



BRAZOSPORT LEADERS SAY AREA IS THRIVING

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Brazosport leaders say area is thriving

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FREEPORT — The rising cost of energy and predictions of soft economic growth nationally for industry and retail are not keeping the Brazosport community from thriving, local officials said.

Representatives from local industry, retail and Brazosport ISD spoke to a large crowd of residents Thursday about the state of the area and plans for the future at the Brazosport Area Chamber of Commerce's annual State of the Community luncheon.

"It is looking very good and it seems like the community is growing, which is very good news for us who have invested in this area," local business owner Chris Gier said. "The chamber has done a very good job of keeping us informed."

The spirit of the gathering was given a boost by the thunder of drums that ripped and roared through Freeport's RiverPlace when Brazosport ISD Superintendent Joe Ripple introduced Brazosport High School's drumline. Ripple then kept the crowd laughing with his comical comments about himself and the other guest speakers.

While national forecasts expect retail growth to wane, the outlook for Brazosport is bright with the addition of retail and real estate, Brazos Mall Senior Marketing Director Patty Sayes said.

Even though the mall completed its \$16 million renovation and expansion, many new retailers and real estate will be opening up in the city, Sayes said.

"We will be adding another addition to Brazos Mall with Springhill Suites coming to an 8-acre tract at the mall," Sayes said.

Prime Retail Inc., owners of the mall, also is building the strip center at the old Starplex Cinema site that will include Best Buy, Office Depot and PetSmart.

Another hotel is planned at Flagridge and Highway 332, and an upscale apartment complex will be built behind the Leo Martin auto dealership, she said. The complex's developers are in the process of rezoning the land and hope to close on the sale this month, Sayes said.

A 40,000-square-foot office complex will go up across from the post office and a new subdivision considered for south of the airport could bring 1,200 homes, she said.

Along with Honeybaked Ham and Lane Bryant, the shopping center next to Kohl's also will see a Sally's Beauty Supply, Check and Go, Famous Footwear and Cricket Cellular, she said.

The old theater at Highway 332 and This Way will be torn down to make way for a new Pizza Hut/Wing Street, and the old Tortuga's location will become another Mexican restaurant, Las Rosas, she said.

"The area is growing," Sayes said.

Although the cost of energy and feedstock, which is a raw material used in the industrial process, is rising with companies paying \$8.75 per million British thermal units in the Brazosport area, Dow Chemical Co. still is expanding, said Bob Walker, Dow Texas Operations' vice president.

"In Saudi Arabia, feedstock is 75 cents per million Btu," he said. "It is hard to argue that these places are the best places to build new facilities. ... Dow is looking for feedstock in other parts of the world, but those places lack the experience we have here."

Freeport's facility is Dow's largest plant with 10 percent of the company's workforce, he said.

Dow is modernizing a lot of its older plants and also will be constructing new units, he said.

"The reality is we're not going anywhere, we will be here for a long time," Walker said.

Clute is welcoming two new hotels — a Hampton Inn, which is under construction, and Texas Inn and Suites that will begin construction in the near future, Sayes said. The College Park and Lake Bend subdivisions also have brought 28 new home starts to date this year. Costa Verde, a new apartment complex, will open in the fall, with construction of a senior housing development and 40 new single-family lots expected to start soon.

"Being new to the area, we had high expectations and they have been met," Clute City Manager Kyle McCain said. "With the new hotels, we want to now bring in new businesses and restaurants to bring in more sales tax."

Construction on a dry boat storage for the new Freeport marina has begun, but the city is waiting for a permit before beginning wet slips for the project, Sayes said.

"It will be able to house 300 boats when completed," she said.

Freeport also is experiencing growth in real estate with 14 new homes this year and the additions of Pico de Gallo and Guadalajara restaurants, she said.

"We play a critical role in the future of retail for Brazosport, so our role is that we must shop locally," Sayes said.

Walker also updated the community on the state of other industry in the area.

"The first priority of chemical companies is safety, health and the environment," Walker said.

BASF has won a number of safety awards over the past year and has decreased its emissions by 12 percent, he said. Dow has reduced the amount of energy it uses for the sixth straight year, with an average annual reduction of 2.3 percent, Walker said. SI Group Inc. has had only one minor reportable incident in the last 20 months, he said.

"We take these things seriously," he said.

Walker assured the crowd that industry will continue to grow and stay in the area, as evidenced by all the new construction.

Shintech is expanding its Chocolate Bayou area facilities in 2008 while BASF has a couple of new facilities under construction, creating 130 new jobs, he said.

"The Gulf Coast is a very good place for business," Walker said.

Local industries also benefit from school districts and Brazosport College helping to train people to meet the increasing demand for a skilled workforce, he said.

Not only are the industrial and retail sectors of the community thriving, but also the school district, with Brazosport ISD getting another academically acceptable rating for the 2006-07 school year, Ripple said. Out of 11 schools in the county to receive exemplary status, Brazosport ISD had five, he said. More than 1,000 high school students participate in the dual concurrent program to earn college credit.

"These students have the ability to graduate with 30 hours of college credit," Ripple said.

Some of the district's students have raised \$36,679 to help build Habitat for Humanity homes, and have donated more than 6,300 hours in community service under the Peer Assistance Leadership program, he said.

Ripple said the district's staff is teaching students the skills they need to make the community a better place for tomorrow.

"This community blessed me growing up, so I'm giving back to it," said Ripple, in his first full school year as superintendent. "Everybody works together here — we take care of our own."

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