

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*, the Real Estate Center Journal

Huntsville Stands Tall

By Jennifer S. Evans

Huntsville is home to the world's tallest statue of an American hero. The 30-ton statue of Sam Houston, which is as tall as the pine trees surrounding it, can easily be seen from Interstate 45. While the statue lures tourists off the interstate, Huntsville leaders are exploring other ways to turn heads. Real estate plays an important role in that plan.

Tourism is a hot industry for Huntsville, especially throughout the spring and early summer. October, however, is typically the busiest month for tourism. In one month, the Chamber of Commerce reported visitors from 13 different countries. People travel from near and far to see such attractions as the Sam Houston statue, the Sam Houston National Forest and Park and the historic downtown area.

According to Dee McFarland, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce, the downtown is busy every weekend with tourists. Private businesses, with assistance from city government and grants, have improved the facades on the downtown square.

Huntsville had an estimated 1998 population of 34,500. Walker County had an estimated population of more than 56,500. These numbers also include the 9,000 inmates housed in the Texas prison system.

Huntsville has a stable employment base. The top employer, with more than 7,000 on its payroll, is the Texas Department of Criminal Justice headquartered in the city. Sam Houston State University (SHSU) is the second largest employer with more than 2,200 employees. Unemployment has remained low over the last several years. The average unemployment rate in August 1998 was 2.4 percent in Walker County, and the 1997 average rate was 2.6 percent.



The economic development efforts of the community have focused on industries and businesses that serve the prison system. When asked how Huntsville entices new companies, Stan Saucier, president of the Economic Development Corporation, responded, "through trade shows to attract prison-related businesses."

SHSU also has been key in attracting new businesses to the area. SHSU had a fall 1998 enrollment of more than 11,000, a figure down slightly from 1997. The university has the federally funded Center for Environment Studies. This

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research group attracted A.P.T. Catalysts, a polymer research and development center, which will work with the university's chemistry department. The university is in the process of completing

a \$6 million expansion for the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Institute.

In addition to the university and prison systems, Huntsville's medical center has built new facilities. New health clinics and a surgical center have been added to the local area.

In 1997, Walker County added 219 new single-family units, at an average cost of \$84,800. By September 1998, 150 new units were under construction. The primary subdivision where construction is currently underway is on the south side of Huntsville near I-45. Elkin's Lake subdivision provides an 18-hole golf course, swimming pools and fishing lakes. The homes range from \$80,000 to \$300,000. Sales are primarily to retiring people and families looking to upgrade housing.

Other residential growth is developing in rural areas. According to James Bartosh of B&B Properties, many people moving to Huntsville are looking to get away from the urban setting of Houston. These customers are looking for a home with land.

Apartment construction has been active for the last two years. In 1997, 232 apartment units were added, and 220 units were planned for completion in 1998.

Retirement housing also is new for Huntsville. The Carriage Inn, an 84-unit retirement center was recently constructed. A new assisted-living facility, The Lexington, is slated for the near future.

The Sam Houston National Forest provides a permanent natural greenbelt along the south side of the city. This natural barrier protects Huntsville from becoming an uninterrupted part of the northern sprawl from Houston. There also are areas for potential growth. There are plans for a state and local road to be extended on the west side of Huntsville to help assist the traffic flow. J.D.

Schindler, director of general services for Huntsville, reports that the city has recently completed a \$14 million wastewater treatment facility in preparation for westward growth.

New retailers include Chili's, Blockbuster, drug stores and fast-food restaurants. Much of the new retail activity has been concentrated along State Highway 30. A new post office also is on the way.

Demand for small office is strong, although there has been no new office space construction in recent years. Much of the new demand is because of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice,

which leases office space throughout the city. According to Bartosh, many professionals are looking for 400- to 1,800-square-foot spaces. There also are numerous inquiries about warehouse space, but the city currently does not have any available.

The outlook for the Huntsville area is positive. Tenaska has plans to build a large power-generating facility less

than 30 miles away. Huntsville officials expect to see an economic spin-off in the community as a result of this new facility, including new residents and businesses. Houston is expected to continue to have a positive impact on the area as growth continues northward.

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Tierra Grande (ISSN 1070-0234), formerly *Real Estate Center Journal*, is published quarterly by the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-2115.

Subscriptions are free to Texas real estate licensees. Other subscribers, \$30 per year, including 12 issues of *Trends*.

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