

# Sights Set on Seabrook:

## SH 146 construction promises more lanes, more opportunities

BY BRANDI SMITH



**PAUL CHAVEZ**  
SEABROOK ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

For about 20 years, an air of uncertainty hung over the future of Seabrook. Everyone knew TxDOT was bound to make changes to State Highway 146, but no one could say what it would look like when all was said and done.

"The idea was to alleviate traffic congestion and ultimately link it to the Grand Parkway. That was its ultimate goal," explains Paul Chavez, the city's director of economic development. "But that uncertainty stifled a lot of new developments in our community."

He says investors were hesitant to pour money into a project without knowing when construction would begin and what it would look like.

"They need to know with confidence that what they're buying and putting into place will still be there and will grow," Chavez says.

Any proposed changes to SH 146 were usurped by other construction for a couple of decades, but when Hurricane Ike hit, the devastating storm and the evacuation it prompted highlighted that an expansion was overdue.

The highway is a vital alternative route for people rushing to get out of Galveston and Galveston County in the case of an emergency.

In October 2016, TxDOT, in partnership with the Federal Highway Administration, revealed its plans for the roadway, which includes widening from six lanes to 12. But the project involves more than just pavement.

"There's going to be a lot more greenery because we built that in to the design for the corridor along 146 once it expands," says Chavez.

Since the plans were finalized, he says the price of real estate in Seabrook is starting to creep up. Along with it, those companies that had been nervous about investing are reaching out to see what kind of opportunities exist along the improved highway.

"Now that we have clarity about the project, things are starting to happen. Brokers, developers and consultants are taking a much more positive look at this community and this commercial corridor overall," Chavez says. "A lot of developers have said, 'This is an area we want to be in. We like the waterfront lifestyle. We think there's a lot of potential here based on traffic patterns, economies, household incomes, and so on.' The school district is also continuing to grow, so they see that there are opportunities, not to mention the big pieces of available land."



The city has a kind of wish list as far as which companies seize on those opportunities. First priority: more grocery options.

"We love our Kroger, which has been here for a long time. It's been a great community partner. We're hoping that Kroger will expand on its footprint and upgrade what it has here," says Chavez, but we'd also love to see another grocery store come in."

He points to more specialized stores, such as a Central Market, Whole Foods or Earth Fare for consumers who want healthier alternatives.

Lunch, Chavez says, is another challenge. The city is looking for restaurants, specifically smaller chains, to bring quality fast food to Seabrook. He points to the newly opened Hubcap Grill as an example.





"Those kinds of businesses, that caliber of a business, will thrive in Seabrook because people who come here from out of town want something different. They want what the locals want," he says, offering up another example: Seabrook Waffle Company. "They only have one location. Their specialty is Belgian-style waffles and that place is packed on a regular basis. When they first landed here, I thought, 'Wow, they have to sell a whole lot of waffles to make it.' But, you know, it's darn good. They took off like wildfire. That's amazing."

As much potential as Chavez knows the city has, he's watched it come a long way in his seven years as the city's economic development director.

"I've gone from being simply an economic development professional to an economic development professional and a business therapist, if you will," he laughs. "A lot of the local businesses will call and say, 'Paul, what am I going to do? Help me. Talk me through this, man.' I have long conversations with our business community and even residents who are seeking affirmation."

Another evolution has been Chavez's outlook for Old Seabrook, which is far enough off the grid that he initially worried visitors wouldn't make the effort to explore it.

"People do! It's really interesting to see that start to come to maturity now. Prospects are very interested in the quaint charm and waterfront views that Old Seabrook has to offer," he says, adding that NASA Parkway is also starting to see some new developments.

Now Chavez has his sights set on two to three years from now as construction along SH 146 begins to wrap up.

"That's when investors are going to start making their plays on a property acquisition and development," he says. "So we're going to see a lot more things ramping up. Developments will start to go vertical and get populated fairly quickly."

It's a satisfying prospect for a community that's pushed through the uncertainty, now confident in a bright future as the highway starts expanding. ■

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