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SNAPSHOT: RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Along the Mexican border, the communities of the Rio Grande Valley are investing in the business and cultural amenities that will shape their future

As far south in Texas as you can go, the cities and towns of Hidalgo County and Cameron County offer an alluring mix of Texan, American and Mexican cultures, plus an economic environment that leverages the region’s unique location right on the border. As well as a center for trade and transportation, this geography has given rise to a thriving retail industry and significant manufacturing presence—and now the Valley is looking to leverage its low cost of living and growing population while adding the amenities that will help it compete in the 21st century.

EMPLOYMENT BREAKDOWN

LOW-COST LOCATION

South Texas is one of the most affordable places to live in the U.S., with the McAllen-Reynosa International Metro consistently ranking first or second for having the lowest Cost of Living Index in the country by the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness.

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It’s an exciting time for the southern tip of Texas, as investments in everything from transportation to higher education continue to elevate some of the nation’s fastest-growing communities, and underpin the transformation of the Rio Grande Valley economy.

Historically dependent on agriculture, the Valley has transitioned over recent decades to a more service-based economy, abetted by healthcare, retail and tourism. The emergence of maquiladores and twin-plant activity has driven industrialization along the border and created a manufacturing ecosystem that appeals to those in the automotive and aerospace sectors, among other high-tech industries.

Today, the Valley is witnessing unprecedented access to research and innovation, in neuroscience, energy, spaceflight and far more besides. An able workforce and low business costs are drawing the attention of companies both new and old. And the region continues to build upon its global connections, to Mexico and beyond, setting the stage for further growth in the decades to come.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The changes that have occurred throughout the Valley in recent decades would not have been possible without the growth and diversification of its higher education ecosystem, training the workers and leaders upon which these new industries depend.

South Texas College was founded in 1993 with a view to driving regional prosperity and social mobility in the Valley, and now serves more than 32,000 students across five campuses, two higher education centers and one virtual campus. Here, they can choose from more than 120 degree and certificate options, including a new Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, while specialist centers such as the Institute for Advanced Manufacturing ensure the college can satisfy employers’ demands for customized training that meets their local needs.

“We knew that the college had to be the economic development catalyst for attracting companies to the region, preparing the workforce, and helping families get out of poverty,”

1. South Texas College is the largest institution of higher education south of San Antonio. 2. STC’s Division of Nursing and Allied Health is learner-centered and offers programs in nursing, emergency medical technology, respiratory therapy, and more.
says president Shirley Reed. “We can say to an industry, if you come to South Texas, we may not have the workforce sitting here waiting for you, but we can prepare it. We have a young, vibrant, smart workforce. They just need to be trained on the skillsets you need in your organization, and that’s what we do.”

Established in 2013 as the state’s first major public university of the 21st century, the creation of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley was another huge milestone in the region’s evolution as an education destination. With close to 30,000 students enrolled at locations all across the Valley, it ranks as one of the largest institutions in the U.S. to have a majority Hispanic student population, while it’s also poised to deliver the innovations and discoveries that will lead to new businesses and industry partnerships for the region, backed by around $50 million in annual research expenditures.

Says president Guy Bailey, “Over the next few years UTRGV hopes to continue its work in transforming the Rio Grande Valley by serving as a unifying force across the Valley, by transforming health care both through the production of health care professionals and through providing medical specialties not previously available, and by providing the best educational value in Texas for residents of the Valley in particular and for all Texans more generally.”

Another of the state’s leading institutions, Texas A&M University also made a commitment to the region in recent years, as it partnered with the city and county to open the Texas A&M Higher Education Center at McAllen. Created in consultation with local business and civic leaders, the center offers degrees in biomedical science, agriculture systems, engineering and public health as it allows students to earn their Aggie ring and diploma without having to leave the Rio Grande Valley.

“We aim to be a center where all of our students are challenged and where all of our students succeed,” says assistant provost Adolfo Santos. “We aim to be a center that reduces the cost of a college education for the residents of South Texas. We aim to be a center where our students develop the skills they need to succeed in life and in work. Lastly, we aim to be a center that makes Aggies of our students.

“Given the great support we have received from our community leaders, and the Texas A&M University leadership, I know we will have great success in the years to come.”

ENERGY

One of the most intriguing opportunities opening up for the Valley right now is in energy, and specifically in the export of liquefied natural gas, as companies such as NextDecade look to the Port of Brownsville for its proximity to natural gas supply, an uncongested ship channel and access to a large, skilled workforce. These factors drew the company to the port for its marquee project, Rio Grande LNG—potentially a transformational development for the local community that will create up to 6,000 jobs during construction and 300 direct jobs once normal operations begin.

“Our vision is that global LNG customers, producers and investors see NextDecade as a company that delivers on our commitments and does what we say we’re going to do,” says chairman and CEO Matt Schatzman. “That generations of Rio Grande Valley residents see NextDecade as a good neighbor with a long-term commitment to the community where we live and work and view our Rio Grande LNG project as a place they, and generations to follow, want to work. And, that all our stakeholders are immensely proud of the role they all will have played in providing the world access to cleaner energy.”
The growth and development of the Valley would not be possible without the partnership of its leading utility providers, many of which have demonstrated a history of innovation and dedication in serving rural populations across South Texas.

These include Magic Valley Electric Cooperative, which has helped to power the region since 1937, when a group of farmers came together to acquire a loan under the Rural Electrification Act to finance the organization. Now the third-largest electric cooperative in Texas, serving more than 100,000 members across six counties, it remains committed to advancing its local communities through extensive corporate citizenship efforts and the provision of reliable and affordable energy, while the upcoming launch of a new operating system will provide its members with cutting-edge tools to control their account.

“Typically coops take the rap of being out there serving farmers and ranchers, and are basically plain Jane organizations, and I can tell you that’s not the case,” says MVEC general manager John Herrera. “We have the latest and greatest technology that larger utilities have, but we try to implement it in the most cost-effective manner because we know that at the end of the day, the member has to pay for whatever we use to provide them with the service they’ve signed up for.”

Meanwhile, Raymondville-based VTX1 Companies has provided rural communities across South Texas with phone, TV and now internet services for more than 65 years, and continues to grow organically and via acquisition to serve more customers across a larger service area. Today, that area stretches from Brownsville to as far north as southeast Austin, delivering the connectivity that the many farms, ranches and small towns in between need if they are to thrive in the 21st century.

“The economic impact in these communities has been profound,” says CEO Dave Osborn. “We have had businesses, hotels and healthcare providers seek out these communities because they have access to really good internet service. Their businesses, these days, depend on having that service available for a lot of different reasons, and we have probably kept a lot of these towns alive and enabled some of the larger ones to prosper.”
Three Texas cities made the Top 10 list for Tech Jobs*

*Fortune, SmartAsset July 29, 2019

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TRANSPORTATION
In addition to road, rail and through the Port of Brownsville, the region is connected to the wider world by a number of commercial airports, including Harlingen’s Valley International Airport (VIA), a former air force base that now has an $430-million annual economic impact on the local economy. With its central location, it draws flyers from across the entire Valley—and will continue to do so as it looks to add to the 615,000 passengers it welcomed in 2018 by introducing new flights and investing in airport amenities.

“We’re really excited with all the growth here at Valley International Airport,” says director of aviation Marv Esterly. “We pride ourselves on taking care of all citizens in the Rio Grande Valley, and making sure that the passenger has an excellent experience from curb to plane and plane to curb.”

In addition, the airport’s impact isn’t reserved to commercial aviation alone. United Launch Alliance has built rocket components in Harlingen for over 25 years, while

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the airport has set aside 480 of its 2,600 acres for both aeronautical and non-aeronautical development.

To the west, McAllen International Airport (MFE) is the Valley’s busiest commercial and general aviation airport, generating over $630 million in total economic output and supporting around 7,200 jobs. In 2015, the airport completed a terminal expansion project, adding 55,000 square feet to the existing terminal and introducing a variety of amenities that the modern flyer is looking for.

According to director of aviation Elizabeth Suarez, the airport is committed to completing key infrastructure programs that will position MFE as the primary airport serving South Texas and North Mexico, while delivering the air service options that meet the community’s diverse needs.

To the east, Brownsville/South Padre Island International Airport (BRO) has supported commercial air service since 1929—the same year it welcomed Charles Lindbergh and the first international airmail flight—and has also made a big investment in its future with the construction of a new passenger terminal to replace its existing facility. Set to open in late 2020, the 97,000-square feet terminal will help accommodate double-digit passenger growth with additional gates and revamped concessions options.

“Now is the perfect time. Not only do we have the outdated version of the current terminal but industry is expanding so fast in the Valley now that we’re going to outpace the capacity of every part of the terminal,” says director of aviation Bryant Walker. “This will be a modern facility that meets the expectations of even the most hardened road warrior, and is going to match up to any other world-class airport.”
PICTURE YOURSELF in something more colorful.

Walk in traditional calenda street parades at sunset. Find one-of-a-kind creations at a Mexican artisan mercado. Taste the most authentic Mexican cuisine north of the Rio Grande. If cultural festivals make your spirit come alive, there's a special place made for you. McAllen, Texas.

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AROUND THE VALLEY

An introduction to some of South Texas’s most prominent communities, and how they are preparing for the future

MCALLEN

The largest city in Hidalgo County has long been a center of commerce for a population of millions of people on both sides of the Rio Grande—with total retail sales exceeding $5 billion annually—and continues to build on that distinction as it welcomes significant investments in everything from healthcare, to education, to entertainment and culture.

“McAllen is a brand that people trust,” says city manager Roy Rodriguez. “When we say we’re going to endeavor to do something, we go do it, and that’s what McAllen is known for. We have had the financial wherewithal for so long, we have a lot of confidence in being aggressive.”

Named as one of America’s top ten “boombowns” in 2018 by MagnifyMoney, McAllen has been deliberate about its efforts to increase the quality of life for residents and employment, while the city offers a host of shovel-ready opportunities for manufacturers and logistics companies at the Harlingen Industrial Park and Harlingen Aerotropolis. The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley will shortly add an Institute of Neuroscience to the school of medicine that opened here a couple of years ago. And the community continues to invest in the local comforts and conveniences that will make it attractive to young people.

“We like to say that we’ve got that small town feel with big city amenities,” says Raul Garza, manager and CEO of the Harlingen EDC. “If you want to go into the big cities for a weekend, you can get there, but Harlingen is one of those places where you can get a good job, raise a family and be very comfortable doing it, and still have a lot of things to do both indoors and outdoors.”

Notably, the state-of-the-art Harlingen Convention Center opened for the first time in 2019, with over 44,000 square feet of space and a large ballroom augmenting what the city can offer as a visitor destination.

“We want our community to be known for its outdoor enthusiasm, for its invitingness, for its central location in the Rio Grande Valley,” says Cassandra Consiglio, director of the Harlingen CVB. “You can come to Harlingen and enjoy a free concert, walk our trails, take in our culture and history, and all of that at a very low economic price for you and your whole family.”
At the southern tip of Texas, boasting a population of more than 180,000 people, the Valley’s largest city offers its own distinctive attractions when it comes to bringing in residents and visitors—from the diverse animals living at Gladys Porter Zoo, to its array of Mexican-American War and Civil War sites, to its enticing variety of fine arts and other cultural museums, to more than 30 miles of biking and hiking trails.

At the same time, it makes a compelling case for businesses across a range of industries, starting with its relationship with sister city Matamoros, across the Rio Grande, and the presence of the Port of Brownsville, the only deepwater seaport on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Among other opportunities, the federal government recently gave approval for three new LNG projects at the port that could represent a total investment of nearly $40 billion in the region. Meanwhile, the community also appeared on news feeds across the world when SpaceX chose the area to build the first commercial orbital rocket launch site, sowing the seeds for a future aerospace cluster in the Brownsville Borderplex.

“For Elon Musk to decide to put an operation in Boca Chica Beach, Brownsville, that brings a lot of global attention,” says Mario Lozoya, executive director and CEO of the Greater Brownsville Incentives Corporation. “We have shipbuilding going on, advanced manufacturing going on, aerospace with SpaceX, and now liquefied natural gas companies, so there are a lot of high-tech prospects here in just one town, and the whole Valley is moving towards meeting the needs of those future projects.”

As the only tropical island in Texas, with 34 miles of white-sand beach and 300 days of sunshine each year, it’s easy to see why South Padre Island is a beloved vacation destination for everybody from spring-breakers to families from across the Valley and beyond. Close to 5 million people visit the small community each year, as it continues to see investment in new and exciting things for them to do.

“This is already known for being the best beach in Texas, but we’re trying to expand that,” says Ed Caum, director of the South Padre Island CVB. “We also are the sandcastle capital of the world, and we are becoming a music destination. One of our taglines is ‘where music meets the beach,’ because a lot of the people in Houston, Dallas and Austin who are great musicians also come to the island to vacation, and when they are here they play in our local venues.”

Besides hotel construction and the creation of the Sea Turtle Art Trail, one of the most significant recent developments on the island has been the multimillion-dollar renovation of the gulf-side Isla Blanca Park, with new pavilions and a 4,000-person amphitheater. Going forward, perhaps most intriguing may be the addition of a second road crossing from the mainland which could reduce travel time from the airport while advancing development to the northern part of the island.

“I think we have a lot of room for growth,” says EDC director Darla Lapeyre. “The island right now is only about 4 miles long with development, and I think that second causeway is going to be huge.”
OUT OF OFFICE

The best things to see and do across the Valley

NATURE AND ECOTOURISM

• With its concentration and diversity of rare and unique birds, including close to 30 species found nowhere else in the U.S., the Valley draws birdwatchers from all around the world to the nine locations that make up the World Birding Center (1).

• Established in the 1940s for the protection of migratory birds along the banks of the Rio Grande, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (2) features 14 miles of trails and a variety of ecosystems that support a dazzling array of bird and butterfly species.

• Thorn forest meets beaches, mudflats and coastal prairies at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (3), whose 97,000-plus acres are home to soaring shorebirds, white-tailed deer and the largest ocelot population in the U.S.

HISTORY

• A landmark almost instantly recognizable to all that walk by, Harlingen’s Iwo Jima Monument (4) is the original working model used in the casting of the bronze sculpture in Washington, D.C., that was donated to the nearby Marine Military Academy.

• Carrying travelers across the Rio Grande River for close to 70 years, the Los Ebanos Ferry (5) is the last hand-pulled barge of its kind on the U.S.-Mexico border, making it a slice of local history that attracts users and onlookers from near and far.

• Building in 1852 to guide ships through the Brazos Santiago Pass, the Point Isabel Lighthouse (6) has long been a landmark along the South Texas coastline, and is open today for visitors seeking a wonderful view of the Gulf and South Padre Island.

EVENTS

• South Padre Island can not only lay claim to beaches that are long, clean and pristine, but also that their sands are perfect for building—a fact celebrated with the annual Sandcastle Days (7) festival, where 30,000 come to watch master sand-sculptors at work.

• A Brownsville tradition since 1937, Charro Days (8) is a celebration of bi-national friendship and the community’s shared heritage with Matamoros, its sister city in Mexico, with costume balls, street parties and parades through downtown among the highlights.

• A five-day music and arts festival that honors the past, present and future of Mexican culture, with calenda-style street parades and other traditions rarely seen north of the border, MXLAN (9) drew 80,000 to McAllen during its first iteration in 2019.

OUTDOOR RECREATION

• With 30 miles of shoreline to explore, beachgoers on South Padre Island (10) can enjoy far more than just sunbathing, including thrilling ziplines, windsurfing and kiteboarding, and even horseback riding guided tours along the water’s edge.

• Whether on the edge of the bay or in offshore waters, the South Texas coastline offers a variety of fishing (11) locations and expeditions—including around a new artificial reef project that has already boosted the population of red snapper and other game fish.

• With its year-round sunshine and enviable selection of high-quality public and affordable courses, the Valley allows vacationers and snowbirds the opportunity to golf (12) through the winter whatever their standard may be.