CHAPTER 2

Land Use and Development

Vision Elements

Resilient Community

Diverse Housing

Economic Growth and Opportunity

Goals

In 2050

Harlingen aspires to foster a resilient community that supports its people through inclusivity, safety and robust support systems.

In 2050

Harlingen will offer diverse housing options to accommodate all income levels, life stages and family types.

In 2050

Harlingen will focus on creating opportunities for economic growth that benefit all residents and future generations.

Objectives

- Strengthen public safety and emergency preparedness for natural disasters and community challenges.
- Expand programs and facilities for youth, families, and seniors to ensure well-being across generations.
- Implement strategies for long-term resilience to economic and climate-related challenges.
- Increase the availability of affordable housing for low- and middle-income families.
- Encourage development of “missing middle” housing such as townhomes, duplexes and small-lot single-family homes.
- Increase the supply of luxury housing for high-income families.
- Incentivize the rehabilitation of vacant and underutilized housing.
- Provide rental assistance and homeownership programs.
- Promote mixed-use developments that include residential options for all income levels.
- Align housing strategies with transit-oriented development to enhance connectivity.
- Expand infrastructure for industrial and tech-focused industries.
- Encourage investment in underutilized areas such as downtown and vacant properties.
- Expand mixed-use developments to integrate business, housing and public spaces.
- Invest in infrastructure improvements to attract new businesses and retain existing ones.



Harlingen Land Use Policies

Harlingen's land use policies guide how the City grows in a way that is balanced, inclusive and future-ready. These policies support reinvestment in existing neighborhoods, expansion of housing and job opportunities and protection of natural resources. The Future Land Use Map (FLUM) helps coordinate where and how different types of development should occur. Together, these tools shape a more connected, equitable and resilient Harlingen.



Sustainable Growth & Development

Promote a balanced mix of land uses that support economic growth, job creation and housing diversity. Encourage redevelopment of underutilized areas while preserving Harlingen's unique character and identity.



Connected & Inclusive Communities

Enhance accessibility and connectivity by prioritizing mixed-use developments, complete streets and well-integrated public spaces. Ensure that land use decisions foster walkability, transportation options and proximity to essential services.



Resilient & Adaptive Land Use Planning

Incorporate sustainable practices, green infrastructure and disaster resilience strategies into future land use decisions. Support developments that minimize environmental impact and enhance Harlingen's long-term livability.



Equitable and Strategic Growth

Support land use decisions that reduce disparities in access to amenities, services and opportunities across neighborhoods. Encourage investment in historically underserved areas by prioritizing public facilities, quality housing and infrastructure improvement

What We've Heard So Far...

"We need more opportunities for high-wage jobs in Harlingen to support families and encourage young professionals to stay."

"Affordable housing options are essential for making Harlingen a place where everyone can thrive."

"Supporting small businesses and creating more local shopping options will help strengthen our community."

"Public transportation options are lacking, making it hard for people without cars to get to work or school."

"Better infrastructure, like roads and streetlights, is essential for safety and future development"

"We need more diverse housing choices, including single-family homes, townhomes, and apartments."

"Sidewalks and bike lanes are critical for ensuring pedestrian safety and promoting alternative modes of transportation."

"We must focus on developing areas closer to the city core before expanding outward."

"Affordable housing options are crucial for retaining families and younger residents in Harlingen."

Key Takeaways:

- Residents want improved public spaces, infrastructure and parks.
- Economic development and job creation are top community priorities.
- Affordable and inclusive housing options are urgently needed.
- Transportation access and mobility remain key challenges.
- There is strong support for protecting and enhancing natural resources.
- Investment in cultural initiatives and community identity is important.
- Residents value equity in access to amenities across all neighborhoods.
- Future planning should focus on attracting and retaining young professionals and families.

Land Use & Resilience Connection

The incorporation of resilience into land use and growth planning involves thoughtfully integrating City development and leveraging growth in a resilient manner to steer responsible development.



Land Use Resilience

Natural Resource Management

Managing natural resources and preserving open spaces with new developments enhances ecological resilience. By prioritizing these considerations, the City can continue to advance environmental resiliency.

Historic Preservation

Preserving historic sites enhances cultural resilience by supporting community pride and fostering economic diversification through thoughtful development initiatives that harness existing assets.

Mixed-Use Development

Fostering a diverse and integrated community fabric supports a blend of residential, commercial and recreational spaces, creating an environment where residents can access their daily needs, support local businesses, and experience environmental amenities.

Green Infrastructure

Integrating green infrastructure into land use planning incorporates urban design elements that fortify buildings and infrastructure for resilience against environmental challenges.

Housing Diversity

Planning diverse housing options, such as affordable housing developments and enhanced building standards, boosts social resilience, promotes housing stability, equitable access and community well-being.

Smart Growth

Implementing smart growth principles in land use planning enhances resilience by optimizing resources, improving transportation efficiency, reducing environmental impacts and ensuring that growth occurs in a resilient manner.

Existing Land Use

Analyzing existing land use is a critical step in comprehensive planning, as it provides insight into the distribution of residential, commercial, agricultural and industrial spaces within the City. Agriculture historically dominates Harlingen's landscape, with 5,773 acres (26%) of the City limits currently dedicated to agricultural uses, increasing to 91,832 acres (68%) when including the ETJ. This highlights the City's strong ties to its agricultural roots, which continue to shape its economy and land use patterns.

The second largest land use category within the City limits is low-density residential, accounting for 5,621 acres (25%), reflecting Harlingen's focus on single-family neighborhoods. When expanded to include the ETJ, low-density residential uses occupy 15,338 acres (11%), highlighting opportunities for suburban growth and development in surrounding areas.

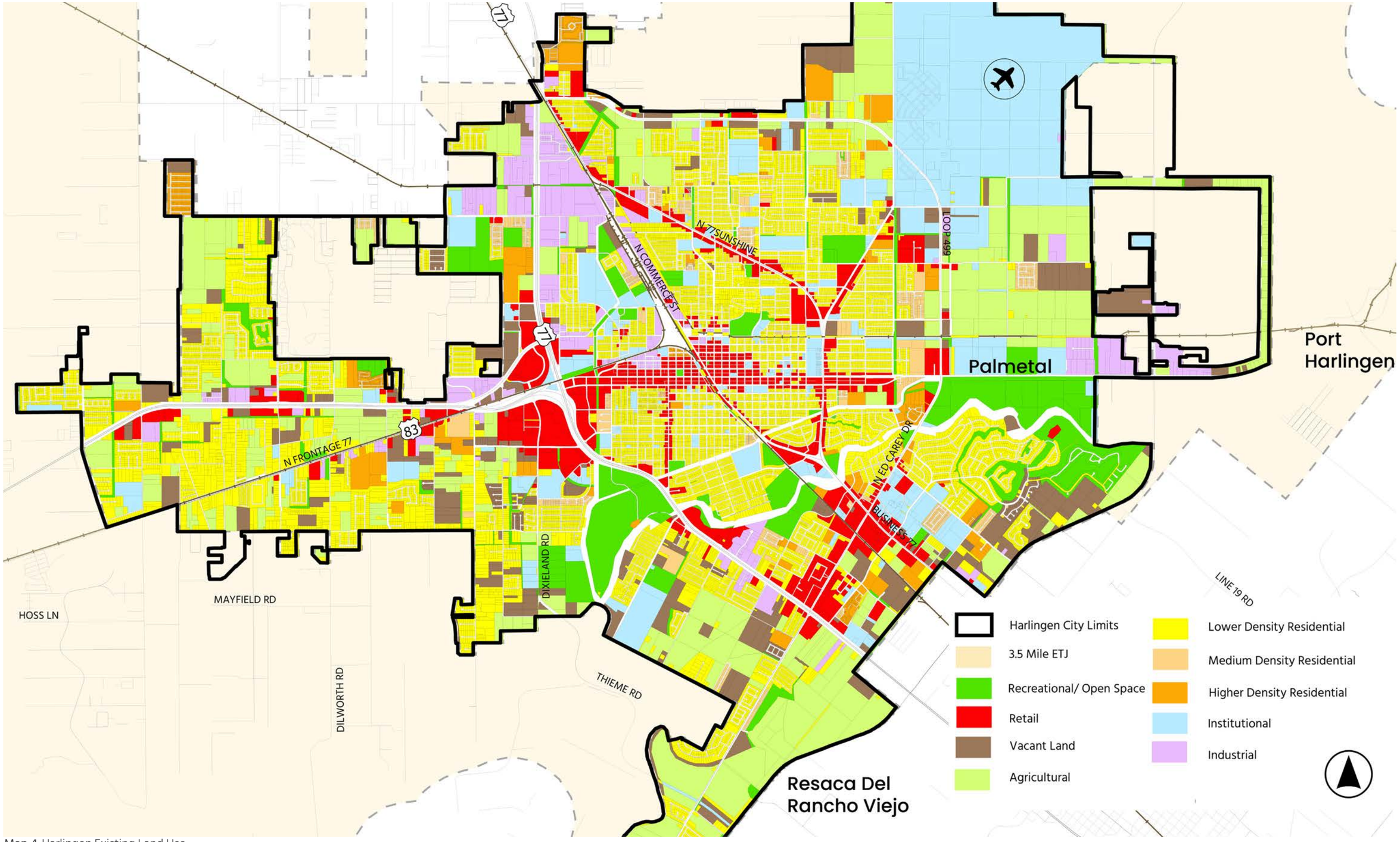
Other significant land uses include institutional and public spaces (15% of City limits), commercial uses (7% of City limits), and vacant or undeveloped land (8% of City limits). These categories reveal opportunities for future development, such as enhancing commercial corridors or utilizing vacant lands for housing or mixed-use projects to support the growing population.

High-density residential and medium-density residential areas are limited within the City, comprising 3% and 2% of City limits, respectively. Industrial uses account for 5% of City limits, with significant potential for expansion to attract industries and boost economic growth.

Harlingen's land use distribution demonstrates its agricultural legacy while highlighting areas for strategic growth in residential, commercial and industrial sectors. By leveraging its existing land use patterns, the City can ensure sustainable development and balanced growth for its community (See Map 4 for existing land use).

Existing Land Use	City Limits (acres)	City Limits (%)	City Limits + ETJ (acres)	City Limits + ETJ (%)
Agriculture	5,773	26%	91,832	68%
Low Density Residential	5,621	25%	15,338	11%
Institutional/Public	3,397	15%	8,435	6%
Vacant/Undeveloped	1,871	8%	7,992	6%
Open Space	1,852	8%	6,276	5%
Commercial	1,573	7%	1,823	1%
Industrial	1,038	5%	1,586	1%
High Density Residential	712	3%	822	1%
Medium Density Residential	404	2%	524	0%





Map 4. Harlingen Existing Land Use

Population Growth

Insights for Harlingen's Future Development

Analyzing growth patterns in local cities within Texas provides valuable insights when comparing them to the City of Harlingen. This comparative study helps in understanding the broader regional trends, economic dynamics and social factors that may influence Harlingen's development. By examining the trajectories of regional cities, Harlingen can also gain valuable insights that will aid in proactively planning and accommodating new growth, ensuring the community is equipped to handle increased population demands, infrastructure needs and economic opportunities effectively. Growth comparisons were selected based on similar relative location to large metros and similar economic pressures to Harlingen. Most of these cities have already seen their first cycle of significant recent growth, which makes them valuable case studies for how the future of Harlingen may look.

Regional Growth Comparison Table

Here is a comparison of Harlingen and nearby Texas cities based on area, population and 20-year Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR). Data is derived from available sources and approximations:

Figure 6. Regional Growth Comparisons

Texas Cities	City Limits Area (Square Miles)	2000 Population	2010 Population	2020 Population	20-Year CAGR
Harlingen	41.0	57,564	64,849	71,485	1.12%
Brownsville	81.5	139,722	175,023	186,738	1.40%
McAllen	62.3	106,414	129,877	142,210	1.46%
Edinburg	44.0	48,465	77,100	101,170	3.20%
Weslaco	13.1	26,935	35,670	41,868	2.24%

Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data, Decennial Census

Growth Rate Scenarios

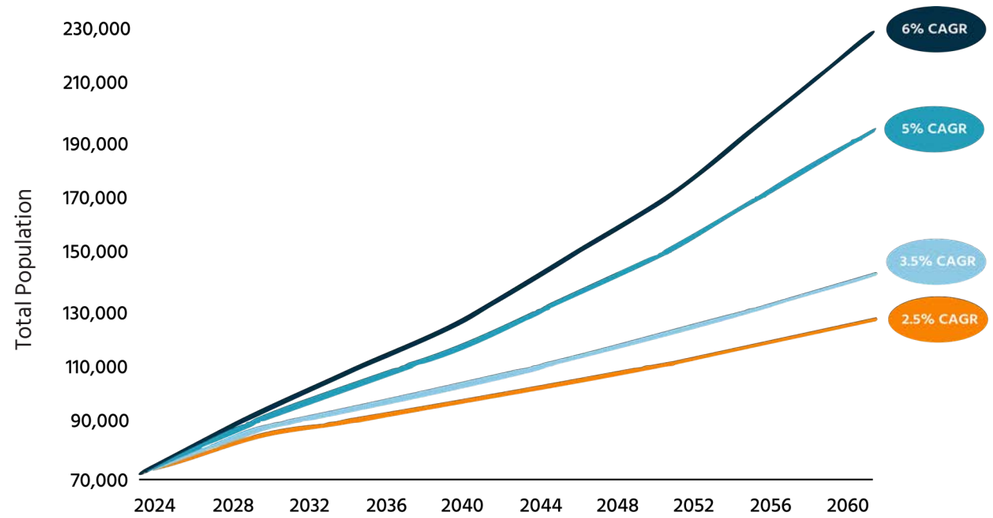
In recent decades, Harlingen's population has grown steadily at just over 1% annually. However, the evolving economic dynamics of the Rio Grande Valley region indicate the potential for higher growth rates. With its strategic location, economic opportunities and ongoing urban development, annual growth rates between 2.5% and 6% are achievable. The following scenarios illustrate how Harlingen's population might grow if such trends continue through 2060:

Figure 7. Harlingen Growth Scenarios

Year	2.5% CAGR	3.5% CAGR	5% CAGR	6% CAGR
2024	72,273	72,273	72,273	72,273
2030	85,436	88,347	91,482	94,673
2040	97,430	103,561	117,354	126,847
2050	111,072	121,452	150,709	170,242
2060	126,598	142,397	193,564	228,176

Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data

Figure 8. Harlingen Growth Scenarios Line Graph



Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data

Future Land Use Map

The Future Land Use Map (FLUM) is a foundational tool that guides how Harlingen will grow and evolve over time. It provides a long-term vision for where different land uses such as housing, retail, employment centers, parks and community facilities should be located. The FLUM helps the City organize growth in a way that reflects community values, supports economic opportunity, enhances quality of life and promotes sustainable development.

Serving as a blueprint for the future, the FLUM helps Harlingen make informed decisions about zoning changes, infrastructure investments, development approvals and capital improvements. It brings clarity and predictability to residents, developers and civic leaders by showing where various types of growth and change are expected to occur. It is not a zoning map, but it shapes future zoning decisions and guides day-to-day land use planning (See Map 5 for future land use).

The FLUM is especially useful when:

- Evaluating new development proposals.
- Coordinating infrastructure and transportation improvements.
- Planning for parks, schools and public services.
- Aligning growth with available utilities and natural features.
- Making updates to zoning and development regulations.

Importantly, the FLUM also helps the City manage growth and change, whether addressing future development on the west side, strengthening older neighborhoods or revitalizing underutilized corridors in the central City.

The FLUM answers key questions for Harlingen's future:

- What types of housing, commercial, and recreational spaces will Harlingen need as it grows?
- How do we plan for economic development while protecting community character?
- How can land use policy support equity, sustainability and quality of life across all neighborhoods?

The map is grounded in community values and was created through extensive input from residents, stakeholders and City leadership. It serves as a living document that evolves with the needs and aspirations of Harlingen.

Trade-offs & Considerations



Westside Investments & Facilities

- West Harlingen has long been underserved in terms of parks, recreation and public facilities. Prioritizing land for these uses may reduce the amount of land available for commercial or residential development, but helps advance equity and quality of life.
- Community centers and healthcare access points on the Westside may require subsidies or partnerships, but they serve essential roles in closing service gaps.



Healthcare & Retaining Medical Professionals

- As Harlingen positions itself as a regional healthcare hub, retaining and attracting medical professionals is critical. Land use decisions should support housing, schools and amenities that appeal to healthcare workers.
- A strong population base with access to insurance and nearby services also helps retain healthcare infrastructure.



Luxury & Market-Rate Housing

- To grow the tax base and attract diverse residents, there is increasing interest in expanding higher-end housing. However, doing so must be balanced with the need for affordable and workforce housing across the City.
- Larger homes on the City's fringe may increase land consumption and strain infrastructure unless paired with smart planning.



Parks and Open Space

- Investing in high-quality parks boosts livability and health outcomes but may reduce land available for revenue-generating uses like retail or housing.
- Harlingen's year-round outdoor climate creates a strong case for integrating green space within new neighborhoods and redevelopment areas.



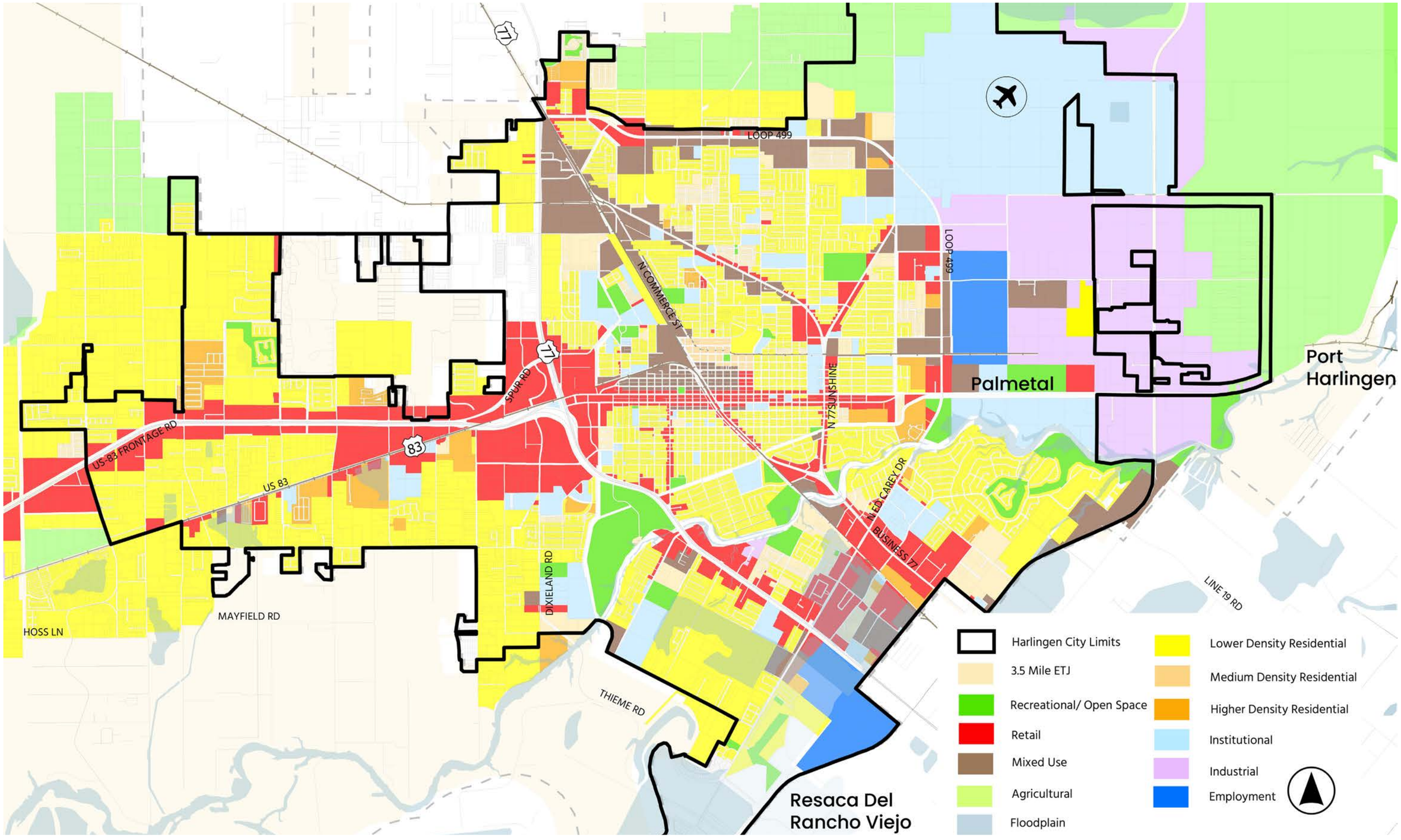
Economic Development & Commercial Corridors

- Attracting new businesses may require strategic land banking or incentives, which could delay other types of development.
- Repositioning aging corridors for mixed-use may require upfront investments, but it creates long-term value and vibrancy.



Transportation & Connectivity

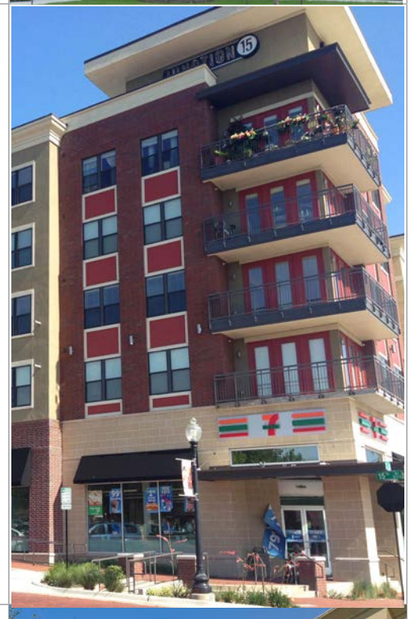
- Harlingen's spread-out development can create traffic congestion and auto-dependence. Compact, mixed-use areas with walkability and transit options can reduce vehicle miles traveled.
- Gridded streets and multi-modal infrastructure improve resilience and reduce the cost of long-term maintenance.



Map 5. Harlingen Future Land Use

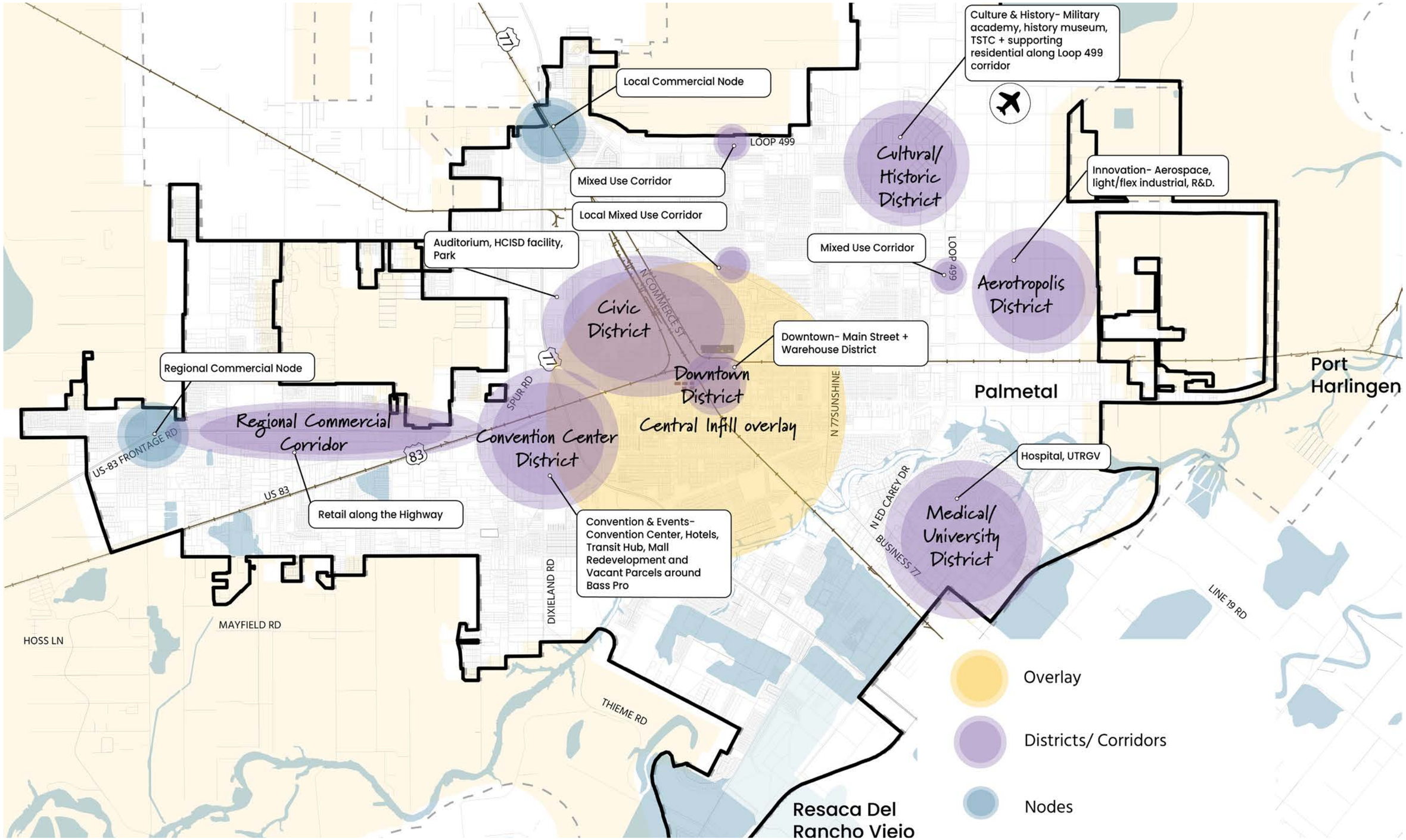
Future Land Use Categories

Future Land Use Categories define the intended character, scale and mix of uses for different areas of Harlingen. They guide zoning and development to ensure growth aligns with the City's vision and priorities. These categories provide a framework for making consistent, community-focused land use decisions.

Land Use Type	Description	Image
Agricultural	Primarily consists of traditional agriculture, focusing on the cultivation of crops, as well as the raising of livestock. This is also inclusive of complementary uses that support agriculture, such as large-lot single-family housing, barns or stables, and landscape nurseries.	
Low Density Residential	Low-Density Residential consists of single-family housing with one dwelling unit per lot, detached from any other dwelling units and designed to be occupied by one family. This housing is typically individually owned and may be built singularly or within larger planned neighborhoods. These areas maintain a lower density, intensity and scale, aligning with traditional uniform single-family home environments.	
Medium Density Residential	Medium-Density Residential includes a variety of housing options, including townhomes and duplexes, in a traditional neighborhood pattern. Duplexes have two attached units per lot, whereas townhomes have one unit per lot but with multiple units that share walls along a street frontage. These areas offer convenient access to small-scale neighborhood serving uses in select locations accessible without a car.	
High Density Residential	High-Density Residential involves housing types with numerous dwelling units, designed to be occupied by multiple families in a single building or structure, such as an apartment or condo building. This land-use type may include ancillary uses such as parking structures and leasing offices and should be incorporated in close proximity to select commercial corridors.	
Mixed-Use	Mixed-use spaces incorporate multi-family residential uses with non-residential land uses, integrating housing with employment and retail. Mixed-use may come in a variety of scales. Neighborhood scale is generally 1-2 stories with locally-serving businesses. Neighborhood scale mixed-use is best at small nodes within residential areas where it's accessible via multi-modal options. Community scale mixed use may have taller buildings with apartments over retail or more intense uses such as regionally serving businesses that attract users from across the community. Mixed-use spaces may be implemented horizontally or vertically along primary corridors including Commerce, 77/Sunshine Strip, and Loop 499.	
Retail	Retail involves businesses and establishments that primarily sell commodities or goods, or who provide services to consumers. These establishments can be local or regional in scale, ranging from big box stores along major vehicular thoroughfares, to local neighbor-hood serving businesses. Examples include restaurants, grocery stores, beauty salons and shopping centers..	

Land Use Type		Description	Image
	Employment	Employment includes all types of professional and administrative service office uses, as well as light industrial and tech/R&D. These uses are commonly found along major thoroughfares to connect to regional markets. Due to the commuters they generate, they are a primary generator of peak traffic..	
	Recreation/ Open Space	Open space and recreation consist of public parkland, open space and/or recreational areas. This land use type includes active and passive recreation, such as public sports fields or courts, swimming pools, walking trails and pavilions. It does not include privately owned parks and open spaces.	
	Institutional	Institutional includes public-serving facilities such as schools, churches, public buildings, libraries, cemeteries and some medical facilities. This land use type may also include support facilities for these uses, such as storage lots.	
	Industrial	Allows for a range of industrial activities, including both light and heavy industry, warehousing, and distribution. Light industrial uses are typically enclosed and low-impact, such as clean manufacturing, assembly, and flex space. Heavy industrial uses, which may generate noise, odor, dust, vibration, or outdoor storage, are directed to designated areas with highway or rail access and must be sufficiently buffered from residential and commercial uses.	





Map 6. Special Districts/ Nodes

Creation of Districts

To support targeted growth, Harlingen has identified distinct districts that reflect unique community roles and development potential. These districts help guide land use, infrastructure and investment strategies (See Map 6 for Special Districts/ Nodes).



Downtown District

The heart of Harlingen, this district includes historic Main Street, the Arts District and key civic buildings. With a strong foundation of local businesses and iconic architecture, the district is primed for walkable redevelopment, upper-floor housing, public events and adaptive reuse. Reinforcing downtown's identity as a vibrant hub for commerce, culture and community life is central to this district's future.



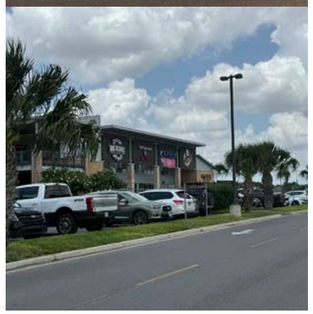
Civic District

This district is anchored by City Hall, parks and public service facilities such as schools, libraries and community centers. It serves as the institutional backbone of Harlingen, providing space for education, governance and civic engagement. Future efforts will focus on public realm improvements, housing located near civic services, and better physical connections between civic destinations and surrounding neighborhoods.



Convention Center District

A regional destination for entertainment, tourism and events, this district centers around the Harlingen Convention Center and surrounding commercial areas, including revitalizing the mall site. The vision includes a mix of hospitality, retail and office uses, supported by quality public spaces and enhanced access from I-69. This area also has potential to evolve into a major mixed-use employment center with strong regional visibility.



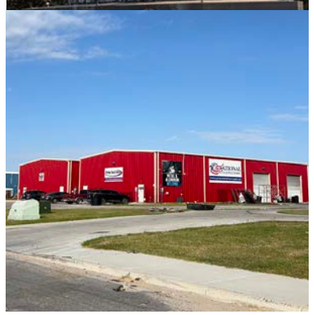
Regional Commercial Corridor

This district includes highway-adjacent retail hubs that serve both Harlingen and the surrounding region. It features large-format stores, restaurants and service uses that support the local economy. Future improvements will focus on reinvestment, connectivity and visual enhancements. There is also potential for more walkable, mixed-use redevelopment over time.



Cultural District

This district links Harlingen's cultural and educational anchors, such as the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum, TSTC campus, the Marine Military Academy and several public schools. It emphasizes storytelling, public art, heritage tourism and identity-driven placemaking. This corridor supports creative businesses, student housing and programming that celebrates Harlingen's diverse history and talent.



Aerotropolis District

With access to the Valley International Airport and nearby industrial parks, this district is positioned for long-term growth in aerospace, advanced manufacturing, logistics and workforce training. Future development will focus on employment centers, regional infrastructure and innovation-oriented land uses. Strategic branding of the Aerotropolis as an innovation corridor can help Harlingen attract forward-looking industries and position the district as a regional hub for business campuses that benefit from airport adjacency.



Medical District

Anchored by Valley Baptist Medical Center and surrounding health facilities, this district plays a critical role in Harlingen's economy and community well-being. Supporting uses include clinics, research, health-tech businesses and housing creating a medical district that is attractive to medical professionals and welcoming to the community. The district promotes walkability, transit access and placemaking that reflects Harlingen's role as a regional medical hub.

Over time, the Medical District can evolve into Harlingen's Innovation District- a hub for medical research, health-tech entrepreneurship and resilient design practices. By fostering partnerships between Valley Baptist, local universities and the private sector, the district can serve as a laboratory for healthcare innovation while enhancing Harlingen's regional competitiveness.

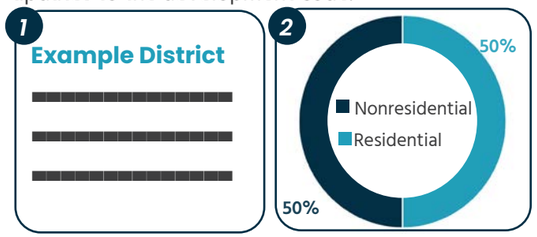
District Development Dashboards

Development Dashboards are a tool that provides staff, appointed officials and elected representatives with comprehensive information related to the application of the future land use model and the districts to development proposals within the City. The components of each dashboard are described in the following section. These dashboards and their elements are meant to be used as guidance and display intent, not strict rules.

The Development Dashboards serve as a framework for the envisioned future of each City district. They provide direction on the types of development and features that may be suitable within that area.

1. District Description

Each dashboard includes the district title and a description of the district's primary purpose, character and intended future conditions. Purpose statements should be used when considering land use decisions, such as the appropriateness of a rezoning case. Character statements should be used when evaluating the building form of a proposal or updates to the development code.



2. Development Ratio

The development ratio dial provides guidance on the overall target mix of residential to non-residential development types envisioned for the areas within the district. This is not intended to be a hard number but rather a general rule of thumb.

3. Density, Intensity & Scale

The recommended density, intensity (i.e. lot coverage) and scale for development in each district are located beneath the purpose statement. Density is represented by dwelling units per acre (DUA) and should be referenced when considering land use decisions with new or redeveloped housing components. Intensity and scale should be considered based on a proposal's relationship to nearby residences and structures. For example, if immediately adjacent to a neighborhood, consideration may be given to limiting the scale of non-residential structures. Scale may be referenced in stories, with one story being approximately 12 to 14 feet high.

4. Visual Representation

Each dashboard includes images depicting examples of the intended character within each district. Local examples are used when available. These photos are not all-encompassing and may not illustrate all appropriate attributes. The representations, however, should be referenced when considering the built form of development inquiries.

5. Project Type & Appropriateness Table

The appropriateness table features ten common project types that illustrate compatible uses within each district. A description of each project type is provided below. Appropriateness ranges are given for each project type on a scale of zero to four markers. Where there is no marker, it means that project type should be prohibited within the district, while four markers mean that project type should likely be allowed by right within the district. Where additional considerations related to the application of a project type are necessary, clarification is provided in the last column. Notably, parks and public facilities are considered appropriate in all districts, regardless of marker designation.

Single-Family Detached (SFD)

Detached dwelling units on separate lots. These homes are typically individually owned and may be built singularly or within larger neighborhood developments.

SFD + Additional Dwelling Unit (ADU)

A detached dwelling unit with a secondary unit on the same property. These ADUs are smaller than the primary unit and can take many forms, including garage apartments, granny flats or backyard casitas. ADUs allow for the provision of housing without drastically changing neighborhood character.

Single-Family Attached (SFA)

Residential dwellings that are connected by a shared wall, such as duplexes or townhomes. Units may be on an individual or shared lot and are higher density than detached single-family homes, but are similar in character and style.

Small Multi-Family (8-12 Units)

Multiple units contained within a single building, with units usually stacked on top of each other, with 8-12 units per lot. Usually the individual units are for rent (apartments), but may be for sale (condos). Multi-family development is the densest type of residential development and may include ancillary uses like parking structures and leasing offices.

Large Multi-Family (12+ Units)

Similar to small multifamily but with 12+ units per lot and may include multiple buildings on the lot, creating a complex.

Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale

Both residential, office, retail and/or other uses contained within a single building or development. These uses may be horizontal or vertical mixed-use. In vertical mixed-use, the ground floor is encouraged to be food and beverage or pedestrian-oriented retail and services, to encourage foot traffic and activity. The residential may be for rent or for sale in a condo regime. Neighborhood scale denotes density, intensity and scale are lower and more compatible with nearby residential neighborhood land uses.

Mixed-Use, Community Scale

Similar to mixed-use, neighborhood scale above but with somewhat higher density, intensity and scale. This project type should act as a community wide draw and attract residents outside of nearby neighborhoods.

Retail

Shops, restaurants, professional services and entertainment uses that can be local or regional scale, depending on their service areas. Locally scaled retail is suitable for small businesses and appropriate for infill projects within existing neighborhoods. Regional scale includes big box stores typically located along major thoroughfares.

Office

Professional and medical offices, including hospitals, that support various employment uses.

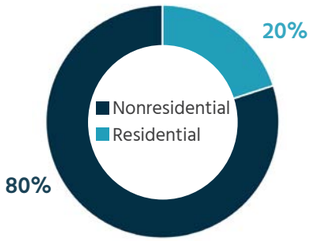
Industrial

Industrial includes both light and general manufacturing uses. Light industrial activities do not generate significant nuisances and are contained indoors. Heavier industrial uses, which may involve outdoor storage, higher truck traffic, and potential nuisances, are directed to designated areas with appropriate buffering and infrastructure.



Downtown District

The historic heart of the City, Downtown Harlingen features a vibrant Main Street lined with shops and restaurants as well as some warehousing. Plans for redevelopment in this district are laid out in Harlingen's Downtown Plan.



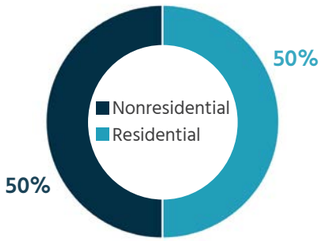
Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
10 to 75 units per acre	Medium, High in some circumstances	1 to 9 Stories Low to Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	● ○ ○ ○	Not considered compatible, as the intent is to provide higher-density housing and activity centers with retail.
SFD + ADU	● ○ ○ ○	
SFA	● ● ● ○	Residential developments can be compatible, provided that they are appropriately located in horizontal or vertical mixed-use areas close to the downtown core.
Small Multi-Family	● ● ● ○	
Large Multi-Family	● ● ● ●	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	● ● ○ ○	
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	● ● ● ●	This is the ideal form of development within the Downtown District, including activity centers, retail, services and diverse housing options; design should emphasize the pedestrian experience.
Retail	● ● ● ●	Most appropriate in the downtown core or major corridors.
Office	● ● ● ○	Most appropriate on upper floors of mixed use buildings with active ground floor uses.
Industrial	● ○ ○ ○	Flex and light industrial that supports the goals of downtown, such as maker spaces and studios.



Civic District

A predominately residential area that consists of single family and small-scale multifamily housing, local serving retail and civic facilities including City Hall, Harlingen Municipal Auditorium and Lon C Hill Park.



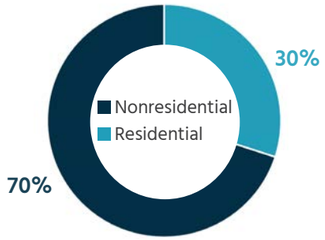
Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
3 to 22 units per acre	Low	1 to 4 Stories Low/Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	● ● ● ●	Appropriate in low-density residential areas.
SFD + ADU	● ● ● ●	
SFA	● ● ● ○	Appropriate in medium-density residential and mixed-use areas with close proximity to civic amenities.
Small Multi-Family	● ● ● ○	
Large Multi-Family	● ● ○ ○	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	● ● ● ○	Most appropriate in northeast node of the District.
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	● ○ ○ ○	
Retail	● ● ● ○	Neighborhood-serving retail and entertainment is most appropriate in mixed use areas and along District corridors.
Office	● ● ○ ○	Most appropriate in existing space reserved for civic uses.
Industrial	● ○ ○ ○	All industrial project types should be located along the eastern corridor of the District.



Convention District

Located at the intersection of highways US-77 and US-83, this district is a central hub for retail, events and entertainment that attracts local residents and visitors from out of town. Additionally, this district includes a variety of residential areas ranging from low-to high-density.



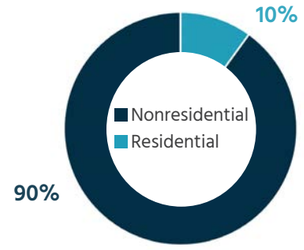
Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
10 to 40 units per acre	Medium, High in some circumstances	1 to 9 Stories Low to Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	○ ○ ○ ○	
SFD + ADU	○ ○ ○ ○	
SFA	● ● ○ ○	Most appropriate in medium-density residential areas.
Small Multi-Family	● ● ○ ○	
Large Multi-Family	● ● ● ○	Appropriate in high-density residential areas.
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	○ ○ ○ ○	
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	● ● ● ●	Appropriate within the district core and along major corridors. Should account for local as well as community-wide draw to this project type.
Retail	● ● ● ●	Appropriate overall. Retail developments should be regional in the size and scale.
Office	● ● ● ●	Appropriate if located within a mixed-use development or along major corridors.
Industrial	● ● ○ ○	Appropriate for limited light industrial development.



Regional Commercial Corridor

A regional hub that serves as the western gateway along US-83. This districts features commercial land uses along the highway as well neighborhoods comprised of single-family homes.



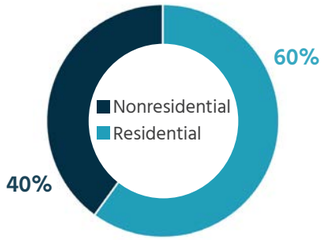
Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
10 to 40 units per acre	Medium	1 to 4 Stories Low/Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	○ ○ ○ ○	
SFD + ADU	○ ○ ○ ○	
SFA	● ● ○ ○	Appropriate along northern perimeter of district to support transition to adjacent, lower density residential areas.
Small Multi-Family	● ● ○ ○	
Large Multi-Family	● ● ● ○	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	● ● ● ○	May be appropriate if set-back from major roadways. Should focus on the retail and services for nearby neighborhoods.
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	● ○ ○ ○	
Retail	● ● ● ●	Appropriate overall, with a regional retail size and scale.
Office	● ● ● ●	Appropriate overall.
Industrial	● ● ○ ○	Appropriate if integrated within larger, regional commercial developments.



Cultural District

This district provides a hub for the City's culture and heritage while serving as a gateway for those arriving through the Valley International Airport. Supporting residential uses can be found along Loop 499 in addition to arts and historical institutions.



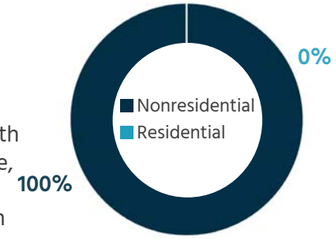
Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
4 to 22 units per acre	Low to Medium	1 to 4 Stories Low/Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	●●●●	Appropriate in low-density residential areas.
SFD + ADU	●●●●	
SFA	●●●○	Appropriate to support transition to adjacent, lower density residential areas.
Small Multi-Family	●●●○	Most appropriate in high-density residential and mixed-use areas with close proximity to schools and employment centers.
Large Multi-Family	●●○○	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	●●●○	
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	●○○○	
Retail	●●●○	Appropriate in mixed-use areas and along major corridors.
Office	●●●○	Appropriate along major corridors and near the Valley International Airport.
Industrial	●●●○	



Aerotropolis District

The Aerotropolis District, located south of Valley International Airport, is largely undeveloped aside from one neighborhood. Future development will target light industrial uses compatible with airport operations, including research and development, aerospace, logistics, and flex industrial. Heavy industrial uses that generate noise, odor, dust, or require outdoor storage are not appropriate in this district and are directed to other industrial areas in Harlingen.



Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
0 units per acre	Medium	1 to 2 Stories Low-Rise

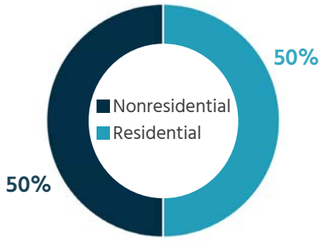
Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	○○○○	Not considered appropriate, as this district can contain uses and businesses that may be considered a nuisance to residents.
SFD + ADU	○○○○	
SFA	○○○○	
Small Multi-Family	○○○○	
Large Multi-Family	○○○○	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	○○○○	
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	○○○○	
Retail	●●○○	Appropriate with increased emphasis on the service industry and office employment. These project types serve to boost attractiveness of office developments.
Office	●●●●	Appropriate in employment and industrial areas
Industrial	●●●●	Appropriate overall, with high quality design standards.





Medical District

Centered around the City's healthcare institutions, this district includes a variety of housing options and supporting retail along local corridors.



Residential Density	Intensity	Scale
18 to 40 units per acre	Medium, High in some circumstances	1 to 9 Stories Low to Mid-Rise

Project Type & Appropriateness		Compatibility Considerations
SFD	●●○○	
SFD + ADU	●●○○	
SFA	●●●○	Appropriate in medium and high-density residential areas. Should be located in close proximity to schools and employment centers.
Small Multi-Family	●●●○	
Large Multi-Family	●●●●	
Mixed-Use, Neighborhood Scale	●●○○	
Mixed-Use, Community Scale	●●●●	Appropriate within the district core and along major corridors. Should account for local as well as community-wide draw to this project type and design should emphasize the pedestrian experience.
Retail	●●●●	Regional-scale retail is appropriate along major corridors. Local-scale retail should be concentrated within the district core, with nearby pedestrian access.
Office	●●●●	Appropriate in mixed-use and employment areas.
Industrial	●●○○	Appropriate for light industrial such as research and development, medical and flex industrial uses.



Urban Design Best Practices for Harlingen

Urban design is about shaping the everyday spaces where people live, work and gather. For Harlingen, good design means more than just aesthetics it's about comfort, safety, connectivity and creating a sense of pride in the City. These best practices reflect what we heard from the community and provide a roadmap for how public spaces, streets and development can support a more vibrant, resilient and inclusive Harlingen.



Prioritize the Public Realm

The public realm, including sidewalks, parks, streetscapes and plazas, plays a major role in shaping community life. Investments in wider sidewalks, street trees, shaded bus stops, solar lighting and benches can make Harlingen more walkable, welcoming and safe for all residents. Feedback from the community emphasized a desire for better lighting, accessible walkways and more comfortable places to gather, especially in Downtown and on the Westside.

- Install solar lighting in parks, alleys and along sidewalks for added safety.
- Provide benches, shade, trash cans and water fountains in gathering areas.
- Activate underused public spaces with events, art and temporary installations.
- Improve sidewalks near schools, parks and high-traffic streets.
- Focus on pedestrian-friendly design in Westside neighborhoods and Downtown.



Beautify Gateways and Corridors

Major roads and entry points into Harlingen shape how residents and visitors experience the City. Improvements such as native landscaping, public art, attractive signage and lighting enhance community pride and attract investment. Corridors like Commerce Street were frequently mentioned as needing visual upgrades and better maintenance.

- Add trees, planting strips and native flowers along major streets.
- Install coordinated signage and directional markers that reflect Harlingen's identity.
- Use lighting and public art to highlight key gateways into the City.
- Improve building facades and remove visual clutter in commercial areas.
- Maintain clean and consistent streetscapes across key corridors.



Make Downtown a Destination

Downtown Harlingen is full of charm and history. It has the potential to become a more vibrant and active place for shopping, dining, events and daily life. Design strategies should focus on walkability, lighting and bringing more housing and activity into the area. Residents want Downtown to feel safe, well-lit and alive with culture.

- Encourage apartments or lofts above existing storefronts.
- Transform alleys into public gathering spaces with lighting and greenery.
- Expand outdoor events and evening programming like concerts and markets.
- Improve sidewalk conditions and pedestrian crossings on Jackson Street.
- Offer support for businesses to refresh storefronts and activate the ground floor.



Design for Connectivity

Getting around safely and comfortably is a top priority in Harlingen. Whether by foot, bike or bus, residents want streets and trails that connect neighborhoods to parks, schools and jobs. Streets should serve all users, not just drivers.

- Fill sidewalk gaps near schools, parks and civic buildings.
- Build more bike lanes and connect them to existing trails.
- Add safe crossings at busy intersections and along major roads.
- Ensure sidewalks and trails are accessible for everyone, including those with disabilities.
- Extend and connect the Arroyo trail to more parts of the City.



Elevate Westside Neighborhoods

Equity in design means focusing investment where it is needed most. Harlingen's Westside has been identified as an area with unmet needs. Improving infrastructure and public spaces here can support long-term growth and well-being for all residents.

- Build parks, trails and plazas in underserved Westside areas.
- Upgrade lighting, sidewalks and drainage systems.
- Develop community centers, youth facilities and local services.
- Improve access to jobs, schools and transit in Westside neighborhoods.
- Use public art and placemaking to celebrate neighborhood pride.



Celebrate Harlingen's Identity

Design can help tell Harlingen's story and reflect its rich culture and heritage. From public art to historic buildings and signage, the City's unique character can be expressed in creative and authentic ways.

- Use murals and cultural installations that reflect Harlingen's people and history.
- Preserve historic buildings and encourage adaptive reuse.
- Highlight the City's bicultural roots in signage, materials and public spaces.
- Support local artists and makers through public art programs.
- Incorporate color, texture and materials that are unique to the Rio Grande Valley.



Create Resilient and Climate-Friendly Design

With frequent flooding and extreme heat, Harlingen must build with the future in mind. Green design strategies can reduce risks, save resources and make neighborhoods more livable.

- Plant trees and add shaded areas in parks and along streets.
- Use drought-resistant landscaping and rain gardens to manage stormwater.
- Encourage permeable paving for sidewalks and parking areas.
- Design for passive cooling through shade, ventilation and orientation.
- Use building and street materials that reduce heat and reflect sunlight.