

A last memory: Laredo Chamber of Commerce closes its doors before move, holds auction

By Jorge A. Vela
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The Laredo Chamber of Commerce hosted an event Friday known as Lights, Camera, Auction! giving locals the chance to purchase historical and traditional items from their office as they continue the process of moving into their new locations by the end of the month.

Headquartered at 2310 San Bernardo Ave. since 1974, the Laredo Chamber has been an advocate for the local business community for over a century as it opened its doors one last time to the general public Friday.

"We had a community event, and we wanted to make sure that the community had the opportunity to take a piece of Laredo history home," Laredo Chamber of Commerce President & CEO Gabriela Morales said. "We had a silent auction and a live auction. We opened up the doors of this building located at San Bernardo just to get that last photo, that last memory, as you can see past chairs are really excited to be here and past members of the board are really excited about the legacy, as they talk about how it used to be back then and what they see ahead of us, which is really bright as we are the No. 1 land port."

The event featured various activities from an open mic session for those who wanted to share memories, a photo opportunity for past chairmen of the Laredo Chamber, a live and silent auction, and refreshments and finger foods were provided.

The new Laredo Chamber of Commerce offices will be located at 5702 McPherson Road Suite 8B. They plan to have a soft grand opening Aug. 1, as a ribbon-cutting ceremony will be hosted later.

The Laredo Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1915 and has since represented over 100 years of essential industries, ranging from financial institutions and retailers, to transportation, logistics and service providers. The chamber is considered as the longest-running business organization in the county.

With almost 700 members representative of every industry in the community, the Laredo Chamber is accredited with five stars by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Only 200 chambers out of 7,000 across the country are accredited by this organization.

The auction

In the silent auction, traditional items that belonged to the former office were auctioned off, while in the live auction, several legacy items were up for grabs including a jersey signed by players from the Lakers, a football signed by an NFL player and other items. The silent auction featured more historical items like newspapers, memorabilia and others.

"The proceeds from today's auction were to fund our new move to our new location on McPherson but also to help with day-to-day expenses, because we also have full-time staff that works all-year round at the Laredo Chamber of Commerce, so these funds will help pay the bills," said Mike Marasco, Laredo Chamber of Commerce Chairman of the Board of Directors.

Marasco said the event went well, and he enjoyed hearing the various stories and memories many people around the community had about the building that has been used for nearly a half century.

"Change is always a



The Laredo Chamber of Commerce on Friday hosted Lights, Camera, Auction! in order to auction historical and traditional items from their office, as they continue to move into their new location by the end of the month.

challenge," Marasco said. "It will open up new opportunities for our community as a whole and for businesses throughout Laredo and Webb County. We will have the ability to offer new services in our new location in McPherson, and today was a good run down memory lane at some of the highlights that have happened here in our San Bernardo location.

Some of the people who bought auctioned items were Cliffe Killam, president and CEO of Killam Development, and Gimelda Ortiz, a loan mortgage officer.

"I am a bigger supporter for the Laredo Chamber," Killam said. "I believe in their philosophy and their mission to help the people of Laredo, our community and the business community. Business can serve a public good, so through that it helps our community. I just wanted to make sure we had some bids there and to get involved and make a monetary contribution, and now ... I have some good birthday gifts for people."

Ortiz said she took one of the paintings featuring a Washington Birthday Celebration Association event being hosted downtown, because she believes it is very important for her to make sure she keeps this little piece of history and showcases it to her children.

"I had left home for so long, and I always cry for things that I missed so much of," Ortiz said. "I do feel sad that sometimes I missed all of these celebrations like the Washington Birthday Celebration, and now that I have a young daughter and she is 3, I want to expose her to all of these cultural things that are very important to us and to keep our community together."

The new location

Rep. Henry Cuellar attended Friday's event and said he was glad to be part of it, stressing how important the Chamber of Commerce is to help businesses -- not only those that have existed a long time but also those just starting out.

"They move to the new office on Aug. 1. They have a new leader who I know and she does a very good job, and we hope to continue working with them," Cuellar said. "If we look at the growth of Laredo, Laredo has grown a lot. The unemployment rate is at 5%, which is one of the best on the entire border, and it is part of what the Chamber does when it gets to work with the long-standing companies and with the new ones that want to start in Laredo. That contributes to low unemployment in Laredo."

Killam said the closing



Jorge A. Vela / Laredo Morning Times

down of the San Bernardo office was the end of an era but the beginning of another, which may be even more prosperous, as he believes people now have access to programs and tools by the chamber online. Killam also touched on how the chamber worked with the Laredo Independent School District and was able to get a resolution for the selling of the property.

"(LISD) is ultimately going to be the buyer, so I guess it makes sense for what their plans are, and we wanted to be cognizant of that and work with them as a community partner," Killam said. "The new location I think has a more open-door concept as well, and so I think that the new location will serve a great purpose for us. We don't know if it will be our forever home, but it will serve that purpose for now and be more accessible to a great amount of the public."

Additionally, the San Bernardo location splits parking with LISD now, so there were always fewer parking spaces for people going to the chamber. The new location will offer better parking for all those seeking to attend those offices.



Jesus, I Trust in You
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chamber. And she said the new chamber's office is in a much more strategic location than where it is now.

"It is much more centralized, and the business community is growing tremendously throughout Laredo," Morales said. "With this centralized location, businesses in the south and businesses in the north will be able to access it in no time through Loop 20. Also, businesses downtown will be able to as we will have a centralized point, however, we are always out in the community when we deliver services, whether it is ribbon-cutting, groundbreaking -- whatever it is, we are constantly promoting the benefits of becoming a member."

Looking forward

Morales said plans for moving the offices to a more central location began about six years ago, prior to her joining the

Morales said many of the services that the chamber offers to both members and non-members -- such as notary services, certifications, promoting Webb County for increased tourism and investments -- will continue to be provided in the new establishment as well.

"We have to empower the businesses with the education and all the tools they need, so they know when to react when things happen," Morales said.

LMT Publisher William "Bill" Green, who served as chairman for the Laredo Chamber of Commerce in the 1990s while the North American Free Trade Agreement was still being debated and eventually had a major impact on the Laredo economy, also said he sees the change as positive.

"I think that they have a good new location there by McPherson, so I think they are doing everything right so far," Green said. "I think the chamber has a very good future, and we reminisce a little bit today as I served as chairman 30 years ago. For some years now, we are growing at 2% a year, and that's a lot. But when you deal with the fact that you have 170,000 people, that means we add another 2,000 jobs in Laredo, and the chamber is a good part of that."

Cuellar wished the chamber good luck with its move, and he said he intends to continue working with them going forward.

"Good luck with the change. ... It's good to have that kind of change," Cuellar said. "When they bring someone with new ideas, it is good for the community."

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