

Enjoy the show
A Doreen-based circus features deep family connections in the business.
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WHAT'S INSIDE
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• Editorial: 50 years later, Vietnam wounds still tender. **Page 6B | Opinion**

Daylight Saving Time begins today
The change officially occurred at 2 a.m. this morning. Be sure your clocks spring forward one hour.

THE MONITOR

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2015 SERVING THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY SINCE 1909 \$1.50 SUNDAYS

Mercedes | Parent-teacher organization

Money concerns after account overdraw

Missing funds prompt police investigation

BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER
STAFF WRITER

MERCEDES — More than 650 children at the Mercedes Early Childhood Center were promised a ticket to a Disney on Ice concert for the annual film from this spring when the school year began.

But the field trip was nearly canceled after officials learned in December the parent-teacher organization's bank account was more than \$6,300 short.

"We've been telling them all year, you're not going to Disney on Ice if you misbehave," said Rhonda Barnes, the parent-teacher organization secretary and board member, adding that her 6-year-old niece and 4-year-old son have been looking forward to the event for months.

An incident report was filed Dec. 27 with the Mercedes Police Department. Police Chief Olga Maldonado declined to comment on the open investigation. No arrests have been made.

During the Christmas holiday season, more than \$1,300 in cash was suddenly withdrawn from multiple ATMs located in Louisiana, draining the parent-teacher organization's bank account. An additional \$316 charged from a casino resort and hotel was found on bank statements provided to *The Monitor*.

But within a few days, there was a more than \$2,000 deposit back into the account. The organization's treasurer was forced out of her position before she could deposit an additional \$6,000 into the bank from previous fundraisers. And a string of cash withdrawals was discovered prior to the out-of-state charges over a two-month period.

Questions remain about exactly how much money is unaccounted for due to a reliance on cash transactions within the organization, PTU members said.

MISSING CASHP
On Jan. 13, the organization's former treasurer, Yodira "Dee Dee" Garcia Gonzalez, made a \$6,000 deposit into the organization's

Rhodes Enterprises Inc.
Building South Texas

Mike Rhodes, founder of Rhodes Enterprises, in front of the Neuhaus Tower in McAllen. **Check & Leave | dsm@the-monitor.com**

View from the top

Developer shares over a decade of vision for RGV

BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER | STAFF WRITER

A panorama of floor-to-ceiling windows offer real estate developer Mike Rhodes an uninterrupted view from the Neuhaus Tower, McAllen's tallest building.

"It's good to get up in the air sometimes," he said.

The 32-year-old developer grew up in Palestine, a town outside Houston, and is the founder of Rhodes Enterprises, which owns more than 10,000 acres — making it one of the largest landowners in Hidalgo County.

During a recent interview, Rhodes turned his gaze south toward the Rio Grande. On clear days, you can see buildings and congestion in Reynosa, nearly 10 miles away, he said.

"It helps you think differently," he said.

The majority of his land is split between three swaths of property in Mission, Donna and McAllen that he bought in 1998, just four years after the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed.

See RHODES | 12A

POLITICS | Texas secretary of state

Cascos takes official oath

BY TY JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

AUSTIN — Gov. Greg Abbott administered the oath of office Sunday afternoon to Texas Secretary of State Carlos H. Cascos, but the governor's pick to lead the state's election office and serve as his foreign policy adviser had

Reliability of Valley electric grid questioned
But officials expect smooth sailing for spring, summer

BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER
STAFF WRITER

As temperatures plunged this week, focus again returned on the Rio Grande Valley's electrical use and whether supply will be able to keep up with demand heading into the warmer months of the year.

But officials with the

See ELECTRICITY | 15A

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64 Pages, 6 Sections

12A

The Monitor, www.themonitor.com | SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2015

RHODES

From Page 1A
Rhodes has been determined to transform farmland into master-planned communities with thousands of single-family homes and commercial developments needed into remanufactured natural spaces.

"We've already taken (more than) 250 acres of farmland and turned it back into wildlife habitat within our development," he said about land donated near Benetton Palms, a community in south Mission. "I've never seen such a dynamic culture of people, I love the Valley."

Despite his affection for the Ito Grande Valley and immersion in its culture, Rhodes said he's not fluent in Spanish and prefers using a translator. He did so for more than a decade when he ran a meat processing facility owned by his wife Lori's father in East Texas.

But the itch for developing real estate kept coming back to the Valley, he said. "We slaughtered about 1,000 cows and 250 horses a day, but real estate was always my love. I would flip houses on the side," he said.

He sold the slaughterhouse for \$17 million in 1986. His marriage was also a partnership. Lori was in the construction crew moving shovels, alongside him and now runs Valley Affordable Mortgage, a lending company for the local properties. She also a master gardener — her love of nature spurred the suggestive plans and dedication to preservation of wilderness in the Valley.

Benetton Palms in Mission, high-speed Internet, digital phones and cable TV to his development's residents. He's the chairman of the IDEA school board — his \$1 million donation helped build a campus in Mission and he has plans for another campus on the edge of Tres Lajas in northwest McAllen. "I make sure that I'm involved in every aspect of my communities to make sure that it's the best it can be," he said.

It's donated more than 500 acres of his land for public use, including 75 acres to create the Ito Grande Valley Veterans Cemetery and 75 acres for a public sports park in Mission.

Rhodes donated 275 acres of land worth \$2.5 million to help establish the World Snoring Headquarters within Benetton State Park. He gave another 100-acre plot valued at \$1.2 million to the North American Butterfly Association to build the National Butterfly Center.

In exchange, Benetton Palms residents don't have to pay admission fees. But the effort to preserve and promote wild habitat also prohibits vehicular access and recreational vehicle camping inside the park. Walk-in camping is still permitted.

"We did several things there that made what we think is the perfect community," he said. The estimated developed value of Benetton Palms is \$1.1 billion for the 2,500 acres in south Mission just near the state park's entrance.

But a decade after breaking ground on Benetton Palms, he has sold 500 homes — a fraction of the 5,000 homes anticipated. Still, he contends the project weathered the recession well.

When former Gov. Rick Perry released 1,800 troops to the South Texas border in 2014, the move was yet another roadblock, he said. Other developers agreed that there's a market for master planned communities in the Valley.

"I think as, Sharyland Plantation has done well and there are very limited pockets for development, especially in the McAllen area," said Almaro Camu, founder of Camu Construction, co-founder of Doctors Hospital at Benetton, and owner of the Ito Grande Valley Vipers, of which he will have a majority stake in a \$68 million arena that recently broke ground in Edinburg.

Camu said he's faced similar challenges when it comes to building homes with a lack of corporate interest in infrastructure. "I've got developments right now that don't have Time Warner Cable because they don't want to spend the money if there's nobody to use them," he said, adding that he respects Rhodes' vision. "I think he's using his resources to improve the whole city of not just his development."

Donna Rhodes' second marriage project, Alliance River Crossing that seeks to tie together the city of Donna and Ito Grande Valley and spur commercial development is also off to a sluggish start.

Inside a Donna City Hall conference room, City Manager Fernando Flores dusted off a shiny poster board with renderings of the development, with an estimated value of \$800 million for 2,000 acres five miles south of the city proper.

"These are apartments, single-family homes, and this is an industrial park," Flores said, tracing the curved roads planned around the Donna-Ito Grande International Bridge with his finger.

Rhodes donated some land around the Donna Bridge in 2007 to the city and secured a 30-year Tax Incremental Reinvestment Zone, or TIRZ, agreement worth \$79 million. The city took out a \$30 million loan to build the bridge, raised property taxes to 1.25 per \$100 of property value to help make payments of more than \$2.3 million per year until 2017.

When a group of residents in Donna opposed the bridge and Rhodes' development, he met with them in person to address concerns. "It was a group of people who thought Donna shouldn't have built the bridge and that it was a tax burden," he said, arguing that it's likely the biggest economic driver in the city. "Then we'll see to me — I'll be happy to buy it."

Car traffic on the eight-lane Donna Bridge has been steadily increasing since its opening in 2010. This is the fastest bridge to cross, maybe 10 to 15 minutes or so," said Flores. "Once commercial traffic gets going you'll start to see the warehouses and of course people want to live close to their jobs."

About 700 cars were tracked per day in 2011 and more than 1,400 rolled through by 2014. In November, Flores said the average daily total had reached 1,500 crossings. But more than 7,000 cars trek across the Hidalgo bridge each day and 2,500 come through Pharr, not including thousands of commercial trucks.

"Until we have truck traffic, things can't explode there, but they'll have truck traffic by April," said Rhodes. The Texas Department of Transportation approved \$9 million for infrastructure at the bridge through the Consolidated Border Infrastructure program and construction is underway.

Not everyone is concerned about the sluggish growth for the Donna development, either. Mike Blum, director of the NAI Ito Grande Valley, a commercial real estate firm, contended that the bridge isn't a failure, either. "You don't generate revenue because you want it to happen, something in the economy happens," Blum said. "Mike is a visionary, an extraordinary and he's done exceedingly well in talking visitors and making them a reality."

Blum said he first met Rhodes back in the 1990s while he was a city planner for McAllen and heard about Benetton Palms. "It was a huge risk and a huge challenge because it was in the same area as Sharyland Plantation," Blum said. "Nobody knew what the World Snoring Center was, but they knew there was a lot of interest in it and a unique opportunity."

TRES LAGOS
But Rhodes' biggest project to date is set to tie Tres Lajas, a 2,700-acre plot worth \$2.8 billion near the intersection of State and Monte Cristo roads annexed by McAllen last month with the blessing from Hidalgo County commissioners.

Rhodes called Tres Lajas his "crown jewel" of master-planned communities. "We've just been waiting for the right time and I believe the time is now," he said.

There will be individually-gated communities, courtyards and commercial spaces but much of the development is meant for public use. Plans for the retail spaces with confirmed tenants are not yet released but the goal is mixed use.

"The coolest thing happening in communities is not old-style malls, but old feeling downtown walking centers with big box retailers," he said. Rhodes said an agreement with the city also included a water re-use plan for treated wastewater to run through the landscaping irrigation system.

Despite his affiliation and support for IDEA schools, Rhodes said there will be full-day school district campuses from kindergarten to high school at Tres Lajas. "We've always got room for an IDEA school, but Edinburg is a fabulous (school district) too," he said.

Another goal within the project plan is to drive technology-based jobs. "We've courted some pretty interesting companies already that will bring several hundred jobs early on that mainly need the high-speed Internet," he said.

But Tres Lajas didn't skate through the annexation process without opposition, either. Commissioner John Ingram, who represents McAllen's historic downtown district voted against all Tres Lajas agreements.

Ingram argued the city annexation and TIRZ agreement was too generous for one project and locks the city's future expansion plans for 30 years. Ingram questioned why the Donna TIRZ agreement hasn't generated any money for that city yet.

Rhodes said he could have blocked any future development of that land and the TIRZ was necessary. "Without that piece of the puzzle, it would have stayed a rural development in the country with half-acre lots and produced not one tax dollar for the City of McAllen," he said. "I'm not against the revitalization of downtown, but it's about giving choice to people."

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CASCOS

From Page 1A

already been working for months.

The former Cameron County judge had been splitting time between the Rio Grande Valley and Austin, essentially since Abbott announced his appointment in Brownsville just days after the November election.

Already Cascos said he has met with Mexican officials to help enhance Texas' relationship and discuss international issues from the 1944 Water Treaty to border security.

But Abbott's goals for Cascos reach far beyond strengthening ties between Texas and Mexico, as the governor explained that he poached Cameron County's leader to expand his sphere of influence to help change Texas.

It was rhetoric that Cascos carried on after he swore his oath on the Sam Houston Bible, explaining that he envisioned a future Texas where partisan



Miguel Roberts | The Brownsville Herald

Many from Brownsville attend the swearing-in of the honorable Carlos H. Cascos as Texas secretary of state Saturday in Austin.

bickering was put aside for the sake of improving the state.

In an address that rarely relied on notes, Cascos openly discussed his

stance as a moderate Republican who has no use for party lines.

"I don't believe that either party has a monopoly on good government," he said.

Increasingly, he said, voters are choosing candidates based on their individual strengths, not their party affiliation.

He has watched it happen in Cameron County, where he won his third term in November as a Republican in the heart of Democratic country.

Cascos said educating voters, a touchstone of the secretary of state's office, will factor greatly into his time in Austin, as he announced plans to visit campuses across Texas to discuss the importance of voting.

He said his office will work to redress voter apathy and cynicism — two factors behind Texas' abysmal annual voter turnout rates.

Texas, historically lagged behind the rest of the country in voting, but Cascos is confident Abbott's election has signaled

a change in Texas government, citing the political demographics at the ceremony and subsequent ceremony where Democrats, Libertarians, Republicans and independents gathered to congratulate him.

"I think everyone recognizes that this is a new era," he said.

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ELECTRICITY

From Page 1A

Much of Hidalgo County went dark for two hours during a controlled rolling power outage Oct. 8 while service for consumers in north Texas was uninterrupted.

"While overall the outlook for electricity reliability across the Texas grid is sufficient for the demand, there are still concerns in the Valley," ERCOT spokeswoman Robbie Seary said Tuesday.

More than 76,000 megawatts of power from wind, gas-fired, solar and coal plants across the state are expected to quell the forecasted peak demand of about 62,000 megawatts this spring.

By summer, ERCOT estimates there will be 77,000 megawatts available and 60,000 megawatts is the expected peak. One megawatt of power can provide enough electricity for 500 homes on a mild spring day and about 200 homes when demand is higher.

Officials said they don't expect any major shifts in the electricity demand from industry from low oil

and gas prices, which has cut jobs in the state's energy industry.

"We have not seen to date a drop off in energy consumption in relation to oil and gas demand," said Pete Naranjo, ERCOT's manager of resource adequacy. "I have not seen any reports any near term impact."

In the Valley, there are 780 megawatts of new generation expected to connect to the grid by the end of summer 2016 from unnamed natural gas fired generators. ERCOT is not permitted to discuss individual operators due to current regulations.

Construction began recently at the La Paloma Energy Center, a natural gas-fired plant in Harlingen, expected to pump an additional 690 megawatts into the grid.

The final greenhouse gas permits from the Environmental Protection Agency were approved for two gas-fired projects in early 2015.

The projects were Tena, an 800 megawatt natural gas fired plant in Brownsville and another 200 megawatt facility in

Edinburg run by South Texas Electricity Cooperative.

But additional generation isn't enough to keep up with population growth and the urbanization of the region.

The "cross valley" transmission project, a high-voltage, 51 billion investment through AEP Texas Electric Transmission Utilities and Sharyland Utilities won't be complete until the end of 2016.

This means 2015 will be a crunch time leaving the Valley consumers more vulnerable to rolling outages.

"We continue to study ongoing concerns in the Valley region and our concerns do continue through roughly the summer of 2016," she said.

But even after the transmission line is built, demand is expected to increase and there is likely need for more upgrades by 2020.

"There may be a need for additional infrastructure needs in addition to the transmission lines that are being built," she said.

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