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Rockdale city officials looking to spur new business

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By Jordan Overturf jordan.overturf@theeagle.com | 0 comments

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ROCKDALE -- When the Rockdale Alcoa plant laid off most of its workforce in 2008, some thought that another company like Alcoa would slide into its place. Five years later, those people are still waiting.

Meanwhile, the folks at City Hall have been working on another plan to lure businesses to town. The city has altered its economic strategy to broaden the scope of jobs and services available to the town's 5,000-plus residents.

"One thing we've learned during this process is the importance of diversification," said City Manager Kelvin Knauf. "We've also been learning to deal with fewer resources."

Knauf came to work for the city in 2009 with 30 years of experience under his belt. But he never faced a challenge like the one in Rockdale. He said a cautious approach and an flexible staff helped keep the city solvent.

In the wake of the jobs vacuum, the city decided to tighten its belt by "deleting jobs or leaving them empty," Knauf said.

Within the past year, some of those vacant positions at the police department, and parks and roadworks departments have been filled. The city also reinvigorated interest in its tourism committee and formed the Rockdale Municipal Development District, which is spearheading the courtship of companies looking to relocate or build new facilities. Knauf said there is a 10-year capital improvement plan in place that focuses on building tourism and helping small businesses grow so they can increase jobs.

Unfortunately, the need for growth is becoming more urgent. Knauf said the appraised value of city property dropped by \$6 million, or 3.5 percent, in 2012. Sales tax revenues also are down.

Some business owners are skeptical the city's plan will pay off five years from now, but they do think the town could grow beyond that, if given enough time to cultivate opportunities.

The Development District's plan

The major catalyst for change in the city comes from the Municipal Development District, headed by Kara Clore.

In 2009, voters agreed to dissolve the hospital district and transfer those tax dollars for use within the city limits. That change allowed the city to start setting aside tax dollars to spur capital improvements and offer tax relief. Clore said a large part of the focus is on revitalizing the downtown area.

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