

# HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Strictly Houston. Strictly Business.

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## The Best Way to Predict the Future is to Create it

By Mike Warren

With picturesque master-planned communities, highly rated public schools, an abundance of recreational opportunities, nearby fine shopping and dining and easy access from anywhere in metropolitan Houston, it's no wonder that Fort Bend County continues to be one of the fastest-growing and most progressive counties in the nation.



Indeed, take a look at some of the most significant factors that fuel a strong economy and make for a

high quality of life such as families living in their own homes, the level of residents that complete high school and college, household income levels and employment job growth. For all these factors, Fort Bend County ranks in the top 4 percent of the 3,091 counties in the nation.

According to the U.S. Census, Fort Bend County grew approximately 6 percent in both 2001 and 2002. At the current rate of growth, Fort Bend, which now has more than 412,000 residents, will reach a population of 800,000 between 2020 and 2023.

And more of the people who are living in the county are working closer to home. In 1990, only 41 percent of the county's residents worked in Fort Bend County. Today, that

number has increased to 58 percent, and the county ranks at the 99.3 percentile in employment growth in the United States.

The strength of Fort Bend's unsurpassed quality of life is found in the numerous public, private and governmental partnerships, says Herb Appel, president of the Greater Fort Bend County Economic Development Council.



“Great partnerships share common goals,” he says. “All the projects that have been undertaken to improve Fort Bend County

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are the result of these partnerships. We all have the common goal of creating a higher quality of life for our residents.”

Most of those residents live in master-planned communities where homes are priced from the \$100s to more than \$1 million. These communities offer a variety of amenities ranging from lakes, swimming pools, tennis courts, golf courses and hike-and-bike trails to one of the largest private water parks in the United States.

Master-planned communities feature a minimum of 1,000 acres and a plan for future residential, commercial and retail development.



“People like master-planned communities because it gives them a sense of security to know the types of development that will take place nearby,” says Susie Mahoney, marketing director for Sienna Plantation. “They also know the property values will be preserved because of the deed restrictions.”

The vast majority of residents in master-planned communities have children, and many of these communities have award-winning schools either within their neighborhood or close by. All four school districts in Fort Bend County – Fort Bend ISD, Katy ISD, Lamar Consolidated and Stafford Municipal -- are above state and national standards, while nearly 70 percent of the county’s high school graduates go on to pursue higher education.

Houston Community College, Wharton County

Junior College, the Texas State Technical College and the University of Houston all have facilities in Fort Bend County. Fort Bend County residents have one of the highest levels of educational attainment in the nation and the highest in the Houston area.



Fort Bend County residents also enjoy close proximity to more than 35 healthcare facilities and agencies including hospitals and 24-hour emergency rooms.

The county offers a host of shopping, entertainment and dining options.

“We’ve got everything from the First Colony Mall and Katy Mills to lots of

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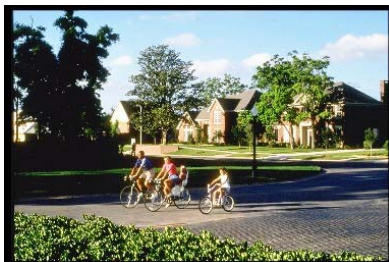
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upscale boutiques, most of the national franchise and department stores, name restaurants and nice eateries throughout the county," Mahoney says.

Recreational facilities and opportunities abound. Area golf courses offer more than 450 holes. Those who want to play it cool may visit the Aerodrome Ice Skating Complex.

Brazos Bend State Park offers nearly 5,000 acres of wilderness that includes nature trails, camping and fishing areas. The park is also home to the Fort Bend Challenger Center, a living memorial to the seven Challenger astronauts who lost their lives in 1986. It also hosts the largest public telescope in the United States.



Located nearby is the George Ranch Historical Park, a 23,000-acre working ranch that offers visitors an opportunity to explore Texas' rural and ranching heritage.

Fort Bend is also home to many houses of worship, and there is a strong bond between neighbors, Mahoney says.



"This is a very generous community," she says. "The money raised for charitable projects is phenomenal. There is a sense of community within communities."

Those who choose to live in Fort Bend County also find it to be the most accessible and easiest commute to and from

Houston of all the outlying communities in the Houston area.

The completion of U.S. 59 expansion has greatly relieved traffic. The area is also accessible via the Grand Parkway and U.S. 90A, and the Fort Bend Parkway and Westpark toll roads will significantly enhance mobility.

"The governmental entities and the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Council continuously work together to make improvements," Mahoney says. "I believe that's one of the reasons the quality of life is so great here." ■