

# Preparing for partnerships: Waller County EDP ready for reshoring & FDI opportunities

BY BRANDI SMITH



Development of the 300+ acre Empire West Business Park is now underway in Brookshire, Texas.

When ‘partnership’ is part of your organization’s name, being awarded for working on a partnership is about as good as it gets. Waller County Economic Development Partnership recently took home a bronze award for Public Private Partnership from the International Economic Development Council.

“To be judged as one of the best in the world, by the best in the world, is truly both humbling and rewarding,” says Vince Yokom, the EDP’s Executive Director.

The EDP worked with the Waller County Road Improvement District and Waller County to help Ross Stores, Inc. build a new distribution center in the community just west of Houston.

“Ross has not even occupied the facility yet and it has already been a great corporate citizen in supporting our infrastructure improvements in the area and our economic development effort,” Yokom says. “This was a true

partnership effort and one of the best experiences we have had in working with a prospect.”

For many companies, Waller County is an obvious choice for a distribution hub. Served by a number of major highways and freeways, as well as rail and an airport, its strategic location on Houston’s west side is an incredible asset. It is now primed for development just as U.S. companies show renewed interest in reshoring operations.

For decades, these factors such as cheap labor, inexpensive transportation and endless incentives convinced companies to move their production facilities out of the U.S. But the times, they are a-changin’, as the song goes. According to the Reshoring Institute, “a growing number of businesses have rethought their global manufacturing strategies,” which has led to an increasing number of companies bringing at least part of their production back to the U.S.

“More than half of the executives surveyed reported that they were planning or considering reshoring activities in the next five years,” the institute’s 2019 report notes. “Notably, 97% said that they would consider a domestic source for parts if the price and quality were competitive to foreign suppliers.”

Knowing that, Waller County has been preparing for those U.S. companies looking to reshore all or part of their operations, as well as foreign direct investment. The EDP hopes to build on its current success with European companies.

“We realize that relocating facilities can be a costly investment. As such we have been preparing to attract new opportunities through our incentive program, working with local schools to develop a workforce and access to workforce grants, and improving our infrastructure,” says Yokom. “While incentives can play a strong role in relocations, the workforce and infrastructure assets are usually considered more important to sustain long-term operations.”

That’s why the county worked with TxDOT to reclassify several of its roads as major collectors. By reclassifying the roads, which usually connect directly with the state highway system, the cost of funding through the State Infrastructure Bank is reduced.

“As we grow, especially along the Interstate 10 corridor, we are seeing the need to improve these collectors,” Yokom says. “This gives us more options when considering improvements to local roads.”

The EDP also established a formal relationship with the Port of Houston, which was approved by the Waller County Commissioners Court in March, then by the Port Commission in April.

“This makes us only the second county in the Houston region to have this type of formal relationship with the port in its Alternative Site Framework under Foreign Trade Zone 84 (FTZ 84),” says Yokom. “This relationship will help expedite the FTZ application process and provide many benefits to the FTZ operators.”

He adds the EDP took special interest in the program when it learned that roughly 80 percent of FTZ operators are based in the U.S.

“It seemed like the perfect fit since both U.S. manufacturing and distribution are joined at the logistics hip with FDI,” Yokom says.

Waller County EDP is already seeing the impact of its efforts. This year alone, it responded to more than 30 requests for information.

“Over the years we have worked hard to develop relationships with key local developers and brokers in the area. So to see an increase in direct contact enhances our ability to reach even more prospects,” says Yokom. “It’s also a good sign that our marketing efforts are paying off and more prospects, or their representatives, are finding Waller County.”



Germany-based MAN Energy Solutions now calls Waller County home for its North American headquarters.

The result: a number of projects are underway, including the 300+ acre Empire West Business Park and 400-acre The Uplands at Twinwood (both in Brookshire), along with Beacon Hill, which will offer more than 200 acres of commercial development, and the heavy industrial Alegacy Park, both in Waller.

Industry-leading European companies now call Waller County home as well. Just in the past few years, companies with ownership or headquarters in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and Ireland have either built new facilities here or have expanded existing ones. Waller County can now boast the North American Headquarters of MAN Energy Solutions (Germany), Burckhardt Compression (Switzerland) and Grundfos Pumps (Denmark).

That’s just the list so far. Yokom says he knows competition for FDI will be intense, but that’s why the EDP started preparing in 2019. Since then, his team’s been researching trends and doing its best to explain why Waller County should be the destination of choice.

“Among other things, we have started visiting trade missions of countries we feel are a good fit,” Yokom says. “Of course, with the pandemic, this has made personal visits almost impossible. We did, however, manage to visit with Enterprise Ireland, which has offices in Austin, before the pandemic. In addition, we are working with the Greater Houston Partnership, which has a great FDI program, to see what more we can do together.”

That’s the key: together. Living up to its title, Waller County EDP will continue to look for partnerships that can benefit companies and the community.

For more information about development in Waller County, visit [WallerCounty.org](http://WallerCounty.org) or email Executive Director Yokom at [vyokom@wallercounty.org](mailto:vyokom@wallercounty.org).