

Predicting the future

A&M research boosts economy

by Staci Finch

The pressing question keeps you awake at night. You toss and turn, wondering if you can ever quit worrying. **WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC FUTURE OF BRYAN-COLLEGE STATION????**

Ok, maybe not. Maybe you never even thought about it for a second. After all, you will graduate soon and then it really doesn't matter. You may want to worry when your children come here, but that is years away.

Wrong. The economic future of Bryan-College Station is a problem worth considering. The population of a depressed area does not increase, and Texas A&M's reputation would certainly suffer if the area's economy were to decline. So, while you have been sleeping easily, city officials have been looking for ways to improve the economy of our beloved Bryan-College Station metroplex.

K. Jack Speer, executive vice president of the Bryan-College Station Chamber of Commerce, says the area has already distinguished itself as an economic "hot spot."

"A company called Conway Data listed two areas of Texas as being major centers for research and development into the year 2000," Speer says. "One was El Paso and the other was Bryan-College Station."

Speer says one reason is extensive research done by A&M.

"A&M is one of the top ten research facilities in the United States," he says. "That is more than just an interesting fact, because research done in the lab becomes some sort of business in the long run."

Speer says aside from the Texas A&M Research Park, two other research facilities (whose names could not be disclosed) are interested in locating in the Bryan-College area.

"This concentration on research is a main item on our 'high-tech' agenda for local economic development," Speer says.

All kidding aside, think about the implications if even one of these interested research facilities moves into the area. Aside from the benefits and discoveries the additional research could bring, the research center would have to hire people to run its facilities, thus bringing more jobs to the area.

But research is only one side of the coin. Speer says there are several businesses that are looking into locating in the B-CS area.

So, what businesses are you going to bring in? Speer says there are some

problems in the twin cities that need attention, and development committees are trying to address these.

"The main problem is the way we have been doing things in the past," he says. "Before the oil crunch and the farm crisis, everything was geared for energy and agriculture production. Now we need to be looking in other directions."

So, if it were up to you, what direction would you go? What do you think is the major problem in Bryan-College Station? Well, what has two lanes and lots of slow-driving farmers? What has no runways and planes flown by in-training pilots? Now you see the problem. Transportation.

"We have one good highway system, which is not enough," Speer explains. "As for air transportation, we are severely limited."

Speer says progress has been made on improving air transportation.

"We are getting a new air terminal which should be on line in the next two years," he says. "That is a start on better air transportation."

Speer says another problem Bryan-College Station is facing is one common to many areas in Texas.

"We have a lack of available investment capital," he says. "We are not a rich county, and our business and industrial base is much thinner than any other community I know of that has around 100,000 people."

But all is not lost. Although Bryan-College Station has its cloud of economic problems, it has its silver lining as well. Walt Baker, area director of the Texas Employment Commission in Bryan, says Bryan-College Station showed the lowest unemployment rate in the state (5.6%) for six out of the first eight months of 1987.

"I expect we will still be the lowest when the figures come out in September," Baker says. "A&M is in full swing and all the students are adding to the economy, as well as all the university employees being back."

Baker says while new industry is very important to the growth of the economy in the area, growth at Texas A&M plays a major role as well.

"Any time you have an increase in students, you have a ripple effect in the local economy," he says.

"Students have to eat, find a place to live and have fun, which creates jobs and keeps unemployment down."

Baker says A&M is a major contributor to the low unemployment rate for the area.

"A&M has a greater proportion of

our city size than University of Texas has of Austin," he says. "Therefore, anything A&M does, whether it is increasing enrollment or research, is going to affect the area."

"A&M itself, with its dealings in the community through hiring employees and purchasing supplies, contributes a great deal to the area," he says. "But when you add the students, and their purchasing power, the impact is even larger."

Baker says new industry coming into the area would cause the unemployment rate to drop only slightly.

"There is a curious paradox in bringing new industry to an area," he says. "It does create more jobs, but people move to the jobs, and so consequently, more people come into the area. The new jobs don't just go to the people already in the area."

"However, those people have to eat, find a place to live. So more jobs are created and the economy stays strong."

Well, you feel much better now, because the economic future of the

area seems taken care of. You begin to drift off, then sit bolt upright. *When is all this supposed to happen?*

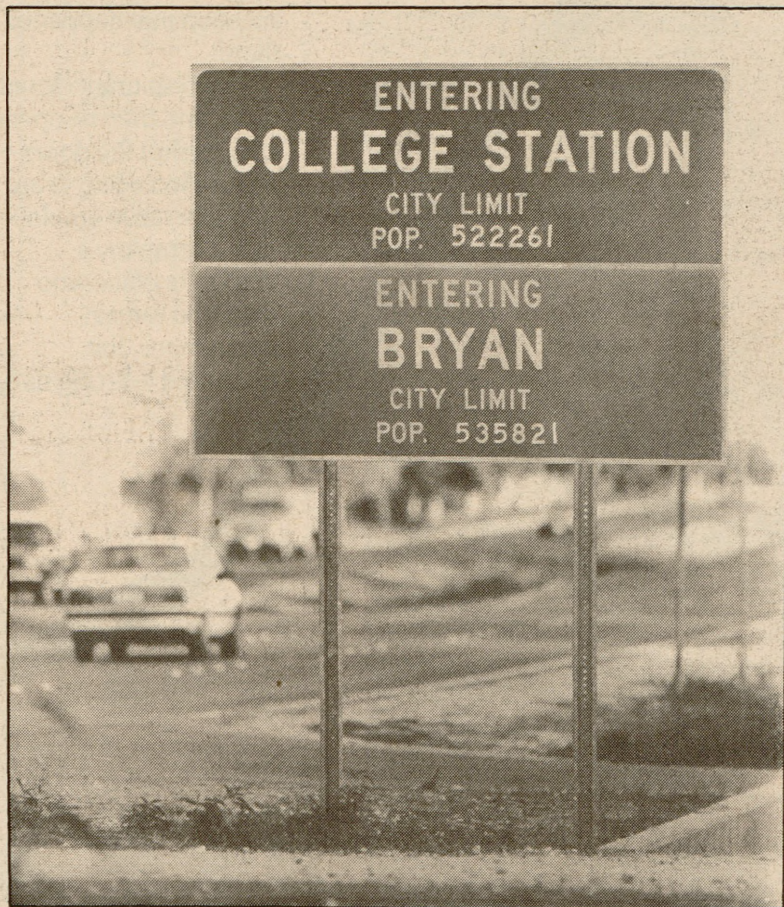
Good question. Nothing happens overnight, and even if it did, the problems in the economy won't be solved by tomorrow.

"On the average, once an industry decides to locate in a certain place, it is three years before they open their doors," Baker says. "There is not a 'quick fix' solution for any of the problems in the economy."

Speer agrees.

"The problems in the economy are too deep to be solved in a day," he says. "But by bringing in as much industry as we can, the Bryan-College Station economy will continue to grow."

Ok, so it may be a while before you can fill your gas tank without emptying your wallet. But think about it: your children could come to A&M and have more than one club to go to, be able to eat in all kinds of restaurants and even, wonder of all wonders, shop at Macy's. It never hurts to dream.



Could this be a sign of the future? Will there be a day when Bryan and College station merge into one city with a combined population of more than one million?