

This Texas economic engine has generated \$76 billion. And it's only halfway developed

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Each year about 1,000 new students roam the halls of Northwest schools.

Morning commuters crowd Interstate 35, Texas 170, Texas 114 and U.S. 377 in a section of Tarrant County that 30 years ago was little more than pastures and prairie.

This growth, described as “awesome,” “phenomenal” and “staggering” by Tarrant County officials like [Haslet](#) Mayor Robert Golden and Fort Worth’s Mayor Pro Tempore [Dennis Shingleton](#) can be attributed to one massive development — [AllianceTexas](#), the commercial, industrial and residential community has generated more than [\\$76 billion](#) in economic growth since ground broke on the Alliance Airport in 1989, including more than \$7 billion last year.

Nearly 30 people a day have moved into the area surrounding Alliance since 1990, and the 26,000-acre development is only halfway built out.

“It’s got to be, certainly for Tarrant County if not the whole Metroplex, the top job generator,” said Tarrant County Commissioner [Gary Fickes](#), whose Precinct 3 includes AllianceTexas.

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More than 61,000 Texans work for the 500 or so companies with operations at AllianceTexas. They include logistics companies like BNSF, FedEx and soon Amazon Air, tech firms like Facebook and financial giants like Charles Schwab.

It all began with a runway, the Alliance Airport, one of the first industrial-specific airports in the county, said Mike Berry, president of Hillwood, a [Ross Perot Jr.](#)-founded developer that manages Alliance. Now between the the Alliance Town Center and other commercial spaces, more than 4.2 million square feet of shopping, dining, health and entertainment venues attract thousands from across the Metroplex each day.

“In those days there was nothing out here,” Berry said of the late 1980s when the site was chosen. “In my opinion it’s bigger and better than what we envisioned.”

Time lapse of satellite images show snake-like streets growing out of the North Texas prairie as warehouses at the airport and nearby BNSF intermodal facility spurred residential subdivisions. Since the early 1990s, 28,000 residential lots have sold with home builders working thousands more.

“I can’t tell you a person in the last 10 years who would have predicted this kind of growth,” Shingleton said. “It’s been phenomenal.”

In 1990, the after Alliance Airport opened, just under 51,700 people lived in the area. That number ballooned to near 290,000 by 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That’s roughly 25 people moving into the former prairie every day.

As Alliance and the surrounding towns grew, so have the school districts. Northwest schools serve more than 24,000 students in 14 municipalities.

In the late 1990s, Texas 114 overlooked open ranch land. Since then, the district’s growth is often described as staggering, said Tim McClure, assistant superintendent for facilities for Northwest schools. The district, which covers 234 square miles, is only about 25 percent built out and includes 80 planned residential developments.

“Alliance is the heart of our district,” he said. “Every year, we add almost a middle school-size worth of students to our district.”

This boom, while bringing in more than \$2.25 billion in property taxes, has not been without growing pains.

With each new housing development or industrial site comes the need for infrastructure.

“It’s a two-edged sword,” said Shingleton, whose Fort Worth district includes Alliance. “It’s difficult to get your arms around, and at times it can be difficult to manage.”

One of the greatest challenges facing Tarrant County communities, particularly those around Alliance, is transportation, said Fickes.

Developers are expected to continue building north along the I-35 corridor into Denton County, Berry said.

Right now, I-35W shrinks to only two lanes in each direction for motorists north of U.S. 287, near the North Tarrant Parkway exit, and the area is clogged with traffic congestion for much of the day.

The proposal to add two toll TEXPress lanes in each direction to that corridor is expected to cost \$762 million. Local and state leaders negotiated an agreement with North Tarrant Express Mobility Partners to build that six-mile section of road back in 2009, but in recent years the project has been slowed by Texas politics.

To accommodate that northern growth, Fickes said the I-35 expansion is a must, as is the extension of Texas 170, which shifts from a freeway to merely frontage roads just east of Roanoke Road.

Communities could look at public transit to help decrease traffic, though firm plans are not in place, he said.

TEXRail's line from downtown Fort Worth to DFW Airport has been popular in its first month of service, but extending rail lines to Alliance will be difficult. Though freight rail crisscrosses Alliance, obtaining right of way for passenger rail is hard and building new lines is expensive, Fickes said.

Echoing concerns about transportation, Golden said connecting Avondale Haslet Road to I-35 will be crucial for commuters. The road, called Haslet Parkway, will break ground next year, he said.

AllianceTexas recognizes this need, Berry said.

"If we have any impediment to growth, it's the infrastructure," Berry said. "It's not growing at the pace we need it."

A pilot program with Drive AI provides an on demand driver-less shuttle, but pending regulation changes there's limited room for growth.

Berry said tech like that is the future of Alliance.

With an abundance of space both on land in and in the air, Alliance is positioned to attract companies exploring drones, automated vehicles and even flying taxis, Berry said. Alliance's roads and runway could be fertile ground for research and development.

"We have something here that doesn't really exist anywhere else," he said.

More diverse housing is also the future.

The median home price in the region around Alliance is about \$246,000, according to real estate site Zillow. But in order to attract a diverse group of workers, more affordable housing options should be explored, he said. A \$125,000 home would be better suited from some of the blue collar jobs in Alliance.

Developments like Alliance Town Center that feature both commercial and multifamily housing have become popular.

"Even though we're not an urban center like downtown Fort Worth we clearly have a need for more diverse price points," Berry said of housing. "We need to figure out how to do that and we haven't done a great job so far."

With Alliance only halfway developed, there's still much to come for North Texas.

That growth will belong, in part to Haslet, population just over 1,800. Golden expects that number to triple in 10 years — still a small town, but significant growth for a town that had just 795 residents in 1990.

Much of Alliance's west side, which includes the Amazon fulfillment center, still has space to grow. Golden estimated the city is about 30 to 40 percent built out.

Having watched the growth in Fort Worth and other cities, Haslet has had time to prepare, he said.

“It’s our turn now,” Golden said.