

Best Practices

Refinery's Closure in Sugar Land Spurs Environmentally Safe Development

By Sugar Land (TX) Mayor David Wallace

A Rich History with a Vision

The Imperial Sugar Company, the oldest continuously operating business in the state of Texas, processed sugar on the same company site for more than 160 years. When the Imperial Company closed its Sugar Land production operations in 2003, Sugar Land felt the impact.

This once company town provided much more than employment for residents—it provided a sense of place and an identity for the community. In the early years, the entire area had thrived and expanded with the construction of hundreds of homes, schools, a general store, hospital – with the sugar company at the center of it all. It remained the very spirit of this small town through generations of families who worked for the company and called Sugar Land home.

Following the refinery's closure, Sugar Land residents immediately realized the historic, economic and emotional significance; but residual environmental issues, stemming from years of manufacturing and the adjacent freight rail lines, needed to be addressed. It was clear that our community faced the dual challenge of revitalizing the area and preserving our past.

With this in mind, and working together with numerous community groups, city staff and council, our community quickly made redevelopment of the Imperial Sugar site the city's top priority. We embraced the challenge and set out a vision for the area that included not only the 165-acre Imperial Sugar parcel, but also an adjacent

525 acres, owned by the Texas General Land Office, a state agency that manages publicly owned land, in an effort to create critical mass and economies of scale.

Leadership and the Right Partner

Searching for the right private partner to redevelop the Imperial Sugar property proved to be a challenging task. Each firm I approached (and there were several) struggled to develop an economically viable plan that addressed the sites environmental conditions and existing infrastructure while preserving our city's rich history. In June 2004, I attended the U.S. Conference of Mayors annual meeting and heard Tom Darden, the Chief Executive Officer of Cherokee, speak about his firm's experience in repositioning "environmentally challenged" or "impaired" real estate. Cherokee is the world's largest private organization that specializes in the acquisition, remediation and sustainable redevelopment of brownfields.

After evaluating the redevelopment expertise and experience of many local and regional private developers, it was clear that Cherokee's unique business model would be critical to the success of our project. Cherokee's mandate to transform areas where urban blight and environmental contamination impede economic growth and development was right in line with our need. After discussing the Imperial Sugar opportunity with Cherokee, they visited the site and expressed a willingness to evaluate the property and its opportunities, and if consistent with the core capacities and investment strategies of Cherokee, the firm would invest in a long-term partnership with Sugar Land.

Cherokee's process and approach included up-front planning coupled with community outreach and teamwork in all phases of the development process. Sugar Land needed this approach and a private partner that knew how to find the right balance between generating sufficient financial returns and building neighborhoods that reflect the values and aspirations of the community. Cherokee proved to be the right fit.

Community Involvement, Public Input

Cherokee developed a strong working relationship with the community, city council, city staff and, together, Cherokee and Sugar Land reached out to various stakeholders, keeping them informed and involved with the redevelopment plans and soliciting their input along the way. We held numerous town hall meetings to get stakeholder input on the development plan, and subsequently, the city council unanimously approved the General Plan and the Development Agreement.

Since that time, Cherokee has acquired the property and partnered with Southern Land Company of Nashville, a unique real estate firm that balances aesthetic, authenticity and functionality when building communities. With Cherokee and Southern Land, we also held a charrette, which is a unique and collaborative approach to design that helps the interests of a diverse group of stakeholders become integrated into the final development plan. This type of outreach gave the citizens a sense of ownership and renewed pride in their historic community.

Sugar Land represents what can be accomplished when stakeholders come together and work in collaboration to meet community needs. Being a strong proponent of public-private partnerships, the Cherokee relationship offered numerous benefits and keys to success. Such keys include: identifying the priority projects in the community; setting goals that benefit the community; understanding the private sector drivers; identifying a partner that understands public-sector priorities; committing to a collaborate process; maintaining continuous, open communication with the developer, city staff and community residents; holding ongoing public forums such as charrettes where the community can provide input; working diligently to overcome hurdles; and knowing that large redevelopments require a long-term perspective.



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Preserve the Past, Build the Future

The current redevelopment plan includes a mix of single-family and mixed-use residential, commercial, retail and office space.

The Imperial Sugar Company redevelopment project is the product of significant dedication and community outreach from each of the project partners and citizens, and I am confident that this successful, interactive approach will serve as a model for other cities.

Sugar Land has a rich and colorful past, and the only way that we can predict our future is to create it. The relationship between Cherokee, Sugar Land, the state of Texas, and the most important component of all – our citizens – is truly a recipe for success. Imperial Sugar has been an important ingredient in many successful recipes in the past... and this recipe will continue for many years to come.



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