


A LONG ROAD





The Greater Tomball
Area Chamber of
Commerce's Role in
Completing the State
Highway 249 Project



By Matt Beardmore

It used to bother John Fishero that Dallas and Fort Worth – which combined are not as large, population-wise, as Houston – always seemed to outdo Houston when it came time to receive funding for transportation projects.

But Fishero, former chair of the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce’s (GTACC) Mobility and Transportation Committee, continued to advocate for what many believed was best for the people of Tomball and the neighboring communities in Harris, Montgomery and Grimes counties.

He, along with many others within the chamber and numerous local and state agencies, was instrumental in completing the incredibly complex and time-consuming State Highway 249 project.



“They had an aggressive bunch of people in the Dallas-Fort Worth area,” Fishero said from his home in Spring, TX, where he is now retired. “I felt that with the size of Houston, we should get the bulk of the funding for transportation projects, so we wanted to do everything we could to get funding in this area.”

“(Before SH 249) all that traffic was going right through the middle of Tomball.”

— John Fishero, former chair of the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce’s (GTACC) Mobility and Transportation Committee

Before looking at how Fishero and many others paved the way for groundbreaking to begin on the first phase of the State Highway (SH) 249 extension project in 2013, it is necessary to turn back the clock 25 years earlier when the highway – which was originally part of FM 149 – was given the designation of SH 249. When Compaq moved its headquarters near the intersection of SH 249 and Louetta Road in 1988, the importance of SH 249 grew.

From there, the growth of SH 249 extended northward from Houston, one bridge at a time.



As the highway approached the southern area of Tomball, the GTACC's Mobility and Transportation Committee, with significant contributions from Peter McStravick and Allen Fletcher, who later served as a Texas State Representative for Harris County from 2009 to 2017, determined that a bypass was needed to relieve the congestion and to help Tomball residents get around.

"All that traffic was going right through the middle of Tomball," Fishero said.

While the GTACC had a great relationship with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and took a delegation to Austin on multiple occasions to offer its support for the creation of this bypass, there was one issue after another – one being how to build the bypass with the oil and gas pipelines in the area. Through lobbying, court hearings and more meetings than anyone can recall, groundbreaking on the SH 249 bypass finally took place in 2005.

For his efforts on this and other projects, McStravick, who also served on the Government and Legislative Affairs Committee during his time with the GTACC, was awarded the 2003 Texas Roadhand Award, which is presented to "citizens who have given their time, energy, and vision to help improve transportation in their communities throughout the state." McStravick, the Tomball Citizen of the Year in 1999, passed away in 2007.

The bypass provided much-needed relief for Tomball, but funding for transportation projects dried up – especially for those projects that were not being strongly advocated for – and the SH 249 project stalled for years. Late in 2010, when SH 249 was absent from the Houston-Galveston Area Council's (H-GAC) 2035 regional transportation plan's list of priority projects, the GTACC met with the council and was encouraged to start a coalition that would educate and unite stakeholders such as landowners, politicians and developers, and push for the development of SH 249 between Northwest Houston and Navasota.

The result was the creation of the 249 Corridor Coalition, which became the 249 Partnership. Fishero, who was named chair of the 249 Partnership's interim board; Lamar Casparis, a local businessman and former GTACC chairman of the board; and George Shackelford, the Tomball city manager had great contacts at TxDOT, are who initially spearheaded the partnership. The partnership's board included the aforementioned representatives from Tomball, as well as three representatives from Magnolia and Navasota.

"One of the most important things we did was getting on lists – SH 249 wasn't on any lists," Fishero said. "Mainly, we needed to get people interested and involved, not the least of which were the counties – Harris, Montgomery and Grimes – and also cities along the way such as Magnolia, Tomball and Navasota. We needed to start getting information out since we felt like people needed to know what was going on. We needed to be transparent."

Twenty months after the first meeting of the 249 Partnership in January 2012, ground broke on the SH 249 tollway, also known as the Tomball Tollway. The number of people who helped this six-mile stretch officially open in April 2015 is too long to list, but Fishero mentioned a number of key players that gave legs to a project that was moving nowhere fast, including Fletcher, Harris County Commissioner Jack Cagle, Montgomery County Commissioner Craig Doyal, who was elected the H-GAC board chair in 2011, Tomball Mayor Gretchen Fagan, GTACC President Bruce Hillegeist, and GTACC Vice President Brandy Beyer.

When an 11-mile, two-lane stretch from FM 1774 in Plantersville to SH 105 between Plantersville and Navasota in Grimes County opened to the public on Oct. 27, 2022, the SH 249 project was officially complete. All the years of hard work resulted in improved regional connectivity and mobility that has been crucial to economic development and population growth in the region, decreased congestion, a safer route for regional traffic, and a new hurricane evacuation route.

When Fishero drives on SH 249 these days, he enjoys what he calls a "beautiful drive that has a lot of woods and trees and is not as



congested." He also thinks back to all the efforts and all the people who had a hand in completing this massive project, including those at the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Some chambers are about the meet and greet, and the GTACC has that, too, but they also get involved in larger things, and this was a big, complex project," Fishero said. "It involved a lot of money, but we didn't have to worry about the money once these relationships developed. It kind of came together like magic."




Tomball Depot Plaza



The plaza plays host to the wide variety of festivals in Tomball and is a place where folks come to take a break from their busy schedules. The plaza includes the 1907 Depot museum, a rail car and a lovely gazebo all surrounded by various statues of local historical figures including Thomas H. Ball. Located at 201 S. Elm, the plaza is the ideal place for both fun day-to-day pictures and for special events.

