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WHEN THE RAINS COME

Starting with A for Alex, the 2010 hurricane season has already shaken the Rio Grande Valley out its usual complacency. Hurricane Alex on June 30 was not a dry run by any means. The Category 2 storm sideswiped the Valley, but brought

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Executive Summary

THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE

Things never stay the same. You've got to change with the times. If you're not going forward, you're going backwards. We've heard these clichés' throughout our lives.

Whether it's business or personal – it's true; all things evolve and we've got only two options: embrace it and go forward or lie down and quit. The way I was raised, quitting is not an option.

In late June as we were putting your July edition to rest, unfortunately we also put to rest a wonderful person, a very talented writer and a true friend. Kevin Knoch, VBR managing editor, passed away of a sudden illness and our lives changed forever. My notes from crisis management classes have been running through my head since that dreaded June 24th night and I can honestly tell you, no college course prepared me for this loss.

I'm a firm believer, we must return to our roots – the things we learned as kids from our parents, our mentors, those who we idolize for their wisdom, faith and resilience. As the Valley Business Report moves forward and deals with the changed hand we have been dealt, a new sense of purpose and guidance motivates me.

As you read my tribute to Kevin in the July edition,

his legacy and dream of Valley Business Report will continue. Have our days been forever transformed? Yes. Will things ever be the same as they were prior to June 24, 2010? No.

In a few weeks, Valley Business Report will celebrate its one year anniversary. When we launched 09/09/09, Kevin and I obligated ourselves to promoting economic development of the Rio Grande Valley. As our staff continues that same philosophy, the next chapter has begun. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the people who bring this journal to you: Sharon Campbell, Lili Asfour, Eileen Mattei, Davis Rankin, Adolfo Pesquera, Cori Thomas, a wonderful group of contributing writers and my dear friend, Loraine Knoch. Our entire organization has accepted the one element none of us can ever escape: change.

As you know, business can change in the blink of an eye, especially when we least expect it. We can adapt to economic conditions as they change. We can try to beat it to the punch and makes adjustments at forecasters' alerts. We can even play catch-up if we're slightly behind the 8 ball when there's a shift in the economy.

A magical thing about change is what it teaches. We



gain a new perspective of where we've been, where we are and where we're going. When we embrace it, we are better for it. Change makes us try a new way of doing something and that makes us risk takers. When we take on a new job, open our own business, accept a promotion, relocate to unfamiliar surroundings, we are taking a major risk. It's all about stepping out of our comfort zone and learning the unthinkable is possible! Like Mr. Fred Rusteberg, IBC Brownsville President and CEO recently told me, "God doesn't want us to be comfortable."

Todd Breland
General Manager
Valley Business Report

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Cover: Some railroad bridges in the Valley become precarious during river flooding. (Curtis Bonner)

Valley Business Report Staff

Editors

Eileen Mattei, Davis Rankin and
Adolfo Pesquera

General Manager

Todd Breland
todd@valleybusinessreport.com

Marketing Consultant

Lili Asfour
lili@valleybusinessreport.com

Marketing Consultant

Cori Thomas
cori@valleybusinessreport.com

Production Art Director

Sharon Campbell
sharon@valleybusinessreport.com

Website Design: Valley IT Solutions

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

BERT OGDEN GROWING STRONG IN THE VALLEY

Adolfo Pesquera

Just a few weeks into operations at Bob Vackar's stand-alone BMW dealership on McAllen's 10th Street, the comments from visitors only bolstered his faith in a brand that has held steady when others were in disarray.

"People thank us for what it's doing for 10th Street, and for what it's doing for the city," Vackar said. "It's looking like it is going to do everything we thought it would."

Bert Ogden BMW, of which Vackar is the dealer principle, features a 45,000-square-foot complex and a uniquely designed air-conditioned service area.

Customer service vehicles are serviced indoors in a climate-controlled environment. An air filtration system maintains air quality, keeping it free of engine-generated exhaust fumes. Waiting areas offer customers luxury seating, flat-screen television viewing, a coffee bar and an accessories center.

It has been an extreme makeover. As Marsha Graham, the company's marketing director explained, the original structure was gutted down to its framework. The former Van Burkleo Lincoln-Mercury-Jeep dealership was a victim of the 2009 Chrysler reorganization.

But while Chrysler and other brands were floundering, Vackar had a growing problem. His combination Nissan-BMW lot was doing so well he needed to split them up.

"We've been working on this (split) for 18 years," Vackar said.

Vackar felt he needed a commitment from BMW that it supply a certain number of cars each year in order to justify a stand-alone dealership. And he needed to get something done, particularly over the last decade, because of the high volume on his Nissan sales.

"Our Nissan sales have been in the top 10 in the U.S. for the last 10 years," Vackar said.

That put a lot of pressure on the service department. By splitting the two brands, Vackar said his mechanics would be able to double service capacity at the Nissan lot, and equal that service capacity at the new lot.

Sales of BMW are also expected to rise. As part of the Nissan facility, Bert Ogden was selling 40 to 45 BMWs per month. Vackar is



from left to right: Mario Bonaccorso, Bert Ogden BMW Service Director; Gene Donnelly, V.P., Southern Region, BMW; Bob Vackar and Janet Vackar, Bert Ogden BMW owners; McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez; Joe Brown, President of Border Capital Bank & Chairman of Board of Directors McAllen Chamber of Commerce. (Valley Business Report)

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Owner, Bob Vackar and General Manager, Kyle Trammell. (courtesy)

projecting 60 to 70 sales per month with a high-end inventory of luxury cars priced from the mid \$30,000s to \$120,000.

Vackar is betting heavily on a brand that

has show it can weather this deep recession. BMW Group reported 13.1 percent growth over the first half of 2010, crediting strongest growth in its vehicle sales in the United States,

Europe and China.

That continues an extended positive trend. In the summer of 2008, when its U.S. competition was in the depths of despair, BMW North America was plunking down \$100 million on a new headquarters New Jersey, talking about investing \$1 billion by 2012 and in the process of expanding production at its South Carolina factory.

That expansion enabled BMW to guarantee delivery of vehicles in the numbers Vackar felt he needed. It was time to move and in June 2009, he purchased Van Burkleo's lot.

Financing was provided by First National Bank of the Rio Grande Valley. Bert Ogden Motors declined to reveal total cost of the project.

The 8-acre site was handed over the McAllen-based general contractor Johnson Brothers Construction. The total makeover began in August and took 11 months to complete.

With about 200 new and pre-owned cars on site, the July 22 grand opening was attended by McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez and representatives of BMW North America.

The facility provides employment to 35 technicians, auto parts sales reps, sales people and clerks.

The BMW lot is the 11th to open under the Bert Ogden name. It employs about 500 workers Valley-wide and includes such brands as Chevrolet, Cadillac, GMC, Mazda and Kia. Despite the recession, none of them were laid off, Graham said.

The company name originated with Vackar's father-in-law, who died with his wife in an accident in 1992. Vackar and wife Janet O. Vackar carried on the family business.

Future plans are to relocate a Hyundai dealership in Harlingen to a new facility in Mercedes. More distant plans are to construct a new building in Edinburg for their Subaru dealership.

The Regional Center Development Manager, Jerome Ruppert, recounted a story to Janet at the BMW opening about his father telling him that when he and his dad (Jerome's grandfather) lived in the Valley back in the 1960's they each purchased their first Cadillac from Bert Ogden back when he was a salesman for Yoder Cadillac, long before Bert ever purchased his first dealership.



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Cover Story

TAKING THE VALLEY BY STORM: HURRICANE AND FLOOD WATCHES

By Eileen Mattei

Starting with A for Alex, the 2010 hurricane season has already shaken the Rio Grande Valley out its usual complacency. Hurricane Alex on June 30 was not a dry run by any means. The Category 2 storm sideswiped the Valley, but brought strong winds, 6-10" of rain, and low land flooding along with relief that it had turned south. One week later, unnamed Tropical Depression #2 unleashed torrential rains south of the border, just as Alex had. By mid-July, the Valley's rarely used Main Floodway demonstrated how crucial a role it plays in diverting water from the Rio Grande and preventing flooding in downstream cities. Manmade flood control systems -- the miles of newly reinforced flood control levees



The Main Floodwaydiverted million of gallons from the Rio Grande that otherwise would have caused extensive flooding of downstream cities. (Eileen Mattei)

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in Hidalgo County, the three floodways and the Arroyo Colorado, a natural Rio Grande distributary -- enabled the Valley to avoid a major disaster equivalent to Hurricane Beulah in 1967.

As a river delta, the Valley will always be threatened by floods because the land is a natural flood plain sitting lower than the river out of its banks. Century-old accounts reveal the extent of flooding far from the river before levees were built and dams constructed. In 1909, for example, the new town of McAllen flooded three times. One report described being able to get in boat near the present-day McAllen-Miller airport and row all the way to Reynosa, six miles south. Closer to the river, only the tops of telegraph poles were visible above the flood waters.

Jump ahead 100 years to July 17, 2010, when Falcon Dam reached its highest water storage level ever at more than 309 feet above sea level. To avoid stressing the dam, water was released at a rate of 26.9 million gallons per minute. Even as more water flowed into the reservoir from the upstream watershed, the International Boundary & Water Commission (IBWC), which by treaty is responsible for flood control along the river, directed the water releases and monitored their impact. The Anzalduas diversion dam functioned as planned, channeling Rio Grande waters into the Main Floodway and out to the Laguna Madre. In the same way, Retamal dam diverted an equal portion of the river's flow into a Mexican floodway. At one point, the four US flood ways were carrying 3430 cubic meters

per second (cms) past recording gages. One cms equals 22.8 million gallons per day, which amounts to 78,200 million gallons per day pouring into the Gulf. A devastating, widespread flood was diverted.

Trial runs

The successful handling of emergencies such as hurricanes and floods requires year round coordination, communication and assessments led by county Emergency Management Coordinators, who emphasize preparedness. Annual disaster simulations and drills develop routines and establish lines of communication that let bureaucracies do what they do best. Back in June 2008, a tri-county drill, funded by the Department of Homeland Security, prepared for a storm's arrival and the making of evacuation decisions. During drills, participants observe the operations that work well and are to be sustained, like interagency communications and cooperation. A few items require only a quick fix, such as larger computer screens so an emergency team can check progress together.

Two-day trial runs like that helped guide the successful Hurricane Dolly response a month later. Because of its well-organized and orchestrated response to Dolly, including pre-positioned clean-up contracts, Cameron County's Emergency Management program achieved Texas and national recognition. The Emergency Management leaders observed that responsibility for the PODs (points of distribution for emergency food and water) should be shifted from the police department to another agency. Police skills could be put to better use elsewhere during an emergency.

Two weeks before Hurricane Alex arrived in the Gulf, Cameron County Judge Carlos Cascos and Cameron County Emergency Management Coordinator Johnny Cavazos talked about the importance of preparing for hurricanes. "Even if you survived Beulah, none of us are the shape we were in 40 years ago. You know whether you flood or not," Cascos said, recommending those people not wait to be ordered to leave. "Everyone must take personal responsibility." Cameron County residents who ignore mandatory hurricane evacuation orders, which are not lightly issued, can not expect law enforcement officers to risk their lives to rescue them. "After the storm goes by, we will try to identify the remains. We

will not go out during the storm."

Only Category 3 and up hurricanes headed directly for Cameron County bring the mandatory evacuation order into play. The Cameron County Emergency Management center was up and running days before Alex was predicted to come ashore. Cavazos said the team grew to 70 persons monitoring reports from different weather services and computer modeling programs contracted to focus on the projected impact on Cameron County. The State prefers assisted evacuations began by H-72 (before landfall.)

Alex threatens

Was Cameron County on the verge of being evacuated for Hurricane Alex? "Had



Pepe's On The River during the recent flooding caused by the heavy rains from Hurricane Alex in late June. (Valley Business Report)

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Alex been a major storm and all the weather services told us it was going to run above a category 3," it could have happened, Cavazos said, if it aimed directly at the Valley. "We know how expensive, traumatic and confusing evacuation can be." The county has approximately 137,000 residents, including hospitalized patients, who would need outside assistance to leave the area. Cameron County and the American Rd Cross no longer operate pre-land fall shelters in the county, although an agreement was reached with Hidalgo County to provide selected schools there as shelters for Cameron County residents. The Texas Guard would man 20 of these shelters for the general public, providing security and food, with two additional shelters for the medically needy.

"People are going to be very reluctant to start evacuating 50-60 hours out under blue skies," Cavazos continued, especially when hurricane landfalls seem so unpredictable. "I believed after Hurricane Dolly people would be more prepared, more aware of the dangers (of a big storm.) But it doesn't seem that



Hurricane Dolly in 2008 brought torrential rains and high winds that toppled trees, downed power lines and caused disastrous flooding. (Eileen Mattei)

way. A lot of people in southern Cameron County and Brownsville had no damage from Dolly, so they have a false sense of security now." Yet given the number of Cameron County houses with windows still boarded up after Alex, it's toss-up deciding if Cameron County is overrun with pessimists or optimists.

In Hidalgo County, while waiting for the floodways to roar to life, Emergency Management Coordinator Tony Pena received reports of levee inspection from the US Army Corps of Engineers and of large water pumps pre-positioned along the levee to handle leaks.

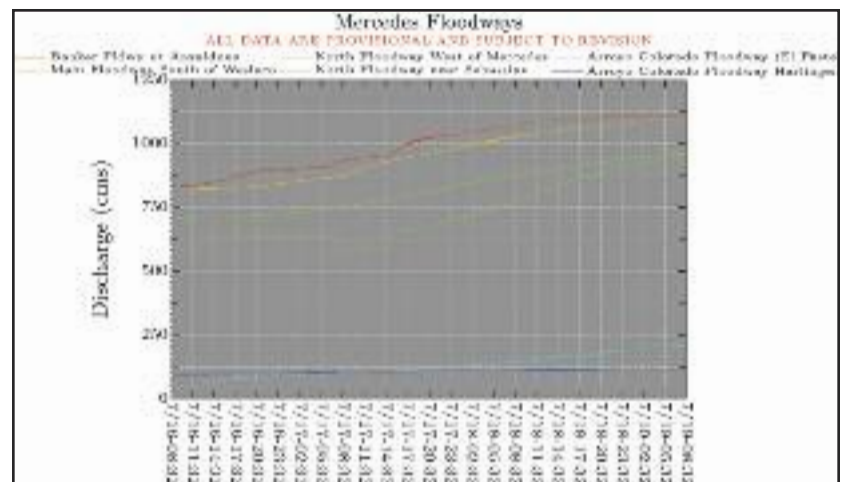
"We immediately knew, because of the path Alex took and where it stalled, that we would have flood water," said Hidalgo County Judge Rene Ramirez, who cited the invaluable team members responding to the crisis. "There are many partnerships that make the challenge more manageable. We're doing the absolute best that we can with the resources available to us." The training and recent experience of Dolly contributed to the smoothly coordinated

response to the rising river levels and associated problems, he added.

The river levee repairs that accompanied the construction of the Border Wall in Hidalgo County are credited with preventing catastrophic flooding. "Had we not had the improvements, I can't imagine how we would have taken it," Judge Ramirez said. The few small segments where levee repairs had not been completed, particularly around the Penitas Pumphouse, were inundated despite efforts mobilized by the County.

Mother Nature can be tough to deal with at times. The most effective ways to cope with her outbursts require long-range preparation. By planning ahead to divert surging floodwaters, by being prepared for a hurricane's devastation and its aftermath, residents of the Rio Grande Valley can continue to work and play in their sub-tropical paradise.

This chart from the IBWC website show the rapidly increasing volumes of water that flowed into the Valley's four interior floodways.



Business News

TEXAS/MEXICO BORDER COMPETES GLOBALLY

With increasing costs in China, a focus on the true cost of inventory carry, a national objective to increase U.S. exports and the local advantage that comes from a large, young, workforce, experts say that McAllen represents a strategic location for advanced manufacturing companies. At the recent Texas A&M University Mexico-Texas Trade Consortium Conference which focused on Texas-Mexico trade competitiveness, experts from throughout South Texas and Northern Mexico discussed that allusive Return on Investment (ROI) and how cities such as McAllen provide high return opportunities for companies that locate in the strategic Texas/Mexico border region.

“We believe there will be manufacturing zones close to the customer- a few days away from the customer base,” said Dr. Barry Lawrence, Distribution Program & Co-Director of the Global

Manufacturing & Distribution Initiative at Texas A&M University. “No more two to six week lead times.”

North America represents the largest consumer market for many companies so naturally they want to be closer and the border region represents a very viable option, Lawrence explained.

Keith Patridge, President/CEO of the McAllen Economic Development Corporation who offered welcoming remarks to approximately 100 attendees, said because of demographic trends companies located in developed nations will compete

with new companies coming from the growing emerging market economies. To compete against these companies that will have succeeded in a low cost emerging nation environment will be



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Keith Patridge kicks off the event with a few words about global trending and our local opportunities. (courtesy)

formidable.

Along the border, companies have a flexibility not found in other areas of the United States. There is no other location where a company has the ability to strategically plan to use the best of what two governments, two tax structures, two labor forces, two wage scales, two regulatory environments, and two trade policies have to offer all for the same production factory, Patridge said.

“Because of our strategic location on the South Texas/ Mexico border we have identified a profile of the type of companies that fit our market,” he said. “This profile extends across many industries and several unique manufacturing and logistical strategies.

When companies look to expand, relocate or open an operation, managers and owners look at which location can offer the best return on their investment. Lawrence explained a ROI calculator that he developed that helps companies assess their risk when choosing a location. Lawrence and his students from A&M examined the costs of labor, utilities, security, shipping, inventory levels, transferring of personnel and facilities costs of the United States, Mexico and China. Using the actual cost numbers of an international company with production facilities in all three countries when a total cost structure is developed that includes the cost of inventory, Mexico is the most competitive nation, followed by the United States with China ranked as the most expensive manufacturing location from which to serve the North American market.

Currently, the McAllen EDC team is working with about five companies interested in Reynosa



and over 41 interested in McAllen.

“The United States is poised to capture significant business,” Lawrence said, “and Mexican industry is enjoying the benefit of Chinese challenges.”

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Business Feature

PHARR CONTINUES POSITIVE STRIDES TO THE FUTURE

By Davis Rankin

Luis Bazan says Pharr is a city of firsts: “When I first started working here, everybody was talking about how we had the first Home Depot in the Valley, the first Lowe’s in the Valley, the first Furniture Row in the Valley, the first Red Robin (restaurant) in the Valley.”

Now he can say, shout if he’d like, that Pharr is once again home to a first: the first Jamaican pastry shop in the Valley, first and only as far as is known.

When you’re in Bazan’s line of work, you look for every and any edge as you jockey with competitors. Bazan heads up the Pharr Chamber of Commerce, selling the city as a good place to do business and their efforts are paying off.

“Now we have the first Ashley Furniture in the Valley. Ashley Furniture’s a huge one and they opened their 400th store here, beamed Bazan.

Not bad for a town of 65,735 (Chamber esti-

mate as of 1/1/09), sitting slap up against the retail behemoth McAllen. The Chamber uses that location to advantage.

“We’re offering location, we’re offering proximity, we’re offering your direct route,” Bazan explained. “We’re not just based on Expressway 83 but we have (US Highway) 281 as well. So, I think location, location, location, and the people and the way we treat them at the city when it comes to permitting and getting that process under way.”

Making it easy to get started brought the Valley’s first Jamaican pastry shop to the Hub City, as Pharr has been called.

When Cy Gordon and partners Owen Leach and Orville Edwards were ready to open Exquisite Jamaican Pastries (205 S. Cage), “we found a location that we did not have to modify much. We were actually looking in McAllen and the Mayor of Pharr made it so easy for us to come here and that’s why we decided to put the facility here. The city of Pharr was very business friendly, Gordon explained.

Opening the store came after two years spent perfecting the pastry, including using focus groups to do it.

“The reception has been great,” Gordon enthused, explaining that he and his fellow Jamaican immigrants “started this business...to bring a part of our culture here and we wanted to open our door to some of the Jamaican things we eat.”

Their “premiere product” is a Jamaican beef patty. “Picture ground beef with tropical spices wrapped in that buttery, flaky dough, baked to perfection,” he continued expansively. It’s like an empanada with the dough similar to a turnover. Other fillings include chicken, vegetables, so, shrimp and plantain, a kind of banana. And because Americans see ‘pastry’ and think sweet, they decided to add a coconut puff—“like a pie crust with baked coconut filling inside” as well as a sugar bun, Jamaican for cinnamon roll.

Location played a primary role in Dahill’s decision to relocate after 30 years in Harlingen. Major Account Manager David Franco explained that Dahill’s clients are Valleywide but “Our growth forecast has actually seen the Upper Valley as the place to be.”

Franco explained that they picked Pharr because “We wanted the accessibility to the high-

way...to make it accessible for our clients to come visit our facilities and it all came down to accessibility” to clients from up and down the Valley.”

The regional office has been operating at 1431 W. Polk since the first of the year.

While Dahill was acquired by Xerox three years ago, it traces its roots back to Felco Office Systems and Copy Data.

Being close to the 281/83 highway interchange has been good for them, the Chamber’s Bazan points out, because it puts Pharr “on the map as being part of the metro area, not a small town, but a city.”

Alfred Samaniego doesn’t know why his bosses picked the spot next to El Centro Mall for the Valley’s first (another one for Pharr) Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen, he just knows “We’re ready. We would love to be open right now; we’re just holding up on construction.”

The site at 1610 W. Expressway 83 puts it on the north side of the expressway, east of the Jackson Road exit and west of the Sugar Road exit, next to El Centro, which is due for a renovation.

The Valley is ready for his restaurant to open, Samaniego offers: “The way the phone’s been ringing, people stopping by, any kind of feedback you get when you’re walking though town wearing any kind of Pappadeaux logo. I feel good about what we’re going to do here.”

The restaurateur says he anticipates a September 7 opening, with a “soft opening” the week before (caution: the opening date has been pushed back before) and he has been interviewing prospective employees since May.

“It’s a monster,” he says with enthusiasm. “We’ve got about 450 seats,” which he believes makes it the largest restaurant in the Valley. “I’ve not seen a restaurant bigger than this” in the Valley,” he qualifies. We’re one of the bigger models” of Pappadeaux restaurants.

“We’re anticipating doing some business,” he proclaims.

Pappadeaux is part of Pappas Restaurants which include Pappas Cantina, Pappas Seafood House, Pappas Brothers Steakhouse, Pappas Barbecue, Pappas Burger, Pappas Grille, and in a nod to their Greek heritage, Yia Yia Mary’s Pappas Greek Kitchen. The main office is in

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Houston.

Making the old new again is one way to describe Mario Palomo's job as Pharr's Main Street Coordinator. The position was vacant for much of last year and he's still immersing himself in the program, which has been in existence for about a decade.

He and the city are trying to "create an atmosphere where people will want to come downtown to shop and enjoy themselves." To that end, the city is spending a quarter of a million dollars to install decorative lighting downtown.

The goal of the national Main Street program is to "save America's diverse historic places and revitalize our communities." Pharr's downtown has a number of buildings dating to its founding in the early 20th century. The program which Palomo oversees for the city makes forgivable loans available to business people to fix up a building or to return it to its original look.

He is excited about a grant just received (Rural Business Enterprise Grant from the USDA) that allows the city to create an intermediary re-lending program.



Pharr boasts being a city of accomplishments and awards that attract businesses and families alike and add to the city's continued growth. (courtesy)

"This program is used for small and emerging business with up to 50 employees and grows revenue up to \$1 million and within those guidelines it allows for remodeling, construction or capital. What this is doing, this program, is taking the place of the credit gap" created by the nation's financial trouble "and the banks got kind of restrictive."

The program is for the entire city but Palomo clearly hopes to use it to lure businesses downtown. "It's intended for start-ups, mergers...and companies on the brink of failing but have shown performance. We're there to give them an infusion until they recover. This program is a really fine program for this area."



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Business Evolution

BAR CELONA IS A HOT SPOT WITH A COOL PAST

By Eileen Mattei

Bar Celona, one of the Valley's coolest places to enjoy tapas and wine, continues a legacy of helping customers chill out that dates back to 1919. That's the year the building at 10 South 11th Street was constructed for McAllen Ice Plant by Robert Lewis, a long-ago chamber of commerce secretary. Mimi Gonzalez saw the ice plant's potential and fell under the spell of the deteriorating building which had churned out hefty ice blocks until the 1990s.

"I don't know what possessed me. I had never done anything this big, but I fell in love with the building. Ideas kept running through my head," said the petite Gonzalez. She first helped Angel Gonzalez, her ex-husband and business associate, resuscitate and renovate the south side of the property. The result was the Old Ice

House nightclub.

Seeing bars booming in the region, Mimi Gonzalez turned her considerable energy and imagination to the north side of the property in April 2009. Gonzalez said she's still amazed by her feelings for what was a dark and dank structure that had no roof, no plumbing and no electricity. "The bar (of the future Bar Celona) was the scariest of them all: no light and a tiny door where ice blocks would be shot out." She envisioned the upper floor with its low beamed ceiling as casual 'back alley' bar. The ground floor would have the ambiance of a cosmopolitan bar in Spain.

Months of hard work stood between the vision and the reality. "When I started breaking walls and ceilings, it looked like Afghanistan because of all the rubble," she said. The thick, 90-year-old ice plant insulation was 'like moon rocks: it weighed

nothing" Gonzalez cut through the ceiling to open up the front of Bar Celona Restaurant Bar & Tapas and give access to the upstairs bar. More weeks of work on the old walls followed. "I washed it and washed it and washed it." Gonzalez had firewalls installed, added stone and brick and stuccoed some walls, and brought what had been the second ice plant in McAllen up to 21st century building codes.

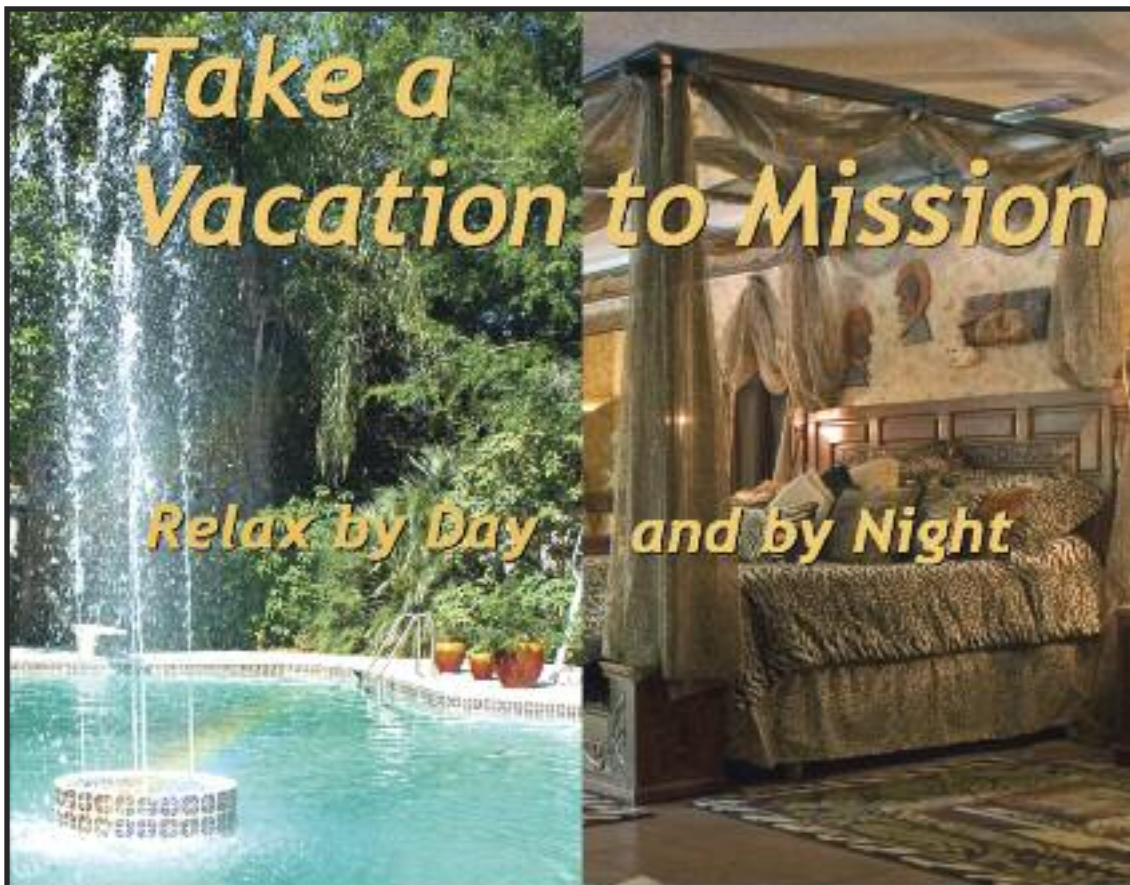
Gonzalez admitted she didn't know the restaurant business. But she did know marketing and chose the name Bar Celona and the theme "Is Spain in your veins?" She wanted a tapas bar modeled on the traditional Spanish food way: a variety of small tasting plates of appetizers. Bar Celona, she decided, would be the bar where you can get good food in an elegant, intimate ambiance. She hired an award winning Iron Chef William Vizea, who had worked in San Francisco and New Orleans. She searched for Spanish colonial antiques, had Bar Celona's bar handmade and installed curved red banquettes and a wine cellar. Terrace bar areas were placed at street level and on the second floor.

Gonzales had to interpret the traditional, small-saucer serving of tapas for an audience

used to gargantuan, Texas-size servings. "We're not the typical tapas bar. We can't have food set out to pick and choose like in Spain. The whole idea is to order for your group, take a taste, and order more, drink a few glasses of wine." But Gonzalez adapted that to allow customers to start with tapas like the grilled Portobelo mushrooms and marinated olives and finish with an entree like lambchops with rosemary and garlic or pollo a la Rioja, perhaps with a fig salad of greens, goat cheese, and honey-roasted pecans.

Bar Celona opened in December 2009, and the crash course in the restaurant business is ongoing, Gonzalez said. She has booked special events from wedding receptions and rehearsal dinners to after-prom parties and family celebrations.

Gonzalez recalled growing up in McAllen, "We would walk downtown to



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Klincks, sit on a stool and order a hamburger. It's a shame it's gone. I would love to see more come back. Ten or 20 years from now, the old buildings won't be here. That will be sad." She is preparing a photo collage of old McAllen for Bar Celona and has done extensive research on old McAllen buildings, particularly the ice plant. She even has boxes imprinted with 'McAllen Ice Plant' and has saved the building's old doors.

Gonzalez recently escorted Old Timers Club president Spud Brown through Bar Celona to show how old buildings can be recycled to new uses while keeping their original character. Brownie's Service Station occupied the building next to the ice plant in the 1930s. As a boy, he'd slip next door and get free chips of ice from the ice plant. Brown told Gonzalez how his father stored merchandise upstairs in what is Bar Celona's second floor bar.

The Ice House District is the name Gonzalez has given to the area between

Mimi Gonzalez turned her energy and imagination into creating a relaxing atmosphere that is reminiscent of Spain. (E. Mattei)



Business 83 and the bank tower. "I love planting seeds," she said. Perhaps in the future, the area will include a contemporary coffee shop and art gallery and more. But as Mimi Gon-

zalez knows: "It's so much work." But the old, well-built buildings would link the past with the future, a goal Gonzalez believes is worth striving for.

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Feature Series

BROWNSVILLE AIRPORT: THE ONCE AND FUTURE AVIATION GATEWAY TO LATIN AMERICA

By Eileen Mattei

Known as aviation's "Gateway to Latin America" when it was a Pan American Airways hub, Brownsville/South Padre Island International Airport certainly ranks as the most historic of the Valley airports and the one with the most glamorous past. It may also have the brightest future, with a remarkable return to those days as the Third Coast's "Gateway to Latin America" thanks to a newly-resurrected Pan American Airways now headquartered in Brownsville and operated by industry veterans.

Brownsville's link to aviation dates back to 1915, when the first US. military plane to be fired on by hostile forces flew out of Fort Brown. The fragile single engine Army plane was observing troop movements in Mexico when it was hit by non-lethal machine gun and rifle fire.

The Brownsville International Airport - with a gravel runway and a modern lighting system - was dedicated with tremendous fanfare on March 9th, 1929. Col. Charles Lindbergh landed that day after piloting the first air mail plane flown between Mexico City and the U.S. A crowd of 20,000, including aviatrix Amelia Earhart and the commander of US Army Air Corps, watched aerial exhibitions of wing walking, parachute jumps, a night landing with flares, and a dead stick landing by the airport manger Les Mauldin. The next morning Lindbergh took off with mail for Mexico City and WWI ace Ira Eaker flew to Panama on a Dawn to Dusk flight.

Three months later, Pan American Airlines leased the field, renaming it Brownsville-Pan American Airport and flying its Ford trimotors from there. By 1932 Brownsville was the headquarters of Pan Am's Western division and the acknowledged "Gateway to

Latin America" complete with a Spanish hacienda-style terminal. Pan Am's aircraft engines were overhauled and tested at the Brownsville facility. Pan Am created hundreds of well-paid jobs and is credited with helping Brownsville weather the Depression. D. C. Richardson and Edward Snyder trained pilots in the new technique of flying with navigation instruments (called blind flying.) Braniff and Easter airlines offered flights from the border.

During World War II, the airport leased 884 acres to the Army Air Force for pilot training while Pan Am overhauled 6,000 engines nearby. It was Top Secret until the war ended that the first American jet engines were flight tested from the Brownsville airport. Reconfigured B-24s and B29s could head over the Gulf to try out the engines, away from spying eyes. Mexico's only WWII combat unit, the 201st Fighter Squadron, also trained at the airport.

The postwar era brought more prosperity with Pan Am's overhaul facility in high gear,

a Fixed Base Operator servicing charters, and new airlines landing in Brownsville. When Pan Am moved its operations to jet-friendly Miami in the 1950s, the airport throttled back. The 1960s brought industrial development and a new weather radar system. During the 1970s Brownsville became an international center for pilot training, welcoming flyboys from 30 countries. The name Brownsville/South Padre Island International was adopted in 1983, and the RGV Wing of the Commemorative Air Force took up residence in the 1990s.

In 2002 B/SPI became the first regional airport with all-jet service. Two years ago, hangars from the 1950s north and south of the terminal were torn down as part of multi-million dollar projects that included terminal renovations and expansion with more gates, tickets counters, and rental car counters for new tenants, Thrifty and National. Drainage and runway lighting projects were part of the upgrade. The main street leading to the passenger terminal, and lined with some of the airport's 80 tenants, was renamed Amelia Earhart Drive.

"We can see continued growth that will bring more airlines and more flights," said Michael D. Jones, Business Development Manager for the airport. "Flights have tripled in the last five years," including non-stop American flights to Dallas. Continental also



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flies from B/SPI. “And we’re proud of our TSA service. The people here make an extra effort of take away the stress of traveling.”

Because Brownsville is the only area airport that has 24/7 US Customs services, Jones sees the airport as the natural choice for increased international service. “In the short term, we see starting non stop flights to Monterrey,” maybe later this year. Working with aviation consultant Sabre, developer of airline reservation systems and Travelocity, the airport is producing a travel forecast, based on the catchment area of SPI, Brownsville and Matamoros. “We have talked to all the major Mexican carriers and some of the new low cost carriers. One or two are talking seriously,” he said, and determining if the connection will be a profitable one.

It could very well be, as leisure travelers regularly request Mexico and Latin American destinations, Jones stated. “Even more requests come from businesses who could use flights every week,” for industrial, retail commercial and service contracts. Jones explained that a number of Mexican companies no longer allow their employees to fly into Mexican border airports such as Reynosa and Cd. Juarez. The perception of danger, long lines at international bridges, and less than customer-oriented BPS agents at the bridges have become significant deterrents.

“Our FBOs work with the customs people. Together they do a first class job of welcoming (charter passengers) to Texas and getting them on the way. People like Jennifer Lopez, and Mel Gibson know they can clear customs here in a few minutes instead of a few hours,” Jones said. He praised the recent appointment of a customer service manager for Cameron County international bridges.

Because the Brownsville catchment area has been documented as having the lowest percentage of computers users in the nation, the airport continues to publish a quarterly, award-winning flight guide. It also offers the \$2 island shuttle and hotshot overnight deliveries to the Detroit area.

Jones predicted that the summer should bring the announcement of a dual customs station--both American and Mexican-- at Brownsville/SPI. That arrangement, which existed at the airport through the 1950s, enables any cargo that arrives to be cleared by both countries without stops on the other side of the border.

Brownsville has applied to the FAA to extend its runways beyond 10,000 feet. To meet new federal air cargo procedures and guidelines, the Brownsville airport will soon have the region’s only certified air cargo screening facility-ray machine. Both upgrades tie into the most important development of the airport’s future as the Gateway to Latin America for cargo and



Michael Jones, Brownsville South Padre International Airport Business Development Manager, said airport's three Fixed Base Operators service numerous private planes and chartered aircraft like these. (E. Mattei)

eventually passengers.

World-Wide Consolidated Logistics, in June acquired the name Pan American Airways, according to President Robert Hedrick. The company has been developing a Latin American air cargo network and intends to start daily cargo service to Monterrey in

the fall. World-Wide has begun restoration of the iconic Pan Am terminal at the airport. Looking for more details on the cargo carrier poised for growth in the September edition of Valley Business Report.

An advertisement for Valley Business Report. The background is a light blue sky with several white palm trees. A red arrow points from the bottom left towards the top right. The text "Bright Marketing Campaigns Target Local Decision Makers." is in the upper right. Below it is the contact email "Contact todd@valleybusinessreport.com for more information." The website "www.valleybusinessreport.com" is written in blue. At the bottom, the logo "Valley Business Report" is displayed in red and blue, with the tagline "Pro-Valley... Pro-Business" in white on a blue background.

Business Development

HISTORIC BROWNSVILLE HAS MUCH TO OFFER

Valley Business Report

Brownsville and history are synonymous and the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce is no exception. The beginning of the Chamber goes as far back as 1925.

According to historical documents, area businessmen were known to assemble at various office buildings in downtown Brownsville before the association built its first office in 1927, a beautiful Spanish Style structure on East Levee Street adjacent to the Missouri Pacific railroad passenger depot.

Ten years later, in July 1937, a voluntary association of thirty-nine business people formed the not-for-profit organization known as the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce.

According to the first Articles of Incorporation, “the beginning purpose of organizing a Chamber of Commerce was the power to provide and maintain suitable rooms for the conduct of its business, to acquire, preserve, and disseminate valuable business



information, and to promote the interest of trade and increase the facilities of commercial transactions.”

In 1966 a new structure was built on East Elizabeth Street next to the Gateway International Bridge which to this day continues to be the home of the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce.

Since its inception, the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce has been the community’s united front and a catalyst for the improvement of the civic, economic and social welfare of Brownsville and its citizens. The Chamber has celebrated community

victories and has responded to challenges, but its most important role has always been relentless advocacy for the region.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce can be credited with helping establish Charro Days, Inc., Sombrero Fest, the Mr. Amigo Association, Leadership Brownsville, Brownsville Crime Stoppers, and Healthy Communities of Brownsville just to name a few.

Today, the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce membership exceeds 1,000 members – companies, individuals, organizations, and industries wanting to promote the economic vitality and quality of life in Brownsville. As in the past, the Chamber is the voice of the business community in the issues of business, education, international transportation, and any other issue affecting the future of Brownsville. The Chamber provides leadership by drawing upon the ideas, talents, energies, and finances of its members.

Additional information on Brownsville Chamber of Commerce is available on the Internet at www.brownsvillechamber.com.

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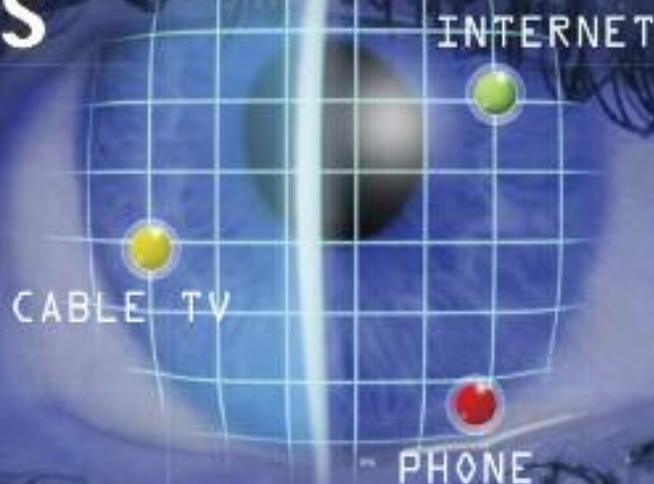
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