

Emerald Tower to rise above Laredo

\$43 million, 16-story project to change the city's skyline

BY MIKE HALL
LMTBusiness Journal editor

For years, C.Y. Benavides and his family have helped create a vision of what Laredo could be. After land donations and other real estate transactions, Benavides hopes to make his mark on the landscape of Laredo.

The skyline of the city will change dramatically after planned \$43 million, 16-story high-rise luxury condo, business center and micro-community are completed in about two years.

"It's going to be like a beacon," Benavides said. "We have Embassy Suites coming in down the street, and Hawthorne Suites and they are talking about a Holiday Inn next to that. We can keep on going. We're developing this whole corridor, a mid-town development. It's not a bad thing."

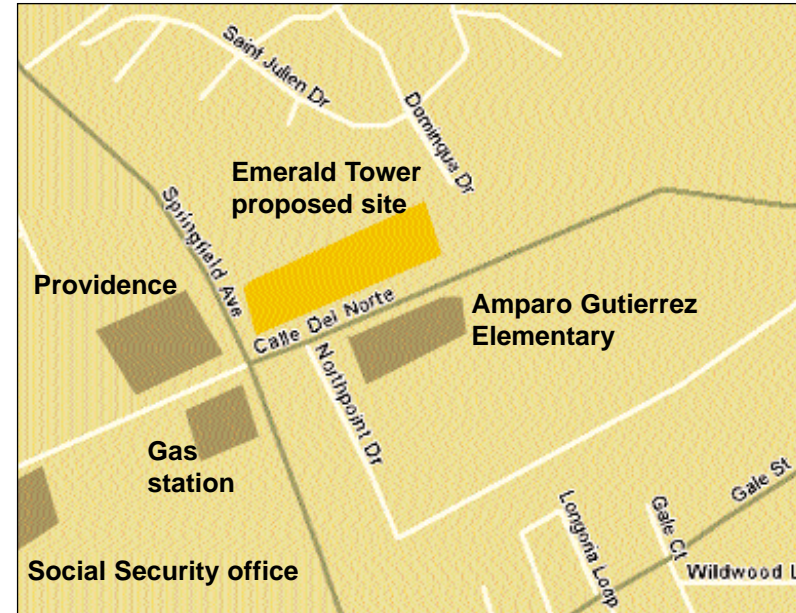
"I can't tell you how many people out there who are so supportive of the project," he said. All the property to what is now Mall del Norte belonged to his family at one time. "The school wouldn't be there if we hadn't sold the property to somebody and all those homes through there. It all belonged to my grandfather."

The complex will be built on a 10.2 acre corner property north of the intersection of Springfield Avenue and Calle Del Norte, according to Benavides.

The concept

The concept was to create a community within a community for a specific type of residents who require security, maintenance, and access to most of their needs such as shops, restaurants and banking, at walking distance of the residences, according to the project designer.

The result was the design of two buildings that would compliment each other. The cost for construction will be \$38 million, Benavides indicated. A



Map courtesy of MAPQUEST.COM

tail vertical building, 16 stories tall would accommodate 72 luxury condominiums and occupy 300,000 square feet.

Residential units would start at a minimum of 15,000 square feet and sell for \$300,000 each, Benavides said. The first three floors of the tower will be dedicated to retail and service space.

Benavides said he could "immediately" build a less elaborate concrete rental complex of 150 units. "There's no comparison," he said. The property developed in this manner would depreciate in value. The Emerald Tower is different, he said.

Benavides did not rule out another similar tower after the first is built.

"It can only appreciate over time. The older it gets, the more valuable it gets. If it's very successful, more than likely, we'll have a second tower down the road. If we're on to something, and the market in Laredo will support us, we'll go for it. How many McDonalds are enough? How many Starbucks are enough?"

Emerald Tower

Oxidized copper metal on the exterior would turn green and the building would be called

money.

"That's the only way you can do it. They got to be able to deliver. You can not do a half-hearted deal. You have to know they can build it. We know they can do the work," he said.

Dear grandfather

The property, originally owned by Roy Rash, Benavides' grandfather, was purchased for \$5 million, or \$10 a square foot, by AMF Development, a partnership comprised of Arlene Aldridge, Rancho Viejo Cattle Company and a Mexican partner, Benavides said.

"Now with the changing landscape and the obvious tax pressures and so forth, my mother and my aunt decided to sell the property," he said.

Dominique Drive will be renamed Rash Drive, in honor of Rash, who came to Laredo without any money, became a successful farmer, landowner and a businessman.

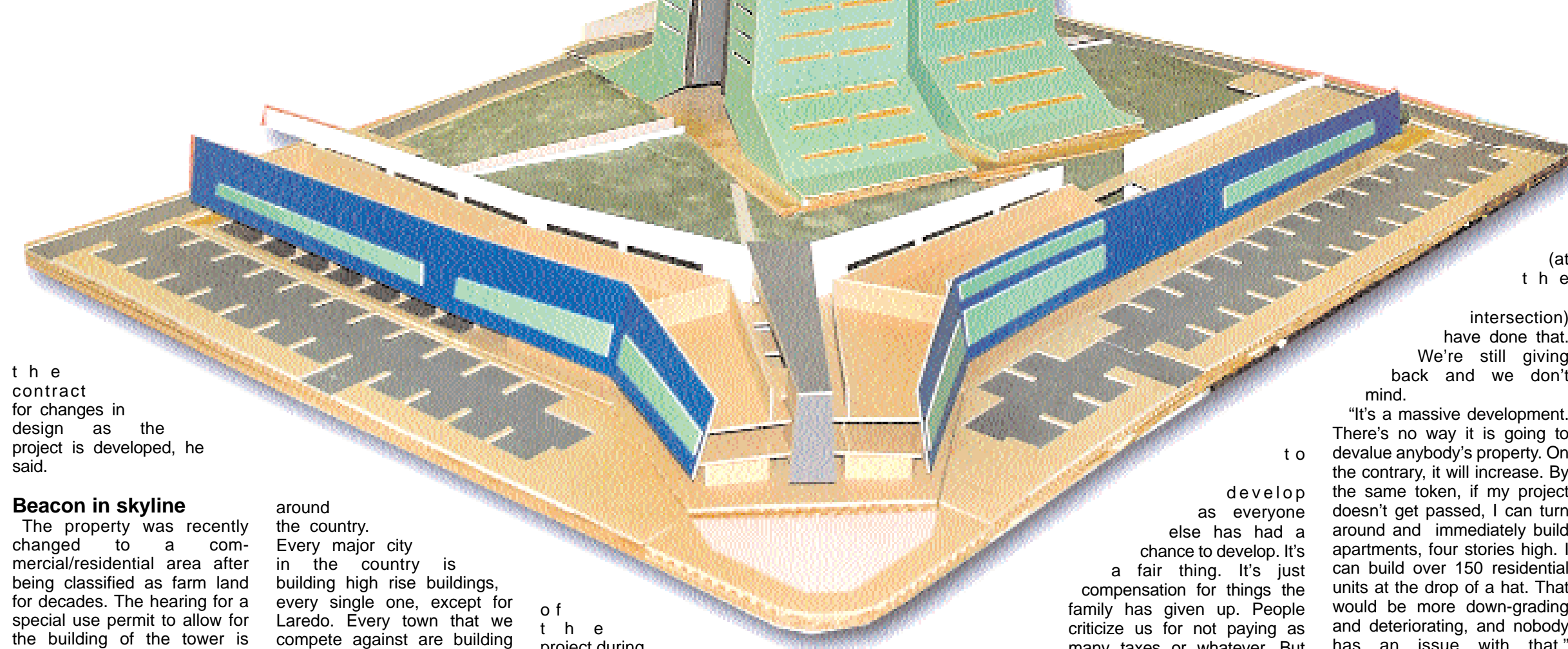
Benavides has been contracted as a manager and developer for the project. Constructors, Inc., a contractor based in Austin, will be general contractor responsible for the making the concept into a reality.

The company was chosen to build the new Science center at Texas A&M International University, and completed a 33-story Frost National Bank in Austin last year, Benavides said. Assisting in the construction will be another Austin-based firm, Epstein Engineering, which has done work world-wide.

Construction will be using a "design-build method," he said. Construction will be as if all the plans were completed from preliminary considerations. "They keep on building and designing simultaneously. You don't lose any time. We are not designing it, and turning over full plans to the contractor."

This method of building compresses actual construction time, he said. There is money in

A preliminary model of the Emerald Tower complex was created by Pedro Morales, project designer and Laredo native. Oxidized copper metal on the exterior would turn green and the building would be called The Emerald Tower. Three stories of subterranean parking are included to add three more stories to the project.



the contract for changes in design as the project is developed, he said.

Beacon in skyline

The property was recently changed to a commercial/residential area after being classified as farm land for decades. The hearing for a special use permit to allow for the building of the tower is scheduled for Oct. 27, Benavides said. The tower will certainly be visible from a distance since it will occupy the highest part of the property, which features one of the highest topography in the city.

Benavides said the family wanted to keep the land classified as agricultural as long as possible to protect the amount of undeveloped land. However, the city has grown around the property and the possibility of development grew closer. The question was what to build.

"This is a happening thing

around the country. Every major city in the country is building high rise buildings, every single one, except for Laredo. Every town that we compete against are building high rise living towers. Why? Because real estate prices are high, and that what makes Laredo a perfect candidate since property prices are higher than most places. Let's go up and make it affordable, but obviously not to everybody. That's due to the function of the building. We want to build something very safe, efficient and classy so people can feel warm in it."

Opposition to change

Initially, there was some opposition to the development

of the project during city council meetings. An area of luxury homes, JSJ Estates is near the property and some, like Michele Raymond, argued the changes planned didn't make sense. She said the structure would destroy the homeowners' right to privacy, decrease property values and increase traffic in an area which is located close to Amparo Gutierrez Middle School.

Morales noted in the study of the property that the project will be close to main circulation

arteries, Interstate 35 to the west, Loop 20 to the east with McPherson Boulevard in between. Del Mar Boulevard is to the north. The tower community is near health and hospital facilities and near Mall del Norte, the largest commercial center in the city.

The infrastructure that is in place today primarily is a result of donations by my grandmother. They would not have these roads if it weren't for her. We have a right to be able

develop as everyone else has had a chance to develop. It's a fair thing. It's just compensation for things the family has given up. People criticize us for not paying as many taxes or whatever. But we've given far and above what real estate that we've donated.

It is a very critical location, and we are talking to the planning and zoning, and have agreed to given them an expansion to the road that exists today. We are going to make a secondary donation for turn lanes, acceleration lanes and a short cut off on to Springfield. Again, we are going to do our share. We are going to make it better than it is today. I would submit to you that no other developer on any of those three corners

have done that. We're still giving back and we don't mind. "It's a massive development. There's no way it is going to devalue anybody's property. On the contrary, it will increase. By the same token, if my project doesn't get passed, I can turn around and immediately build apartments, four stories high. I can build over 150 residential units at the drop of a hat. That would be more down-grading and deteriorating, and nobody has an issue with that," Benavides said.

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"I'm trying to bring something that's fancy and fun and new and exciting. The residents will be able to walk around and have fun. We will have grass, landscaping, water, a pool, lots of places to shop and have services available all in one place. This is an opportunity for other businesses to get started. Money in this situation breeds money," he said.

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