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# **“Your Pro-RGV News”**



# The Leaves Have Turned

by: Todd Breland

The old days of competing amongst ourselves is a thing of the past. Working together for the good of the Valley is as bright as a Northeast fall leaf.

If you don't believe me, drive the Valley and see the incredible growth of rooftops and businesses, reaching far and wide. The comradery between county, city and town leadership combined with the very friendly business environment proves bitter leaves of yesteryear have transitioned into a fiery vibrance of beauty.

Regional EDC directors, chamber leaders, city managers and commissioners are sharing the love so the entire area grows together. Current leaders understand when one town scores a victory, the RGV wins! Chemistry for success is here and here to stay!

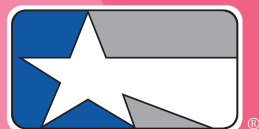
My visits with small business owners and others give me goosebumps. The energy and teamwork across the RGV has invited and landed a good taste of karma. It is my opinion

that the universe rewards the celebration of others' wins. The selflessness proves the region is working toward a common goal -- prosper the entire Valley and improve quality of life for all residents. Success takes the entire team and the Valley is winning!

Our job at VBR is very simple: connect businesses with buyers. That can only happen when doors are open. Believe me, the Valley's

doors are wide open! New businesses are choosing our four counties. Additional locations of established stores and shops are happening. Different price points of new residential neighborhoods stretch across I-2 and I-69 and everywhere in between.

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## VBR Staff

General Manager  
Todd Breland  
todd@valleybusinessreport.com

Content Editor  
Ricardo D. Cavazos  
ricardo@valleybusinessreport.com

Online Editor, VBR e-Brief  
Angey Murray  
angey@valleybusinessreport.com

Writer  
Chris Ardis

Design Director  
John M. Hazlett  
john@valleybusinessreport.com

Production - Daniel's Printing Place



350 N Virginia Ave, Mercedes, Texas (956) 376-9554 | Open Thursday-Sunday 5-10p.m.



# Henry's Adjusts & Stays Local In Harlingen

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Jay Garza as a freshly minted Texas A&M University graduate relocated to California to chase his big-city dreams.

Living in San Francisco, Perez worked in human resources operations for Gap Inc. at its corporate headquarters. There were aspects of the West Coast life he enjoyed, but long, traffic-filled commutes became tiresome, and his family in Harlingen beckoned. His father, Henry, a small business owner in Harlingen, was perplexed why his son was applying his talents to make a company money when he could do the same for the family's venture.

Returning home in 2003, Garza began working with his father and other family members at Henry's Party Supply & Food Services store. He figured it would be something of a pit stop before moving on to Austin to pursue other interests.

"Twenty years later, I'm still here and I haven't visited Austin," said Garza, who is also a Henry, but adopted a work name "Jay" that has stuck since his return home. The younger Henry now runs the daily operations of a Harlingen business that started in 1990 on Lewis Lane, a business location nestled on the city's west side between Business 83 and the nearby Expressway.

Henry's is a 30-year-old-plus business that has adjusted and redefined itself more than once. It has done so again since the economic challenges of 2020. A business once dependent on big Halloween sales has further diversified its services and products. Henry's has adjusted to a now different economy while dealing with the entrance of corporate party store chains in its market.

"They deal in bulk and they're cheaper," Garza said of the chain stores. "We function differently. We're more personalized with our customers and will do custom orders for them. We figured out a different kind of strategy."

## The Halloween Phenomenon

Henry's former dependence on Halloween was understandable due to its past successes with that holiday and its huge popularity in the United States.

Halloween generated over \$10 billion in consumer retail spending in 2022. Only Christmas is a bigger holiday when it comes to American retail spending. Henry's was a local leader when it came to Halloween products long before big box stores and online sales.

"In the mid-1990s, Halloween exploded," Garza said.

Henry's added fitting rooms for customers to try on Halloween costumes. The store expanded its parking to accommodate a growing base of customers. The quantity and variety of its seasonal inventory grew as well.

"There really wasn't anyone else doing what we did back then," Garza said of the

Halloween market. "There were no party stores, no Internet, no dollar stores and the big box stores hardly had anything."

Halloween became Henry's biggest producing season and the store thrived. Then came 2020, which Garza said "changed everything." There was a diminished Halloween season that year and retailers felt it. For Henry's, a business whose origins were





in food services, it meant going back to its roots while highlighting the array of services and products in its nearly 9,000-square-foot store.

The store has an eclectic but orderly and well-organized mix of inventory. It includes restaurant supplies, frozen food storage for small restaurants, religious candles, party supplies, and inventory geared to quinceaneras and wedding showers. Graduations and office events like retirement ceremonies and employee recognition celebrations lead to lots of helium-filled bouncing balloons going out the doors of Henry's. Business is brisk even with new corporate store competitors coming to a growing Harlingen market.

Halloween remains a significant factor in Henry's business mix but there are no more fitting rooms or an outsized reliance on yearly October sales. There are still hundreds of Halloween costumes at the store for would-be superheroes and Barbie admirers, to name a



Henry's stocks a wide variety of restaurant supplies at its Harlingen store. (VBR)



Halloween sales at Henry's are still important but the longtime Harlingen store has worked to diversify its sales to more of a year-round emphasis. (VBR)



A new football season kicks off sport-related balloon arrangements at Henry's. (VBR)



couple of the wide variety of seasonal attire at Henry's. Halloween inventory is available for sale year round.

### Staying Local

Henry's is one of those type of local businesses that has been in its community for so long that it's on a one name basis for many of its customers.

Garza said the store's customer base extends from the Mid-Valley to Brownsville, with many seeking the sort of specialty items Henry's stocks along with its willingness to customize orders to personal preferences and needs. The connection to community has only grown stronger since 2020, Garza said, as has the sentiment to appreciate businesses rooted in their community.

"There's a growing trend to go local and support local businesses when you can," he said. "Staying in the community, that's important, and they see a business like ours as one of their own."



Halloween retail sales trail only Christmas season revenues among U.S. consumer purchasing during major U.S. holidays. (VBR)



Mexican candy is among the eclectic mix of inventory stocked at Henry's in Harlingen. (VBR)



# Monterrey Natives Reach Goal In RGV

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Enrique and Feve Zaragoza grew up in Monterrey with their favorite U.S. shopping destination being McAllen.

The Rio Grande Valley, and McAllen in particular, has long been the favorite border spot for Mexican nationals residing in their nation's ninth largest city. People from Monterrey, Enrique Zaragoza said, know McAllen offers the sort of retail and dining experiences Mexican consumers are looking for that's close to home.

"We've always liked the variety of products McAllen and the Valley has to offer when compared to other parts of the border," he said.

As adults, the couple would move to the United States and establish careers in finance and accounting. First in Los Angeles and then in Houston in more recent years, the Zaragozas began working for restaurant companies. They found the ideal employer in Sweet Paris Creperie & Café. It is a restaurant and catering company specializing in crepes and other French-inspired dishes.

The company has been getting a foothold in Houston and other large Texas markets. It is a restaurant chain with big expansion plans. The Zaragozas, seeing an opportunity to advance themselves, approached the company's owner with a request to take Sweet Paris to a new Texas market. The quick reply was yes. The couple put in their application to be Sweet Paris franchisees.

"This is the business and opportunity we have been waiting for," Feve recalls telling her husband.

The eventual approval to open a new Sweet Paris location was given after a vetting process. The Zaragozas had the whole state of Texas to consider. One location possibility they already knew well. First, they visited Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country. Next came a trip to McAllen. A third possibility was in the Dallas area. The couple never made the Dallas trip. They knew after the second visit where they were headed to open a new restaurant.

## Growing The Brand

McAllen's La Plaza Mall in recent years has undergone a dramatic expansion and renovation. It is now a prime retail destination for Mexican tourists since opening in the mid-1970s.

The Simon Property Group-owned mall has long brought its retailers some of the best sales-per-square-foot sales revenues in the United States. One area where the mall was lacking for years was in its smallish food court and the restaurant experience in general. All of that has changed. La Plaza now offers well-designed and ample dining areas and food courts to go with new restaurants. One of them in early 2024 will be Zaragoza's Sweet Paris Creperie & Café.

"We're thrilled and a little scared, too, but in a good way because this is such an exciting opportunity for us," Feve Zaragoza said. "When we visited McAllen, and saw everything going on there, our hearts were

beating. We could feel it. The city and the area are perfect for us."

It's the culmination of an ambition the couple long had and will soon see come to fruition.

"Our goal was to have our own business," Enrique Zaragoza said. "We saw the brand, the products it has, the kind of company it is, and we knew we could take it to a new market. It's exciting that it will be in a city that our friends and family know so well."

## A New Choice

Having a crepes-flavored café will be a new restaurant choice on the Valley menu.

A crepe is a very thin type of pancake that



*Feve and Enrique Zaragoza are Monterrey natives living in Houston who are excited about a new restaurant at La Plaza Mall in McAllen. (Courtesy)*



is ideal for a wide variety of fillings and toppings. The versatility of the crepe is such that it can have sweet and savory fillings like chocolate sauces and fruits, or meaty toppings as well. They are considered to be a healthier choice than pancakes or waffles because crepes have fewer calories, fats and carbohydrates.

For the Zaragozas, the next few months will be ones of overseeing the construction and design of their new restaurant at La Plaza Mall, which will also offer outdoor courtyard dining. Sweet Paris corporate staff will send chefs and other professionals to help train the new staff to be hired in McAllen. The new RGV restaurant will be one of 20 franchise locations Sweet Paris hopes to add to its network in the next few years. The Zaragozas are hoping to open their 2,000-square-foot restaurant in McAllen by February 2024 and have a staff of 20-to-25 employees.

“We want to give the Valley and McAllen a new concept they don’t have right now,” Enrique Zaragoza said. “I think they will find it to be refreshing and unique.”



*The new Sweet Paris Creperie & Café will offer outdoor dining at a La Plaza Mall location. (Courtesy)*



*The new Sweet Paris restaurant at La Plaza Mall will offer a wide variety of tasty brunch choices. (Courtesy)*



*A crepe-oriented restaurant will be a new dining choice for RGV patrons when it opens early next year in McAllen. (Courtesy)*



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# SpaceX Aims For Launch Amid Reviews

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

SpaceX has completed a months-long process it says shows compliance with federal requirements that would authorize the second launch of the Starship rocket.

The nearly 400-foot rocket currently sits on its launch pad on the shores of Boca Chica Beach. The initial Starship launch occurred on April 20. The rocket, which is described as the largest and most powerful ever built, got off the ground in spectacular fashion. Thousands of spectators cheered in taking in the spectacle across the Laguna Madre on South Padre Island.

The fiery liftoff of the giant rocket destroyed its launch pad and produced huge plumes of dust and ash, with some of the debris eventually drifting across bay waters and settling on Port Isabel and Laguna Vista. The Federal Aviation Administration put forth over 60 corrective measures SpaceX has to meet before it will

grant a second launch license.

“We fly to learn,” said Kathryn Lueders, the new executive general manager at Starbase on Boca Chica Beach. “How do we make it safer and build on what we learned?”

## Connecting To Communities

Lueders gave an overview of SpaceX’s work since the April launch at a Sept. 14 brunch event hosted by the South Padre Island Chamber of Commerce at the Holiday Inn Resort.

The event drew a large crowd given how rarely SpaceX shares information with the public. Lueders, a former NASA associate administrator, says one of her missions is to build stronger connections to area communities.

“We need to do a better job of letting people know what our demographics are,” she said, referring to the SpaceX personnel

working at Starbase. “We need to reach out to our communities and learn more about area services in health care, housing and education.”

SpaceX’s 2,000-strong workforce on Starbase is focused on the big picture goal of getting Starship back in the air. Lueders says SpaceX intends to make Starship its “workforce for space.” The ultimate aim is for Starship to transport large amounts of cargo to the moon as way station to Mars.

“We don’t do anything small,” Lueders said of her company’s audacious goals as defined by SpaceX founder Elon Musk. “Some of the most exciting space developments in the world are being done here in South Texas.”

## ‘Here to Stay’

SpaceX will first have to get FAA approval for another rocket launch before it can get to Mars.

*SpaceX has been busy since Starship’s initial launch in April, rebuilding the launch pad and other needed infrastructure. (Courtesy)*





The federal agency is concerned about the messy liftoff and understanding why Starship disintegrated 24 miles up into the atmosphere. The rocket failed to reach its intended orbit around the earth. The FAA says it is close to finishing its review of SpaceX's actions to remedy the many deficiencies of the April 20 flight.

Beyond the FAA, there's also an upcoming examination by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to gauge the environmental impact of the initial launch. All told, it appears SpaceX is weeks, if not months away from getting all of the federal agency approvals it needs before a license is given for a second launch.

"Build, test, fly and learn," Lueders said of SpaceX's philosophy and its eagerness to engage in more rocket launches at Boca Chica. "We're going to build a bunch of rockets and fly, test and learn."

She made clear during the SPI chamber presentation that her company plans to make its presence in the Rio Grande Valley a permanent one.

"When you look at the size of investment SpaceX has made here, I can say we're here to stay," Lueders said.

*Eighty percent of Starbase's workforce at Boca Chica Beach are Rio Grande Valley natives. (Courtesy)*



*Rebuilding Starship's infrastructure is a top priority at Starbase as a second launch nears. (Courtesy)*



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# RGV Native Finds EDC Fit In Harlingen

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Brownsville native Orlando Campos spent over 15 years in North Texas, working for chambers of commerce and in economic development, and hoping for the right opportunity that could bring him home.

In 2023, a job opening and the right candidate for it met when Campos was named the new manager and chief executive officer for Harlingen Economic Development Corporation. After a several months search, Campos was selected by the EDC board in mid-June among 20 candidates in utilizing a headhunting firm's national search process.

In Campos, the Harlingen EDC not only chose a RGV native, but an economic development executive whose first big job in the field was in Harlingen in 1999. Campos served as the manager of business development for Valley International Airport and was responsible for recruiting new passenger air service and expanding air cargo business in Harlingen. He would later take a job with the Brownsville Economic Development Corporation before leaving for the North Texas area to work for the Arlington Chamber of Commerce.

More recently, Campos was the director of economic development and tourism for Addison, a city just north of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He held that job for 12 years before the Harlingen EDC leadership job came open.

"The mayor and city commission are very ambitious and progressive," Campos said. "Harlingen in the past was sort of left behind when it came to growth in the Rio Grande Valley. I don't know exactly why, but I do know Harlingen today is primed for growth and development."

## 'Investors Are Looking'

Looking out over the RGV's current economic development map, Campos sees a cluster of upper Valley communities that are reaching levels of saturation, with Brownsville experiencing "lots of activity."

"Then you have Harlingen," he said. "We're right in the middle of those nodes."

Harlingen features the Valley's busiest airport with Southwest Airline flights daily. The city is seeing its best retail growth and new housing construction surge in years. Academy Sports + Outdoors is building a

nearly 58,000-square-foot building in the Harlingen Corners shopping area that's located near Expressway 77/83 and just west of Dixieland Road. It's in the same general southwest area of the city where a number of new subdivisions and homes are being built, heading west toward Stuart Place Road.

"Investors are looking at what the rest of Texas has to offer," Campos said of economic activity that is moving out to previously underserved markets. "In the Valley, a rising tide lifts all ships. We need to be able to compete head-on while working well regionally with the other communities in our area."

## Key Elements

The first months of the new job in

Harlingen has found Campos busy meeting with organizations and local governments across the city.

"I've been going to a lot of meetings and listening to what people are saying and getting to know key stakeholders in the community," he said.

He is currently focusing on his internal organization and "polishing up processes" in setting his staff up to best serve the EDC's mission. Campos wants to work with his board on a targeted industry analysis that identifies Harlingen's best opportunities in marketing to specific industries that are right for Harlingen.

Campos plans to continue the small business assistance program favored by Mayor Norma Sepulveda. The program



*Orlando Campos is busy meeting with organizations and stakeholders in Harlingen since becoming Harlingen EDC's manager and CEO. (Courtesy)*



assists local businesses in the city's core areas with grants to improve exterior appearances in signage and facades as well as upgrades inside stores, shops and restaurants. The Harlingen EDC is working closely with UTRGV's Workforce & Economic Development office to make the university's resources available to local businesses. A full-time staffer from UTRGV is based at the EDC office in partnering with Campos and his staff on initiatives to support small businesses and entrepreneurs in the city.

The EDC office is housed on the campus of Texas State Technical College and working with the school on the wide range of technical training and programs it offers is essential in providing industries with a skilled local workforce, Campos said. Another recent development sure to help in all of these efforts is a \$1.6 federal grant given by the Economic Development Agency that will enable Harlingen to develop a new industrial park. Harlingen, in Campos's view, has all the key ingredients needed for development and growth. It's what brought him back home.



*Texas State Technical College programs are essential to providing Harlingen and the Rio Grande Valley a skilled workforce to attract and grow industries. (Courtesy)*



*Nursing programs at TSTC play an important role in Harlingen's extensive medical and health care industry. (Courtesy)*

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# LNG Puts Brownsville On Global Map

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The official word finally came in late June with the announcement that Houston-based NextDecade was building an \$18 billion-plus liquefied natural gas plant at the Port of Brownsville.

For port executives and community at-large leadership, the announcement was a combination of relief and elation in definitively knowing they overcame all obstacles and last-minute legal challenges. Site work began the same day of the announcement. The dirt started moving on the port's northside by state Highway 48 where the Rio Grande LNG plant will sit.

A celebration took place on Aug. 17 at the Brownsville Special Events Center to commemorate the years-long process that concluded with a successful ending point. The \$18.4 billion investment to build the LNG plant at the Port of Brownsville was described as the single largest private sector project in recent Texas history. The West Texas natural gas to cool down to liquid form at Rio Grande LNG will ship to points around the world. Europe and Asia are the most likely destinations.

"This plant will put Brownsville on the global industrial map," said Paul Marsden, the president of Bechtel Energy, which has been contracted to build the Brownsville LNG plant. "The product made here will provide clean energy around the world."

## Wide-Reaching Impact

The economic impact of the project will be immediate.

Bechtel will need at least 5,000 workers to build the plant on the 1,000-acre site. Marsden said Bechtel has a commitment to slotting at least 35 percent of the construction workforce for local residents. A good portion of the supply and vendor chain to construct the plant will come from local sources, Marsden said. This includes welders, electricians, plumbers, and meals and food providers.

"We intend to get as much as we can from the local supply chain," he said. "We want everyone to participate to the maximum extent possible. We're going to build a diverse supply chain."

It will take about three years to build the plant, which will be located east of the port's fishing harbor. The port's chief executive officer, Eduardo Campirano, has emphasized the LNG plant will not have the refinery look seen in the

ship channels of Houston and Corpus Christi. Renderings of the LNG plant in Brownsville give the appearance of a heavy industrial plant minus the exhaust stacks of a refinery. Also missing are the flickering of flames atop tall stacks.

At the Aug. 17 event, Campirano lauded the range of local services that will be needed to construct what he called a 32-to-36-month project.

"I don't know if we can get our heads around it yet," he said. "Pipefitters, welders, electricians, janitorial services, it's going to be across the board. This is transformational."

Beyond the construction phase, Campirano expressed confidence that Rio Grande LNG will transition to a mostly local permanent workforce. It's estimated the plant will have at least 400 permanent workers. Campirano emphasized that what is now under construction is just the first of three phases planned for NextDecade's LNG plant at the port.

"This project has a six-to-eight-year horizon," he said. "It's not a one and done."

## A Long Road

The chief executive officer of NextDecade recalled how long it had been since he first approached the Port of Brownsville about the possibility of constructing an LNG plant.

"It started eight years ago," said Matt Schatzman, who is also NextDecade's chairman.

To get from those origins in 2015 to the recent construction announcement meant getting through legal and regulatory challenges. Port Isabel sued the Brownsville Navigation District. The city alleged lease agreements with liquefied natural gas terminal developers were approved without sufficient environmental analysis. A group of environmental groups made the same sort of claims. They contended an LNG plant at the port would cause extensive damage to wildlife habitat in the area. NextDecade



*Port of Brownsville CEO Eduardo Campirano says the building of an LNG plant at the port will put Brownsville on the global industrial map. (Courtesy)*



also had to get the necessary permitting and approvals from the U.S. Corp of Engineers and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

All of those issues took eight years to resolve. Then there was the final piece. It involved securing private sector commitments from overseas companies that they would purchase product from a Rio Grande LNG plant for years to come. The last of those commitments came in June 2023. Looking out over a happy audience at the Special Events Center, Schatzman raised a glass of wine to make a toast. He also expressed gratitude to those gathered for their years-long support.

“We’re going to do right by the Brownsville community,” he said. “That comes first for us.”

Campirano took it all in. It was a crowning achievement in capping many years of being a chief executive for public and private sector entities in the Valley. The port director deflected any personal credit. He states it took the efforts of many county and local leaders, including the support of U.S. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez who urged federal agencies to move on the project.

“The world will know where Brownsville, Texas is, and more importantly, where the Rio Grande Valley is,” he said.



*NextDecade's CEO pledges "to do right" by Brownsville and is supporting nonprofit events. (Courtesy)*



*An artist rendering of the Rio Grande LNG plant under construction at the Port of Brownsville. (Courtesy)*



# Incoming Realtors President Looking Ahead

By Chris Ardis

The Greater McAllen Association of Realtors has nearly 1,800 members and as of Jan. 1, 2024, it will have a new president.

Anita Moon will take the leadership spot at the beginning of a new year and be the first woman president of the association in 10 years. She is a Texas Tech University graduate who started her career in a management position at a Holiday Inn in McAllen. It's where she met Diana Weisser, who would become a good friend and mentor in the business world.

Moon would later work for state Sen.

Carlos Truan in Corpus Christi and serve on the school board of a nearby community. Her parents, Willard and Ana Maria, had moved to McAllen in the early 1990s to open a new business. Moon's good friend, Weisser, had done the same and urged Moon to move to McAllen.

"She told me, 'You're a smart person. Get your real-estate license. I'll mentor you,'" Moon said of Weisser.

## Making The Move

In 2011, Moon and her children made the

move to McAllen. She earned her real estate license in 2012 and worked with Weisser at Keller Williams. The best friends decided to move to RE/MAX 1st Choice in 2017. Two years later, the broker/owner of RE/MAX 1st Choice, Joan Massie, called Moon to her office.

"She said, 'I'm so tired' and suggested I buy the franchise," Moon said.

Moon's father urged her to make the acquisition. She bought the franchise and thought of her friend and mentor, Weisser, who had died of cancer a few years prior.



Anita Moon and her business partner at RE/MAX Platinum in McAllen opened their new office in North Park Village on Auburn Avenue in October 2022. (Courtesy)



Moon and her business partner and broker, Jonathan Lindley, changed the name of the franchise to RE/MAX Platinum. They officially took ownership on Sept. 1, 2019.

### A New Chapter

The RE/MAX offices are now on the second floor of North Park Village, a new commercial development on Auburn Avenue and 10th Street in McAllen. Moon prominently displays a picture of Weisser in her office. Moon and Lindley acquired the RE/MAX franchise in Weslaco early this year.

“We can sell anywhere in the state, but our company prefers that we have geographic competency,” Moon said. “We focus on residential and commercial properties, from the ranches in Rio Grande City to the condos on South Padre Island.”

Moon says networking and education will be among her priorities when she takes the presidency of the Realtors board. She encourages members to travel across the state and the country to continue learning about their field.

*Both residential and commercial development continue to thrive in McAllen. A four-phase project will transform this space on 10th Street and Auburn Avenue into The District @ North Park Village, an upscale commercial and residential development. (Courtesy)*



*When a group from the Greater McAllen Association of REALTORS went to Washington, D.C. in May 2023 for legislative meetings, Congresswoman Monica De La Cruz took them on a private tour of the Capitol Building. (Courtesy)*





“At a recent conference in Austin, we learned the Rio Grande Valley is the fourth fastest-growing area in the state,” Moon said.

### An Area Moving Forward

SmartAsset.com, a financial services website, recently ranked 185 metro areas in the United States to determine the top cities for first-time homebuyers. Researchers used four metrics: affordability, growth potential, competition and demographics. McAllen ranked number three and Brownsville rated at number eight.

“I see the Valley continuing to grow for the next 10 to 20 years,” Moon said. “Because of our cost of living, companies are moving here. Education, medical facilities and other industries are still growing here.”

The Texas Quarterly Housing Report for Second Quarter 2023 confirms the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metropolitan Statistical Area enjoys a robust housing market. The median price of a home is \$239,900, an increase of 6.6 percent as compared to the same quarter last year.

“We are still in a seller’s market,” Moon said. “It becomes a buyer’s market when a home is on the market for more than four months.”

Homes in the McAllen MSA are on the market for an average of 67 days. Moon is looking forward to 2024 for her business and in leading the local Realtors Association.



*RE/MAX Platinum is on the upper level of North Park Village on Auburn Avenue between Main and 10th in McAllen. (Courtesy)*



*The view from the second floor of North Park Village on 10th and Auburn in McAllen will change dramatically when construction is completed on The District. (Courtesy)*



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