

Transcript_Podcast#4_Workforce Lens_Hosting Mercedes Bolen, Vice President of External Affairs and Community Relations at Hillwood

Shannon Bryant (Host): Greetings, and welcome to the fourth installment of our podcast series, The Workforce Lens, brought to you by Tarrant County College in North Texas. I am Shannon Bryant, Executive Vice President for Corporate Solutions & Economic Development. I will be your host, moderating strategic conversations with employers and economic developers on all things related to preparing and growing the workforce today in the future.

Today we would like to welcome our guest, Mercedes Bolen, Vice President of External Affairs and Community Relations with Hillwood. Welcome Mercedes.

Mercedes Bolen: Thank you Shannon for having me.

Shannon Bryant (Host): So happy to have you here, Mercedes. Please tell us a little bit about Hillwood, who you are and all about the vision for Alliance, Texas.

Mercedes Bolen: Absolutely. I've been with Hillwood for about 10 years now, and Hillwood is a staple in the North Texas landscape. Owned and chaired by Ross Perot, Jr., Hillwood, is one of the largest developers in the nation, and one of its greatest developments is right here in the Fort Worth Dallas metroplex, Alliance, Texas.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Yes, and growing every day, as I know by going up and down the highway. So, as one of the largest private real estate developers and investors in the US., how did Hillwood build relationships to make Alliance Texas happen? And can you give us some examples of what that's looked like over the years.

Mercedes Bolen: Well, the birth of Alliance is really just a fascinating story. It's a story about vision. It's a story about collaboration. Back in the 80s, when Mr. Perot, Ross's father, was putting together projects like Legacy, they were looking at real estate, and this part of the metroplex, north of Fort Worth, west of Dallas, was really just wheat fields. It was prairie, lots of land, and they knew with the growth that was coming to the area, that it was probably going to go up that corridor, while at the same time, the airport had commissioned, or had asked the FAA to do a study on where they would need reliever airports. So, they approached Mr. Perot for some property to do a general aviation airport, as a reliever airport. And, Ross Jr, went to the market, said, "Okay, do we need an airport here? What kind of facility do you all need to serve the market?" And that's where the idea of an industrial airport was born. It was really that they needed, not the general aviation but something to service industrial cargo. Alliance airport was the first industrial airport in the World, and it was done in cooperation with the city of Fort Worth, the FAA, and with Hillwood, so that is where it gets its name, from that alliance.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Very, very cool. So obviously Alliance Texas has had a huge economic impact on the community. I believe and correct me if any of these numbers are incorrect, but right now, as of this moment, \$91.98 billion dollars impact on the North Texas economy with 63,000 jobs added. Can you talk a little bit about the job creation, specifically, and how that was accomplished? I also believe you mentioned there were around 533 companies currently at Alliance. Correct?

Mercedes Bolen: That's right, amazing, amazing numbers. It's absolutely great and of course we like to say \$92 billion. So, \$92 billion in its 30-year history. In 2020 alone, that's \$8.2 billion. And the way this economic report is calculated is by Insight Research Corporation, it's a company an outside company that you know

calculates our economic impact. And those 533 companies that are in Alliance, Texas proper employ those 63,000 employees. Now that is just our Hillwood properties, that's just Alliance, Texas proper on 27,000 acres. That's not to say what Alliance, Texas launched. That's not the Alliance, Texas corridor, the property that Hillwood doesn't own, all of those companies and all of their employees. So truly, it's such an ecosystem out there. When we started it was nothing, like I said, but wheat fields and prairie. They brought jobs, they brought companies, that brought the need for housing, that brought the need for retail. You know, and on and on and on. So that's what brought that ecosystem and now you're seeing that multibillion dollar impact to the region.

Shannon Bryant (Host): So, those 533 companies. Obviously, there's a big retail presence right now, but can you talk a little bit about some of the industries that are encompassed in that entire 533 companies?

Mercedes Bolen: Sure. Really every sector is represented at Alliance. From the residential sector and multifamily, to hospitality, retail, we also have financial services, medical, you have great hospitals, THR is there, MCA is there. We also have Schwab and Fidelity. For industrial, you're looking at one of the best logistics centers in the nation. You have Amazon, Walmart.com, FedEx, UPS, all of that logistics hub is at Alliance, and certainly we saw a boom in those industries in the last year with COVID.

Shannon Bryant (Host): As someone who's been fortunate to take the helicopter ride over the Alliance location, the construction is just absolutely amazing, seeing all these industries come to the area. So obviously, over the last year the pandemic has impacted everyone as it relates to workforce. Can you speak a little bit about how the pandemic over the past year has impacted growth for all of you and what unique initiatives you're seeing from the companies that are now trying to recover and grow during this time?

Mercedes Bolen: Wow, what a crazy year, right?

Shannon Bryant (Host): That's a good word it, for sure.

Mercedes Bolen: It was a test in all sectors, it was a test in office, it was a test in retail, it was a test in our ability to love our families and spend a lot of time at home. But in all seriousness, it was a test on our ability to get goods out, it was a test for our logistics people and traditional retail. I will be as bold as to say that I think every sector has changed, every sector has seen an adjustment in the way that they do business. If you look at retail, traditional retail has moved to ecommerce. Restaurants have largely added a takeout or delivery component and that's not going to go away, that's here to stay. We saw a logistics boom. We saw a lot of what might have been happening anyway in four to five years, condensed in about a year, they had to figure those things out. Again, like I mentioned before, supply chain had to smooth out. They had to turn into something that could get the products out easily and smoothly to the people as the demand increased.

So, looking at the Census Bureau in preparation for today I wanted to look at these numbers. During the pandemic, just between quarter one and quarter two, eCommerce grew by over 30% between those two quarters, whereas in 2019, that growth number was 2.4%. Isn't that amazing? It's an amazing difference. It really says something about our ability to adjust on getting products and meeting demand.

Shannon Bryant (Host): It's funny, as you mentioned the pandemic, I think we've all had to learn a new way of doing business, even we, as an educational community, have had to learn to pivot in transition, and we're trying to learn how to do a way of new business, as well as the customers and the clients that we serve. They're all trying to figure it out, too, so it's definitely a new era, new times and all about change. So, could you tell us a little bit about the Hillwood culture itself? How have the core values, not only at Hillwood but the community, help to align and influence the growth of Alliance Texas?

Mercedes Bolen: I think it does and I think it comes all the way down to Mr. Perot. I think it comes down from his people first, people centric philosophy. Our core values are integrity, respect, excellence, and teamwork. And I think that's what you see, especially in a development like Alliance, Texas. We are long term, we're here to stay, we're part of the community. So, when you're looking at Alliance, Texas, you're looking at a development that has the future in mind. So, even when it was started, let's take 170 for example. Public-Private partnership is how Alliance was built, and you see Public-Private Partnership in so many of Alliance's endeavors. With 170, we had the engineering done and everything for 170, we had the future in mind for the growth of 170. We knew the growth was coming up the corridor. So, the center was left open so that later we wouldn't have to come back and get more land or more property for the right-of-way to build all that. So right now, 170 is being built in through the middle, so that we can expand it. That's knowing that you're going to stick around, that's knowing that you are part of the community, and that's knowing that you're building for the long term. Today we're doing the same thing. Today we know that the logistics world is changing, the movement of people and goods is changing. And that's what we're getting ready for, that's what we're future proofing the development for because we want Alliance, Texas to last. We want it to be ready for the future that includes the communication infrastructure. We have to be ready for technologies that we don't even know exist yet. They have to be able to communicate with each other. You know that infrastructure, the ability to test future technologies in different zones, whether that's air, whether that's traffic, what have you. We have to create those regulatory environments and those even infrastructure environments, so that we can prepare those technologies for the future.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Right, continue to be one step ahead. You mentioned the land, can you talk a little bit about how much land is under development currently.

Mercedes Bolen: Sure, so we have 27,000 acres. Now that's a number that changes quite a bit. We're generally about 50% complete, and that's because we purchased land, so we continue to add and grow. Right now, we run, essentially, from Fort Worth up into Denton, from Hazlet in the west, over to West Lake in the east.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Okay, perfect, thank you. So, you were talking a little bit about the community. How does Hillwood capture the voice of the communities to gain buy in, especially for all the expansion that's going on right now?

Mercedes Bolen: Well, I guarantee you it was much easier 30 years ago. That one groundhog, he was rough. But you know, today, it's really about being part of the community. All of our employees live here, we're encouraged to be involved in the community. Even in my position, I am part of community relations, I look for those opportunities to talk and form relationships. And that's, again, coming down from Mr. Perot. He wanted relationships with not only community leaders, but the neighbors themselves, with city leaders. So we do have the town halls, and we do go out into the neighborhoods and join HOA meetings and talk about plans and, you know, as a matter of practice, however, we do quality work, and we make sure that it's something that we're going to be proud to put our name on it, so that we know that we're presenting something we wouldn't mind sharing with you, Shannon, that I wouldn't be embarrassed of it. So, in those ways, it's part of the fiber of Hillwood in that we want to share with you because you are my neighbor, you are my community.

Shannon Bryant (Host): It sounds like community collaboration; everyone has a voice at the table.

Mercedes Bolen: Exactly.

Shannon Bryant (Host): So, great segue mentioning, obviously you are the Vice President of External Affairs and Community Relations for Hillwood. What do you see as the greatest challenge for Alliance Texas moving

forward, and how does that relate to attracting and retaining the quality talent that we need for our workforce in this region?

Mercedes Bolen: I think that our greatest challenge at Alliance Texas is really the greatest challenge for Texas right now, it's growth. You know it's coming and it's coming because, let's face it, we're great, we are a business-friendly state, we have a great quality of life, and a low cost of living, and I think those are things we've got to protect as well. And I'm not saying, protect them from the people that are coming in, I'm not saying that I'm just saying we have to make sure that we have protection of our education that we are focused on making our education better, that we're not just importing our talent that we're home growing our talent and organic growth is important, organic growth is important. We have to be looking at that and we have to be looking at that every at every level. Our ISDS, it's from cradle to career, we have to look at our universities or colleges, you know, let's face it, it's not just post-secondary doesn't mean a degree anymore, it can mean its credentialing, it's skilling, you have to do something, but it doesn't have to be, you know your four-year degree anymore, and be a lot more thing.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Exactly. So, another great segue. I have been interviewing quite a few employers and I always like to ask this question pertaining to community colleges, because obviously we are Tarrant County Community College. How have you partnered with TCC or other educational venues in the region as it relates to workforce and economic development programs, even including the aviation program at Alliance? Can you speak a little bit to that?

Mercedes Bolen: Sure. TCC has been a great partner. You mentioned aviation, we have, you have recognized certification programs in not only avionics and transportation management, but also logistics and supply chain management, warehouse management. What we like to do is marry the two, our relationships with our companies at Alliance, the 533 companies that are at Alliance, and our relationships with TCC. We like to marry those two and we like to make sure that the awareness is there, that the communication is there, that they know that TCC is a resource that can customize the training that they need. And certainly, now with the new way of movement of people and goods, that's going to become even more important as we design curriculums to fill those needs in the future.

There's one great example that I would love to give you, Shannon. When I first started at Hillwood, GE Locomotives had come to town, and they were looking at Alliance. This was the first time that locomotives would have ever been built outside of Erie, Pennsylvania. And, as their building was being built at Alliance, they partnered with TCC to develop the curriculum, on how to build trains outside of Pennsylvania. That's an incredible feat because, if you think about it, not only are you doing the mechanical work on how to build trains, but you're also building a culture. You're building a team and they don't have a building there, right? They don't have a history of building trains. They have a partner, TCC, and essentially a parking lot.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Very home grown, for sure. That's what customized learning development is all about. That's wonderful. We really enjoy having the partnership with Hillwood and the entire Alliance area, working with all of the companies in that particular region. So, I would say from your perspective, of the 533 companies in particular that we're talking about, what are some of the things that you're seeing as it pertains to some of the specific jobs that are going to be in high demand for Hillwood Alliance moving forward?

Mercedes Bolen: I think that what we're seeing is a lot of automation. And I think one of the misconceptions about automation is that automation means no people. I think what automation means is that there's a higher skill set involved, because of the design, the instruction required to have that done, so every sector that's represented in Alliance from retail to hospitality, financial services, medical warehouse logistics. All of those are going to advance in some way. With automation, you need a different skill set, autonomous

vehicles, what we're seeing a lot of [is the need for] efficiency. Logistics efficiency and transportation. That requires a different skill set with knowledge of technology and digital communication. This is what we're seeing, that's the wave of the future., where people are going to need to concentrate on and develop a curriculum to grow that skill set.

Shannon Bryant (Host): From an academic standpoint, from an institution of higher education, it is really key for not only the community colleges but the universities to be involved in those conversations, because it's no longer us developing the curriculum, without the voice of the employer, it's actually quite vice versa. Now it's us engaging with the employers to listen to what they need, so we can then go back and design not only what they need today but what they're going to need tomorrow.

Mercedes Bolen: Absolutely agree, and I like this open forum discussion. I've researched a lot of these programs across the nation. There are different groups that can be industry-led panels, that will even include the ISDs at an elementary level all the way up. They will sit down and design curriculums together, and some of the some of the groups will include awareness only. Maybe your third-grade curriculum doesn't include autonomous vehicle driving, but it will include the awareness of it. It includes the awareness that there's other career paths that exist that aren't, you know your standard doctor, lawyer, police, fire, which are fantastic and I'm not saying anything against this, I'm just saying that there's a broad world out there that you, you need to educate from an early age, all of the possibilities that are available to our kids, and educate their families as well, so that they know that there's more than one path to a career,

Shannon Bryant (Host): That's almost different from when you and I were kids, right, when people would say, "Hey, what do you want to be when you grow up," and we could kind of determine what we wanted to be when we grew up. Now it's almost a silly question to ask a five-year-old what they want to be when they grow up, because nine times out of 10, the jobs that they'll have when they grow up don't exist today, so no one knows. So, obviously, Hillwood has taken a huge leadership in the development of this region. And I'm just curious to know from your perspective what value-added lessons can you share, as it relates to the success of Alliance, and what would be maybe two or three leadership skills that you think are important to this growth and everything that you're doing in Alliance.

Mercedes Bolen: Well, listen, public private partnerships instead of silos – don't do it alone. Collaboration, working together, each piece brings something, right? They have their strengths, and they have their own struggles, the private, same, so when we team up and work together, we bring those strengths, and we bring different perspectives to be able to see where our blind spots are. So, if you look at Alliance, it's a perfect example of what can happen when you layer on, time and time again, public-private partnership, collaboration, listening, discussion, etc. I think, if you are open to ideas, open to other perspectives, and you take down those walls, you take down those silos, a lot can get done. Also, if you don't care who gets credit.

Shannon Bryant (Host): I always say in this business no person, no entity, is an island in the area of workforce and economic development.

Mercedes Bolen: Absolutely. Especially, the way that Texas is growing right now. If we want to continue in this trajectory and be the greatest state that we know we are, that's what we have to do. We have to open it up and say, "Okay, how do we maintain this quality of life? This low cost, business-friendly quality of life, so that we can continue to attract such great businesses.

Shannon Bryant (Host): And talent. Absolutely. So, Mercedes, just to close, what are some future goals of Hillwood that you might want to share with us that will impact our regional workforce and economic development efforts moving forward.

Mercedes Bolen: I think our future goals are just to continue to build out Alliance Texas and make it future ready. I think our goals are continuing to be innovators in the movement of goods and people, and I can't say that enough. We want to innovate, we want to be on the cutting edge of that, and, and bring the future, starting in Texas, to the rest of the world. I think that Texas is uniquely positioned to do that with our location, with our business climate, with our government, with our educational leaders, like you, Shannon. I think we're uniquely positioned to work together and lead the nation, and the rest of the world, in what tomorrow looks like.

Shannon Bryant (Host): There's a world of things happening here right now, which are definitely innovative and moving forward. So, any additional closing comments you would like to add for cities before we finish?

Mercedes Bolen: Alliance Texas is a Planning Center and it's crucial that there is an alignment between the goals of business and educational leaders in place to ensure that a qualified workforce is developed for our future.

Shannon Bryant (Host): Mercedes, thank you so much for being my guest today on The Workforce Lens. We really appreciate having you here and having Hillwood represented. We look forward to what the future brings, and all the growth in the area. Again, thank you so much, and to our guests today. All of the folks out there listening, we look forward to seeing you on the next edition of The Workforce Lens. Thank you.