

Star-Telegram

BNSF headquarters has been huge asset for Fort Worth

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FORT WORTH — It's hard to nail down the economic impact of having Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp. headquartered in the city, but there's general agreement about its value: priceless.

"To have BNSF here sends a very strong signal about our economy," Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief said. "There's no doubt that we are on the right track."

But the \$26.3 billion purchase by Berkshire Hathaway announced Tuesday is only the latest achievement for a company that has gradually become a leader in the Fort Worth business community since moving here 25 years ago.

Burlington Northern Railroad brought its headquarters from St. Paul, Minn., to downtown Fort Worth in 1984, in part to reinvigorate a company whose predecessors date to 1849. In the 1990s, the company merged with Santa Fe Pacific Corp., moved to a campus in far north Fort Worth and spread its presence throughout the area.

"They are real corporate citizens," said Ann Rice, chief operating officer of the United Way of Tarrant County. "And they're an encourager."

Communities vie for corporate headquarters because they typically bring high executive salaries, greater corporate philanthropy, civic leadership and enhanced security during job consolidations. All that seems to have played out with BNSF in Fort Worth.

BNSF has 3,300 corporate headquarters personnel in Fort Worth, the city's second-most, behind American Airlines, according to data from the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce.

Last year, local BNSF employees contributed \$2.2 million to the fall United Way of Tarrant County campaign, about 10 percent of the total. Tom Hund, a BNSF executive, was recently chairman of the United Way board, but it's not just the top dogs who help keep the not-for-profit rolling.

"We stay in very close contact with labor," Rice said. "They serve on different United Way committees. They lend a tremendous enthusiasm."

Because BNSF has not had the kind of dramatic job cuts that have rocked other companies, contributions have remained relatively stable despite the recession, Rice said.

And the company has joined in broader North Texas efforts. For example, BNSF signed on as a founding sponsor of Super Bowl XLV, committing \$1 million to the host committee planning the big game at Cowboys Stadium in 2011.

William Moncrief, senior associate dean at Texas Christian University's Neeley School of Business, said BNSF's corporate presence here is a big boon for its students.

"Back about '86, they flew our entire class to Chicago and Kansas City" to study rail operations in those cities, he said. "BNSF has just been a huge part of our leadership program."

Some 80 TCU sophomores, for example, vie for 30 spots in the university's Burlington Northern Santa Fe Next Generation Leadership program. The company not only hires students when they graduate but also is a source of tuition dollars for the university's executive MBA program.

The University of Texas at Arlington also feels the presence, with John Lanigan, BNSF's vice president and chief marketing officer, on the College of Business' advisory council.

"It's kind of a blue-collar company, and UT-Arlington is kind of a blue-collar school," said Roger Meiners, chairman the economics department. "You don't have fancy-pants boys. You hire people who know how to talk to working people."

"They've been very generous to us. I think they find some value in our programs. We're a good fit."

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