

Right on the mark:

La Marque offers unique development opportunities

BY BRANDI SMITH

Growing up in La Marque, a southern suburb of Houston, Alex Getty says he watched as growth from the state's largest city slowly started to spill into Galveston County. Now, he says, it's pouring into his hometown, which is just 15 miles south of Houston and four miles north of Galveston.

"It's exciting. It's a big opportunity and we're excited to see it finally come to fruition," says Getty, who now serves as the executive director of the La Marque Economic Development Corporation. "We're the second fastest-growing city in Galveston County."

A population of roughly 16,500 is a far cry from the community's roots. Back in 1867, the town only had six farming families living in it. That number grew to nearly 200 by the 1890s. In the years after, four different railroads laid down their tracks in the city, bolstering the small town's economy. Over time, it became a residential hub for employees who work at chemical plants and refineries in neighboring cities. Lately, though, the growth has been substantial.

The community's easy, breezy coastal living and the security of a hurricane protection levee system are a huge draw for housing developers, who are busy building 7,000 homes in La Marque's retail trade area right now, potentially

delivering up to 20,000 new residents. One of those projects is Land Tejas's Lago Mar, a 2,033-acre, 4,000-home community just north of the city. Delany Cove by Friendswood Development, Saltgrass Crossing and Painted Meadows are building, as well

"We've got the rooftops coming. Now we want to focus on getting the retail that we want," Getty says.

The city recently celebrated the groundbreaking of La Marque Crossing, a 15,000-square-foot retail center along I-45 and FM 1764, on a pad site in front of Sam's Club and a Walmart Supercenter. Now its priorities are bringing in hotels, grocery stores and casual sit-down restaurants.

"We believe that we have some of the greatest values in the greater Houston area. Commercial real estate prices just haven't caught up with the amount of growth that we're having and the amount of traffic that we're seeing on I-45," points out Getty. We have 14.3 miles of I-45 frontage, more than anyone else in Galveston County. That's huge for us. We've got the big traffic counts, lots of available land and excellent prices."

Though the EDC's targets are clear, Getty knows La Marque's attributes will lure more than just hotels, grocery stores and restaurants.

"We'll talk to any potential business," he says. "We'll try our best to find a spot for them."

Residential and commercial expansion has concentrated on the west side of town for the past several years, but the EDC is also focused on its historic downtown, what it's coined the 'Renaissance District,' on the east side. Home to City Hall, the EDC, police HQ and the public library, like so many downtowns, it was once the center of city life and economic growth. Over time, that faded as developers turned their attention to the freeway.



ALEX GETTY



COLLEEN MERRITT

"We recently completed a resiliency study and found that we have some amazing bones, solid existing infrastructure and high daytime population downtown," says Colleen Merritt, who works with Getty at the EDC. "Revitalizing our downtown will not only take advantage of those things, but also help community cohesiveness. We're going to start where we are, with what we have, and rebuild downtown."

That work is already underway, beginning with 401 Laurel, which is getting a facelift. A restaurant and coffee shop have also signed leases to come to downtown La Marque. The area, Getty believes, will be a draw for mom-and-pop shops, which carry a different type of flair than national chains.

"We're going to be swinging hammers on 401 Laurel within the next month or so. Then we're going to work on streetscaping projects. We hope to bring back the energy downtown, and increase the after 5:00 p.m. crowd with community engagements. We want a fun historic district where people can gather, shop, eat and just be together," Merritt says.

The EDC knows better than to have a cookie-cutter approach to working with business partners. Every deal is different, Getty says, because every company is different.

"Sometimes a tax abatement is very important to a person. Sometimes they just need a little help on the real estate side or a grant. We really try first and foremost to find out what the needs are of each individual developer and then we customize a plan that makes sense to everybody," he says.

With its prime I-45 frontage, creative incentives, an abundance of commercial property, a budding downtown revitalization and build-to-suit options, La Marque no doubt hits the mark for developers and companies looking to capitalize on the available opportunities here.

Adds Merritt: "Life is good in La Marque." ■

