

Lexington Leader

SERVING LEE COUNTY, TEXAS

A Place to Live and Work and Thrive

Thursday, July 24, 2025

Last Wednesday, July 16th, the Leader had a meeting with Kayla Schnell, the former Special Assistant for the Lee County Judge and now the Business Systems and Communications Associate with Sandow Lakes Ranch Venture, LLC (SLR). She had with her Karina Kling, the media contact for Sandow Lakes.

Kayla began by saying the main goal of SLR is to bring economic vitality back to the area. She explained the difficulties our communities have suffered and the subsequent economic decline after Alcoa shut down operations. She said, “Sandow Lakes is still in its infancy, and the final plan for the property has not been etched in stone at this time. However, the overall concept of building a sustainable place where people can live, work, play, and thrive is still the main focus. We want to serve this community from cradle to grave, with children and families that grow up here and work here.”

She compared the vision as being one similar to The Woodlands, which is 28,000 acres, and has a population of roughly 124,500. The Woodlands has churches, schools, hospitals, shopping, entertainment and all that is needed to enjoy life. This is the vision for SLR, which spans 33,000 acres and estimates that as many as 200,000 people could live there.

Kayla said, “That’s another reason we don’t want to come in and do what we’re doing to the exclusion of everyone else. We want to bring things up around us and grow together. We have been asked if there will be schools in this development, and our answer is, ‘Yes!’ It will have elementary and middle, and high schools.

“We’ve been asked if we’re going to have our own school district, and we say, ‘No. We’re not planning to do that.’ We have three school districts that will serve us – Lexington, Rockdale and Thorndale. On top of that it’s a benefit to us, in the long run, to be a part of these school districts because they will complement what we are doing. Rockdale suffered a great deal after Alcoa closed. We want to be good neighbors to them and those around us,” she said.

She brought a few renditions of the plan, much of which has changed even from what was shown, but she pointed out the planned Advanced Manufacturing and Logistix Campus (AMLC) included in their overall plan. “This campus will bring many jobs to the area,” Kayla said. She reminded us that T1 Energy has selected this campus for a 5GW U.S. solar cell manufacturing facility. The majority of solar cell manufacturing is currently done overseas, so this will also aid in bringing more manufacturing and industry back to the United States.

She got excited when she explained that the AMLC has been branded as “The Switch” because of the spur that runs off the rail line that connects Hwy 79 to the old Alcoa property. “This Spur includes a railroad junction that is historically called the Marjorie Switch, so our visionary has blended the history of this site with the forward-facing identity of the current development to land at “The Switch”. And because the rail runs through the AMLC, it is attractive to future tenants because of the intermodal options it provides,” she explained.

She continued, “The goal is to train a workforce that will support The Switch, so we are envisioning putting in a school or training center. We are talking to several schools, including Texas State Technical College, Temple College, and A&M’s Rellis Campus. We have a lot of options but haven’t narrowed one down yet. We want to partner with one of them to open new doors for the students in Milam and Lee County, as many opt not to go to a four-year college. This would provide opportunity for them to stay near home and gain the knowledge and skills to build a good career for themselves.”

We asked if any of the colleges or universities they have talked to are interested. She said they are, although she didn’t elaborate beyond that. She said one of the deciding factors of who they will ask to come to SLR would be what would be the best fit for the tenants that will be a part of the AMLC.

Of course, the contentious questions about the power plant were also part of our discussion. Kayla reiterated their desire to be good neighbors. She said, “SLR wants to bring the communities up with us. It’s not always about the money; it’s also about the love for people and being proactive as we pave the way for the generations to come. And if you look at everything that goes into the power plant, as far as it being environmentally friendly, the state is not going to issue us the permit if it is detrimental to the community’s health and welfare. We’re checking those boxes. We want to do it the right way. We genuinely want to do this responsibly.”

Kayla said her primary goal is to help people realize that, as for the power plant, “we’re not trying to harm; just have a conversation with us; we will show you honestly this is the most economically friendly way to bring power to the area. The system is designed with carbon

capture features that are not available commercially yet, but it's coming, and when it's available, we will have the opportunity to implement those features."

As for contamination fears, Kayla said, "After Alcoa closed the mine and production, they had to go through reclamation and the State had to sign off on that reclamation. Alcoa received an award for the work that they did. The property is not contaminated; there are certain areas where we are limited in what we can put there. But the entire property and the lakes are not contaminated. Maybe some people are misunderstanding that there are some very small parts that Alcoa used for waste. We cannot, and would not, put houses in those areas. The old Alcoa Lake was closed because, originally, when the power plant was operating, the heat level was too high for it to be a recreational lake. That is not the case today."

"One of my favorite pieces of this plan is when we cleared for the AMLC, we did clear a lot of trees. But what we also did was relocate many of them to our tree farm. We nurture our tree farm so that as we build out the development, we will reintroduce those trees back into the landscape. We are trying to do this in the best possible way. We are still learning. After all, we're building a community. Alcoa did us a favor by selling it as one piece; if they had sold several parcels, who knows what we would have out here!"

Kayla said again, "Every day, my goal is to be proactive and to do my best to help lay the groundwork for future generations. Just think about how much has changed in the last 50 years: computers, smart TVs, cell phones, the internet. Everything evolves, and not everyone welcomes change. That's why, if I'm going to be proactive, I'll do everything I can to educate and help people understand what we're doing, because I believe that understanding can help us all navigate the inevitable change."