

Support in Seabrook:

The city's EDC steps up to help businesses

BY BRANDI SMITH



In many ways, the City of Seabrook had prepared for a disaster of this level. Even before Hurricane Ike slammed into Galveston Bay in 2008, the city had developed a plan in case the inevitable occurred. But the covid-19 storm that started brewing in early 2020 hit in an entirely new way.

“It was certainly like a tidal wave that hit shore so fast. We saw it coming, we started to prepare and then it hit. We just went straight into emergency mode,” says Paul Chavez, director of the Seabrook Economic Development

Corporation. “It’s unprecedented because the whole world is experiencing something as significant as Ike. Everybody is affected by it.”

He says that in early February, the city started reaching out to citizens and businesses, trying to prepare them for what lay ahead.

“A lot of hard decisions had to be made, but we knew that for the safety of everybody, we had to make those decisions and enforce them,” Chavez says.

In some cases, it means abiding by and enforcing decisions made at a higher level, such as Harris County's Stay Home, Work Safe order.

"We're asking our residents to work from home if they can and that's the same policy we're using at the city," says Chavez.

There are exceptions to the rule, such as EMS crews, firefighters, police officers and public works. In addition to responding to emergencies throughout the city, Chavez says first responders are also checking on local businesses, which may or may not be open.

"They make sure that there isn't any kind of suspicious activity going on inside because we know a lot of people are scared about looting and burglaries," he explains.

That's one of many concerns local business owners started calling about months ago when it became clear that covid-19 was going to have a considerable impact in the U.S. As those calls came in, Chavez says the county was also keeping in contact, providing information in twice-daily updates.

Now in the midst of it all, he says his priority is touching base with Seabrook businesses to provide as much support as possible. Chavez says it is a new role to balance economic development and emotional needs of the business community during this volatile environment.

"It's in this role that a new challenge of managing all of these needs has emerged to sustain the local economic base and assist with these new needs of the business community. They need somebody to talk to and I feel that a lot of them don't want to express some of these things to their employees because they want to keep morale up," he explains. "But when I call and I talk to them about what's going on, they just sometimes open up and say, 'I need help.'"

Chavez says he's heard from some businesses that have cut down on staff. In other cases, deliveries aren't coming through, so they're making do with what they have on hand. He has also talked business owners through the process of furloughing workers, how to apply for grants and loans and where to go for assistance.

"I'm trying to learn as much as I can as fast as I can so I can turn around and say, 'Have you checked this out? Have you looked at this? Have you explored these options?'" says Chavez.

Alternately, he says he's picked up the phone to hear: "We've got a game plan in place. What does the city need from us? How can we help?"

"It's been good to see that everyone's out there just trying their best to keep moving forward. We all know that we will all meet again soon and we'll have a great time together, but until that point we have to all do our best to just keep things rolling," Chavez says.

The city, which already relied on social media to keep its residents informed,

is leaning on apps such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram to keep information flowing to area businesses.

From emergency notices to letters from Mayor Thom Kolupski, Seabrook's social media channels are providing a constant stream of information to those who need it. They're also a way to let residents know which essential businesses are open, including local restaurants offering pickup and delivery.

"We're trying to keep that economic engine rolling," says Chavez. "Being a seaside community, our priority is keeping everybody above water. We're doing what we can and we're all locking arms together to ensure the vitality of our community and the region."

"We're asking our residents to work from home if they can and that's the same policy we're using at the city," says Chavez.

He points that other communities throughout are doing the same, resulting in a web of support that stretches throughout southeast Texas.

"What's been very fascinating is how willing everyone is to share as much information as possible with one another. One city will say, 'I have these employees. Can you help me?' Another city will respond, 'I have this program that works. See if this works for you guys,'" Chavez shares. "It's been uplifting to see a city that would have been considered a competitor, if you will, for economic activity reaching out and asking, 'Do you need anything from me to help you?'"

While Seabrook EDC focuses on keeping the city's existing businesses, it hasn't paused efforts to bring new businesses in, though things have slowed down on that front.

"I'm still calling prospects. A lot of them are still very interested in Seabrook, but they are constrained by the orders surrounding the disaster around the country not allowing them to travel or handle business as they previously could," explains Chavez. "The environment is changing for both local municipalities and retail for the future, but industry experts are expressing that these changes are already being envisioned long term by retailers for future recovery efforts. With over 300 million dollars in thoroughfare expansion in our community, Seabrook is positive on the recovery efforts and what this could allow in the new market post-COVID."

He adds that some of the national prospects predict that by this fall, the economic climate will start to turn around. The hope is that all of the pent-up economic energy on the consumer side will result in a boom on the business side.

Just as it has overcome obstacles in the past, Seabrook is prepared to meet this challenge head-on. For more information about opportunities there, contact economic development director Paul Chavez by phone (281-291-5730) or email (pchavez@seabrooktx.gov). ■