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## Roanoke's big plans

*More development in the works*



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Reporter

The small town of Roanoke has an emerging downtown with restaurants that make its larger neighboring cities green with envy—and after Nov. 11 the city could have more for others to covet.

The city of Roanoke has been nominated as a finalist in the Best Public Improvement and Best Marketing Program categories for the Texas Downtown Association's 2010 President's Awards Program.

The nominations are just the latest good news for the city with a population of 7,500. In the past year, Roanoke has reinvented its downtown area, a stretch of Oak Street, with public improvements as well as a handful of popular, new restaurants including Twisted Root Burger Co., Cowboy Chow, Gerhard's and Brix Pizza and Wine bar joining Babe's Chicken Dinner House. And since reopening in April after extensive reconstruction, Oak Street boasts new curbs and light fixtures; gutters and a storm drain system; and more than 100 parallel-parking spaces.

"We are the unique dining capital of Texas," said Roanoke Marketing Manager Amy Radford. "That's been our push and we've had a great response to it. This nomination is just one way people are noticing."

The Texas Downtown Association, a nonprofit organization that supports development and revitalization of downtowns statewide, chose Roanoke as a finalist for the two statewide awards. Since 1998, the program has honored more than 150 projects, events and people impacting Texas downtowns.

Also vying for the public-improvement award is Waxahachie for its city parking garage project., as well as best marketing contender Bastrop, for its Main Street campaign, and Winnsboro, for its city website.

Winners will be announced at the Texas Downtown Revitalization Conference Award Gala in El Paso on Nov. 11.

And though the award would be a great accomplishment for the city, Roanoke City Manager Jimmy Stathatos said the city will continue doing what has worked for it in the past few years: offering unique entertainment.

"Roanoke has been successfully attracting lines of hungry diners, foodies, plus new restaurants and shops. Roanoke continues to expand downtown entertainment, concerts and festivals and offers a special, down-home ambience hard to find in the midst of the Metroplex," Stathatos said.

## **Building for a legacy**

Roanoke officials retained The Gateway Planning Group in 2004 for a comprehensive long-term redevelopment plan for the city's downtown area. Phase one was presented in June of 2004 and consisted of a vision for redevelopment for Roanoke, including architectural renderings and photographic representations of architectural styles. Phase two included extensive surveying to allow for the development of an overlay district, specific ordinances for this district and the renovation of the Rock Building, which was completed in 2007.

The changes culminated in Roanoke being a hotbed of restaurant activity, announcing several new openings for a few "hard to land" regional chains to join its Babe's location—the popular chain's original restaurant. The latest restaurant opening—set for sometime in September—is Brix Pizza and Wine bar, at 101 S. Oak St., which also has a Fort Worth location. Radford said the city has worked to encourage a "walkable" downtown area with a mix of indoor and outdoor dining options

But restaurants aren't the only changes to the fair city of Roanoke. Thanks to a considerable investment from Dallas-based Margaux Development Co., Roanoke has seen one large new retail center come to town with another scheduled.

Margaux, the developer of multiple shopping centers in Fort Worth, Southlake and Keller, erected the 505,000-square-foot Roanoke Crossing Retail Center on 56 acres in Roanoke anchored by Home Depot and Walmart Supercenter. Margaux also is planning to complete Roanoke Gateway Shopping Center, a 175,000-square-foot retail center on 18 acres. To date, no tenants have been announced for this project.

Margaux Development officials also are passing around a petition throughout Roanoke to allow for off-premises liquor sales, which they say will make the city more competitive with neighboring cities that already allow for off-premises liquor sales.

But with all the new restaurants, Radford said city planners were careful not to erase the city's own roots. One way that was accomplished, she said, was through the establishment of a city visitors center and museum—in a building with a colorful history.

The original settlement of Roanoke dates to 1844. The Roanoke Visitor Center and Museum is the cornerstone of Roanoke, located at 114 N. Oak St., in a building constructed in 1886 that once operated as a saloon and brothel. Today, the building holds a “nice collection of Roanoke memorabilia,” Radford said. “We plan on having a lot happen here and we wanted to preserve our past.”

In a past life, The Silver Spur Saloon building actually had a secret entrance from a bank next door—and the museum today still bears the doorway for that secret entrance.

“It was so the gentlemen of town could go in the bank and then go through the secret entrance so people thought they were doing extended banking,” Radford said. “The cool thing is there is absolutely no entrance from the saloon to the brothel except outside,” thanks to a law in Texas that said no brothel could be accessed directly from a saloon. So patrons accessed the brothel from an outside staircase.

“There’s some great history, and we wanted to make sure all of the people coming here to eat at the great restaurants could hear some of that history while they visited,” Radford said.

## **A new era**

In years past, Radford said Roanoke was bigger than Grapevine, serving as an entertainment stop for cattle drivers coming to and from Fort Worth. As the airport was developed in later years, Grapevine surged and Roanoke was all but swallowed up. Radford said city officials made the effort 12 years ago to revitalize the town.

With an economic development plan in place, Radford said, city officials began developing the new marketing campaign six years ago.

The city formed two economic development corporations, both 4A and 4B.

Each corporation receives a one half cent sales tax from each dollar spent in Roanoke. And the city has adopted an economic development investment policy that awards grants to companies that retain a certain amount of inventory in their facilities.

Businesses in Roanoke benefit from a Triple Freeport Exemption as well as a self proclaimed “fast track” to building permits allowing a project to be under construction while the remainder of the construction plans are still under review.

“Sometimes people don’t realize what all is happening here,” Radford said. “It’s a neat feel with some older buildings and a mix of ‘60s and ‘70s and new buildings. It’s an eclectic, funky kind of feel. And I don’t think people realize how busy it is. This is actually a really busy place with some different kind of entertainment and, of course, the restaurants.”

And when Roanoke officials declare the town the unique dining capital of Texas, they mean business.

“Known for miles around for the original Babe’s Chicken Dinner House and the upscale Classic Café, Roanoke was already well-known for its dining establishments so the city proposed a designation for ‘The Unique Dining Capital of Texas’ and this was made official by the Texas House in June 2009,” Stathatos said.

And that designation, Radford said, has helped the city build up its downtown area with more development on the way.

“There’s something different about it,” Radford said. “It’s a nice little drive from your Southlake or Grapevine and it feels like they’re getting away to a little Mayberry. We’re really proud of it.”