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Lawrence E. Jenkins/Special Contributor
From left: Mayor Alan Hugley, City Manager Todd Fuller, and Director of Economic Development Lee McCleary are the backbone of the city's team in Red Oak. The city's population has grown almost 200 percent since 2000.

Best Southwest

Red Oak experiencing boom in residential, commercial and economic growth

By NANETTE LIGHT

Neighborsgo

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The summer after his high school graduation, Mayor Alan Hugley took a job as a teller at the then-named Red Oak State Bank

It was 1980, and the building was one of the only nods to development along the old two-lane Ovilla Road.

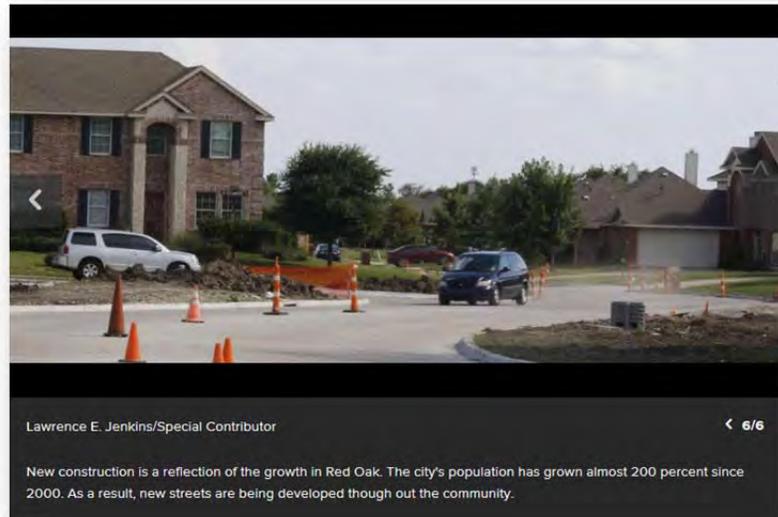
On hot July days, Hugley sat in the drive-through lane at the isolated landmark, staring across a sun-scorched field. Occasionally, he spied a few birds soaring over the expanse.

“That’s all there was of Red Oak that direction, at least until you got over that hill,” he said from a conference room in the city’s municipal building.

RED OAK EXPERIENCING BOOM. THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS. JULY 9, 2015

Now, retail and fast food chains have overtaken the once-empty space.

Hugley paused, staring out the window and at a row of homes in the Waterview Farms neighborhood that leads to the city hall building. Those homes weren't standing 30 years ago. Neither was the red brick municipal building with its arched entryway.



“[Red Oak] is very different than it was in 1980,” said Hugley, who’s now in his fourth term as mayor.

From 2000 to 2014, Red Oak’s population grew 168 percent, according to the city. During that same span, Ellis County grew 42 percent.

And it’s not stopping.

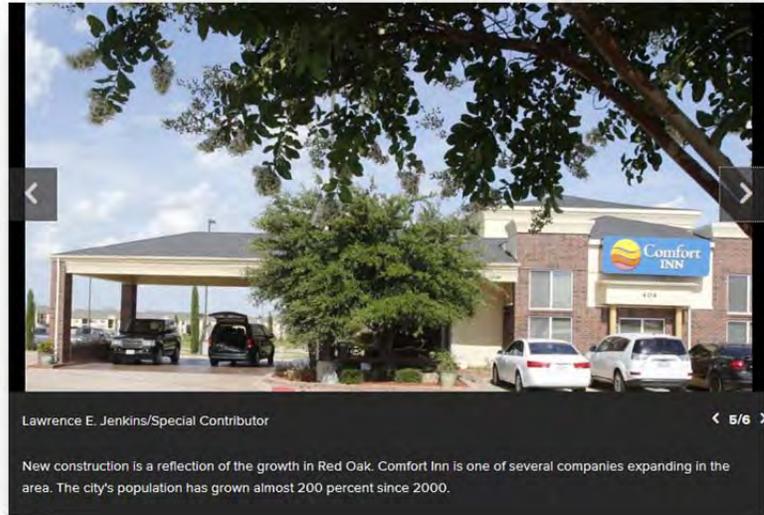
Lee McCleary, economic development director for Red Oak, credits the growth to the city’s proximity to Dallas and Fort Worth, its lack of traffic, and lower taxes and housing prices compared to larger cities.

He counts the opening of three industrial facilities, two schools, six neighborhoods and 13 retail developments since he started at the city two years ago.

“What [city leaders] have done isn’t quite walking on water, but it’s pretty close as far as recruiting businesses,” McCleary said. “It’s just amazing.”

Ray Salika, general manager of Comfort Inn along I-35, senses it, too. Recently, he completed a four-story rear expansion of his hotel, adding 32 suites to the 65-room hotel. He renamed it Comfort Inn and Suites.

An immigrant from Dubai, he came to the U.S. in 2001. He was searching for adventure and the American dream, he said. A job managing the hotel landed him in Red Oak that same year.

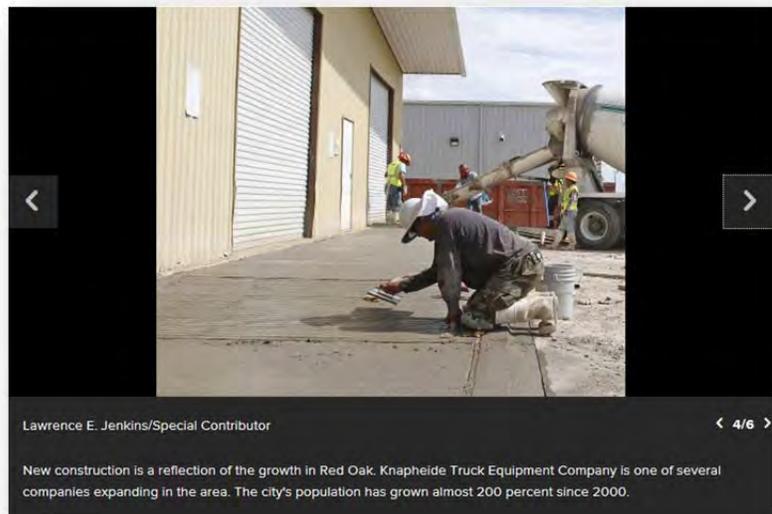


“It was a small town. A countryside out of nowhere. It’s still like that to me,” he said. “It’s getting better.”

But to the north, Collin County continues to surpass Red Oak and Ellis County’s development, with cities averaging growth of 250 percent.

Hugley and other Red Oak city and business leaders are preparing for that to stagnate.

“That is the direction everybody has looked for growth for a long time. It’s been very successful up there,” Hugley said of Collin County. “Our concern has been that as that whole paradigm played out further and further north ... there would come that tipping point in time where the Dallas development community turned around and went, ‘We can’t even see the horizon up there. What’s behind us?’ And when they did that, we needed to be prepared.”



Hugley took the reins of the city in the beginning years of the housing crisis and economic recession. Residential development had slowed. The largest employers in the city were the school district and a grocery store.

“There wasn’t a place to buy a white shirt in this city,” Hugley said.

But with the Dallas skyline in view, Hugley and others such as city manager Todd Fuller saw the potential for growth — calculated growth.

“We don’t want to be the same kind of community necessarily,” Hugley said of Collin County. “We still really appreciate the rural roots of the area. And the space that’s out here.”

Hugley and his family moved 5 miles from his Lancaster hometown onto 7 acres in Red Oak in 2004. He planted a failed vegetable garden and a more successful field of wildflowers that return each year as reliably as the seasons. Next door, his neighbors raise potbellied pigs, goats, ducks and chickens.

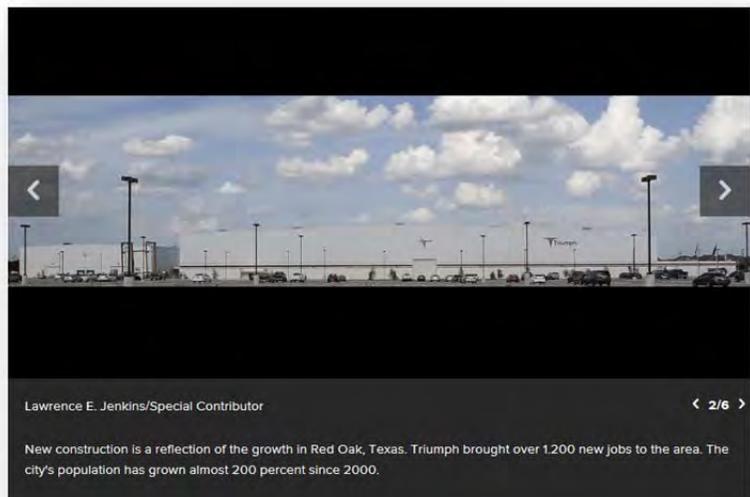
Hugley’s property includes a creek and a pond, where he’s spotted beavers.

“There’s still that out here, and I don’t have to drive a mile to be looking at the skyline of the big green building in Dallas,” he said. “Some of that opportunity still exists out here, and it’s our choice what to do with it.”

Last spring, Triumph Aerostructures opened its more than 880,000-square-foot facility after announcing about two years ago plans to close its West Dallas plant. The facility is in Red Oak’s Industrial Park.

The space was a cotton field about 15 years ago. Its infrastructure was developed by Fuller when he took his first job with the city in 2000 as its economic development director. At that time, most Red Oak residents lived on 2- to 5-acre lots.

A native of Ellis County, Fuller’s father attended elementary school in Red Oak. His aunt and uncle lived there when he was a kid.



Now, Fuller's house sits about 20 miles outside the city on a farm where he grows crops such as wheat and corn. It's the same land where his great grandparents, grandparents and parents once grew cotton. He was raised working the fields with a hoe after school.

"They really hadn't had much of a residential market," Fuller said of Red Oak. "But they wanted all this retail and stuff to go with it, which just doesn't work. You have to have some density to have retail."

Triumph's move brought about 1,200 jobs into Red Oak.

Once a bedroom community, the project created daytime traffic for the city of more than 11,000.

It filled then-empty local eateries at lunch and prompted the opening of more restaurants. Snuffers Restaurant and Bar had its ribbon cutting in late June.

It spurred a partnership between the city and Red Oak ISD to open a Texas State Technical College North Texas campus to train Triumph employees, among others. The campus neighbors the new Red Oak High School. The school district forfeited land to build a football stadium for the project.



And the growth isn't slowing.

Hugley admits some wish it would.

"It's going to be a diverse community. It's going to be cosmopolitan. It's going to be more heavily populated. It just is," he said. "There's no sense crying over it."

*Neighborsgo reporter Nanette Light can be reached at 214-977-8039
nlight@neighborsgo.com*