

Access equals growth

Roads offer chance for development

**By Kimberly Vetter Caller-Times Business Editor
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When local developer Lewis Alty thinks about building, he thinks about access.

He thinks about how easily drivers can get to and from his project, commercial or residential.

"It's a huge factor," he said.

That's why the owner of Alty Enterprises and A&J Construction is waiting until work on the JFK Causeway is complete before he builds a multi-family housing complex.

"I think the market will be more enticing with better access," he said.

Developers and business owners across the country make similar decisions. They look at where the traffic is before they commit to investing in an area, proving that transportation and economics often go hand in hand.

"Good transportation routes are essential for economic vitality," said Tom Niskala, transportation director for Corpus Christi Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"Congestion and traffic can strangle a community."

Ron Kitchens, president and CEO of the Corpus Christi Regional Economic Development Corp., agreed: "Access equals opportunity."

Access is becoming greater in the Coastal Bend with the largest amount of construction projects going on in 14 years.

These projects have sparked commercial and residential developments, the potential of future projects and in some cases higher land values.

Areas around Packery Channel, a sand-filled pass through Padre Island, for example, have seen a surge of interest from developers, some of whom already have started construction.

John Golden, a property developer from Central Texas, has closed on the old marina location on Packery Channel just across the JFK Causeway.

Golden, who bought the property in anticipation of the Packery Channel dredging project now under way, is planning a residential, retail and restaurant development for the 50-acre lot.

Alex Harris, president of Brite Star Construction, also broke ground on a 32-unit town home complex just after the city held the groundbreaking for the channel dredging.

Meanwhile, Harris is working on a deal for an 11,000-square-foot professional office plaza near the intersection of Whitecap Boulevard and South Padre Island Drive.

Land values last year around the channel soared by 8.7 percent, according to the city's budget office. In 2002, the property within the Packery Channel taxing district was booked at just more than \$102 million. For 2003, those values rose to \$111 million. That growth is roughly four times more than the rest of the city.

The Crosstown Extension and Interchange projects, which will open routes to the south side that bypass South Padre Island Drive, also have spawned development and will likely bring in a lot more, said Matt Cravey, president of NAI-Cravey Real Estate Services.

"The impact of Crosstown is huge," he said. "It could be the new hub of Corpus Christi."

Several restaurants have gone up in the area near the Tinseltown movie theater. A hotel is being built and several developers are interested in 200 acres of vacant land behind the theater.

Cravey said the value of the land already has increased. In the 1980s, land in the area was going for about \$90,000 an acre, Cravey said. Now, it's going for \$300,000 an acre and the value is increasing.

"There's going to be a lot of development going on here," Cravey said.

Another transportation project that could lead to big development is the Joe Fulton International Trade Corridor.

Local trade officials say the corridor, to be built on the north side of the Port of Corpus Christi, will provide access to more than 1,000 acres for industrial development, which may create thousands of jobs.

Kitchens estimated that the land, opened for development, could bring in 8,000 to 10,000 jobs.

"We can guarantee we will never get those jobs if we don't open the corridor," Kitchens said.

The economic development team has already shown the future sites to petrochemical companies that may be interested in opening shop, he added.

Port Commission Chairman Ruben Bonilla said the north side of the ship channel would be a prime space for industries such as offshore platform fabrication, ship building or light industrial uses.

The port expects that developing the land on the north side of the ship channel will bring in \$250 million in new facilities.

State transportation officials are reviewing plans for the \$49.7 million Joe Fulton International Trade Corridor, said John LaRue, executive director for the Port of Corpus Christi. Bids have been sought and a contract should be awarded in April if not sooner.

Construction is expected to start later this year, and the corridor should be ready for traffic by the first quarter of 2007, port officials have said.

The corridor will connect U.S. Highway 181 to Interstate 37, thereby linking the port more efficiently to San Antonio, Laredo and the Rio Grande Valley, according to port officials.

"All of these projects have put our community in a positive position for growth," Niskala said. "And more projects are on the horizon."

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