the north was tough no matter how you went. A dusty, rough, stagecoach service from Alice, Texas, was available to Brownsville, but the trip took days. Travel by horseback could be perilous at the best of times. The alternative travel mode had plenty of dangers and drawbacks but worked well through most of the 19th Century.

Sailing ships carrying cargo and passengers called regularly at Point Isabel or near the mouth of the Rio Grande. Often embarking from New Orleans or Galveston, the ships were the RGV's lifeline to the outside world.

Navigation of the region's main waterway became a profitable pursuit for two businessmen arriving with General Zachary Taylor's forces at the start of the Mexican American War in 1846.

Mifflin Kenedy and Richard King learned the secret of navigating the Rio Grande by using a paddle wheeler craft designed for shallow waters. First delivering military supplies and later all sorts of cargo before, during and after the American Civil War, they dominated commerce on the Rio Grande.

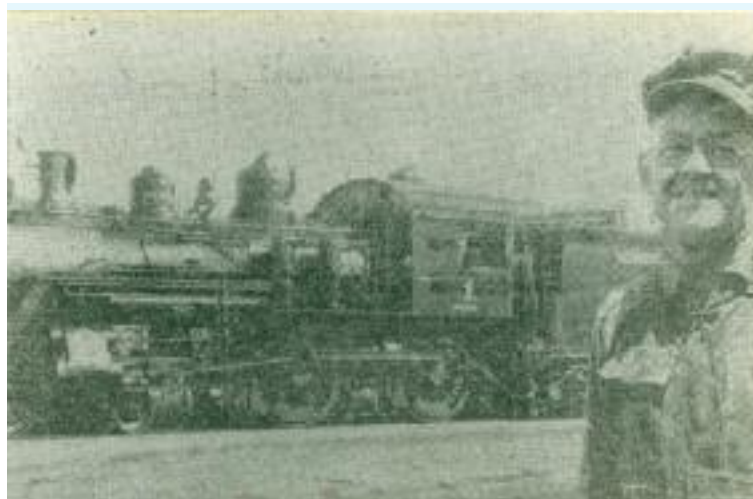
The monopoly of transportation, combined with high tariff rates, led to dissatisfaction with the Kenedy and King Steamboat Company among the merchant class in Matamoros and Brownsville.

The key to ending the domination of the steamboats was improving overland transportation routes. The question was how? King and Kenedy had become formidable foes with considerable wealth and connections. The answer was railroad, a mode proven at the end of the Civil War when General Phil Sheridan completed a railway from Brazos Island to White Ranch along the Rio Grande.

The track route was an immediate improvement over unloading ships to lighter craft or steam boats at the mouth of the river. Trains were much faster than steamboats, even though the last leg of the route from the ranch to Brownsville or Matamoros was covered by wagons or ox carts.

Here is where the plot thickens. Kenedy and King had to know that their dominance of river trade was about fade. They had tired of Brownsville and turned their attention northward to ranching interests numerous miles north of the twin cities of Matamoros and Brownsville. They had lived the Civil War years on their respective ranches.

Bitterness and bad relations with the commercial



Courtesy of Brownsville Historical Association.

interests may have hastened the retreat of the duo, and it is not hard to imagine that some in the Rio Bravo/ Rio Grande commercial class were quick to adopt the Irish saying about their absence, "Nor will they be missed."

After a bad storm did irreparable damage to the Sheridan rail line, new track and bed were needed for a rail route between Point Isabel and Brownsville. Oddly, the reconstruction era legislature granted a charter to recently pardoned firebrand Confederates Kenedy and King: a charter for a railroad from Point Isabel to Brownsville in 1866.

According to Brownsville Historian A. A. Champion, newspapers of the day went back and forth about King and Kenedy's intentions about building the railroad. No one was more on point on the subject than rancher and early South Padre Island resident John V. Singer (of the famed sewing machine family). Singer questioned the pair's intentions in a letter to the editor of the Houston Telegraph.

"No intelligent man who is acquainted with the affairs upon the Texas Border can be made to believe that King, Kenedy and company, ever intend to build one foot of the railroad for which they now hold a charter, and it requires but common sense to enable anyone to see that the charter was simply obtained to shut out capitalists who were anxious to establish rail between Brazos Santiago and Brownsville."

Singer further pointed out numerous rail charters were issued for the same route from 1850 to 1860. "For ten years, King, Kenedy and associates have held a charter to build a railroad from Brazos Santiago to Brownsville, and what have they done? ... Nothing-and neither do they intend to."

Imagine Kenedy and King's chagrin when, after two decades of foot dragging, a group made up of most of the

merchant and community leaders in Brownsville/Matamoros suddenly took the bull by the horns in 1870. The group received a charter, built track and had working line carrying freight to Brownsville from the Point, making its first trip to Brownsville on July 4th, 1873.

The two remained angry at those who built the line, and nine months after the first train made a trip to Brownsville, Kenedy and King sold their boats. The business that had made them their fortune was gone. The bitterness remained, and animosity towards the Rio Grande Valley would manifest itself a few years later.

Just how bitter? Noted Mexican Historian Dr. Octavio Herrera, who recently spoke at the University of Texas Brownsville/Texas Southmost College on March 31, 2010, outlined a theory on how the Rio Grande Valley and Northeastern Mexico were denied rail service for nearly three decades through manipulations of a few.

Dr. Herrera, a native of Matamoros, gave his opinion on what could be termed a conspiracy in an interview with the Valley Business Report before his lecture on the Mexican Revolutions of 1810 and 1910. On the Mexican side of the equation, two names are involved: one is Mexican President Porfilio Diaz and the other James Stillman, son of Brownsville founder Charles Stillman.

Herrera pointed out Stillman no longer lived in the Brownsville area and resided on the east coast of the

United States in the 1870's. The Stillman family had a long relationship with President Diaz, who granted Stillman a concession to build a railroad between Monterrey and Matamoros in the late 1870's. A Monday, September 29, 2008, article in El Manna, a Matamoros newspaper, dates the granting of the concession by Diaz to Stillman in 1880, seven years after the Point to Brownsville rail line was running.

The Stillman family also had a long history of business dealings with Kenedy and King. The two former boat captains now had a sudden interest in railroads after the PI/Brownsville line opened. Partnering with Uriah Lott, Kenedy and King received a charter to build a line in 1875 from Corpus Christi to San Diego. In 1881, they sold their line to a company that was building track from Laredo to Mexico City.

And the rest is, as they say, history. Kenedy and King watched their part of the line expand to Laredo. What had started with their financing a short line railroad was now known as the Texas Mexican Railroad. In 1885, when the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad reached Alice, the Texas Mexican Railroad now could run through service into the United States from Mexico City.

What about that concession to build rail connections from Monterrey to Matamoros? Dr. Herrera points out Stillman sat on it for years. A case of benign neglect? He

Mifflin Kenedy partnered with King to create the transportation industry for bringing goods to South Texas.

(Brownsville Historical Association)



feels the Kenedy, King, Stillman alliance “wanted to see the commercial interests in Brownsville/Matamoros dry up and blow away.”

Eventually, rail service reached Camargo from Monterrey and later into Matamoros. The connection of the line in Brownsville and Matamoros was completed in December of 1910 with the opening of the B&M Bridge. The rail connection happened possibly 25 to 30 years later than it should have been made. There is no telling what opportunities were missed by the South Texas and Northeastern Mexico.

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Opinion

IS NOW A GOOD TIME TO INVEST IN REAL ESTATE?

By Charles Marina

With a commercial real estate career spanning over 30 years, I am asked numerous questions regarding real estate. One question that comes up most often is “whether it is a good time to invest in real estate”. Which is usually followed up with yet a similar query, “should I buy now or wait?”

In order to adequately answer both parts of this question, I find myself looking back at the economic cycles that have occurred over my career. As I reflect, many things become apparent, the first of which is each time we have an expansion in the market it is always followed by a contraction, which is then followed by yet another expansion. The cycle repeats itself with varying degrees of recovery and contraction. Just when things are feeling great and everyone is jumping into the market, the bottom suddenly falls out and people are surprised. Then, when things feel like it cannot get any worse and everyone is staying out of the market, the market suddenly recovers and people are surprised, wishing they had bought when prices and conditions were more favorable.

Economic cycles occur approximately every 5 to 7 years. They are a common occurrence and have been with us since we began tracking markets. At least two events take place each

economic cycle (1) the downturn referred to as the “contraction period” usually lasts an average of 10 to 12 months while (2) the recovery referred to as the “expansionary period” lasts an average of 36 months, with varying degrees of upward and downward movement, from crest to valley.

Corrections in the market are necessary to balance the supply and demand of inventories and to keep prices in check. Without corrections, inflation and rising interest rates surface, causing irreparable damage to our economy, both on the domestic front and on the international scene. Inflation, deflation and stagflation can cripple our economy. To delay or soften their impact, economist and the Federal Reserve (The Fed) often manipulate interest rates, create tax incentives and even rebate taxpayer’s money, urging them to spend, which in turn produces a reaction within the economy. Sometimes the reaction is positive, other times it advances and perpetuates the inevitable. Attempting to guess and time the market even during periods of stability is not easy; it is increasingly more difficult when no one knows what The Fed will do next. Banks don’t lend, buyers don’t buy and everyone sits around waiting for direction or for something to happen. The result leads to deflation in the economy.

As consumers, we have an innate trait, “the propensity to con-

sume” goods and services, meaning we can only put-off making that purchase for a relatively short period-of-time. It’s not our nature to deprive ourselves of those things we want. Notice I did not say the things we need; therefore, eventually the “pinned-up demand” is released with a vengeance and the buying cycle begins all over again.

The return of a strong housing market has led our economy out of recessions more than once. It creates jobs in almost every sector of the economy; simply put, recovery cannot occur without the creation of jobs. By closely observing trends within the market you may be able to better gauge when the cycle begins and when it comes to an abrupt end.

New construction has a wide and far-reaching “multiplier-effect” on the economy, touching virtually every industry either directly or indirectly. When a new home is built, hundreds of businesses benefit.

Now that we have examined some of the factors that impact the market and understand that economic cycles are a natural occurrence, let’s address the question. Is now a good time to Invest in Real Estate? When the market is in contraction and hits bottom, we usually have lower interest rates, lower prices, motivated sellers and a large inventory of property to choose from, which in-turn creates an ideal buying scenario. As an added bonus, Congress provides tax credits or other buyer incentives to help simulate the lagging economy.

On the other hand, when the economy is expanding we have higher interest rates, high inflation, higher prices, stubborn sellers, less inventory and the government working against us to cool the market off. The ironic thing is most people make their purchases under the second scenario because it feels right and that is what everyone else is doing. Everyone except Warren Buffet, Donald Trump and other savvy investors; this group of elite investors buys low and sells high. You will usually find them heading in the opposite direction of the herd, reaping huge rewards for their insight, vision and discipline.

When you examine the two scenarios it becomes very apparent that the best time to invest is when others are sitting back waiting for something to happen. Sadly, for some, both scenarios pass them by. When the economy is red hot, they say, “let’s wait for prices to drop” and when the economy is soft, they say “let’s wait for things to get better”.

So you tell me, “Is now a good time to Invest in Real Estate?” The important thing to remember is you must act to reap the benefits. Both scenarios create opportunity. Understanding how to benefit from each requires skill and specialized knowledge. I hope this helps you spot the trends and encourages you to act when others sit back and do nothing.

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