



YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

Jim Spaniolo brings local knowledge to the North Texas Commission

By Paul K. Harral

Go online and find the music video *4 Minutes* by Madonna. In the time it takes to watch it, one new person will have moved to the 12-county North Texas area.

One of those newcomers was Jim Spaniolo, hired in August as president and CEO of the North Texas Commission, which was formed in 1971 as a nonprofit corporation membership organization to market Dallas Fort Worth International Airport and the region. The airport that would lead the area to explosive expansion was still under construction at the time.

Actually, it's more accurate to say that Spaniolo returned to North Texas.

He was president of the University of Texas at Arlington from 2004 to 2013 and aggressively worked to position UT Arlington as a major research university. Spaniolo also pushed increased campus housing to change the university's "commuter school" image and created the College Park District to weave the school more deeply into the fabric of Arlington and the surrounding area.

After he left UT Arlington, he returned to his native Michigan, where he had been dean of the College of Communication Arts and Sciences at Michigan State University – the nation's pioneer

land-grant university – from 1996 to 2004.

Back in Michigan, Spaniolo did some consulting work that called for trips to the Metroplex. (As an aside: The North Texas Commission copyrighted the term “Southwest Metroplex” in February 1972 to establish an identity for the communities of North Texas. In use, that was shortened to “Metroplex.” Just in case you were wondering.)

“I was coming back to Texas about once a month during that time that I was away, which just reminded me how closely I felt toward Texas and North Texas. I had been away for three years, and being away makes the heart grow fonder,” Spaniolo said.

Spaniolo hadn’t known what he was going to do after he left UT Arlington, but he knew he wanted to find a way to engage and be involved in public life. But he had been gone from East Lansing for 10 years – “a long time,” Spaniolo said. “I found that it was more difficult to reconnect there professionally than I thought.” He did some pro bono work as an adviser to the governor of Michigan on higher education policy. “That was interesting, but it wasn’t as engaged as I wanted to be,” he said.

And that’s why the North Texas Commission job was of such interest to him.

He and his wife, Sue, have bought a house in Arlington. She spent 29 years at Michigan State in a variety of staff roles and retired in January.

His selection was met with praise.

“I have so much respect for the guy, I really do, and I wish him all the luck,” said Bill Thornton, president and CEO of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce. “We sat down, I’ve given him my thoughts and so I’m very optimistic. What Jim brings to the table is familiarity with all of North

Texas and having served in an incredible leadership role in UTA.”

Former Fort Worth Mayor Kenneth Barr, who also served as chairman of NTC, said Spaniolo was an excellent choice since he already was well-known across the Metroplex and is respected as a “can do” person for his work at UT Arlington.

“He already has a network of acquaintances in place across the region, so he starts with good relationships and a strong reputation already in place. He is exactly the kind of leader NTC needed – not centric to only Dallas or Fort Worth, but rather a leader with a regionwide standing,” Barr said.

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price agrees. She says she appreciates both his knowledge of the region and his ability to collaborate with all communities and constituencies and said he brings a fresh perspective and creativity to NTC.

“Jim is a great administrator, with a primary focus on the people and the community,” Price said. “He has a reputation as an excellent manager, not a micro-manager, with great vision and the ability to be a very innovative leader.”

Kristin Sullivan, the founding executive director of the Fort Worth literacy partnership and former associate vice president for communication at UT Arlington, praised Spaniolo’s style. “Jim’s leadership strengths are evident in his ability to recruit, cultivate and develop talent. As a boss, he expected the best of us, and also gave us the tools and encouragement we needed to deliver,” she said.

“Spaniolo had a big vision for the University of Texas at Arlington and for North Texas. He knew that UT Arlington should and would become a national research leader, and he believed in the power of working collectively

with city leaders, other universities and institutions across the region to strengthen the workforce and the university’s contribution to the innovation economy,” Sullivan said.

Spaniolo contrasts North Texas with his native Michigan, which suffered through a serious economic downturn and now is beginning to make some progress. But the effort in Michigan is “almost a defensive game,” he says, focused on not losing more population. “In Texas, [it’s] how can we accommodate all the people who want to be here?” he said. “I would much rather be associated with how do we figure out how to work together to accommodate all this growth than I would how do we try to minimize the loss.”

THE COMMISSION

To understand the role of the North Texas Commission, you need to understand how Dallas Fort Worth International Airport came into being. For people who moved to the area in the late ’70s, it looked like a marvelous cooperative venture between North Texas’ two largest cities. But that’s not how it happened.

Actually, it was a shotgun wedding forced by the Federal Aviation Administration (formerly the CAA), which refused to put any more money into duplicate installations in the area. In 1964 the Civil Aeronautics Board ordered Dallas and Fort Worth to come up in less than 180 days with an agreement on the location of a new regional airport or the federal government would do it for them, wrote Art Leatherwood in *The Handbook of Texas Online*. The new site included the old Greater Southwest International Airport.

When Dallas Fort Worth International Airport opened Jan. 13, 1974, there were few corporate headquarters in North Texas. But visionary North Texas leaders,

recognizing that the airport’s strategic location made any city in the nation only a couple of hours away by plane, met on July 29, 1971, to form the North Texas Commission.

The concept was to establish a regional marketing organization for the entire North Texas area. Today the 12-county region is home to 7.2 million people – 5 million more than when NTC was formed. That’s more people than the populations of 29 states in a land area larger than New Jersey and Connecticut combined.

“The North Texas Commis-



WHEN DALLAS FORT WORTH INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT OPENED, THERE WERE FEW CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS IN NORTH TEXAS. VISIONARY LEADERS FORMED THE NORTH TEXAS COMMISSION TO MARKET THE REGION.



Photo Courtesy Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport

sion has, I think, a unique set of members in that we've got cities, municipalities, we have private company corporations, we've got universities – higher educational institutions, community colleges," Spaniolo said. "Those are all important institutions and they're all different. [We're] trying to find a path that makes sense to all of them in terms of the region. The other thing is there really isn't any other entity that has the kind of membership that we have that's regional in the 12 counties."

Some nonprofits struggle

financially as corporate donations decline or change focus, but Spaniolo and Kimberly Walton, vice president for communication, say support of NTC remains strong.

"Our region is so unique in that all the cities hug each other. Everybody still wants to be a part. They still see value in being a regional player. They understand that. Same with the corporations," Walton said.

Membership is only a part of it. There are underwriting opportunities for events such as an annual luncheon and for *NTX*

Magazine, distributed to more than 20,000 decision-makers worldwide.

NTC also publishes *Profile of North Texas*, a 12-page brochure launched in 2015 that is packed with facts about the region and is available in six languages – English, Spanish, French, German, Japanese and Mandarin. In addition, NTC's annual report briefs members on how their membership dollars are being spent.

"The NTC is one of the key places where this region comes together," said Barr, noting as Spaniolo does that the area has

EXPERIENCE AS A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT WAS GOOD PREPARATION.

more people than many states. "And we're growing rapidly. But we don't have the organizational structure we would have if we were a state," Barr said. "So it is important to have organizations like the NTC that can unite us as a region, help develop a regional focus, and help us sell/market the region. That includes marketing to ourselves, to the state Legislature and to the rest of the world."

OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT

Spaniolo was deeply involved in the community as president of UT Arlington. He was on the chamber of commerce boards in Fort Worth, Arlington and Dallas. Not all necessarily at the same time, he notes, but over a 10-year period.

But the net is cast much wider now. There are 150 cities in North Texas, 14 with populations of more than 100,000 people. The big dogs are, of course, Dallas and Fort Worth, and both have aggressive business development efforts of their own.

"That presents a lot of challenges and yet, if we can work together as a region in terms of addressing the needs within that region from a legislative standpoint, both in Austin and Washington, and just in terms of trying

to create the best possible environment for continued well-being and economic growth, it's great to have an opportunity to be part of that," Spaniolo said.

He's reaching out. "I like to talk about this as being a listening tour initially, making sure that I'm plugged in to what's happened, what people see across the region as being the most compelling needs where we can look for opportunities to work together," Spaniolo said.

And while individual cities have their own priorities, there are regional issues that affect all of them.

"I look at North Texas as a land of opportunity, which has experienced tremendous academic, economic and population growth and the projections are more," Spaniolo said. "As the region fills up with people and economic entities, there are lots of challenges associated with it. You got the transportation, water, quality of life."

But there also are benefits that

affect the whole region.

"Obviously, all of our cities are hoping to recruit new businesses and there is an element of competition. We stay out of that," Spaniolo said. "We're not involved in the recruitment process other than to promote our region. The individual cities and communities are going to do their own recruitment. They have their own economic development staff and the chambers are involved."

He cites Toyota's decision to locate its North American campus in Plano as an example. No matter where in the Metroplex Toyota chose to locate, it was in the North Texas region. "That's value added for the whole region. Over time, that's a major plus ... I think it's our job to make sure that we as a region are recognizing the benefit from major new additions within the region regardless of where that takes place."

TRAINING GROUND

At first blush, you might won-

der what prepared Jim Spaniolo for his current role. He certainly has the education necessary with a law degree from the University of Michigan Law School, a bachelor's degree in political science from Michigan State and a master's degree in public administration from Michigan. He also has extensive publishing experience with the now-dissolved Knight-Ridder newspaper group, in Miami and Detroit, and with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

But it may be that the experience at UT Arlington prepared him best.

"To be president of a university is different than being CEO of a private corporation. You accomplish things by consensus," he said. Faculty members are not traditional employees. "They're employed by the university but they are, to a great extent, independent contractors. At a university, you have to bring people together. You don't issue directives or edicts. You build support for what your vision is, your message, and you try to work in a collaborative kind of way. You've got a lot of different constituencies."

That's also what he faces at the North Texas Commission.

He thinks part of his success

Here's a quick briefing, excerpted from The Handbook of Texas Online article by Art Leatherwood, "Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport."

A regional airport for North Texas was considered as early as 1940, and the Civil Aeronautics Administration approached the city of Arlington to sponsor an airport midway between the two larger cities. Both Dallas and Fort Worth were interested, since expansion of Meacham Field in Fort Worth and Love Field in Dallas would require extensive construction to accommodate increasing air traffic and larger aircraft.

Arlington agreed, and with the support of American Airlines and Braniff Airways, which were to deed 1,000 acres of land, the CAA was to build the landing area; a seven-man board would control overall operation of the field. Construction began in 1942, but a disagreement over which way the terminal building should

face, along with other considerations, caused the airport, then called Midway, to be turned over to the city of Arlington in 1943. ...

In 1946 Fort Worth hired a firm to prepare an airport plan for the city. The next year it decided to develop Midway as its major airport and renamed it Greater Fort Worth International Airport. Dallas continued to develop Love Field. In 1948 the CAA National Airport Plan recommended that Greater Fort Worth International Airport be expanded into the major regional airport. Fort Worth annexed the site and continued to develop the airport with the support of American Airlines. Dallas continued its opposition. ...

In 1950 the Fort Worth City Council renamed the airport Amon G. Carter Field. In September 1951 a bond election was held, and voters approved \$28.9 million in bonds. Another election was held in May 1952 in which \$1.5



at UT Arlington was building relationships and partnerships in Arlington, but also in Dallas and Fort Worth. The NTC role seemed to be a good post-university president opportunity. And it satisfies his need for public involvement.

“I found it attractive to pursue this opportunity to play a role, to be part of a regionwide effort to promote what I consider to be just a terrific place to live and work,” Spaniolo said. There was tremendous regional growth during his time in Arlington and that is continuing. “It seemed natural to me and it was a way to be fully engaged.”

Back in the bad days of Dallas-Fort Worth competition and conflict – the lingering legal battles that kept Dallas’ Love Field open after Dallas Fort Worth Airport opened, for example – the challenge was daunting. Regionalization has changed the tone of that relationship. And that is a door for opportunity for NTC.

“We want to look for those opportunities where we can be value-added across the region, where we don’t get in anybody’s way, and we don’t step on anybody’s toes,” Spaniolo said. “We’re not trying to do anybody’s job.

“The analogy that I think of is being like glue, that there are



Photo by Paul K. Harra

always gaps. There is white space that needs to be filled in. The challenge for us – and we’ve got a very good board and an executive committee working with our members and with the major players, the cities, the chambers – is to chart a course where we’re actually accelerating positive developments here in the region,” he said.

Representatives of the airport itself and of Dallas and Fort Worth regularly take promotional

trips across the world to encourage more international involvement with the Metroplex.

Sean Donohue, the airport’s CEO, made it clear at a Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Five Pillars Luncheon in September at the Fort Worth Club that the airport’s major growth potential was in international flights. “We’re not seeing much growth domestically because pretty much all the dots on the map are connected,” he said.

“What will really help us now is more and more international growth.”

That’s also an invitation for international companies to move to or establish operations in the Metroplex.

“I think we ought to be able to play a positive role in trips like that,” Spaniolo said. Not all cities can be represented on those trips, and that opens a window for NTC to serve as their representative. “If Frisco and Plano and

million was approved for aviation improvements. This issue was part of the Love Field-Carter Field competition during the 1950s. The airport officially opened in April 1953.

During the 1950s two attempts were made by Fort Worth to convert Carter Field into a joint regional airport with Dallas participating as a full partner. Both efforts were rebuffed by Dallas, and expansion of Love Field continued. In May 1960 the airport, renamed Greater Southwest



International Airport, was purchased by the city of Fort Worth in an effort to compete more successfully with Love Field, and a municipal board

was established to supervise the city’s airports. ...

Though Dallas and Fort Worth were archrivals, the Federal Aviation Administration (formerly the CAA) refused to put any more money into duplicate installations. In 1964 the Civil Aeronautics Board ordered the two cities to come up in less than 180 days with a voluntary agreement on the location of a new regional airport, or the federal government would do it for them. ... Both cities appointed committees, and by 1965 plans were set for a

Dallas-Fort Worth Board, which would consist of 11 members – seven from Dallas and four from Fort Worth. ...

The site for an airport, originally called Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport, was chosen. The plan received broad support, and in December 1968 ground was broken at the intersection of the towns of Euless, Irving, and Grapevine. The new site included the old Greater Southwest International Airport.

The new airport, now known as the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, was dedicated in September 1973 and became operational on January 13, 1974. The first commercial flight that day, American Airlines Flight 341, flew from New York to Dallas via Memphis and Little Rock, touching down exactly on time. At the time of the opening of the airport nine airlines operated there. ...

When designed, the airport occupied 17,500 acres, which equals more than 27 square miles, an area larger than the island of Manhattan.



Arlington are not on the trip then we can say, ‘Let us tell you also about these three great cities and the opportunities that may exist there for business development.’ We’re advocating for the region as a whole. ... I think that’s real value added. We would be prepared to do that.”

It is important to remember that the population of the region’s three largest cities – Dallas, Fort Worth and Arlington – added together is less than half the population of the entire region. NTC, with its diverse membership, is in a position to be a regional representative.

“I’m in the business of making friends. What you do when you have a friend is you try to be supportive of your friends. You find that common ground. Friends disagree at times or they

don’t see things exactly the same way, but the role that I see is that we’re an ambassador for North Texas,” Spaniolo said. “We have to be diplomatic. We have to be careful, thoughtful. We are here to partner with them and to bring people together. ... We’re not in the business of trying to promote ourselves. We’re in the business of promoting our region and our members. That’s a full-time job.”

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

NTC runs two leadership programs, Leadership North Texas (LNT), a graduate-level leadership program launched in 2009 and now in its eighth class year, and Leadership North Texas University, a program developed by LNT alumni and aimed at emerging millennial leaders under the age of 35.

Walton directs both programs. “We highly encourage [LNT participants] to be grads of a community program or have demonstrated a deep understanding and connection to their community,” she said.

“We now have over 200 alums spread across the region. What a great resource they are for the region and for the North Texas Commission,” Spaniolo said. “I think that when we sit back and say, ‘What contributions has North Texas Commission made in the last decade,’ you’ve got to say Leadership North Texas.”

The program was launched when Barr was chairman of the NTC board with Leadership Fort Worth Executive Director Harriet Harral as a consultant. “I’ve been very pleased with the program as it has developed, and I believe it is

North Texas Commission by the Numbers

9,000 square miles in North Texas

7.2 million people

150-plus cities

14 cities with more than 100,000 population

In 45 years, the North Texas population has grown by 5 million people – that's greater than today's population of 29 of the 50 states.

4th largest region in the U.S.

North Texas grows by 1 person every 4 minutes.

If North Texas were a state, it would be 9th in GDP and the population would tie with Washington state as the 13th most populous.

34 is the media age in North Texas

3,000 high tech firms in North Texas

3.5 million people in the North Texas labor force

And just for fun –

110 museums across North Texas

6,000 arts and cultural events

1,728 miles of off-street trails for cyclists and pedestrians

400 public parks

52 wineries

60 lakes and reservoirs

23 state parks within 100 miles of North Texas

13 professional sports teams

Source: North Texas Commission



accomplishing much of what we had originally hoped it would,” Barr said. He said graduates have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities across North Texas and have made friendships and working relationships that would not exist without LNT.

“It’s a great concept and it attracts high-caliber people, a diverse group of people every year,” Spaniolo said. “They bring a lot to one another. They bond. People say, ‘I was in LNT class six,’ or ‘I was in the first class.’ They’re proud of that,” he said. “We’re in a region. We’re cohesive enough and close to one another so that you can really make it work.”

Spaniolo says that in any organization, leaders build on the platform left by their predecessors. “It’s true in a university and it’s true at North Texas Commission,” he said. “Organizations evolve, they change, they reinvent themselves. There’s a very strong historical heritage and some really good work that’s been done by my predecessors. My hope is to build on what they accomplished and then focus on what we can do in the future. My hope is that

we will have a strong presence in the region, that we’ll be viewed as part of the solution as we go forward, that we will be value-added, that we will help be a strong force for regional progress, regional collaboration, and that we’ll be in the friend-making and in the partner-making business.”

OUTSIDE THE OFFICE

The job at NTC has cut into one of Spaniolo’s favorite activities.

“What do I do for fun? One of the things that I did in the last three years is that I read a lot of books,” he said. “I love to read. I don’t have as much time as I had a little while ago but I enjoy reading. I still read newspapers, too, both online and hard copies. I like to get ink on my hands. My father was a journalist and then a weekly newspaper publisher [in Michigan] ... so I grew up with that.”

He likes to travel when possible and he plays golf occasionally. But it is not surprising that maintaining relationships is also important to him.

“I like having a chance to interact with people who think

seriously about issues that affect our country and our communities. I try to stay in touch. Over the years you develop a lot of friendships and relationships. Maintaining those connections is important to me. I’ve lived in a lot of places. I’m proud to say that I still have friends in Michigan, in Miami, in Texas, and throughout the country,” Spaniolo said.

He developed a taste for leadership early. Really early.

“I’m the only person I know who was in the high school marching band beginning in sixth grade playing trombone,” Spaniolo said. It was a small high school is Cassopolis, Michigan, with a small band. “I think I had only been playing the trombone for a year and they needed another trombone player, so here I was in sixth grade. I was actually in the high school marching band for seven years – and I didn’t repeat any grades.”

It is, he says, the only unusual thing about himself he can think of. “It’s not consequential,” he says. But he does link it with something that is consequential.

“I always wanted to be in a leadership role of some kind or

another,” Spaniolo says. Maybe his willingness to face the older kids in the high school marching band was a precursor of that. “I always had those kinds of aspirations – to be the best that I could be. I gravitated to leadership opportunities.”

It is the team-building that is important. “You’re doing something together and you’re supporting one another and you’re holding each other accountable. Obviously, you need a captain but if the leader is committed to each member of the team and helping them be successful then the team is going to be successful,” he said.

“I love Jim Spaniolo’s sense of humor,” said Sullivan.” He’s got a wonderful smile, a hearty laugh and he doesn’t take himself too seriously. At UT Arlington, he read an annual Maverick-ized rendition of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* while sporting a Santa hat. Some of us rolled our eyes a bit, but we always knew when the holiday break was on its way.”

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