

‘Irving evangelist’

Convention and Visitors Bureau executive director leads city into new age

By GREG TEPPER
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Maura Gast has been with the Irving Convention and Visitors Bureau for almost 20 years and still has trouble explaining what she does.

“I like to tell folks we’re ‘Irving evangelists,’” Gast said, “telling and selling the ‘gospel’ of Irving as a destination for meetings, events and any kind of travel.”

Gast, the bureau’s executive director, has seen Irving go through significant growth, including the multimillion-dollar Irving Convention Center due to open in December.

Gast recently answered some of *neighborsgo’s* questions.



Maura Gast

What is the biggest struggle facing Irving as far as becoming a “destination?”

One of our challenges — but still one of our assets — is that we’re surrounded by bigger, better-known destinations. Creating an independent identity that has its own points of distinction is what is evolving here right now as the city takes an aggressive position in creating bigger picture new developments and in harnessing the opportunities in front of us. I think that’s what you’ll see happen as the convention center opens, the entertainment district gets developed, and other core visitor-oriented developments such as Water Street and the Orange Line route into D/FW Airport.

Is there added pressure to grow Irving into a major destination with the growth of places such as Grapevine and Frisco?

Absolutely, although I don’t know that “pressure” is the right word. I think what you see in Irving today is every element of the Irving community working together with a bigger picture common vision — City Hall, our mayor and City Council, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the chamber, volunteer leadership. And that bigger picture extends throughout the city — it’s taking advantage of game-changing opportunities such as the Trinity Railway Express, the expansion of the DART Orange Line, the redevelopment of [State] Highway 183 and Texas Stadium,

Irving Boulevard and the Heritage Crossing area.

How do you reconcile drawing new people to Irving while maintaining Irving’s historic past and old-city charm?

It’s a dichotomy for us. No place can be all things to all people, but we must recognize and respect what made our city the success it is today while being willing to consider a new perspective for who the city needs to be to succeed tomorrow.

We did a lot of brand-related research for Irving a few years ago, and the key takeaway from that, our “elevator speech” if you will, sums it up perfectly — “Irving, Texas offers the comforts of home, with a world of opportunity at its fingertips for entrepreneurial spirit, corporate success and cultural interaction. Our government and community leadership are committed to those qualities of life that make a home a home. They also are committed to the pace required to make business flourish and succeed. Irving, Texas, is ‘The Hometown with A World View.’”

On the whole, what does the future of Irving hold?

Irving’s history of committed leadership — volunteer, elected and staff — gives me great faith and hope in our community’s future. Many years ago, our leaders sought to identify water sources for our future, knowing how critical that commodity is to so many things. In more recent times, city leadership increased their commitment to DART and capitalized on the development of the Orange Line to D/FW Airport, which will ultimately deliver one of the largest and most vibrant transit-oriented development districts in the country.

From a visitor perspective, our future holds the missing pieces for our hotels, restaurants and retailers in the development of the Irving Convention Center, which will help stimulate weekend business when we all need it the most; the entertainment district, which will help solidify business year-round and all week long; and that DART line, making it easy for Irving visitors to access not only D/FW Airport but Love Field as well.

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Irving destinations

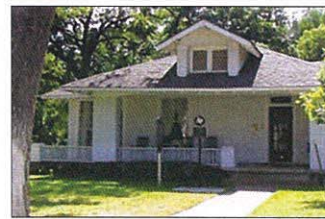
Maura Gast, executive director of the Irving Convention and Visitors Bureau, gave her thoughts on the past, present and future of some of Irving’s most notable areas.



Staff photo by ANDY JACOBSOHN/DMN

The Texas Stadium site

When you consider this site and understand the true magnitude of what can happen here, it is mind-boggling. There’s almost 400 acres available for development in this area, including the city-owned stadium site itself. It’s almost exactly the center of Irving, which makes it very centralized for the entire Metroplex. The DART Orange Line expansion is going to open up the site in ways the highways surrounding it can’t. But it is extraordinarily accessible, and from a workforce of the future standpoint, that’s just going to be monstrously important. There is no piece of real estate in the Dallas/Fort Worth area that better epitomizes the most important adage of real estate — “location, location, location.”



Submitted photo by MARY HIGBIE

The Heritage District

The community’s original heartbeat — already graced with some beautiful infrastructure in the Millennium Fountain, the Veterans Memorial Park, Delaware Creek. The shops of Main Street can echo this city’s past, present and future. The nearby TRE line can open up a lot of opportunity. The City

Council and city staff continue to work closely with the community on this close-to-the-heart project to make sure it is both respectful of the community’s history and standards and allows room to grow and build the Irving of tomorrow.



Staff photo by GREG TEPPER/neighborsgo

Las Colinas

I am still amazed at the vision Ben Carpenter had to have to develop Las Colinas. He was ahead of his time in so many ways. His vision gave so many gifts to this city — the Equestrian Center and polo fields, the University of Dallas, the Irving Arts Center, the magnificent mustangs, and the list goes on and on. And the Las Colinas Urban Center, while certainly not a philanthropic gift, has been the gift that keeps giving to Irving through the commercial tax base it provides this city.



Photo courtesy of VALLEY RANCH ASSOCIATION

Valley Ranch

I lived in Valley Ranch when I first moved to Irving and was amazed even then at this community within a community. It is almost a city in and of itself, with so many residents, many of them not only new to Irving, but also new to Dallas-Fort Worth. You can look at [Interstate] 635 as both buffer and barrier, and I think our city leadership wants to make sure that it doesn’t prevent the Valley Ranch residents from becoming engaged and involved within the greater Irving community.