

# Seeing progress in Seabrook:

## Massive highway project creates new development opportunities

BY BRANDI SMITH



Look around Seabrook today and the signs of progress are clear.

"The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the City of Seabrook have the last buildings going down. All the necessary parcels have been acquired and the remaining buildings have been demolished for the footprint of the project," says City Manager Gayle Cook. "Visually, it's really made a change here in the past month or so."

The project, of course, is the long-awaited widening of State Highway 146 from four lanes to up to 12. Discussed for decades, TxDOT just got started on construction in February 2019.

"They're getting close to the end of Phase 1, which includes the widening of the Clear Creek bridge by adding one additional travel lane, plus a 14-foot-wide pedestrian and bicycle lane and utility work," Cook says.

In Phase 2, crews will continue work on the bridge, create a new southbound frontage road and build the bulk of a new express bridge. Phases 3 and 4, expected to be finished in the next five years, will rebuild and raise SH-146's main lanes, as well as complete the express bridge and add more greenery and landscaping. It's a massive undertaking in the community that's about 30 minutes south of Houston.

"It's a short-term negative for long-term positives. It's similar to remodeling your home over a number of years, but at the end of the day, the city will be much better off," says Paul Dunphy, a longtime Seabrookian, small business owner and president of the Seabrook Economic Development Corporation.

He adds that the city has been actively working on this expansion for years, focusing on how to prepare the community for the challenges that come along with years of construction.

"I think it just really shows a small city working extremely efficiently, identifying a problem and preparing for it, so that the process is as easy and successful as possible," says Dunphy, who also served on the Seabrook City Council.

Paul Chavez, the director of the Seabrook EDC, echoes that: "All of our boards are aligned with one another. All of us who serve the community live in this area. We have family in this area, so we all have a common interest in seeing the best development possible for our community, for our home."

As progress is made, residents are starting to understand the benefits that are on the way.

"Of all of the comments that we get now, there's definitely been a huge shift in the past year and a half from people questioning why the construction was needed to finally seeing the end goal," says Cook. "I think we are finally coming over the crest of getting people to envision the future and get excited about what's to come."

That includes developers and investors, who held off on plans due to the uncertainty that surrounded the project for so long.

"It paralyzed our economic development. As a result, our highway had always been many steps behind where it should be," says Dunpheay. "Now we are now able to plan for the future and make substantial improvements to our city and with our economic development expansion."

Seeing TxDOT's plan, as well as how construction is coming along, has generated a lot of interest within the development community, according to Chavez.

"This is an exciting and rare opportunity to be able to market highway frontage. Investors sense that highway frontage is a rare thing to come across, especially a major highway like 146," he says. "But they're also looking at our community in general."

Cook points out, even though the highway expansion is years out from completion, this is "prime time" for some developers due to the scope of their project and the lead time required.

"We have a couple of corners of wide-open space, so someone can come in and combine parcels like never before," she adds.

Chavez says so-called 'orphan' tracks along the freeway are garnering a lot of interest from investors as well, who seem to pose similar questions.

"They say, 'I noticed that a McDonald's here, but relocated, so this is a little piece left over. There's a little piece right next to that and another piece next to that. Can we combine those together?' And the answer is yes," he says. "You can combine those together, make a master track and put your new retail site right on the highway."

He says the EDC tracks all of that information and is happy to share as much as possible with

interested parties. Those opportunities are also clear in the aerial photos the city commissioned to document the open lots.

"When you see the scope of it from the aerial side, it's wild," laughs Chavez. "It's pretty neat and it's amazing to see this redevelopment happening right here, right now."

Along with drone photography, Seabrook is using other forms of technology to help with marketing. That includes developing a website to keep the community updated ([SH146.com](http://SH146.com)), using GIS data to create slider maps that reveal

it's an effort he knows will be worth it as the city looks to add to its roster of retailers.

"We are very aggressive and want to work with the development community and retail site selectors on what we can offer to help sweeten the deal when it comes to locating with our community," says Chavez.

The city is especially interested in bringing in a large grocery chain (it currently only has a Kroger), as well as more restaurant options for the families who call Seabrook home. Business offices and service providers are also on the shortlist.



the impact construction has had on certain parcels and creating an app to help developers have easy access to available properties for sale or lease.

"We are harnessing the technology we have now and utilizing it to its fullest potential. It's made our jobs easier in some ways, but more difficult in others. There is a lot of data to collect and distill," Chavez says.

"We're looking for developers who make our quality life in Seabrook better, while promoting economic development and increasing jobs and property value," Dunpheay says.

You can learn more about the development opportunities in Seabrook by contacting economic development director Paul Chavez by phone (281-291-5730) or email ([pchavez@seabrooktx.gov](mailto:pchavez@seabrooktx.gov)). ■