ICMA Awards

Category: Community Partnership Awards

Entry Title: Extraordinary Partnership Brings College Campus to Sugar Land

**One: Problem assessment, the challenge or need that prompted the local government to develop the program.**

Background: About 10 years ago, there was a vision of our residents attending college here in their own community, rather than trekking 22 miles to Houston. Sugar Land had a small satellite campus of Wharton County Junior College, but the courses were limited and the facility was in a 35-year old strip mall. Sugar Land experienced dramatic growth (150 percent) in the decade of the 90’s and the current decade—the fastest growing city in Texas for several years. (In January 2009, the city’s population was 79,732 and another 35,000 in the extraterritorial jurisdiction which will be annexed in seven or eight years.) Sugar Land was fast becoming an employment hub and recreational/cultural destination for this area south and southwest of Houston.

The City of Sugar Land, the State of Texas, the University of Houston System, and the community partnered ina highly unique and innovative manner to facilitate an accelerated development of higher education opportunities for Fort Bend County in order to promote quality of life and economic development. Under planning and construction for nearly five years, the University of Houston at Sugar Land campus opened in 2002 as a facility to address the community’s educational needs. In a time of economic pressure on higher education, the City utilized its resources to expedite higher education opportunities and, additionally, community recreational needs faster than could have been otherwise accomplished.

## Two: Program implementation and cost.

The first part: Former Sugar Land Mayor Dean Hrbacek recalls: “I worked with the former Texas Lieutenant Governor, Bill Hobby, who was named Chancellor of the University of Houston System after he left office in Austin. He was one of the most respected Texans ever, and his view was that the university should provide service to its customers, wherever they were living, and we both felt—and a lot of people felt the same and supported us-- that Sugar Land was a prime market for the University of Houston. We looked to find an area of land for the university. We were very fortunate that the State of Texas owned a substantial amount of land within our ETJ [extraterritorial jurisdiction] at that time. Bill Hobby approached the state legislature with his vision of bringing education to this community; we spent a good amount of time in Austin and Bill Hobby testified, cashed in a lot of chips, and we ended up with 248 acres for the university and another 428 adjoining acres of park land for the city of Sugar Land. Governor Bush signed the legislation. It was the very first time that the State of Texas had donated this large a parcel to a municipality.”

Another very positive aspect of this land grant was the opportunity for the City to establish a one-of-a-kind park incorporating both recreation and conservation along nine miles of Brazos River within its city limits.

“ Here we are with UH Sugar Land today, and it’s a tremendous asset not only to the city but to the surrounding area as a whole by being able to provide a quality university in our backyard,” says Hrbacek.

Sugar Land committed $3.5 million towards the construction of the $11 million, 57,000 square foot building. The City joined with UH in an aggressive campaign to find private donations and foundation grants to help fund the building. The UH campus building has general classrooms, a multi-media center, library resource center and four interactive television rooms. A community education room is available for public use. This collaborative effort was remarkable for two reasons: It was the first time in Texas history that the state legislature actually gave away—donated—land to another jurisdiction. The university received 248 acres and the City of Sugar Land received 428 adjoining acres. Additionally, this was an effort involving a municipality helping to fund a state project—another first—demonstrating the City’s commitment to education and work force development. The City of Sugar Land’s ability to participate in the building project was made possible through the Sugar Land 4B Corporation, an economic development corporation which is financed through one-quarter of one cent of the City’s share of sales tax. (The Texas Development Corporation Act of 1979 enables cities to allot tax monies for economic development.)

The second part: The University of Houston at Sugar Land offered junior and senior level courses and graduate courses. Soon after the opening of the Albert and Mamie George Building, the City and UH in 2005 extended their partnership with the plans of a second building which would offer space to Wharton County Junior College, thus creating a full undergraduate curriculum. In January 2006, plans for a second building of 145,000 square feet were announced. The City committed another $3.5 million for the “Building Futures Together” campaign, and construction of the second building. In turn, UH leased to the City an adjacent 52-acre tract of land that the City will maintain as parkland and looks to develop such amenities as a park and recreation center. These amenities can be enjoyed by those attending college and the general public.

The new Wharton County Junior College (WCJC) building—Brazos Hall--has 44 classrooms, a performance hall, five computer labs, nine science laboratories and a nursing skills laboratory. A School of Nursing is shared by both facilities. The new facility also features a two-level, 150-seat auditorium and large multi-purpose room. Construction was paid for, in part, with a $4 million gift from the George Foundation and a $3.5 million contribution from the City of Sugar Land’s 4B Corporation as a long term lease agreement for nearby UHSSL property.

In January 2009, students registered in 25 courses and began the Spring semester at WCJC. It was now possible to earn a baccalaureate degree right here in Sugar Land.

# **Three: Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program**

The UH Sugar Land campus was immediately full with 2,300 students when it opened in the summer of 2002 offering 34 graduate and undergraduate programs. UH anticipates a 5 percent enrollment growth annually. WCJC had 2,100 enrollees in its Spring 2009 semester..

“This collaborative vision demonstrates our continued support of this very important educational institution,” says Sugar Land City Manager Allen Bogard. “The partnership provides greater opportunity for our residents to access higher education and recreational facilities.”

**Four: Lessons learned during planning, implementation and analysis of the program**

Partnering increases likelihood of success: This was an extraordinary partnership involving a city, state, state-supported university and a county-supported junior college. The generosity of citizens and foundations also contributed to the success of the campus.

Under the leadership of the late Lieutenant Governor Bill Hobby, the Texas Legislature took action that made the property (formerly owned by the Texas Department of Transportation) available to the City of Sugar Land and the University of Houston System; it is the first of its kind land donation in Texas. To further ensure the success of this venture, Sugar Land pledged a total of $7 million toward construction of the two buildings; to our knowledge, a municipality pledging this amount of funding to a state entity is exceedingly rare—if it has ever occurred at all.

The University of Houston System had broad experience in creating branch campuses. The UH System has satellite campuses at Victoria, Texas; in downtown Houston, six miles from the main campus; Cinco Ranch in Katy, Texas; Clear Lake, Texas; and the University of Houston Distance Education program.

Wharton County Junior College, founded in 1946, is also experienced with satellite campuses, the Sugar Land campus becoming the school’s fourth.

The citizens of Sugar Land embraced the partnership—and no wonder: 59 percent of Sugar Land adults hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, the highest education attainment in the region.

The benefits of the UH System campus in Sugar Land are varied. The educational opportunities add immeasurably to the quality of life. The positive effects the campus will have on the work force is expected to be dramatic. The UH Computing Services alone offers Sugar Land residents instruction in laptop, mobile computer, multimedia lab computing; the Computer Science/Information System Instructional Computer Lab is utilized by all disciplines. The campus is intended to be a high-tech hub connected to workplaces, schools, homes and the other UH campuses.

Affordable learning is more accessible than ever in Sugar Land, Texas. Conveniently located together with the University of Houston System at Sugar Land, the new junior college makes it easy to take the first two years of courses at WCJC and pocket substantial savings before transferring credits to a four-year college. This unique transfer-driven new campus offers more than 25 different courses and an opportunity for students to take part in the WCJC/University of Houston System Partnership 2 + 2 Joint Admissions Agreement. This agreement facilitates the admission of WCJC students to the University of Houston System (UH, UH-Clear Lake, UH-Downtown, UH-Victoria) so that they may continue their studies in four-year programs, including those at the University of Houston System at Sugar Land.