

Houston Northwest Chamber finalizes long-term improvement plan priorities

by Matt Stephens , September 10, 2014

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HOUSTON NORTHWEST CHAMBER IMPROVEMENT PLAN



Safety and security
Four-year cost:
\$1.65 MILLION

- Conduct business security audits
- Contract officers to patrol commercial areas
- Monitor and report crime statistics
- Deliver educational programming to help prevent crime



Economic development
Four-year cost:
\$883,000

- Launch a Grow Northwest business retention and expansion program, reach out to 15 businesses per year
- Recruit two non-retail businesses per year
- Create a Grow Northwest Center to provide economic development services to existing businesses



Community image and marketing
Four-year cost:
\$610,000

- Develop and implement a strategic marketing plan for the community
- Design and install monument signs to mark key entrances to the region
- Install street markers with street addresses at 75 intersections



Monument sign



Street signs

Source: Houston Northwest Chamber of Commerce

The Houston Northwest Chamber of Commerce has finalized the goals for its community improvement plan and will launch a capital campaign this fall to raise \$3.14 million to fund those projects.

Chamber President Barbara Thomason said the plan includes \$1.65 million for safety and security, \$883,000 for economic development and \$610,000 for community image and marketing. Thomason said the funds raised by the campaign this fall would be spent gradually in the next four years.

Although she said the first steps of the plan will probably be seen at the center of the chamber's service area—along FM 1960, Louetta and Spring Cypress roads—Thomason said the plan will be implemented across the entire service area, which stretches from Hwy. 290 to east of I-45 and from inside Beltway 8 up to north of FM 2920.

Some of the plan's improvements could be implemented as early as mid-2015, Thomason said.

Plan priorities

Safety and security improvements prioritized by the plan include the creation of a public safety program with a public safety director and an advisory council. Thomason said the chamber has examined similar programs in the Greenspoint and Westchase districts and could borrow from their best practices.

The area's public safety program could conduct business security audits, contract law enforcement to patrol commercial areas of the region and deliver educational programs to the community. Thomason said the chamber hopes to see a 10 percent reduction in commercial-related crimes year over year, including burglaries of businesses, break-ins and assaults.

"We don't think we're any more crime-ridden than other parts of the county, but we want to be less crime-ridden than any other part of the county," she said. "We want that reputation."

The Cypress Creek Parkway Business and Property Owners Association has similar goals, Thomason said, and could partner with the chamber to provide some matching funds for the program.

Local groups may also partner with the chamber for the marketing portion of the plan, which includes the placement of monument signs and street signs.

Thomason said the Cypress Creek Cultural District has already begun discussions regarding the placement of the first two signs along Cypresswood Drive that they would fund themselves. The \$610,000 slated for the marketing portion of the plan would only provide enough money for six monument signs and about 75 street signs at significant intersections.

The cultural district's signs will likely be the first two signs installed and are not included in the chamber's cost estimate, Thomason said.

"Those will go up and other communities will say, 'Where's our sign?'" she said. "And we'll discuss that with them. If they have a utility district that wants to hurry it along, they can [fund the monument]."

The economic development portion of the improvement plan would emphasize business recruitment, retention and expansion.

Thomason said about 68 percent of all jobs created in the Greater Houston area come from existing businesses. Although she said the chamber has a business retention and expansion program, it is run by volunteers. With funding provided by the campaign, Thomason said the chamber could expand that program, working on identifying businesses that plan to leave the area and address their concerns.

"If it's a space issue, we'll help [businesses] find an appropriate space," Thomason said. "If it's workforce, we'll help them find the workforce. We'll work with them to apply for a skills development fund grant."

Funding campaign

The chamber's board of directors met at the end of July to finalize the priorities set by a chamber task force and to announce community leader Anne Vallette as the campaign director. Thomason said the first draft of the plan was compiled last fall using input from community workshops.

The capital campaign to raise money for the plan will be an eight-week program launching this fall, Thomason said. The majority of the money for the plan is likely to come from businesses, with some individuals also contributing.

A consulting firm—Opportunity Funding LLC—met with more than 75 local stakeholders this year and reported to the board in March that the businesses could commit a combined \$1.8 million. However, some stakeholders could not commit money until they saw more detailed plans and the firm did not meet with every local stakeholder, Thomason said.

Vallette and Thomason said they felt confident they could raise an additional \$1.4 million from businesses and community members for the four-year plan.

"I have a great database [of stakeholders]," Vallette said.

Although the \$3 million requested for the plan will fund projects in the next four years, Thomason said the safety and security and economic development portions of the plan will require money after the four-year plan is completed.

"There are plans for funding after that," she said. "One of them could be another campaign, but there are some other sources that we're seeking. I'm just not prepared to talk about that right now."

