

# COMMERCIAL Real Estate Journal

1ST QTR 2014 | A supplement to the San Antonio Business Journal

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Food Bank's expansion  
feeds the community





# ARCHITECTS <sup>OF</sup> Abundance

San Antonio Food Bank's \$15M expansion diversifies its cornucopia of nourishing food and social services

By Jenny Halpin & Donna J. Tuttle

Only in a select few industries is the health of the economy inversely proportionate to product demand.

Food banks are one of those anomalies.

So when the Great Recession of 2009 descended on the United States and other companies watched their customer base erode, the San Antonio Food Bank (SAFB) more than doubled its hungry clientele.

"We went from feeding 25,000 people a week to 58,000 people a week," says Eric Cooper, president and CEO of the SAFB.

At the same time — in a cruel twist of irony — the SAFB was forced to turn some large donations away because it simply didn't have the refrigerated storage space.

The next planned phase of expansion wasn't slated until 2015. Construction at the facility's 16 acres needed to take place soon, and the timing couldn't be worse.

"We were looking for financing when everyone was hurting," Cooper says.

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**Problem:**

How does a food bank that juggles an enormous influx and outflow of perishable goods expand its warehouse cold storage space and entire campus in a way that improves logistics, sustainability and aesthetics — all within a nonprofit’s budget?

**Solution:**

For the San Antonio Food Bank, the keys to success were: hiring an architectural firm with expertise in the grocery industry, seeking advice from a local powerhouse grocery chain, taking advantage of a government tax credit program and having a vision for the future.



➤ **Michael Guerra**  
Chief Development Officer (CDO)

**Years on the job:** I came to the Food Bank in 2011, having previously been the Chief Operating Officer at the Capital Area Food Bank in Austin.

**Job immediately preceding this one:** Chief Development Officer; American Red Cross (Tulsa, OK)

**Describe your role in the expansion:** 1) Managed all aspects of fundraising for expansion; 2) Project manager for the Food Bank’s expansion: coordinated all aspects of project with architects and contractors

**What was the biggest challenge?** Juggling my normal CDO roles and responsibilities, which never went away during the two-year construction process, with the Project Manager responsibilities.

**One element of the expansion that holds a special place in your heart:** I think the outdoor pavilion is spectacular!

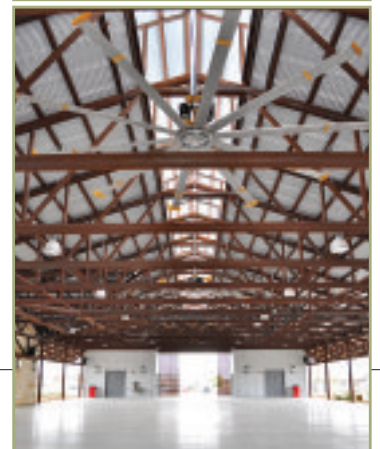
**Dispel a myth about your job:** That the Food Bank only serves San Antonio. We actually serve 16 counties out of our facility, including many rural to our south and southwest. We have been there for more than 30 years, quietly helping food insecure families find the nourishment they need for healthy living.

**People would be surprised to know that you ...** spent time in my earlier life as an actor and as a musician.

**Tell us about the mystery shopper program:** If I did then it wouldn’t be a mystery...

**Favorite hot meal at the Food Bank?** They have competed locally against other chefs with an amazing Paella recipe. It’s definitely my favorite!

**Right bottom:** Harvey Najim Children’s Pavilion







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## Fast financing

During the next three years, the food bank staff and board of directors huddled to speed up development plans and piece together financing.

“There’s a real test of faith to know if you’ll acquire the capital to do the project,” says Cooper.

By 2012, the gameplan for a \$27 million expansion was drawn up and put in motion, thanks — in large part — to the use of the New Markets Tax Credit program. The program encourages flexible, low-rate financing in revitalization projects by supplying tax credit incentives to investors.

With Crescent Growth Capital LLC as the broker, the Food Bank used the \$12 million worth of existing facility and assets as collateral and raised \$15 million through some San Antonio powerhouse donors.

Crescent structured the deal through two certified Community Development Entities (CDE) and the project investor, U.S. Bancorp Community Development Corp. What’s more, the Food Bank reaped a \$4 million subsidy from the deal.

## Highlights of the expansion include:

- Doubling the facility from 104,000 square feet to 210,000 square feet.
- Constructing a new volunteer lobby, food sorting area and 300-seat indoor events space for corporate meetings, luncheons and conferences.
- Tripling the freezer and refrigeration space to allow for millions of pounds of protein-rich foods and fresh produce, which require either refrigeration or freezing.
- Doubling the parking to accommodate nearly 1,000 volunteers and 1,000 clients who visit each week.
- Relocating the Food Bank’s five-acre urban farm to a more permanent space; gaining access to an additional 15-20 acres adjacent to the facility to farm fresh produce.
- Constructing a new road behind the food bank to improve access for the fleet of trucks dropping off and picking up from the facility’s loading docks.
- Building the Harvey Najim Children’s Pavilion, which provides a shaded space near the produce gardens for volunteers and special events for children. ►

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➤ **Eric Cooper**  
President and CEO

**First job before college:** At the age of 10 I took all of my mother's Encyclopedia Britannica books, loaded them up in my red wagon and went door to door selling them for 10 cents each. My mother soon found out and made me go door to door to experience my first customer refund. My first paid job was in the concession stand at a movie theater in Denton.

**What was your role in the expansion:** It was my job to incubate the thought of expansion with the board, then move forward — How can we do it, how do we raise the funds? From there, we developed the strategic vision around meeting the operational needs of the organization and community while securing funds to support the capital expansion including securing contractors, oversight of construction and of course, quality management.

**What was the biggest challenge?** The biggest challenge was, and continues to be, securing and locating the funds to bring the campaign to fruition.

**What is your favorite part of the expansion?** The strategies we have around sustainability with our solar,

wind turbine and rain catchment. These approaches invite efficiencies and creative strategies which are at the heart of the San Antonio Food Bank.

**People would be surprised to know that:** According to my kids, I make some mean "McCoopers" — fried egg with bacon and melted cheese between two pancakes with syrup.

**Favorite meal at the Food Bank:** The Food Bank's social enterprise, Catalyst Catering whips up some great treats including our signature dessert: the Extraordinary Cookie.

**Dispel a myth about the Food Bank:**  
**Myth:** We accept only non-perishable canned good items. **Truth:** We actually procure the same mix of foods that you would find at your local H-E-B from refrigerated to frozen from perishable to non-perishable foods. We are committed to having and providing fresh ingredients and food.

**Right center:** San Antonio Food Bank's new event center, which accommodates 300 people.

**Right bottom:** In the fresh produce area, clients and partner agencies can pick up fruits and vegetables.



CATHY DE LA GARZA / SABJ



# ➤ Dawn A. Thurmond

Communications Manager



## Logistical efficiencies

What's more, the entire warehouse uses a cross-dock distribution model, meaning incoming food arrives from the south and departs out of the north portion of the facility.

Food Bank CEO Cooper says one of his favorite additions is the electronic dock leveler, which eliminates the need for workers to manually transport a bridge to load and unload the 100 deliveries and drop-offs each day.

With the future in mind, insulation — required under the concrete floor for frozen space — was expanded into three aisles beyond the current freezer. "This way, when we're ready to grow again, we don't have to rip up the floor," Guerra says.

Since the Food Bank makes an effort to hire warehouse workers who either are hungry and unemployed — or inmates from the Texas Second Chance program — their forklift operators don't always arrive with a lot of experience.

"We were able to include extra, extra wide aisles into our warehouse design, which really helps avoid or lessen the damage of awkward operational fumbles during the forklifter learning-curve," Guerra says. ■

**Years on the Job at the Food Bank:**  
I just celebrated one year!

**Job immediately preceding the one at the Food Bank:** Consultant, Training and Development

**What was your role during the expansion?** I managed/facilitated media visits and tours with our media partners including local and national outlets.

**What was the biggest challenge?** Our new expansion is huge, making our entire campus almost the size of a football field! It's a fun challenge managing visits from multiple media partners and wearing comfortable touring shoes.

**What is your favorite part of the expansion?** I love the Harvey Najim Children's Pavilion — it couples the landscape of the outdoors (beautiful sunset views) with functionality, the beauty of our garden and makes learning fun.

**People would be surprised to know that you...** became a Certified Laughter Leader more than three years ago in the mountains of Carrizozo, NM. I can teach people how to relieve stress using laughter.

**"We are more than food ... we try to end hunger through education."**

**Favorite meal at the Food Bank?** It's a tie between the Extraordinary Cookie and the Chicken Cilantro Ginger soup made in our Community Kitchen.

**Dispel a myth about the Food Bank:**  
**Myth:** That we distribute only food.  
**Truth:** We are more than food — we provide a holistic approach to ending hunger through education, empowerment and most importantly compassion for those we serve in 16 counties.





## Soaking up liquid leftovers

When crops started popping up in the community garden nestled between the San Antonio Food Bank and its neighbor Bay Valley Foods, John Torrez had an idea.

“We looked over at the Food Bank’s garden and thought perhaps they could use the wash from our vegetables,” Torrez, plant manager for Bay Valley, which formerly was Van De Walle farms.

The company is one of 22 facilities in the U.S. and Canada which makes private label salsas, pasta and taco sauces for stores like Wal-Mart, Target and HEB.

Bay Valley uses 5,000 gallons of water a day, five days a week, to clean and rinse vegetables for their sauces. Instead of going to waste, the filtered rinse water will be drained and pumped to irrigate 22 acres of land the SAFB acquired last year for farming.

“We had to work with the state,” says Torrez “which tested the water and took samples.”

Once given the green light by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, pump and drain lines were put into place. The land, which is owned by the City of San Antonio, is being leased by the SAFB for \$1 per month for 15- 20 years.

That’s about 100,000 gallons of veggie wash a month, which will help keep the SAFB’s crops nourished despite a potential drought.

Now that’s salsa with a kick.

- JENNY HALPIN



GETTY IMAGES



## HARNESSING THE POWER OF MOTHER NATURE

Solar panels, a wind turbine, and a rainwater catchment system are all helping the nonprofit’s bottom line by lowering utility bills.

“To date, my firm hasn’t worked on a project that has this many green components,” says Architect Jim Kissling.

Solar panels cover 25 percent of the roof at the SAFB, which about \$1,000 a month in electricity. It’s about 10 percent of their overall usage.

The wind turbine, which was donated, is expected to generate enough electricity to run the lights and fans in the new outdoor pavilion, which can be rented by the public for events.

Four rainwater catchment tanks can collect about 500,000 gallons of rainwater and irrigate two acres of community gardening at the facility. The vegetables and fruit grown onsite are used to provide meals for the needy as well as educate them on how to become self-sufficient and grow their own produce.

“Our goal isn’t to have more demand, but to better nourish our current demand,” says Cooper.



### ➤ 3 Sassy and Sustainable Features

#### • Electricity-Generating Wind Turbine:

Donated to the Food Bank, the wind turbine is the first of its kind in San Antonio. Food bank staff are currently working with City Public Service to get it in motion.

• **Dynaco Entrematic:** Bright blue industrial fabric, high-speed smart doors that seal the cold air in are now part of the warehouse. The doors open and close with the tug of a rope to allow for high traffic and easily absorb truck damage.

#### • Water bottle refilling stations:

Reduces the use of single-use plastic water bottles. Provides instant digital feedback by displaying the number of bottles saved per day.

