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## A comprehensive plan for Hitchcock makes its debut

By KATHRYN EASTBURN The Daily News  
Dec 17, 2019



A rendering of one of the new signs that will welcome travelers to Hitchcock.

Courtesy/Hitchcock Industrial Development Corporation

The first time Texas A&M University students and planning professionals met with a group of Hitchcock citizens — in the summer of 2018 — the goal was to begin a comprehensive planning process for the small Galveston County town.

“A gentleman stood up and said, ‘People don’t even know when they’re in Hitchcock or when they’re leaving,’” said Sabrina Schwertner, Hitchcock’s economic development chief and a key player in the planning process.

Eighteen months later, “Welcome to Hitchcock” signs have been designed and are in the process of being made and paid for through a combination of economic development and Houston-Galveston Area Council funds. They will be posted at the city’s entrances and exits — two on FM 2004, two on state Highway 6 and one on FM 519.

And in another sign of progress, a nearly 200-page plan titled 2-/20 Vision: A Comprehensive Plan for the City of Hitchcock 2020-2040 was presented Monday night to city commissioners at Hitchcock’s regular December commissioners meeting. If adopted, it will serve as an umbrella document under which all other future plans will fall, said Jeewasmi Thapa, program coordinator for Texas Target Communities, the program that saw the comprehensive planning process through to its conclusion.

Texas Target Communities is a Texas A&M University program that began in 1993 with the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning. The program helps small communities across Texas with planning while providing a learning laboratory for graduate students.

“The timing’s perfect,” Schwertner told the packed room of residents gathered at Monday’s meeting. “We can start the new year with a new motivation in Hitchcock.”

The sweeping plan addresses the past, present and future of the small rural community with an eye to maintaining values residents identified as most important to them: quality of life, inclusiveness, sustainable development, a small-town feel and celebrating the resilience of the community.

As many as 150 Hitchcock residents participated in a series of brainstorming meetings over the 18-month process.

“We started with thinking assets, assessing what really mattered to people,” Thapa said. “The residents of Hitchcock told us they cared about the small-town feel of the town, and they valued the town’s ability to get through tough times, to pull through and to help each other.”

That doesn't mean Hitchcock residents were satisfied with the state of the community. They identified concerns for their town, ranging from bringing in more industry to preserving important natural resources such as wetlands. They talked about transportation needs ranging from roads improvement to sidewalks for the safety of residents on foot. They talked about flooding and drainage problems.

Residents also discussed creating a downtown area that would transform the town center from a series of random houses and businesses lined up along state Highway 6 to a place with a municipal complex at its heart — city hall, a community center, the library, possibly the police department — along with new businesses and recreational opportunities, making it a place for residents to gather, work and just enjoy.

As laid out in the plan, that would mean moving Hitchcock's City Hall, flooded out in Hurricane Harvey, from the south to the north side of Highway 6. Possible locations are the Good Ole Days Grounds, a sprawling open area owned by the city, or in and around Stringfellow Orchards, a national historic site with an abundance of huge, old live oak trees. Hitchcock resident Sam Collins, also a key participant in the planning process, owns Stringfellow Orchards.

“We need a heart and a hub for the city, and it will take a long time to carry out that project,” Schwertner said. “But one of the things that people are understanding is that now we have a plan and we can start to go after grants.”

The grant-making process, in general, requires a plan like 20/20 Vision that demonstrates engagement with the public throughout the planning process, she said.

20/20 Vision breaks large, long-term goals down into smaller tasks that can be completed within five or 10 years and identifies potential funding sources for each of them.

Commissioners will need to review and adopt, monitor, evaluate and update the plan as it moves along, Thapa said. They are expected to review the plan in coming weeks and possibly bring it up for adoption at their January meeting.

“This is where the work really starts, Schwertner said. “It’s about 5 percent done. We’ve got 95 percent to go.”

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