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Eagerness to relocate packs event

By David Hendricks - Express-News

MONTERREY, Mexico — They arrived in a steady stream to a high-rise Monterrey hotel ballroom — Mexican captains of industry and small-business owners. By the time former San Antonio resident Monica Sanchez, director of the State of Texas NAFTA Office in Mexico City, stepped to the microphone, the largest-ever Invest in Texas seminar was under way with 160 registrants in attendance. For six hours, the participants heard presentations about what was required to move to and invest in Texas: the incentives, visas, financing, taxes, corporate laws, real estate rules and assistance programs.

Registration cost \$50 and had been capped a week earlier to keep the audience size manageable. Speakers said another 160 were turned away. At stake for the registrants is the future of their businesses and their families. The vast majority of them want out of Mexico.

They don't need to be told about the nasty turn in violence from the ongoing war between rival drug-smuggling cartels. They live with it and the threat of kidnappings and extortion that help the cartels finance their operations. The Mexico City office has staged Invest in Texas seminars in Mexico since 2001, when only 20 or 30 people showed up. This year, the state plans six seminars in several large Mexican cities.

The Monterrey seminar was one of three of its kind Wednesday. At the same time, more than 100 people attended a seminar held in San Antonio by the University of Texas at San Antonio Small Business Development Center and by the Asociación de Empresarios Mexicanos.

In Edinburg, UT-Pan American also held a seminar Wednesday attended by more than 100 people. Combined, about 400 people met Wednesday on the same subject of how to move to Texas.

“That's a lot of people,” said Robert Barnett, partner in the San Antonio law firm Cacheaux Cavazos & Newton, which provided speakers at all three seminars.

Underlying the calm, sometimes humorous, tone of the seminars is fear. No one talks about the anxiety openly, either to the speakers at the seminars and certainly not to the media.

“They speak in code words,” said Barnett, who spoke about corporate law in Monterrey. “Insecurity, difficult situation, recent difficulties. They used to never mention that. A couple of people today told me directly, ‘Because of this, I’m starting a business in the United States,’” he said.

“People are afraid. They don’t want to take chances. They are looking for a way to get out of Mexico,” said one seminar speaker, Nestor Montemayor of McAllen, with Re/Max Elite, a real estate company.

Montemayor cited clients who show up in the Rio Grande Valley to buy a house without the intention of ever returning to Mexico. “They stay in a hotel until we can connect the electricity” on a new house, he said.

Montemayor also recalled a client from the state of Sinaloa who was kidnapped. The client’s wife couldn’t sign papers for a new U.S. house, so the kidnappers let him go to sign the papers with a promise to return with the ransom. The victim returned with the money to protect other family members and also sold his Sinaloa ranches to move to the United States, Montemayor said.

Fear often drives Mexicans to make unwise decisions. They relocate to the United States on “nonimmigrant visas” and enroll their children in public schools based on their house purchase, which is an act of intention to immigrate, said John Meyer, partner in the Houston-based law firm of FosterQuan.

“This happens hundreds of times a day,” even though it runs afoul of immigration law, Meyer said. If U.S. authorities find out about the school enrollments, the family can be barred permanently from U.S. entry, he said.

“There is no visa based on fear,” Meyer stressed, emphasizing that families need to focus on visas based on student, business and professional activities.

Other San Antonio speakers at the Monterrey seminar included Rogelio Garcia of the Free Trade Alliance San Antonio, who explained the alliance’s incubator program for foreign companies entering the U.S. market. Noel Olguin of Olguin International explained U.S. franchise opportunities to seminar registrants.

Antonio Opengo, a Frost Bank vice president who spends most of his time in Mexico, outlined the bank’s lending, investment, insurance and deposit services.

“Interest is higher, especially this year,” said Opengo, who said that he has spoken at more than 30 seminars in the last seven years. In one-on-one visits, no one tells him about their security fears. “We all know. We don’t ask,” he said.

Enough state of Texas seminar attendees over the past year have signaled their interest in moving to San Antonio that the office plans to bring 40 to 50 business owners and investors to San Antonio in June on an exploratory trip, Sanchez said.