

1940s and '50s: Planning a new campus

In the 1940s, St. Joseph Academy continued to function at its campus on Elizabeth Street, near downtown Brownsville. But during the same time, school and church officials began to focus on making plans for building a new campus at the newly-acquired 21-acre site near Palm Boulevard.

In 1950, Bishop Garriga suggested that St. Joseph officials begin making plans for development of the new property. The bishop also advised that there was a trend toward moving students in lower grades into parochial schools, and he suggested that after the move to its the new location St. Joseph should begin

planning to limit its student body to boys attending junior high and high school.

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In 1951 and 1952, discussion continued about the need to build a new campus on the 21 acres that had been acquired in 1943. This proposal was discussed numerous times, both locally and among church officials at a higher level, but during these years no plan was developed for the financing of the project.

Everyone agreed a new school was needed, but there had been no progress in dealing with the substantial questions and challenges that had to be settled.

Discussion continued

in 1953 and 1954 about the need to raise funds to build a new facility, but during this period the economy of Brownsville slowed, which brought a delay in making plans to raise the funds.

In October 1954, Bishop Garriga, with permission from his Marist Brothers superiors, decided the time had come to initiate a fund drive to raise \$500,000 for construction of the new campus. Arrangements were made with a fund-raising company to manage the campaign, with plans to approach prospective donors throughout Cameron and Willacy Counties. In November, the campaign was kicked off, with Bishop Garriga delivering the principal address. By January 1955, it became apparent that the amount pledged had

reached a total of only \$341,000, of which 25 percent was designated for a new girls' school, operated by the Sisters of the Incarnate Word. The funding for the new campus of St. Joseph was far short of what was needed.

Architects were instructed to design a new school, with the cost limited to \$350,000. However, when it became apparent that not even this amount was available, the project was delayed until \$400,000 could be raised. There was much concern among St. Joseph supporters and school officials about the outlook for developing a new campus.

Some people continued to make payments on their pledges, but contributions declined after it was learned the project had been delayed. In

1957, it was announced that over the two-year period only \$50,000 had been collected.

There was concern it would be impossible to obtain sufficient donations to reach the goal of \$400,000. Enrollment continued to increase at the downtown campus, and St. Joseph was outgrowing these facilities. It was becoming more difficult to find enough space and facilities to properly conduct the classes and student activities. Brother William Vessels, St. Joseph principal, at one time even considered the idea of refunding the contributions and closing the school.

Bishop Garriga was determined to get the new campus built, and during that difficult period took actions that provided funding to move

forward. He arranged for St. Joseph to receive \$100,000 for sale of the Elizabeth Street property and, as a second step, provided a \$300,000 interest-free loan. These funds, plus the amount of contributions that had been received, made it possible to proceed with plans for construction.

In January 1958, school officials met with architects to complete plans for the new facilities.

Ground-breaking ceremonies took place on May 4, 1958, with Bishop Garriga presiding. Among those present were Brother Paul Allemand and Brother Henry, early day teachers and heads of the school.

The story of St. Joseph Academy will be continued next week.

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