

## LEDC Director Varela remains optimistic about organization's future as she prepares to retire

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**P**resident and chief executive officer of the Laredo Economic Development Corporation, Olivia Varela is set to retire by the end of the month.

After seven years serving as the director and then president/CEO of the LEDC, having been involved in many projects and business decisions for the community, Varela is set on a new course.

"I have been working with the LEDC for seven years, although it was not my first time working with the LEDC. I had previously worked with the Laredo Development Foundation back in the early 1990s with one of Laredo's leading economists, Mr. Frank Leach," said Varela.

During her recent tenure, she focused primarily on business development in the industrial and commercial sectors. But much of the work allowed her to network, learn and create relationships with businesses and people all throughout northern Mexico and throughout Texas. Her involvement in the industry dates to longer than 20 years in the field.

"In my prior work, I walked into almost every single manufacturing facility from Brownsville to Eagle Pass, Piedras Negras, Matam-



Varela

oros, Reynosa, and of course Nuevo Laredo and learned the manufacturing industry from various aspects — from operational management to warehousing. It definitely gave me a unique perspective of the industry," said Varela.

In terms of her legacy, she believes that her hard work will speak for itself. She came in during a difficult time to help change the vision of an organization, and with it a city that depends on business immensely.

"I would like to be remembered for taking on a challenge at a critical point for this organization and successfully working through many of the situations that we faced. I believe we were able to bring a new light, a new focus on to the LEDC that has to do more with moving forward the development of the community and working in a highly professional and ethical manner," said Varela.

In terms of accomplishments, she is proud to include the work of the LEDC team in the recruitment of companies large or small that have helped the city grow. They visited companies from areas as far as Canada, such as SUNSET Produce, and recruited them

to operate locally. Another achievement she is proud of includes the expansion of Medline Industries in Laredo, and the significant return and growth of Delphi in Nuevo Laredo.

Personally, however, for the businesswoman, two of her greatest accomplishments include the establishment of the downtown business incubator Mile-One, which she points out is a good way to help sustain the local economy by way of assisting small local businesses; and the job her organization has in helping to recruit and bring investors to the area.

Varela said her initial goals and vision for this job has not changed fully, but had evolved with time.

"I oversimplified it in my mind at the beginning to the three M's, or the three goals: manufacturing, membership and money," said Varela. "These were the priorities when I was first hired.

"Looking at it from an organizational standpoint, those continue to be very important; however, from a community standpoint these continue to evolve as we continue to evaluate our resources and our strengths. We now include commercial development, small business development, downtown revitalization and quality of life as an integral part of our business."

Varela's successor is not

yet known. The application process continues after they narrowed down the list of many who had applied to what is now a handful. Varela is part of the job search committee that was enacted to look for her replacement.

"We are still in the process, and I agreed to stay on until we find a replacement. Admittedly, that is taking a little bit longer than what I thought it would," said Varela. "But we are well on our way. We had 30 applicants and it was a difficult and tedious process, but we went through all the details of those applicants."

Varela said they are looking for a highly dynamic individual who has leadership skills above all else, plus vision and sharp business acumen to make things work.

"It has been a bit tough to get people with direct economic development experience, but we have a list of applicants with a very high level of successful business experience," she said.

After retirement, Varela says she will not leave the business world but will focus some of her energy on things that she likes to do in her downtime.

"I love business development and commercial development. My ideal job does not exist at the moment. Although, I know what it is ... and it has to do with a business development project that is probably on hold at

the moment!" laughs Varela. "It is a wonderful project that I hope comes to fruition with or without me involved, just because I think it would be fantastic for Laredo. I have a lot of interest in downtown revitalization."

"I also want to get involved in some of the other things I like doing like travelling, but the current virus situation is putting a damper on that," she said.

Varela said she would love to get into painting once again, one of her main passions before she began working at the LEDC. Evidence of that are several paintings throughout her office and one particularly colorful one of a lion that she painted.

Varela remains positive of what is to come after her departure.

"I know that the transition with a new president is going to be very smooth. We have a highly professional and trained staff with anywhere from six months to 27 years of experience," said Varela. "People here are certainly self-motivated, and they have made my work here much easier. There is a lot of potential for this city, and we can do it but we have to do it together."

She is very optimistic of what is to come both for the LEDC and for her city as well.