



B.J.  
Simon



Dave  
Irvine



David  
Showlater



Vince  
Yokom

# Working with Local Stakeholders

BY BRANDI SMITH

When Amazon opened the doors of its 1 million-square-foot distribution center in Brookshire, it was heralded as one of the biggest economic development projects Waller County had ever done.

"That will change if you guys all do your jobs," joked Vince Yokom, executive director of the Waller County Economic Development Partnership.

Yokom has headed up the organization for the past 15 years and has seen development in the area increase exponentially as population growth has shifted west.

"We're excited about the future of the Houston region and certainly in Waller County," he told the crowd assembled at the Houston & Southeast Texas Development / Redevelopment Summit organized by REDNews.

Waller County EDP's goal is to work with existing businesses and those wanting to move into the county to facilitate positive growth in the county.

"We try to encourage developers or any end user coming into the community to engage with us as soon as possible," said Yokom. "In a high-growth area like Waller County, we're constantly changing rules and regulations. Things are on the move. We don't want

someone to start in a particular direction and have to change directions."

He noted that every project is evaluated on its own merits, that there is no "cookie-cutter" or "one-size-fits-all" approach to working with a developer.

"A lot of developers don't realize that we are here to help and we can help guide where you are looking," Yokom said.

B.J. Simon, associate executive director of the Baytown-West Chambers County Economic Development Foundation, added that organizations like his can serve as interpreters between different organizations within a region, especially when it comes to zones and uses.

"What is 'general commercial' in Houston may not be 'general commercial' in the city of Baytown," he explained. "Depending on the nature of projects, it's key to understand what flexibility exists."

Simon stressed, as Yokom did, the importance of starting the process early.

"Contact us early, get involved early, let us help you as early as possible," said Yokom. "That's probably the number one thing I would recommend."

That is something both men have learned in their roles working with various governments and developers. They also took the opportunity to share other lessons they've picked up along the way.

"Time is critical. Leverage can be a killer. Get in and get out of projects," advised Simon. "Picking the right location is helpful. Of course, freeway locations are better than off-freeway locations, if you have an unknown property in the time of need. Good locations are always important."

"Being sensitive to the time, we try to develop everything we do around making sure that you make a good decision on your behalf or on your client's behalf as fast as possible," Yokom said.

He mentioned that Waller County has introduced what it calls parallel abatement, a process aimed at speeding up approvals.

"We work with the cities and as soon as the city indicates to us that they are going to participate, instead of waiting for them to finish their process, we start immediately," said Yokom. "So you have both entities running simultaneously to go through the process of shortening that incentive prep approval process. We've taken it from 90 to 100 days to maybe 45 days." How to utilize opportunity zones, a

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relatively new federal program aimed at injecting economically poor areas with investment, was a popular topic for audience members, who asked panelists multiple questions on the topic.

"Baytown has 8.25 square miles of opportunity zone designation, essentially the old central business district," Simon said, adding that Baytown EDF has been working with municipal governments and private industry to develop projects in those areas.

"I think opportunity zones are a great tool," added Yokom. "I'm very fortunate to have a lot of land in Waller County to be taken advantage of. So, if you know anybody out there that has excess capital gains and looking to offload, look out in Waller County."

His county was also the focal point for a discussion about eminent domain, led by attorney David Showalter. Waller County residents have pushed back against plans for Texas Central Partners to claim property along its proposed route for a Dallas-to-Houston high-speed rail line.

"There are a lot of strong feelings from folks, like

legacy farms with big land holdings where the rail's going to cut through," Showalter said. "This is going to have a big impact on those people."

The panelists appeared to agree that, despite resistance, the project will likely move forward. As it does, state leaders are taking notes.

"Some lawmakers have been trying to get eminent domain reform passed in several sessions. They got close this time; it was unsuccessful," explained Showalter.

He added that the reform that's being considered involves preventing low-ball offers from condemning authorities and to bring some fairness and transparency to the eminent domain process.

"A lot of it is shrouded in mystery or intimidation," Showalter said. "It's intimidating to land owners to have to deal with the process of eminent domain." The Texas Central project is not the only one taking advantage of the state's eminent domain policies. Showalter, who has handled hundreds of eminent domain cases since graduating from Baylor Law

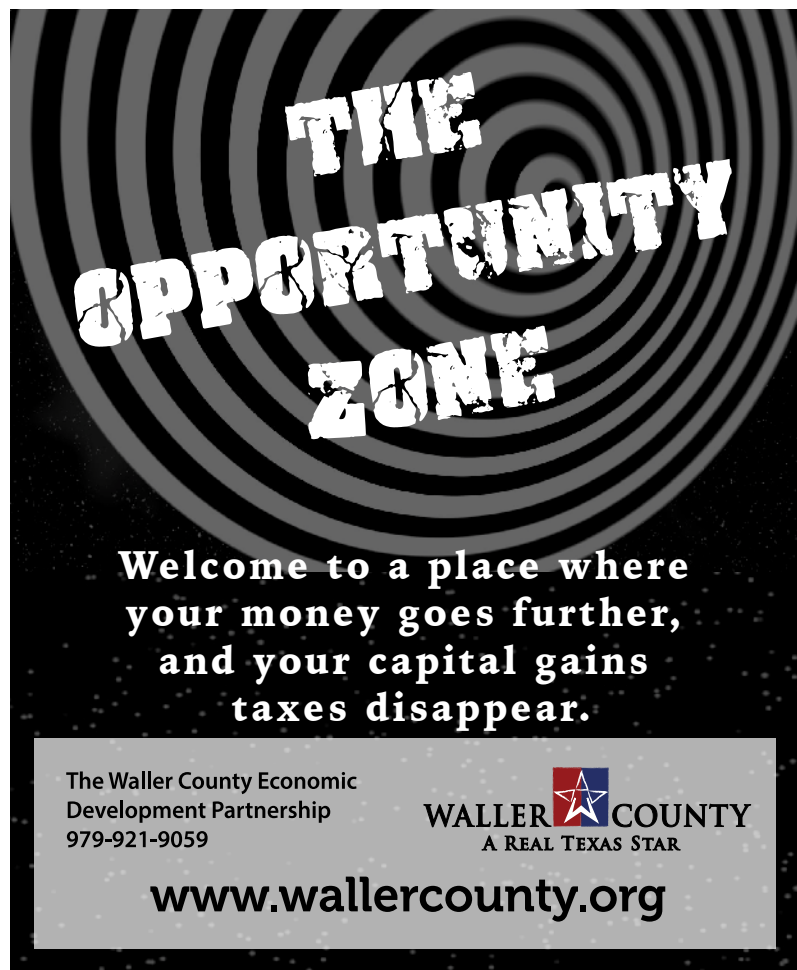
School in 1977, noted that pipelines are also picking up property all over Texas.

"There are thousands of miles of pipelines being under construction right now bringing crude out of the Permian Basin area to refineries in the Gulf and elsewhere," he said. "So pipeline companies are blowing and going right now, condemning land from Fort Stockton to Midland to Houston. It's pretty amazing."

Showalter stressed the importance of education about the process, as well as hiring an attorney steeped in the nuances of eminent domain.

Education seemed to be a theme for this panel, focused on working with local stakeholders. Panelists emphasized the value of research, asking questions and, above all, coming to the table prepared.

"Find out what you need. Start the conversation by being very honest," said Yokom. "We try to get you in and go over and quantify you as fast as you possibly can, so you won't have to worry or wonder what is going to happen with your project in our community." ■



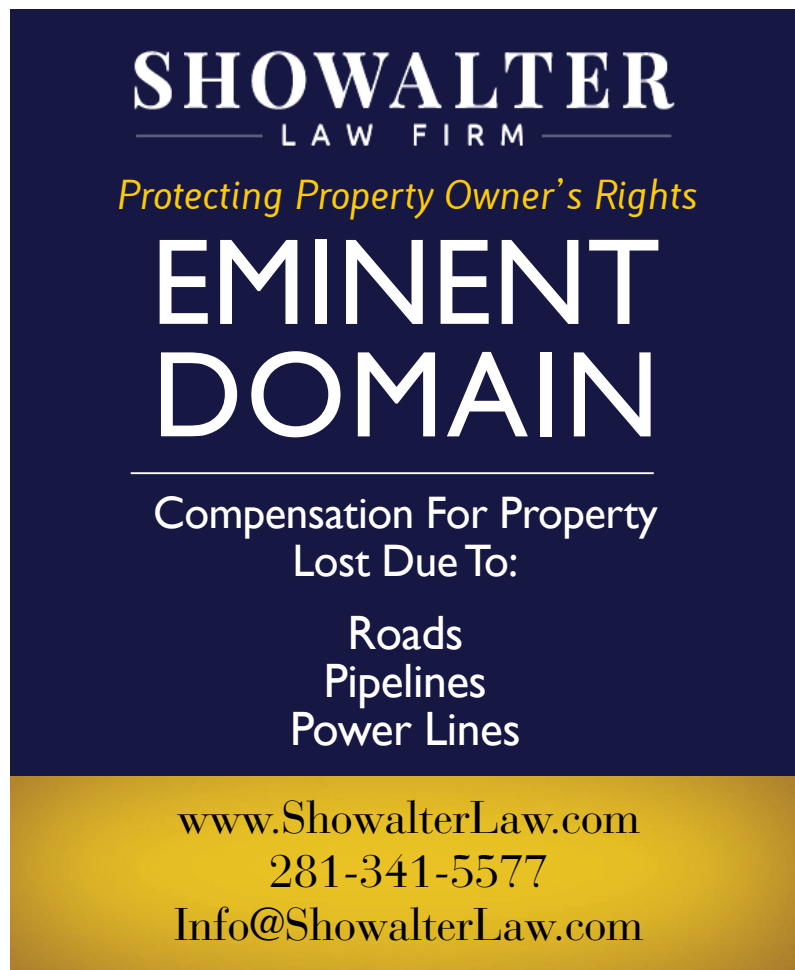
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