
RSTEC: Close To Landing Some Very Big Projects

By Anonymous

Published: 01/24/2012 - 11:00

Published in the online newspaper *Rio Grande Guardian* on 1/24/2012:

McALLEN, Jan. 24 - Rio South Texas Economic Council is close to landing some major new projects that would mean hundreds of new jobs for the region.

Raudel Garza, executive director of RSTEC, said he could not reveal too many details right now but said he was confident the projects will happen.

“Rio South Texas Economic Council is showing you we can market the Rio Grande Valley and Rio South Texas as a region and be very successful at it. We are getting very close to landing some very big projects. I would love to tell you about it once they have signed on the dotted line. And they will bring a lot of jobs. When we talk about a lot of jobs we are in the 200, 300 range at least,” Garza said. Garza made his comments in an exclusive interview with the *Guardian* at RSTEC’s annual general meeting, which was held at the McAllen Convention Center last Thursday. At the event, Rose Benavidez, of Starr County Industrial Foundation, was appointed chair of the group for 2012.

RSTEC, which comprises economic development councils, cities, and chambers of commerce in the four-county Rio Grande Valley region, was started three years ago. Garza was appointed executive director in October, 2010. In his interview with the *Guardian*, Garza gave an overview of the group’s progress.

“The first year was like a planning year, everybody was trying to feel each other out and get to know how we were going to work this thing. Now, we have a marketing plan that we are executing. We have attended several different trade shows in the past year and this year we are being even more aggressive,” Garza said. Garza said RSTEC will be attending about six different trade shows across the country in 2012, as well as four or five other industry gatherings.

“It all is about promoting this region as one, showing that we are the third largest metro area in Texas, the largest border region in America, and the 23rd largest metro area in the United States. That is the mantra for taking us out

there," Garza said. "We are promoting our quality of life. We are promoting our available workforce and access to markets and just trying to promote the area in general as one where any manufacturer or large employer can do well for themselves."

Garza said RSTEC will be attending MD&M West in February. This is a huge trade show for the medical device industry. "We are trying to get in front of suppliers and manufacturers of medical devices. That is one of our target areas. We have the qualities those suppliers and manufacturers are looking for in terms of workforce and location," he said. The following month, RSTEC will be in Los Angeles again promoting the region to WESTEC, a major trade show for advanced manufacturing and engineering. "We get in front of the manufacturers, the large employers, and the large capital investment to promote the region," Garza said.

Garza was asked what benefits accrue members of the group. "We have produced quite a few prospects and visits for our members. That is one of the benefits. We also do marketing pieces, press releases for our members and try to leverage our resources. We are really a volunteer organization. So, whatever a member puts in to it, the more they get out of it because together we are stronger than we are individually," Garza said.

"A lot of people have talked about how the Valley is always separated and the communities are always fighting with each other. This group shows you otherwise. Every community is trying to get its piece of the pie, if you will. We are just trying to bring the pie closer to everybody. That is how we look at it."

Focusing in a little more on the Friday Night Football mentality that the Valley is often accused of, Garza acknowledged that when he first took over at RSTEC he was told it would be "like herding cats." In other words, the cities that make up the group would not get along and would always be trying to out-do each other in order to land a major employer.

"Yes, when I took on this job, I was told it would be like herding cats. It really has not been that way. Everybody works well together. Every community understands that they are stronger together; that they can leverage each other's resources and that the private sector does not look at us through city limit lines. They look at this as a region and as a region we have a lot of assets, like the Port of Brownsville, the foreign trade zones, the research park that McAllen is about to embark on. There are a lot of regional assets. The universities, the community colleges, they are all working together. They all have that same vision."

Garza pointed out that RSTEC is not a planning group. "We have a marketing plan that was adopted two years ago. We are an implementation group, we are an action group. We try to do as much as we can with the resources we have," he said.

Cities and economic development corporations from outside the Valley have asked to join RSTEC, Garza said. However, for now, the group is focusing solely on economic development for Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron counties. "We do get interest from other regions that want to join but we have not got to that point yet. We think we still need to strengthen some ties here locally. Once we have those strong ties we can produce the success we think we can produce, pretty soon. Then, we will move on to the next level. At this time we have to focus on being

very strong within the four county region and promoting the four county region,” Garza said.

When Garza joined RSTEC, the cities of Weslaco, Pharr and Brownsville had just pulled out of the group. He said those decisions were made for different reasons. “I have tried to be inclusive of every community regardless of whether they are members or not. The members get special treatment, they have benefits the others don’t. The Port of Brownsville is a member. The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce is a member. I have spoken to people within the City of Brownsville and Brownsville EDC and there is some interest in rejoining. A lot of it has to do with people understanding how they can use this group to leverage their marketing plans,” Garza said.

“We are not a solution for everybody and we are not trying to be. We are aggressively taking on some marketing activities that will produce results and those people who can use us as part of their marketing team should actually be members, regardless of whether they are public entities or private entities. We have a lot of benefits. Our members can go to a trade show with us at no charge to them. We can pool our resources, which leads to cost savings.”

Asked why major manufacturers should look at moving to the Valley, Garza said: “We have a young workforce. That means longevity. Workers will be here for a long time. And, our workers are trainable. Logistically, we have the Port of Brownsville. We have 13 international bridges and we promote that like there is no tomorrow. If you want to move products north and south between Central America, South America, Latin America, Mexico and the U.S., especially the north east, which is where the population centers are, this is the perfect funnel.”

Garza added that the Valley’s education system is affordable, with some of the lowest cost universities in the United States. “Companies can spend a lot less here. We have the lowest cost of living, we have job growth, and our small businesses are creating jobs. We are beyond the recession level. We are doing great and it is easy for us to sell that.”

At the annual meeting, RSTEC members voted for new officers for 2012. In addition to Rose Benavidez being named incoming chair, Alma Colleli, of San Benito Economic Development Council, was named the new vice chair. Eduardo Campirano, of the Port of Brownsville, was appointed secretary, and Steve Ahlenius, of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce, was appointed treasurer. Miki McCarthy, of San Juan Economic Development Corporation, is the immediate past chair.