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Courtesy photo

## **From this Abengoa cellulose ethanol plant to Main Street, Hugoton residents embrace growth.**

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Land has been purchased for a grocery store and a Best Western Plus Hotel in Stevens County, and the two new businesses will be the latest of several to move into Seward's neighboring county.

Justin Carter, owner of Carter's Thriftway in Ulysses, purchased the land on which he hopes to build a new grocery store.

Carter has owned the Ulyssess store for two years, and with the new store still in the planning stages, he said he's working with Stevens County and hopes to start construction on the store as soon as possible.

As far as the hotel is concerned, Stevens County Economic Development Director Neil Gillespie, said a feasibility study had been conducted by Spurrier Consulting of Gautier, Miss., that indicated the area could support a higher-end hotel. Currently, there are no franchise or chain hotels in Hugoton, he said.

"It's progress," Gillespie said. "We have been concerned that we were losing a lot of the high-end market on the lodging, and hopefully, that would address that issue."



The economic development director said county and City of Hugoton officials are simply hoping for a new chain hotel that will choose to stay in the community.

As for how many jobs the two new businesses would create, Gillespie is unsure at this point.

"Lots have been purchased for a grocery store and hotel," he said. "I haven't been informed about how many jobs will be created, yet."

Gillespie said hotel developers would like to be operational as soon as possible, but he has yet to hear a timeline for the supermarket.

“I believe covenants in the industrial park require construction within a year of purchase,” he said.

Two major businesses have been completed or are under construction in Stevens County. Gillespie said the Abengoa cellulosic ethanol plant is still under construction, while Kansas Dairy Ingredients is currently processing milk at a local facility.

“We also appreciate every small business that operates here,” he said. “Recent additions have been two new restaurants, Southwest Family Steakhouse and Dominoes’ Mexican Grill, Eagle RV Park and the Blue Lilly clothing store.”

Gillespie said the current state of Stevens County’s economy is good, and the future looks promising.

“Many businesses, not only in Hugoton, but the entire surrounding area, are benefitting from the 1,000-plus construction workers at the Abengoa plant,” he said. “I believe Kansas Dairy Ingredients will be a catalyst for growing the dairy industry in Southwest Kansas.”

Gillespie said the entire area is dependant on agriculture, and the recent rains have been a “phenomenal blessing.”

“Recent articles are also indicating that natural gas prices should trend up, which would help many businesses, royalty owners and our county valuation,” he said.

Gillespie said while Hugoton, like most communities, has a sales tax, it does not have a program such as Liberal’s 1-cent sales tax to help with community projects.

“(The sales tax’s) primary purpose is to keep property tax lower,” he said. “It is not earmarked

for any particular purpose.”

Larger area cities such as Garden City and Dodge City are likewise bringing in new business, and along with Hugoton, other smaller area communities, such as Guymon, Okla., are even attracting business. Plains, with a population of around 1,000, has even taken on the task of getting a grocery store, a sign that officials there are wanting to grow that Meade County community’s economy.

Some in Liberal have noted the local economy seems to be a bit stagnant compared to other area towns. Gillespie said Liberal, like other communities in similar situations, needs to “hang in there and keep trying.”

“My experience has been that when you check with communities asking how they managed to land a new business, etc., you’ll almost always find out that it took years of hard work with many setbacks along the way before the seemingly overnight success was achieved,” he said. “Sometimes the years of hard work is preparation to be ready for a good opportunity if and when it comes along.”

Gillespie said although it may appear to people in Liberal that Liberal is staying the same, from the outside looking in, he sees numerous positive developments such as new hotels and restaurants.

“I believe if you went back five years and listed all of your new businesses, housing and events, such as the Sampler Festival, it would be an impressive list,” he said.

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