

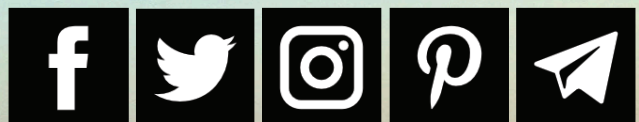
DECEMBER 2023

VBR

Winds Of Change

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SPI Spurs Link
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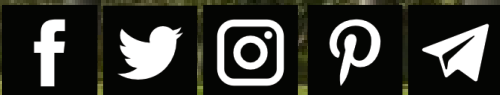
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Sink Or Swim

by: Todd Breland

The Valley knows all about drought season. Months of zero precipitation and scorching temperatures plagued Deep South Texas month after month. The same happened for South Louisiana, the area where I was raised.

For Thanksgiving, we visited the Baton Rouge area to enjoy excellent food (including some Cajun favorites) with family and friends. While downtown, a sunset walk was a must. Having young children prevented riverboat casino play time but the Mighty Mississippi never disappoints.

What is disappointing is the water level. The summer and ongoing drought is wreaking havoc on cargo transportation that is effecting the entire United States. Due to the record low depth and narrowness of the Mississippi River, there are federal and state restrictions on size and quantity of barges and ships.

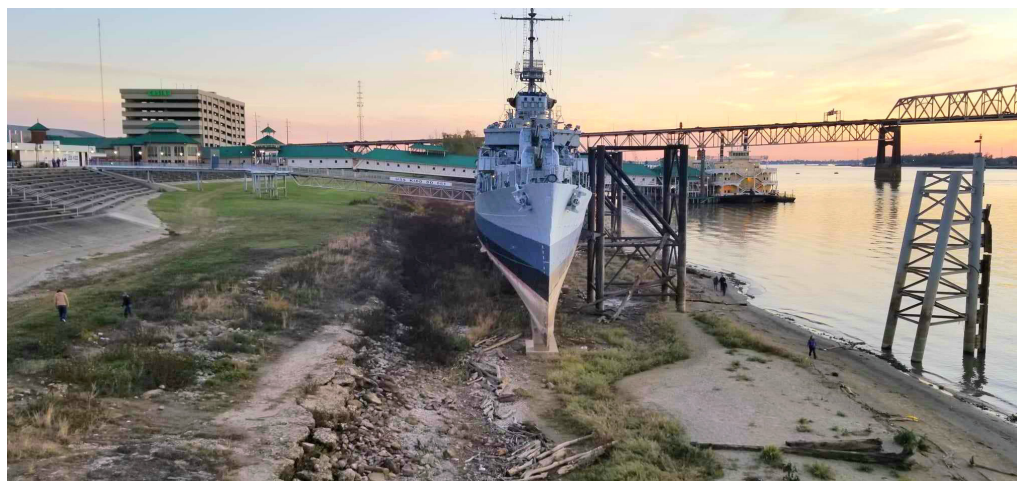
As I took the adjacent photo of the USS Kidd, which I have never seen this

drydocked, I pondered. When times are tough, do we find waters to swim or do we go to a sure spot of safety.

Entrepreneurs don't settle for contentment. We stay in the water. Owning and leading businesses and other organizations leaves no time for docking. Yes, we take breaks for

air but we press on, kicking and braving the elements. With our teams, we keep our heads above water during 2023's last laps. The 2024 race will need all lifeguards, instructors and swimmers working together.

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Wind Energy Gives Students New Challenges

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Andrew Garza spent over a decade in the fast-food industry, rising to management positions at Chick-fil-A and Pizza Hut.

He enjoys working in teams and helping to lead them. Garza figured there was another industry where his experience would prove valuable.

"The green energy field is growing, here in the Valley and around the world," Garza said. "I see really good opportunities in wind energy technology. Hopefully, at some point, I can be part of a team running a site."

For Dolores Delgado, a former dental assistant, there was a yearning for something different. She also wanted a job with more challenges than working in an office. The wind energy industry, she thought, would appeal to her mechanical abilities and affinity for hands-on work.

"I knew this would be a challenge for me," Delgado said of enrolling in the Wind Energy Technology Program at TSTC-Harlingen. "I want to prove to females that this is a field that's not only for males."

Patrick Zoerner is the director of the wind energy technology program at the Harlingen campus. He is seeing students of all ages and with diverse backgrounds enrolling in a program that's providing workers for a growing industry.

"The numbers are growing every year," Zoerner said of the program's enrollment. "With green energy, it's one of those things where there are many wind farms coming up, here in the Valley and across the country and the world."

Getting A Start

Zoerner worked in the wind energy industry himself and described the feeling of working hundreds of feet up, hanging with ropes and doing blade repairs.

"There's nothing like being up there," he said. "It's perfect solitude."

Blade repairs are among the many jobs offered in the wind energy field. Inspectors and technicians are needed as are crane operators and analysts who help determine the best locations for wind turbines and where they can yield the most energy production.

Texas has more than 18,000 active wind turbines and the state leads the nation in wind energy. The greatest concentrations of Texas wind turbines are in the Panhandle and West

Texas, but the largest wind farm in the state is found in the Valley. The Los Vientos Wind Farm goes across Willacy County and into neighboring Starr County. It ranks first in Texas and second in size among wind farms in the United States.

Given the proximity of large wind farms to the Texas State Technical College campus in Harlingen, it's no surprise when Zoerner reports a steady rise in his program's enrollment. The

program is more than a decade old and has gone from enrollment in the 60s and 70s to over 100 students for the current fall semester.

He describes the industry as one where new hires work their way up. Travel is often a requirement for new employees as they go from site to site, gaining experience and learning from mentors.

"I tell my students like it is," Zoerner said. "You start from the ground up."



Andrew Garza is getting a fresh start in wind energy after years of working in restaurant management jobs. (VBR)

New Opportunities

Starting on the lower rungs of the industry and working their way up does not phase Garza nor Delgado.

Delgado is open to job travel and is particularly interested in schematics, the drawings and plans that show the details of how something operates or is put together. At a recent class, she did just that, looking over numbers and figures on a white board in a TSTC lab as her instructor, Mario Sanchez, looked on and other students observed her work. She relishes the new opportunities that will come her way after completing her associate of applied science degree in the wind energy program.

“You only live once,” Delgado said. “You shouldn’t let age hold you back, be it if you’re young or older. You’re never too old to try something like this.”

Garza is going through the same two-year program at TSTC and sees himself branching out into other technological fields. The wind energy program, he said, will give him a good foundation to begin a new career wholly different from what he has experienced in the



A wind farm just east of Lyford is one of many in Willacy County. (VBR)



A range of job opportunities, including those in construction and crane operations, are part of the wind energy industry. (Courtesy)



Dolores Delgado has left behind being a dental assistant for new opportunities in the wind energy industry. (VBR)

restaurant business.

“The big green field,” as he describes it, looks to be as large as the endless blue skies behind a Willacy County wind farm.



The Los Vientos Wind Farm in Willacy County – the largest in Texas – rises above farm fields near Lyford. (Courtesy)



Instructor Mario Sanchez makes a point during a class session in a lab of the wind energy program at TSTC. (VBR)

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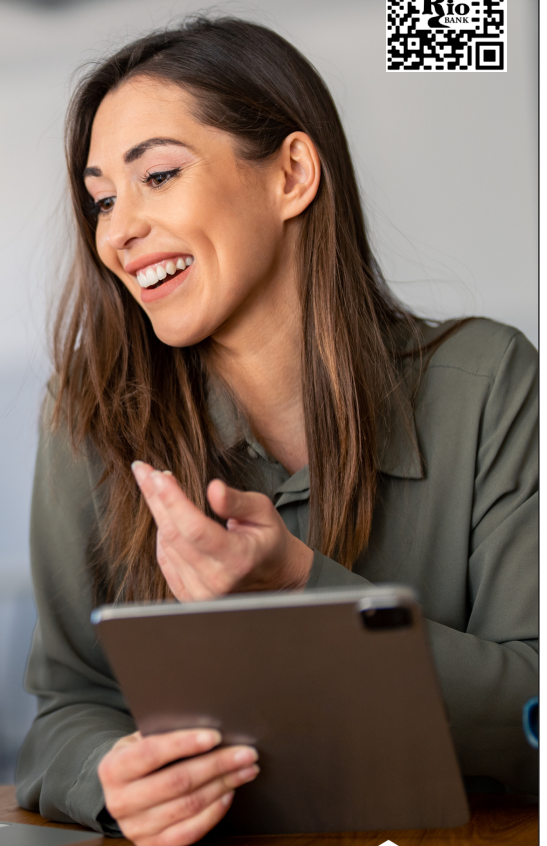
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Knapp Medical Extends Services In Mid-Valley

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Mid-Valley has a new healthcare option with Knapp Medical Center extending urgent care at a Mercedes clinic it jointly operates with the UTRGV School of Medicine.

Knapp Medical of Weslaco recently added urgent care to the services offered at the UT Health RGV/Knapp Family Health Center at Expressway 83 and North Mile 2 W Road. A wide range of essential medical services are offered by UTRGV staff during daytime hours, including immunizations, physicals and wellness exams. In the evenings, Knapp medical staff works at the new Mid Valley Urgent Care and treats injuries, illnesses associated with fevers and colds, and also provides stitches and laceration care.

It marks the full utilization of the nearly 14,000-square-foot Mercedes clinic and demonstrates how UTRGV can collaborate with area hospital systems to improve health care in the Rio Grande Valley.

"We wanted to do something in the Mid-Valley for care after hours," said Dr.

Ruddy Valdes, Knapp's medical director for emergency and urgent care. "Families and residents in this area can now come here for minor emergencies. This is a great option that's local."

Needed Option

Mercedes Mayor Oscar Montoya recalled that as a young father, he and his wife were dealing one night with a baby who wouldn't stop crying.

"Knapp Medical is all we had back then," Montoya said of where he took his young son. "You go to an emergency room at a hospital and it's wall-to-wall people. This is a whole other option that we really needed in Mercedes and in the Mid-Valley."

Montoya made his remarks at a Nov. 9 event at the Mercedes clinic that drew Knapp Medical administrators and Mid-Valley community leaders in celebrating the expansion of services at the family health center. State Sen. Morgan LaMantia

called the clinic's day and night services "a lifeline for families" in the Mid-Valley. County Commissioner David Fuentes lauded Mercedes and Weslaco leaders for working together to improve health care in the area.

"People are utilizing this facility," Fuentes said. "They're using it and it continues to grow."

The family health center is in part a teaching facility as medical students treat patients under the supervision of practicing physicians on the UTRGV School of Medicine staff. It is hoped the aspiring doctors develop a connection to the Valley and will choose to practice medicine in the region. Knapp Medical is also a teaching hospital for UTRGV medical students and its connection to the Mercedes clinic is part of that process.

Providing Access

Valdes, the Knapp medical director, highlighted the new services offered at the



Knapp Medical Center of Weslaco is expanding urgent health care in the Mid-Valley at a Mercedes clinic it runs jointly with the UTRGV School of Medicine, (VBR)

Mid Valley Urgent Care wing of the family health center in Mercedes.

"We have labs, X-rays, there is a lot we can do here," he said.

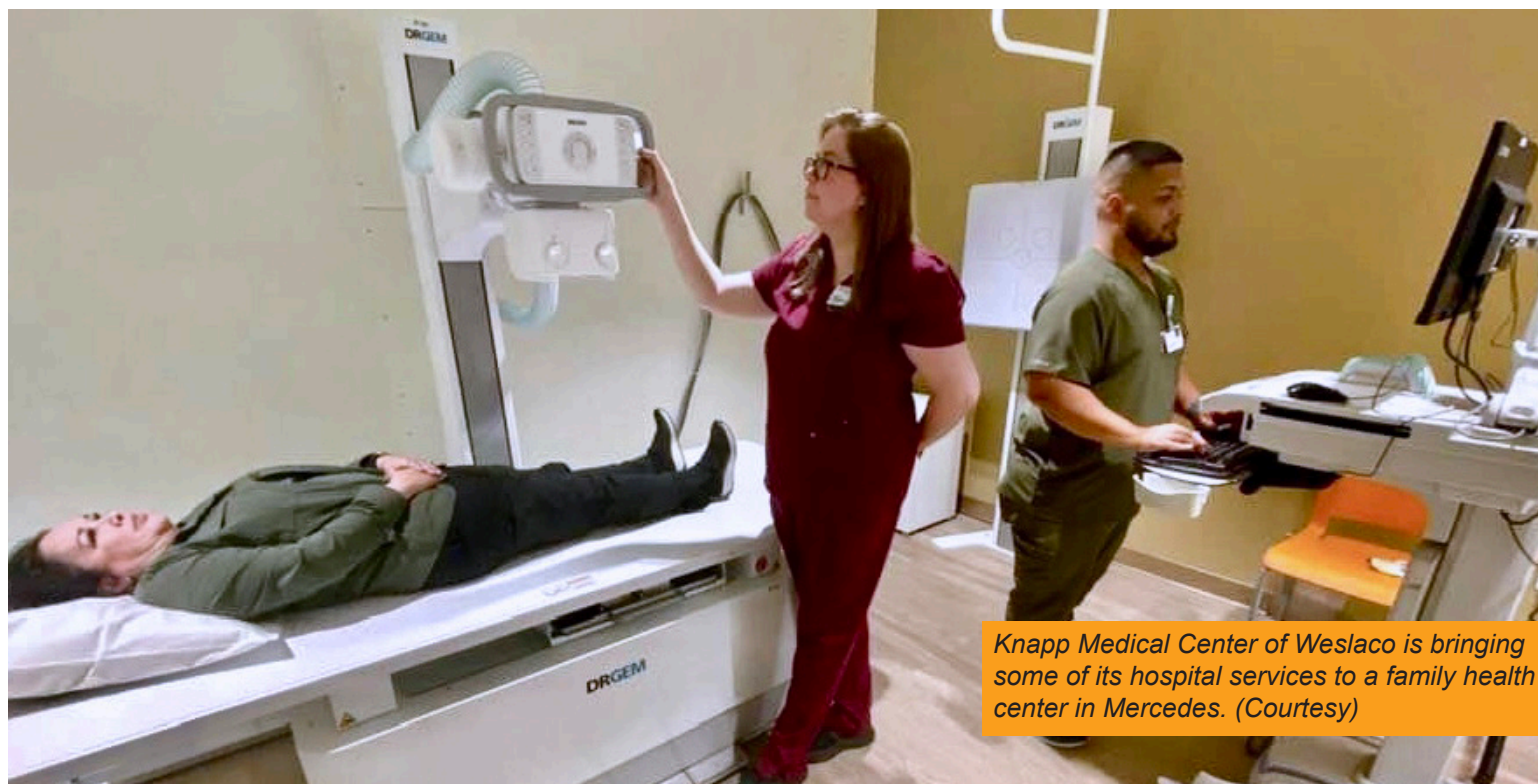
Valdes sees the expansion of services in Mercedes as a benefit for not only that community but for rural residents in nearby communities who have had to travel to Weslaco or Harlingen and hospitals in those cities for minor medical emergencies.

"It's still best to go to a hospital for something that's major," he said. "If it's something we can treat here, it's an option to going to a big hospital that many times is busier and further away."

Urgent care is available at the Mercedes clinic from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. during weekdays and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekends.



Knapp Medical Center administrators and area community leaders gather for a ribbon cutting celebration for Mid Valley Urgent Care in Mercedes. (VBR)



Knapp Medical Center of Weslaco is bringing some of its hospital services to a family health center in Mercedes. (Courtesy)



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StartUp Events Feature Local Entrepreneurs

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The 36,000-square-foot eBridge Center in downtown Brownsville was envisioned as a space where aspiring entrepreneurs and existing business owners could experiment and test new ideas.

After a year of operations on East Adams Street, eBridge is proving to be just that and more. Its StartUp Texas innovation competitions feature enterprising businesses from a variety of industries representing food, research and emerging technologies. Just in recent months, presenters offered judges in the competitions a look at one company developing technology to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and another advocating fitted bed sheets to monitor patients via wireless means.

An earlier 2023 StartUp event featured

barbecue meats rubs and frozen fruit bar *paletas*. All of the entrepreneurs and business owners shared the same characteristic of being local and connected to Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley with the ability to appeal to U.S. and Mexican markets. Seed funding is awarded to the top three winners at each event. Expertise and guidance is also shared with all entrants in developing business plans and improving their products.

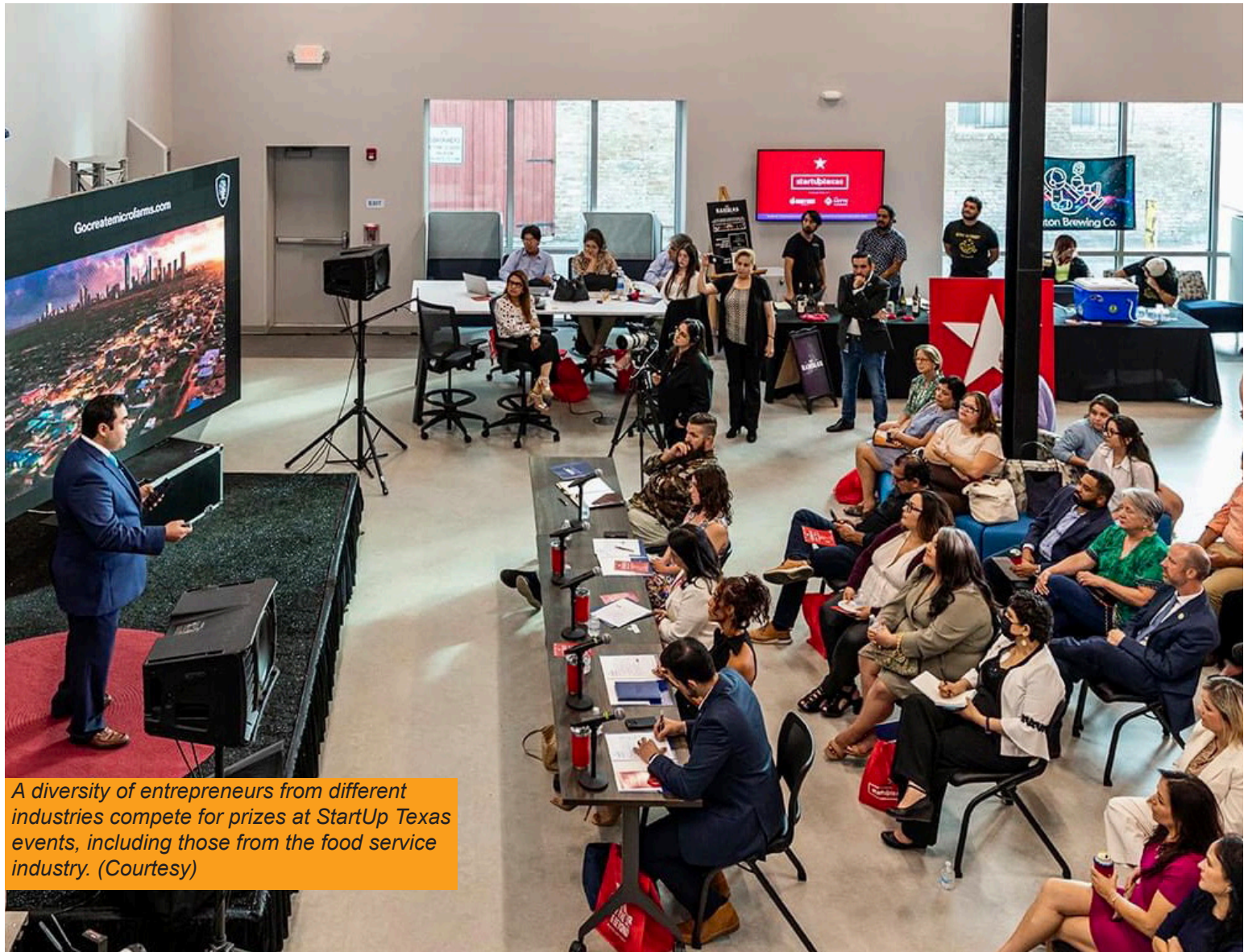
“It’s about as diverse as we can make it,” said Nathan Burkhart, the director of marketing and small business development for the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation. “We’re seeing a more robust entrepreneurial ecosystem developing in the Rio Grande Valley. It’s a reflection of what’s happening with the

economy on a local and regional level.”

Keep Them Local

StartUp Texas began in 2019 with the goal of helping local entrepreneurs seeking capital to expand their Brownsville-based operations.

Initially, the thought was to invest in early stage companies. It has now evolved into what Burkhart calls “full accelerator programs” to include the opportunity to win up to \$40,000 at the StartUp competitions after participants make pitches and presentations to a panel of local and out-of-area judges. The presentations take place after the selected entrepreneurs go through an eight-to-12-week program utilizing curriculum from UTRGV’s Entrepreneurship and Commercialization Center.



A diversity of entrepreneurs from different industries compete for prizes at StartUp Texas events, including those from the food service industry. (Courtesy)

With product presentations developed and financial projections sharpened, the entrepreneurs go before the judges at the eBridge Center to make their pitches. The end result is investment capital for the emerging entrepreneurs. It's a confirmation that some of the Valley's best and brightest can stay locally and regionally to develop their ideas.

"In the past, entrepreneurs with these kinds of ideas and projects would leave our community," Burkhardt said. "We want to use the resources and the facilities we have here to keep them in Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley."

Think Outside Of Box'

The pitch summits are just one aspect of the offerings at the eBridge Center.

It goes beyond being a conventional business incubator. The center offers an array of services that include programs and insights on how to scale up local small businesses and properly use market research to grow revenues. The building's second floor also features large laboratory spaces. Here, emerging businesses can temporarily house equipment and test its capabilities before going to market.

"It's collaborative space to inspire and think outside of the box," Burkhardt said.

UTRGV and its ECC are key partners in making the eBridge facility an effective one. Here, city government also offers insights on the permitting process and the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce has an extension office.

"It's convenient to have everything under one roof," Burkhardt said. "It can be difficult to build an ecosystem if it's spread out all over a city."

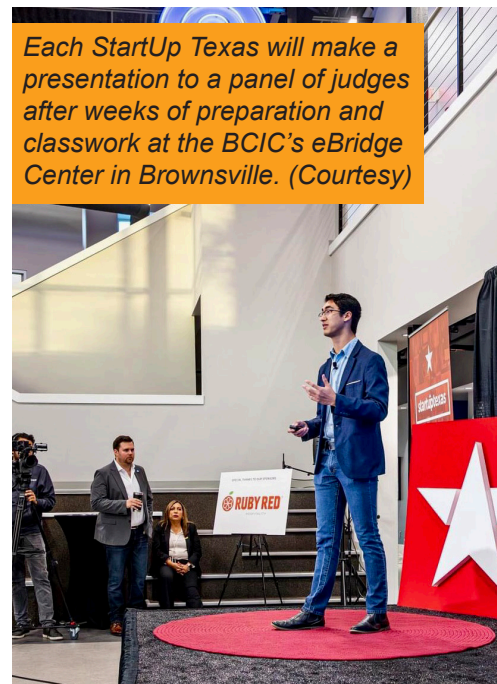
The eBridge center is a public incubator in that it is funded through public sales tax dollars and university assistance. Private incubators would take equity or stock in businesses they assist, but with eBridge, Burkhardt said, Brownsville-based entrepreneurs own their businesses outright and retain as much of their business as is possible.

Next up is a Dec. 14 Startup Texas event, now in its third of the year at eBridge. Startup Texas will feature emerging local companies in the areas of energy, technology and health care.

"We're developing different cohorts," Burkhardt said of the three StartUp Texas events. "We want the community to see what we have here. Five-to-10 years from now, there

will be an even more robust ecosystem of entrepreneurship where you can still leave (the Valley) if you choose to do so, but you won't have to."

Each StartUp Texas will make a presentation to a panel of judges after weeks of preparation and classwork at the BCIC's eBridge Center in Brownsville. (Courtesy)



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Colleges Create Programs To Fit Needs

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

SpaceX has more than gained a foothold in southern Cameron County with its imposing rockets looming over Boca Chica Beach.

More than 2,000 employees work at Starbase, a production and launch site just across the Laguna Madre from South Padre Island. Keeping such a large operation going as it pursues audacious goals related to space travel requires vast amounts of skill and know-how from its teams of employees. South Texas College administrators recently sought insights on how Starbase's leadership thinks and what they value in the employees they hire.

"We sat down and talked to them and met

with their engineers," said Kim Moore, the interim director for institutional advancement and economic development at STC. "They described how they like their employees to expand their creative side for problem solving and applying that to real world work environments."

With that information in hand, STC administrators can reshape curriculum and training to fit a particular industry's needs.

"We can create it," Moore said of his school's ability to adapt. "We will find instructors that have experience and credentials to teach what industries are

requesting."

Moore calls it "the upskilling" of students, making them aware of the intangibles and analytical skills they need beyond core classes and training.

'Lots Of Opportunities'

At Texas State Technical College, it's much the same story on the system's Harlingen campus.

Cledia Hernandez, a TSTC vice chancellor, said her school and instructors are "constantly collaborating" with industries and companies in the area and beyond the South Texas region.



Welders are in great demand in many industries and programs like this one at Texas State Technical College are producing job-ready workers. (Courtesy)

“We work to build capacity in providing a continuous flow of workers to our industrial partners,” Hernandez said.

Community colleges and technical schools have long played an integral role in providing industries with essential workers whom they can hire, train and develop. The connection in the Rio Grande Valley between community and technical schools to industry has never been more important than it is today with the rise of Starbase and the construction of the Rio Grande LNG plant.

Sara Lozano, a dean of technology at STC, spoke of “lots of opportunities coming in multiple directions.” Welding classes are filling up and in demand at STC’s technology campus south of McAllen, near the city’s industrial parks and foreign trade zone. In Harlingen, Hernandez said there are more than 300 students in TSTC’s welding programs, with job placement after graduation exceeding a 90 percent success rate.

“Electricians, plumbers, welders,

technicians,” Hernandez said in listing some of the fields in high demand by employers. “We’re able to align with the timelines and needs of industries.”

The surge in the region’s industrial activity is leading to tips from many sources. Lozano spoke of the text messages administrators receive from STC President Ricardo Solis after he hears from business and industrial executives on plans for expansions or locating new facilities in the Valley.

“We take it from there,” Lozano said. “We are out there, promoting the college and letting people know what we have.”

Being Flexible

STC’s discussions with SpaceX led to the school looking at a new aspect of the welding field.

Robotic welding is used at Starbase in the production of the rockets assembled at the site. It’s a highly advanced version of automated welding but still requires welders to control

and supervise the robotic technology. The discussion piqued the interest of college administrators to begin examining adding that branch of welding to what STC offers.

“What does it require?” Moore recalled asking when he returned to the McAllen campus after the Starbase visit.

It’s an example of how area colleges begin exploring the possibilities of adding a program when an industry expresses a need for a skill in an emerging technological field. Customizing training to suit an industry as it adapts to market changes is something TSTC and STC commonly do. It’s an advantage college have when they offer a wide array of associate degrees in technical fields to go with yearlong programs that produce graduates with the necessary credentials to get started in a particular industry.

“The beauty of it is that we can be flexible in our curriculum based on the needs of an industry,” Moore said. “It can be molded to fit the needs of an organization.”



A Texas State Technical College student works on a skill in a lab at the school. (Courtesy)



A wide array of technical skills are in demand as industrial activity ramps up in the Rio Grande Valley. (Courtesy)

SPI Hopes Spurs Link Builds Brand

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Blake Henry had his fingers crossed last summer when the NBA held its annual player draft.

Henry, as the chief executive officer of the South Padre Island Convention & Visitors Bureau, was seeing the draft more as a marketing professional than a sports fan. In his just over a year on the job, Henry has been active in seeking partnerships to build greater state and national awareness of the Island. A partnership with a professional sports franchise would fit the bill. He had one specifically in mind.

“Our destination deserves a professional sports team to partner with,” he said.

The “perfect storm,” as Henry described it,

occurred when the San Antonio Spurs won the NBA draft lottery and selected 19-year-old phenome Victor Wembanyama, who has been called a generational talent. Thus far in his young career, the 7-3 Frenchman is proving the hype was real and is already playing as a dominant force in the league.

Fan interest in the Spurs is surging again and Henry knew the time was right to secure the partnership he and the CVB were seeking. On Nov. 2, SPI’s Convention & Visitors Bureau announced it had entered into a marketing partnership with Spurs Sports & Entertainment, the company that owns and operates the San Antonio Spurs as well as managing the day-to-day operations of the

Frost Bank Center.

The agreement is good for three years and will give South Padre:

Signage throughout the Frost Center arena. Floor-level images visible to television viewers while games are being played.

Access to the Spurs social media programming and “special sweepstakes opportunities for Spurs supporters.”

Likely visits to the Island during the basketball offseason from Spurs players.

“It gives us another outlet to tell our story and raise awareness about the Island,” Henry said. “Our destination deserves grand recognition and I can’t think of a better partnership than the San Antonio Spurs.”



An early November event was the official kickoff of a partnership between the Island and the San Antonio Spurs. (VBR)

Attracting New Visitors

One of Henry's chief goals is making the Island more of a year-round destination that has economic activity during fall and winter months after the always busy tourist seasons of spring and summer.

The partnership with the Spurs represents a step in that direction. The NBA season starts in October and runs through spring to early summer. The new partnership puts the SPI name and brand in the forefront of one of its best Texas tourist markets – San Antonio – while having the potential to attract new visitors as the Spurs' fan base grows with the addition of Wembanyama.

"Economic development starts with a visit," Henry said. "The more visits we can bring to our destination, the more impressions we can create and spur economic activity down the road."

The partnership with the Spurs was announced during a late morning event at the SPI Convention Center with splashy decorations, Spurs and SPI-themed cookies, and a raffle for game tickets. Sports and athletics in general are an opportunity Henry plans to pursue. He can draw upon an early career job when he worked at the Staples Center in Los Angeles for the LA Kings of the National Hockey League.

"It's just the beginning," he said. "Phase two is expanding the convention center to attract more sporting events and now we have this name recognition with the San Antonio Spurs."

Redefining A Destination

Henry spoke of developing the CVB staff to recruit more company and group meetings to bring more visitors during the offseason tourist months.

He described it as business "we're going to plug in after the summer all the way to February to keep economic activity flowing to our destination."

It's all part of the focus heard among Island business and political leaders who want to make SPI more than a go-to summer destination and one where there are sufficient attractions and reasons to visit year round. Making the Island more of a national brand is central to that goal.

"We have the ability to redefine our destination with the development of this convention center and to rethink our marketing plans," Henry said. "Going through this process and having a big name like the San Antonio Spurs is going to help us get more events."



South Padre Island and the San Antonio Spurs have announced a promotional partnership that SPI hopes will lead to more year-round economic activity. (Courtesy)



Promotional materials were plentiful during an event announcing a marketing partnership between SPI and the Spurs. (VBR)

McAllen Unveils Holiday Wonderland

By Chris Ardis

Holidays in the Rio Grande Valley involve a lot more than your average Christmas tree, a lighted menorah, wrapping and unwrapping gifts, and eating too much turkey.

The Valley is in Texas, where everything is big, including holiday events in McAllen.

The city will host everything from parades to shopping events and holiday music from an orchestra and a wind ensemble to “The Nutcracker.”

Dream Land

Then there’s the South Pole of Texas. The official lighting of the record-breaking, 100-foot-tall digital Christmas tree in the

South Pole (the McAllen Convention Center grounds the remainder of the year), took place on Nov. 30.

Valley residents and visitors can see it in all of its glory through Dec. 30, on Sundays and Tuesdays to Thursdays from 5:30-9:30 p.m., and Fridays and Saturdays, 5:30-10:30 p.m. The South Texas South Pole will close on Dec. 24 and on Christmas Day.

The tree, which has to be set up using cranes, has a new spot this year, serving as the focal point of the illuminated festival. Adding to the holiday spirit are more than 100 lanterns, a giant Ferris wheel, light tunnels, a Gingerbread Village, s’mores stations, local entertainers and a Metro

McAllen train.

“This is something we’ve evolved into,” said Yajaira Flores, director of the convention center and the McAllen Performing Arts Center. “Now it’s like setting up a small city. What happens at the end of the year is that things turn into magic and we start believing in things bigger than us.”

Expect to step into a South Pole Dream Land, which is the theme of this year’s event.

Throughout December, H-E-B will host Days of Giving for area nonprofits, including free event passes. Lone Star National Bank will sponsor Children’s



Illuminated trees line the grounds of the South Pole of Texas, creating the perfect complement to America's tallest digital Christmas tree. (Photo courtesy of the McAllen Convention Center.)

Nights, allowing children ages 7-11 free entry on these special days. (Children under six are free daily.)

“It’s all about bringing cheer and joy to children. For some, it may be their only Christmas celebration,” Flores said.

For more information on events, sponsors and tickets, visit southpoleoftexas.com.

Holiday Parade

Santa will have a hectic weekend Dec. 1 and 2 at Christmas in the Park and as the man of the hour at the McAllen Holiday Parade. Christmas in the Park takes place at Municipal Park on Bicentennial Boulevard. On Dec. 1, the event runs from 5-11 p.m., and on Dec. 2 from noon to 11 p.m. Admission is free.

“We will have 30 food vendors and over 20 artisan vendors, in addition to carnival rides,” said Maritza Munoz, the convention sales manager for the McAllen Chamber of Commerce.

On the afternoon of Dec. 2, large, painted puddles of polyurethane will morph into gigantic helium characters and join Santa at the McAllen Holiday Parade. The event calls on hundreds of parade volunteers and each needs every muscle they have to keep the characters from flying away.

Spectators can purchase tickets for special seating at McAllen Veterans Memorial Stadium, the South Padre Island Vuelta Zone or the McAllen International Airport Skybox. Thousands also line the 1.5-mile parade route from the Stadium down Bicentennial. The city also expects over 27 million television viewers to take in the spectacle of a parade featuring 35 giant spinning balloons.

Visit mcalleholidayparade.com to purchase tickets, see the sponsors and special guests, and view the parade route.



Ride the Metro McAllen train around the grounds at the South Pole of Texas Dream Land throughout the month of December. (Photo courtesy of the McAllen Convention Center.)



Throughout the month of December, the tallest digital Christmas tree in America will light up the skies in McAllen at the South Pole Dream Land. (Photo courtesy of the McAllen Convention Center.)



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Shopping & Music

Another local holiday treat is the McAllen Chamber of Commerce's All About Women "A Christmas Affair," a shopping and networking event.

It's the 17th annual event and is sponsored by PNC Bank. It will take place on Dec. 7 from 5:30 to 8 p.m. at the chamber. The event kicks off with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres from 5:30 to 6 p.m., which is sponsored by Macaroni Grill and Tacocean.

Approximately 30 female vendors will have their pop-up shops at the event, according to Gerry Garcia, the chamber's director of public policy and government affairs. Entrance is free, and while men are certainly welcome, be warned that it's more like girls night out.

To balance the holiday bustle, relax at the performing arts center while enjoying "A Touch of Frost" with the Valley Symphony Orchestra, "Christmas with a Twist" featuring the McAllen Wind Ensemble, Tuba Christmas, and the RGV Ballet performing "The Nutcracker." Visit ticketmaster.com and type in "McAllen Performing Arts Center" for dates, times and tickets.

A seasonal village with a plethora of events cannot be built in a day; nor can it be built by one person. City staff, volunteers, elected officials, sponsors, residents and visitors become merry magicians during this time of year.

"Everyone believes in the magic and in bringing it to the community," Flores said.



Santa had his parade wave ready for last year's McAllen Holiday Parade. Get yours ready for the big event December 2. (Photo courtesy of the McAllen Convention Center.)



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