

Jay Socol: Welcome to "All Up In Your Business." I am Jay Socol, and today's conversation is always a fun one because it's with economic development director, Natalie Ruiz. Hey, Nat.

Natalie Ruiz: Hey, hey.

Jay Socol: So in the tradition of our old podcast called, "Is This A Thing?" we're going to discuss the business landscape in terms of what's coming, maybe a little bit of what's probably not coming, and maybe even some things that we're still hoping for. So, Natalie, I'm about to get all up in your business. You and I talked a little bit before we sat down about some of the topics that we wanted to hit. I thought we would just go straight down to South College Station because there's always stuff going in now at Tower Point and Caprock, so you want to walk me through some of highlights there?

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah, we've seen quite a bit of development there recently. IHOP just opened this week, the new restaurant there at Tower Point. We've also seen Tad's, the Cajun Kitchen. They've broken ground right next to the Lowe's there at Highway 40. Seen announcements and permits for Great American Cookie Company, Marble Slab over in the Caprock area. They've also submitted plans for a new office building that has capabilities for two restaurants at the first level that we're working on trying to fill. Some of the other things that are happening over there, we've got Walk-On's the bistro sports bar that just pulled permits recently that'll be there next to Salt Grass. They just pulled their permits this week. Pie In The Sky, the old Bush's Chicken, they'll be open sometime in late May, early June time frame.

Jay Socol: Let me stop you on that one. Is Pie In The Sky, is that... is this a franchise, or is this actually a locally owned, original business?

Natalie Ruiz: From my understanding it's a franchise started out of the Austin area. So they're branching out into College Station and their menu looks pretty good.

Jay Socol: Alright.

Natalie Ruiz: A lot of good sweets.

Jay Socol: Okay.

Natalie Ruiz: But those are the big things that are happening in the Tower Point area, unless you want to talk about what may be not coming.

Jay Socol: Okay, we can get to what's not coming in just a second.

Natalie Ruiz: Okay, okay.

Jay Socol: But I will tell you that I got a really nice email from our listener, because we may just have one.

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: Who has just opened, I think, a new business down in South College Station called Little Land Play Gym, is that right?

Natalie Ruiz: Yes, yes. That's the building that so many people have reached out to us as to what's going in behind the Walmart there on Longmire. There's a strip center there and for the longest it was we didn't know what was going in there, but recently permits have been issued for Zoner's Pizza Wings and Waffles, so a restaurant that will go in that center as well as the Little Land Play Gym will also be in that same center.

Jay Socol: I passed that the other day, didn't realize what all that was going to be.

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: So, that's what it's going to be.

Natalie Ruiz: That's what it's going to be.

Jay Socol: Okay. Back down closer to the Tower Point and Cap Rock area, something that we thought was coming in, suddenly is not coming in, Gringo's.

Natalie Ruiz: Yes.

Jay Socol: What happened, Natalie?

Natalie Ruiz: Well, the short answer is I don't know. To be perfectly honest, they came in, made the announcement, we worked with them on a site plan, issued full building permits about a year ago. They were getting ready to start construction and then they notified us that it was going to be delayed. That the franchisee of this area also has some restaurants in Houston that took on damage from hurricane Harvey that wasn't planned. So they were going to focus on those repairs before they moved to College Station, but they were still coming. Then in the most recent, in some of the social media that we've seen, they made an announcement they were coming to the Katy area, and that they weren't going to move forward with College Station at this time. Trying to figure out, I've reached out to corporate, I've reached out to the local franchisee as well to try to find out is it postponed? Have they completely pulled out of the market? What are the plans? So that's why I'm saying, "I don't know." I've reached out to them a couple of times and will continue to track that down and see what their plans are.

Jay Socol: So you've kind of helped train me that until you see something sprouting from the ground...

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: ... that it could always pivot and go the other direction.

Natalie Ruiz: It can, and that's one of the things in this business, you get excited, especially when you've been working with a particular group about bringing them to your community, when they say they're coming you're all pumped or excited. They come in and file site plans, when they start spending money you get more excited because it's more of a thing. Once they start spending money, and have their financing, and are designing buildings, and actually pulling the building permit, they've spent a substantial amount of money in this community. So the further you get along in the development process, the more... there's never a sure thing, but the more of a sure thing it could be. And that's why we felt really strongly about Gringo's was definitely a thing, until we found out it wasn't.

Jay Socol: Right. Maybe, by the time you and I sit down again for a conversation like this, maybe you'll have a little more insight about Gringo's.

Natalie Ruiz: I hope so, definitely.

Jay Socol: Okay. Let's fly over to Northgate, because I know you've told me that there are some things coming to Northgate that maybe we haven't heard about.

Natalie Ruiz: There are. And I think the things that we've talk about mostly have been new student housing.

Jay Socol: Right.

Natalie Ruiz: Right, rent by the bedroom, in the last several years we've seen... well, the last five years we've seen about 7,000 beds in the Northgate area. From a market perspective, typically when you see a large increase of rooftops, or beds, in this example, retail tends to follow, so we're starting to see more retail interest in the area. We've seen more traditional retailers that are looking at maybe changing up their concept to more of an urban, general retail type situation, difficulty is finding the dirt to do it, or an existing building as well. Now, the Aspire building that is recently completed is... we have Fajita Pete's that has pulled permits there, Which Wich has announced that they're coming, the sandwich location as well.

Jay Socol: I like Which Wich.

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah, yeah. So we're starting to see more restaurants and more retail interest in the Northgate area, and I'm hoping over the next 18 months to 24 months that we'll be able to release some more commercial interest in the area.

Jay Socol: Now, didn't you tell me the other day there was a coffee place that was...

Natalie Ruiz: Yes, yes, a new coffee place that has announced as well in the Northgate area, so we're starting to see a little more interest other than night clubs in Northgate.

Jay Socol: Okay. Now, I know you're not the project lead on this, but I think that the city recently funded a comprehensive study of the Northgate area-

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: ... in terms of mobility, how people are moving around because the way it's currently designed is probably 20 plus years old-

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: ... and we're just not the same Northgate anymore. In terms of what you're aware of and your interest in it, what it could help you do in Northgate, can you talk about that a little bit?

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah. Debbie Eller, our community development department is the lead on that and it's more of an operations plan. Really looking at how we operate in that area from a police and fire standpoint, pedestrian, bicycles, you know, when that area was planned, gosh, 15 years ago and then we updated about 10 years ago, we lifted the lid in terms of density, what you could put there, really raise the height limitations, the density, and let the market dictate that. Did we ever think we would see high rises? No, no. So it's really going back and taking a deeper dive into, from an operational standpoint, for example, are there streets that we close on Friday and Saturday night so that pedestrians are more protected in the area? Taking a broader look at parking, surface parking lots are few and far between over there and that was intentional. The parking garage was built to try to spur some additional development, additional densities in the area without having to build surface parking.

It's just going back and taking a look at that to see, where do we stand with things like Uber and Lyft? And more and more students coming into the area that may or may not have a car with them, how has that changed over time and looking at that master plan for Northgate, what should we plan for? Do we need less parking? Do we need more? In Texas it's always been more parking, but what we're seeing in Northgate is fewer students are bringing their cars to school because they have to pay for them. There's additional cost if you live in Northgate and more and more students are taking Uber and Lyft when they go out so there's less demand for parking in the Northgate area. But just trying to get a handle on what does that mean and what are the implications from an operation standpoint?

Jay Socol: In terms of available real estate that can be developed or even redeveloped, what still exists over there?

Natalie Ruiz: You know, it really is a redevelopment play over there. There are some areas that could be higher and better used from a real estate standpoint. You look at some of the one story development over there, not in the historic area, but closer to college where you have the old Hurricane Harry's area, we're working with Jack Culpepper on a potential redevelopment plan there as well. I think the question right now is timing. Do you go head to head and compete with some of the uses over at Century Square, or do you sit back and take the approach and have your plan ready to go once the market condition are right and start moving forward? I think in the next five years you're going to see significant changes in the Culpepper area there at College and University, then moving closer to Northgate in terms of redevelopment potential.

Jay Socol: I still have to adjust my mindset because when we talk Northgate I'm thinking sort of the older, traditional boundaries of Northgate and that's really not... that's no longer Northgate it's expanded so much-

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: ... in it's footprint.

Natalie Ruiz: Right. We really look at it from the Bryan city limits, Wellborn Road, University Drive, and then College.

Jay Socol: Wow.

Natalie Ruiz: It's a big area.

Jay Socol: Okay. Are we done for now, for Northgate?

Natalie Ruiz: I think so.

Jay Socol: Okay. I want to touch on Chimney Hill for just a little bit, because I know The Republic is going gang busters.

Natalie Ruiz: Yep.

Jay Socol: And Primrose Path is open now-

Natalie Ruiz: They're open.

Jay Socol: ... but I know there's still more to come on that site, what can you tell us about that?

Natalie Ruiz: Drury Inn filed a site plan on the back part of the property, they're... from what I understand, they're still in their due diligence phase to make sure everything fits and in that particular area it's making sure that you have enough parking for all the uses that are there and for a hotel of that size. So we're reviewing the site plan on the Drury Inn now. We're also reviewing site plans for the Starbucks with the drive-thru there at that location. Now, there's still a prime corner there close to Hilton that could also be a strip center with a couple of uses, it could be a large restaurant, there's tons of potential for that corner. In terms of a new restaurant, to me, that's a money tract right there in terms of a new location, something shiny and sexy.

Jay Socol: Are you getting the sense that some kind of announcement about that could come soon? Or is that kind of a longer play? Do you even have an idea?

Natalie Ruiz: I think it's a little bit of a longer play. I know that several folks have gone after that corner, but as long as The Republic has moved forward, Drury Inn, that's really the last lot. So typically on a development that last lot, you take your time.

Jay Socol: Okay.

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah.

Jay Socol: All right, and what's the timeline? Remind me, because we've talked about it before, the timeline for the drive-thru Starbucks?

Natalie Ruiz: We're reviewing site plans now, hope to issue permits later this summer. I'm not sure what the construction timeframe is, but they're ready to move.

Jay Socol: Alright, so that's Chimney Hill. Now let's go over to Midtown.

Natalie Ruiz: Okay.

Jay Socol: And this is our portion of Midtown-

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah.

Jay Socol: ... it's the business park, right?

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: We recently announced that the Lakeway and Pebble Creek Parkway extensions are completed.

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: And that's wonderful in terms of mobility, but for you and what you're trying to bring to that area, to that business park area, what does this do for you?

Natalie Ruiz: It's huge from not only a transportation standpoint, but from an economic development perspective. You're right in that the city owns a total of 600 acres in that entire area that's a regional park that will be open and ready to go 2020 timeframe. The Lakeway extension cuts through the business park from an industrial standpoint on one side, and then on the Highway 6 side there's a 57-acre commercial tract that we are trying to attract some of the big box users that have been looking, haven't been able to find landing spots here in College Station, junior anchors, restaurants, more of a destination entertainment type of development there. Now, the connection at Lakeway, it really opens up that entire area running all the way from Fitch down to the new Baylor Scott and White hospital. That's going to open up the entire area in terms of new development.

There's also closer to the Baylor Scott and White is a Huntington senior housing development that they're currently working on, we're reviewing site plans for that as well. This extension helps make that happen. In addition to there's a private piece that James Murr is developing in the area to where he's entered in two letters of intent, could be a thing, we're still working through all the details but for a hotel, some additional senior living, as well as market rate multi-family that would be part of that, and then a recreation center for the residents over there. There's a lot of things that once you open up Lakeway you have the access, you have water, you have sewer, it will open up that entire area for more development. Not just on the city's track, but also private tracks over there.

Jay Socol: So how big of a deal is this, because how many other 600 acre areas does the city have access to open up?

Natalie Ruiz: Right. And we didn't purchase that 600 initially with this overall vision, we pieced it together over time through, we need a business park, we need a regional athletic facility, major green ways that are coming through that area, being able to extend more hike and bike trails. The Lick Creek Trail comes through that area, I don't know if you've walked it or ridden your bike, it's fantastic.

Jay Socol: We're probably not going to replicated this anywhere else in College Station?

Natalie Ruiz: No, no. This is the only place in College Station where Lick Creek and Spring Creek converge, so there's a lot of open space but there's also potential for new businesses, new homes. In my mind this is the area that we're going to see some of the biggest development changes in the next three to five years.

Jay Socol: That's exciting.

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah, it is.

Jay Socol: Okay, so that's Midtown. Alright. What are the odds of you bringing me a Buc-ee's to College Station?

Natalie Ruiz: Oh, you know, Buc-ee's, that's one of those... we have our recruitment list that we through and we say, "Okay, what areas do we need to fill in our market? Is it restaurants, clothing-

Jay Socol: Beaver nuggets?

Natalie Ruiz: ... beaver nuggets?" Beaver nuggets are at the top of our list, okay? I mean, you can't be from Texas, and you can't drive up and down 290 and stop at the one there at Waller and not be a fan of the beaver. We've had several conversations with Buc-ee's, their real estate folks, they've been poking around for several years. We even got the opportunity to meet "Beaver" Aplin, the founder-

Jay Socol: Who is an Aggie.

Natalie Ruiz: ... who is an Aggie.

Jay Socol: Yeah.

Natalie Ruiz: He was here speaking on campus, and we just happened to be there, and happened to invite him to drive around and look at some sites. And trying to explain that to my boss on a Friday afternoon that I'm out driving the highway with Beaver was an interesting one. But they're definitely interested. They want one here in Aggie-land, they'd like one here in College Station further south of town to intercept some of the Houston traffic that's coming in, but they're very particular about their locations, they've changed their location formula over time. They want to be just far enough out that they can pick up traffic coming into town, but they want to be close enough in town to be able to intercept locals as well, so there's only a few locations that they're looking at that would meet that criteria and they are actively working those. It's one of those things that, gosh, we definitely want it to be a thing, it's just finding that right location and the right deal for them.

Jay Socol: So they have different footprints, I think?

Natalie Ruiz: Right.

Jay Socol: I mean, some are big, some are supersized, I heard there's a travel center version. You know, what makes sense for College Station? What could be done here?

Natalie Ruiz: You know, I think what makes sense here, what could be done is the larger travel centers. Now we're not an interstate, we're on Highway 6, but there's a

ton of traffic that comes through here whether it's game-day weekend, special events, or folks just traveling through our area. I think the Waller size is a very large footprint, but it's something, I think, that could do well here even if you didn't build it entirely in the first phase it's something that you could expand upon and I don't know I get pretty excited thinking about not only Beaver Nuggets, but all the Aggie merchandise that they could have as part of that having a Buc-ee's presence here in Aggieland.

Jay Socol: What kind of sales tax revenues does a Buc-ee's location generate?

Natalie Ruiz: Man, it's huge. They... looking early on, you've got to kind of back out some of the fuel sales tax because fuel sales is a huge part of their business, but the sales tax, it's even larger from... I'm having to pull that from memory and that's scary, but it's on the same lines as a Costco would have-

Jay Socol: Wow.

Natalie Ruiz: ... in this community. I mean, it is, in terms of the amount of sales that they do at a large Buc-ee's, it's a game changer, for sure.

Jay Socol: Yeah. And what typically can be done around a Buc-ee's? I'm sure that serves as some level of an anchor for development. I mean, what typically happens?

Natalie Ruiz: You know, in different areas I think they've experimented with that in other areas, what... there's not a specific formula, but when you have something like that in a community like ours, when you have game day weekends, things like that, you would also see other restaurants, other retailers that could feed off of folks coming in and out of the site.

Jay Socol: Right. Okay. You make that happen.

Natalie Ruiz: You got it, you got it.

Jay Socol: Okay. What did we miss that maybe you have on your list, but I don't have on mine? Anything else come to mind?

Natalie Ruiz: No, there's... in terms of Jones Crossing we're starting to see some momentum out there at the new HEB center.

Jay Socol: Right.

Natalie Ruiz: Some interesting uses that have announced that they're coming, Chicken Salad Chick is a new franchise to this area that's an interesting concept. A new boutique in terms of it's a local boutique, Threads. Someone that hasn't been in the clothing industry that's branching out into that, that's local, that's an interesting story. Zero Degrees just opened recently, pretty cool concept, great drinks, great fruit, fresh fruit drinks and smoothies, and OrangeTheory Fitness

has announced that they're heading out there as well. We're starting to see a little more momentum at Jones Crossing other than just the HEB.

Jay Socol: MOD Pizza's open.

Natalie Ruiz: MOD Pizza is open.

Jay Socol: I saw that.

Natalie Ruiz: And we just issued permits for a new Chick-Fil-A drive-thru out there.

Jay Socol: Oh, great.

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah.

Jay Socol: Well, that won't generate any traffic at all.

Natalie Ruiz: No, not at all.

Jay Socol: That's exciting about Jones Crossing.

Natalie Ruiz: Yeah.

Jay Socol: Good deal. Okay. By the time we talk again-

Natalie Ruiz: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jay Socol: ... what else do you hope to be able to share with us? What kinds of things?

Natalie Ruiz: You know, we're really focused on the entertainment side of things. We attend a state and a national conference every year and that national conference every year and that national conference is coming up at the end of May, so we're scheduling all of our visits with retailers and developers who are interested in coming down and either opening a new business or developing a piece of property to market to newer businesses, so I guess next time we could talk more about that, who we met with, who was receptive, maybe who wasn't.

Jay Socol: Right, right.

Natalie Ruiz: If there are any of those out there, I don't know. But that, and then, more of the entertainment side of things. We're starting to get attention from the larger folks like Main Event, or a golfing facility, or more family oriented entertainment. And we're starting to see more of a demand for that here locally, and we're reaching out to the directly to try to recruit them here.

Jay Socol: Alright. I think we covered some ground.

Natalie Ruiz: Good.

Jay Socol: We did all right.

Natalie Ruiz: Good, good.

Jay Socol: And thank you for letting me get all up in your business.

Natalie Ruiz: You're welcome.

Jay Socol: Alright, that's it for this time. We'll see you next time.

Natalie Ruiz: Thanks.