

COVER STORY

Avocado facility coming to the city as cold storage businesses expand locally

By Jorge A. Vela

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Already known as the No. 1 land port in the country, the Gateway City is also expanding to become a major player in other transportation businesses such as the cold storage industry. A big step in that direction was the announcement of a deal with California-based company West Pak Avocado, Inc. which will invest nearly \$18 million locally.

"West Pak is a top-notch avocado company that will be investing nearly \$18 million in our community and hiring 140 employees with good pay, great benefits and career advancement opportunities, and they have proven to be excellent corporate citizens wherever they operate," Laredo Economic Development Corporation President and CEO Gene Lindgren said.

Lindgren said West Pak reached out to them looking for somewhere to start a new facility. West Pak was referred to the organization by a member of the Laredo EDC after learning they were considering a major expansion of their operations on the border.

"Our initial conversations were very positive right from the very beginning, and the West Pak team was impressed with our community's receptiveness, unity, transparency and overall positive business-friendly atmosphere," Lindgren said.



Courtesy Photo / West Pak Avocado Inc.

The California-based company West Pak Avocado, Inc. will invest nearly \$18 million locally.

Lindgren said another asset they had to bring West Pak to Laredo was being able to get the city on board right away with what the company had to offer.

"One of our strengths in the community is the use of Team Laredo in attracting and landing great companies here," Lindgren said. "It many times starts with the Laredo EDC where we utilize the relationships we

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Laredo Economic Development Corporation President and CEO Gene Lindgren

have maintained over decades with developers, banks and commercial property managers. Then we combine efforts with the City of Laredo's Economic Development Director Teclo Garcia, Laredo City Manager Robert Eads and Laredo College Economic Director Michael Gonzalez."

Garcia expressed his support and was thrilled about having the client come to the area.

"West Pak is a dream client to work with," Garcia said. "From the CEO to the operations VP and other personnel, they are completely transparent, willing to work with the City of Laredo, exceed our expectations and genuinely are interested in investing and working with Laredo as they locate a major facility here. West Pak applied for a grant, or property tax rebate, under the Texas Chapter 380 economic incentives program."

Garcia is excited the facility will bring a lot of permanent jobs to the area.

"West Pak's facility will create at least 140

new permanent jobs, several more administrative and support jobs, and it will also have additional seasonal workers," Garcia said. "All jobs will pay more than \$15 per hour, one-third of jobs will pay \$34,000 per year or more, and some upper-end management positions will pay more than \$60,000. The firm's annual average payroll during the 7-year term of the agreement will be about \$3.5 million."

The company will have a state-of-the-art facility that will incorporate modern sustainable building materials, and it will be a showpiece for their big customers like Kroger, H-E-B and Walmart. According to Lindgren, this will drive additional business visitors to Laredo who will spend time and money in the city.

Lindgren said the company's avocados will not be grown locally as these large companies usually have their farms in various places around the world to take advantage of the different growing seasons. West Pak grows its avocados in California

and Michoacan, Mexico along with Chile, Columbia and Peru.

Lindgren said bringing large corporations such as West Pak to the area is a growing trend as the city continues to show its economic vitality.

"I believe our Team Laredo approach continues to be a strong advantage along with the City of Laredo sealing the deal with their incentive package that was devel-

oped and approved by our great city council and mayor," Lindgren said.

According to Lindgren, the community has developed a strong momentum of late in cold storage, especially in perishables, and he said the city plans to continue to leverage the trend.

"We have landed significant investments, well over \$100 million over the last couple years, with companies like Sunset Produce, Nature Fresh Farms, U.S. Cold Storage, Librado Piña, Inc., Mission Produce and now West Pak Avocado," Lindgren said. "We have a lot to offer these kinds of companies with our location, available talented workforce, innovative educational institutions and great properties coming on line this year."

According to Garcia, produce logistics, although still a small part of Port Laredo's more than \$200 billion in annual trade, is a fast-growing sector.

"Half a dozen cold storage and produce facilities have opened or been announced to open soon in Laredo in the last 18 months including West Pak, Mission Produce, Mastronardi, Nature Fresh Farms, Empacadora GAB and more," Garcia said.

"And, most of these are large facilities of 100,000 square feet or more. Consumer demand, changing diets, product price point, sourcing and other factors are driving this new growth."

jorge.vela@lmtonline.com



Gene Lindgren, Laredo Economic Development Corporation President and CEO.



Teclo J. Garcia, City of Laredo's Economic Development Director

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Publisher

Bill Green

General Manager

Adriana Devally

Editor

Malena Charur

Writer

Jorge. A. Vela

Photography

Danny Zaragoza

Advertising

728-2515

rcamacho@lmtonline.com

Araceli Guerra

728-2513

araceli@lmtonline.com

Kazandra Gonzalez

728-2508

kgonzalez@lmtonline.com

Amy Gonzalez

728-2520

algonzalez@lmtonline.com