CHAPTER 2

DOWNTOWN FRAMEWORK



Proposed Downtown Framework Plan

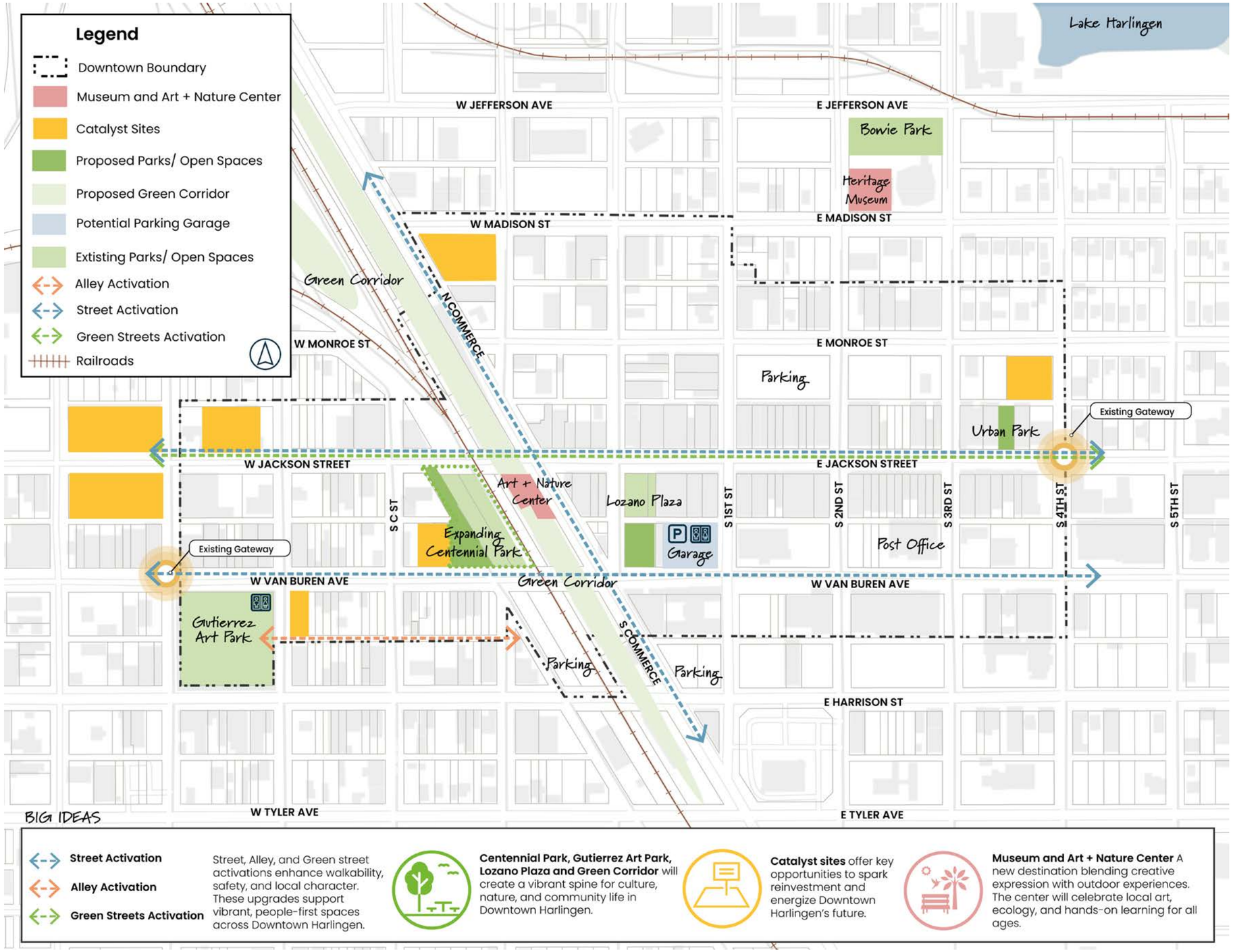
A framework plan for Downtown Harlingen consists of roadways, open spaces and other public realm elements that define and connect downtown development. These components form the fabric that holds the district together. The framework organizes key components into four categories: catalyst sites, character areas, open space and mobility. Within this framework, a series of development opportunities, ranging from new buildings to enhancements in the public realm have been identified to support future investment, strengthen connections and guide downtown growth.

- Catalyst Sites – Priority areas in Downtown Harlingen that are positioned for major redevelopment and investment, with the potential to become signature destinations.
- Character Areas – Distinct sub-areas within the downtown that reflect unique identities and assets, helping to guide tailored and strategic investment.
- Open Spaces – Parks, plazas and other public gathering places that provide venues for recreation, events and community interaction in the heart of Harlingen.
- Mobility – Enhancements to transportation infrastructure, including streets, sidewalks, bike facilities and wayfinding, that contribute significantly to the function and experience of Downtown Harlingen.

Together, these elements support a connected, accessible and walkable downtown. Strategic investment across these categories can enhance the local business environment, attract visitors and create a more vibrant and cohesive district that aligns with the guiding principles of the Harlingen Comprehensive Plan.

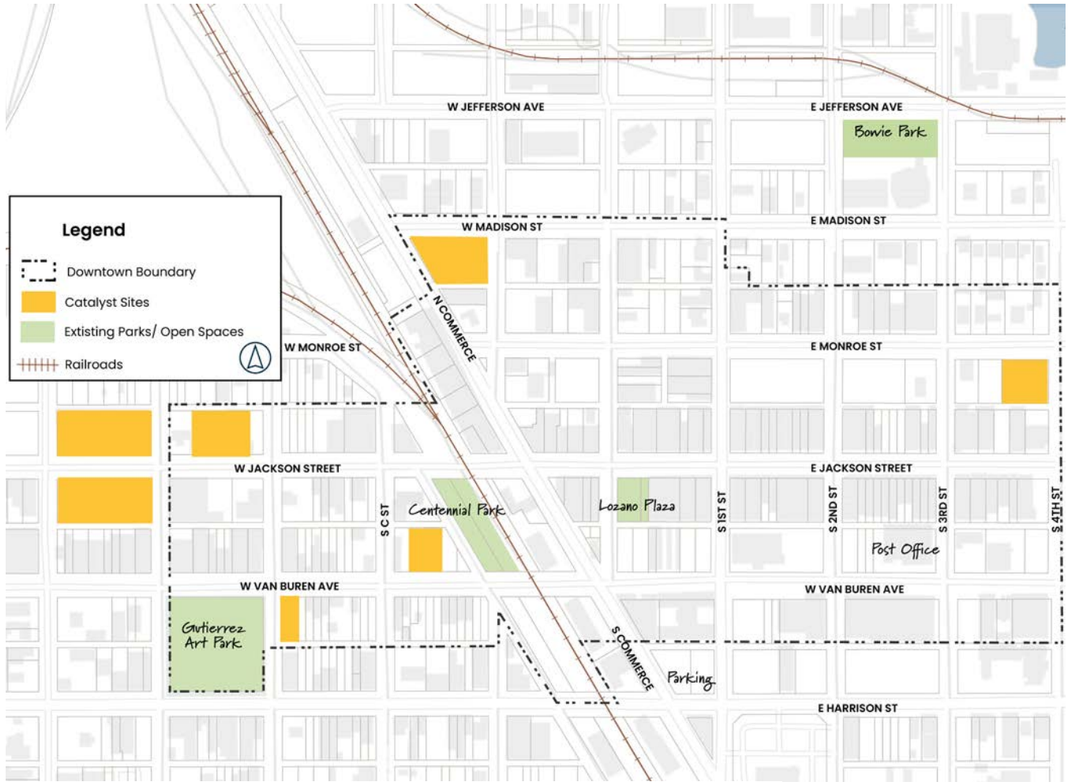
The Downtown Framework is shown on the adjacent page. The following pages provide a closer look at each element of the framework.





Map 6. Downtown Overall Framework

Catalyst Sites



Map 7. Catalyst Sites

Catalyst sites are key opportunity areas that can significantly shape the future of Downtown Harlingen by attracting investment, promoting redevelopment and enhancing the public realm. These sites were identified based on visibility, location, ownership patterns and potential to support the community's broader goals for downtown vitality, walkability and economic activity.

Catalyst sites are underutilized properties with strategic potential to advance housing, civic, cultural and public realm goals in Downtown Harlingen.

W Madison Street - Catalyst Site

Situated at a key gateway along the Green Corridor and adjacent to the historic Madison Hotel, this site presents a strong opportunity for mixed-use redevelopment. Its visibility and proximity to planned green space improvements make it well-suited for ground-floor commercial uses with upper-level housing or office space. Redeveloping this parcel could reinforce Downtown Harlingen's northern edge, activate the corridor and introduce new energy near an iconic historic landmark.

E Monroe Street - Catalyst Site

Located at the corner of East Monroe Street and South 4th Street, this site offers a prime opportunity for mixed-use redevelopment. Currently serving as a surface parking lot, the property's visibility and proximity to a proposed urban park position it as a natural catalyst for new investment. Redeveloping this site would create better connections between key downtown destinations, activate the streetcape and bring new life to the eastern edge of Downtown Harlingen.

Arts + Culture Hub - Catalyst Sites

Two vacant or underutilized blocks west of South Commerce Street present the opportunity to develop a dedicated arts district anchor, including studio spaces, maker hubs or creative incubators. This area already aligns with the broader Arts + Entertainment District and could be the site for new community-facing arts infrastructure. These blocks could also support event programming or affordable artist housing to help retain Harlingen's creative talent.

Food and Family Activity Hub - Catalyst Sites

Located next to the Gutierrez Art Park and Centennial Park, these areas could become lively hubs for families and everyday parkgoers. Future development should consider incorporating public-facing elements such as a splash pad, updated playground equipment, a bandstand and space for food trucks or casual dining. Public art installations, enhanced lighting and increased policing would support safety and create a vibrant, welcoming environment that activates Van Buren Avenue and encourages more foot traffic along the corridor.



Open Space Framework



Map 8. Downtown Open Space Framework

Downtown Harlingen's evolving open space network builds on a legacy of civic plazas, community parks and natural assets that have long anchored public life in the City. Existing destinations like Centennial Park, Lozano Plaza and Gutierrez Park provide critical recreational and cultural value, while underutilized parcels, vacant lots and public right-of-ways offer new opportunities to create a cohesive and vibrant open space system.

A proposed green corridor would serve as the backbone of this network, connecting Downtown's cultural anchors, civic institutions and neighborhoods through a safe, shaded and walkable environment. This linear corridor would not only support active transportation and recreation, but also act as an urban habitat that supports bird migration and biodiversity in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Native landscaping, integrated stormwater features and pollinator-friendly plantings would reinforce the corridor as both an ecological asset and a social connector.

Key Public Space Opportunities

Urban Park in the East Downtown Core

A new pocket park near 3rd Street and Monroe Avenue would introduce much-needed green space to a higher-density district with limited recreational amenities. Designed for flexibility, this park could host casual gatherings, small events and interactive public art while providing daily shade and comfort. This park would be located near the East Monroe Street catalyst site, which has been identified as a prime opportunity for mixed-use redevelopment.

Gutierrez Park

Gutierrez Park is envisioned as a vibrant Art Park featuring public art installations, a shaded modern playground, a splash pad, a restroom, a bandstand and improved safety through increased policing. The park should also support informal gathering spaces and family-oriented activities, strengthening its role as a neighborhood anchor. In addition to the improvements identified, Gutierrez Park should also see upgrades in site lighting, landscaping, signage and sidewalk infrastructure. Additional benches, a pavilion and long wheelchair-accessible picnic tables should be incorporated to support family-oriented gatherings and activities.

Lozano Plaza

Lozano Plaza could be enhanced as a key civic space with integrated restrooms and a small stage to support performances and community events. The plaza also has the potential to expand across the adjacent alley, creating a larger, more flexible gathering space that connects seamlessly with nearby amenities like the parking garage and trail network.

Museum and Art + Nature Center

The Museum and Art + Nature Center will serve as an interactive space that celebrates local art, ecology and culture through both indoor exhibits and outdoor learning. This unique destination blends creative expression with hands-on experiences and nature-based programming for all ages.

Restroom and Comfort Nodes

To encourage longer visits and improve user experience, comfort stations featuring restrooms, drinking fountains and shaded seating are recommended at key locations. Lozano Plaza and Gutierrez Park are ideal sites for these upgrades, supporting daily use and special events while enhancing accessibility and convenience along the green corridor.



Figure 6. Centennial Park Concept Sketch

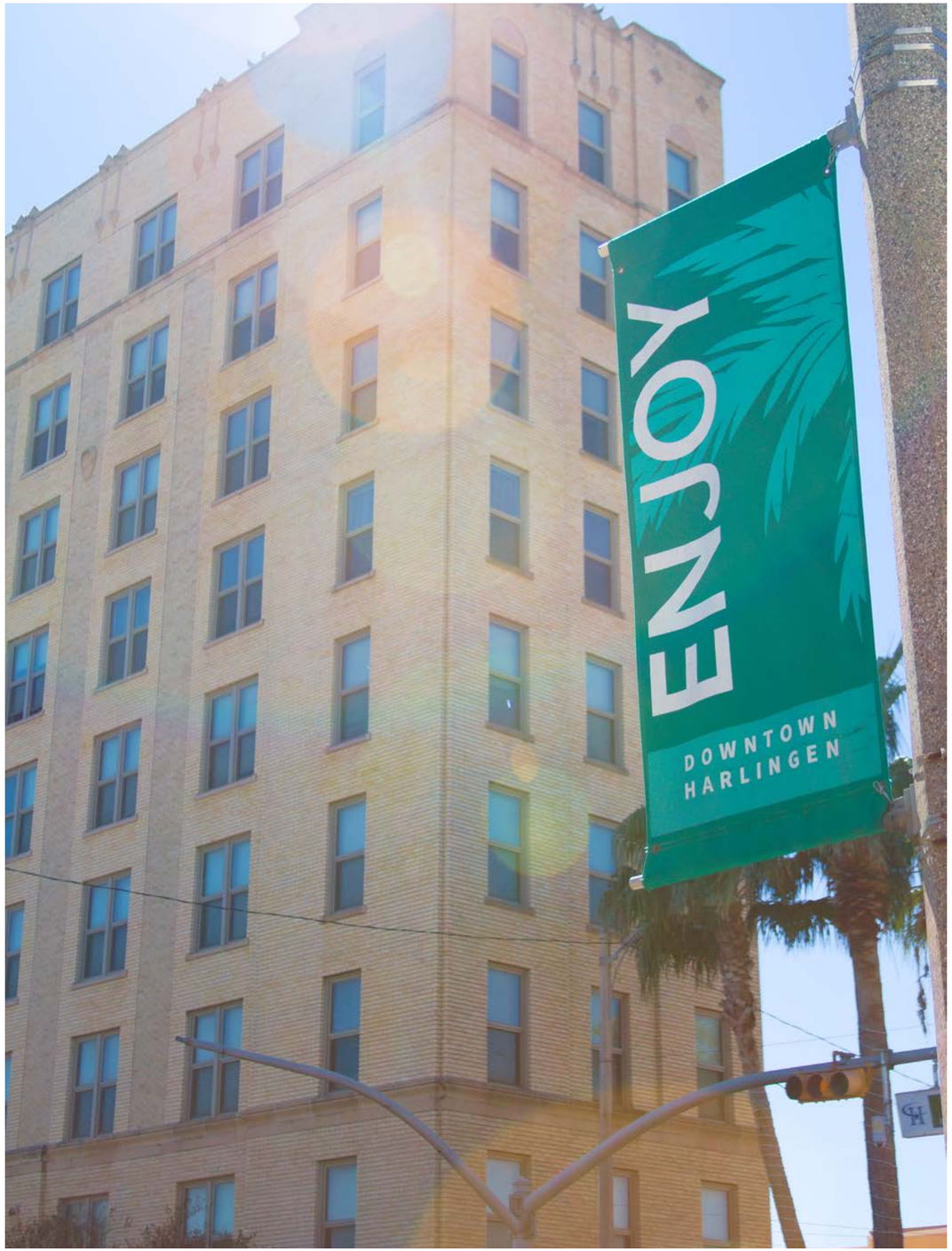
Centennial Park

Centennial Park should be expanded and enhanced with flexible event-ready infrastructure such as vendor zones and stage areas to host larger festivals, public gatherings and pop-up markets (see Figure 6). The park should also incorporate additional benches, tables, lighting and a small covered pavilion for community gatherings. Programming opportunities for Centennial Park should be coordinated with downtown business owners. The design and activation of the park should complement and build upon the catalyst site identified just to the west, creating a cohesive connection between these two key downtown destinations.

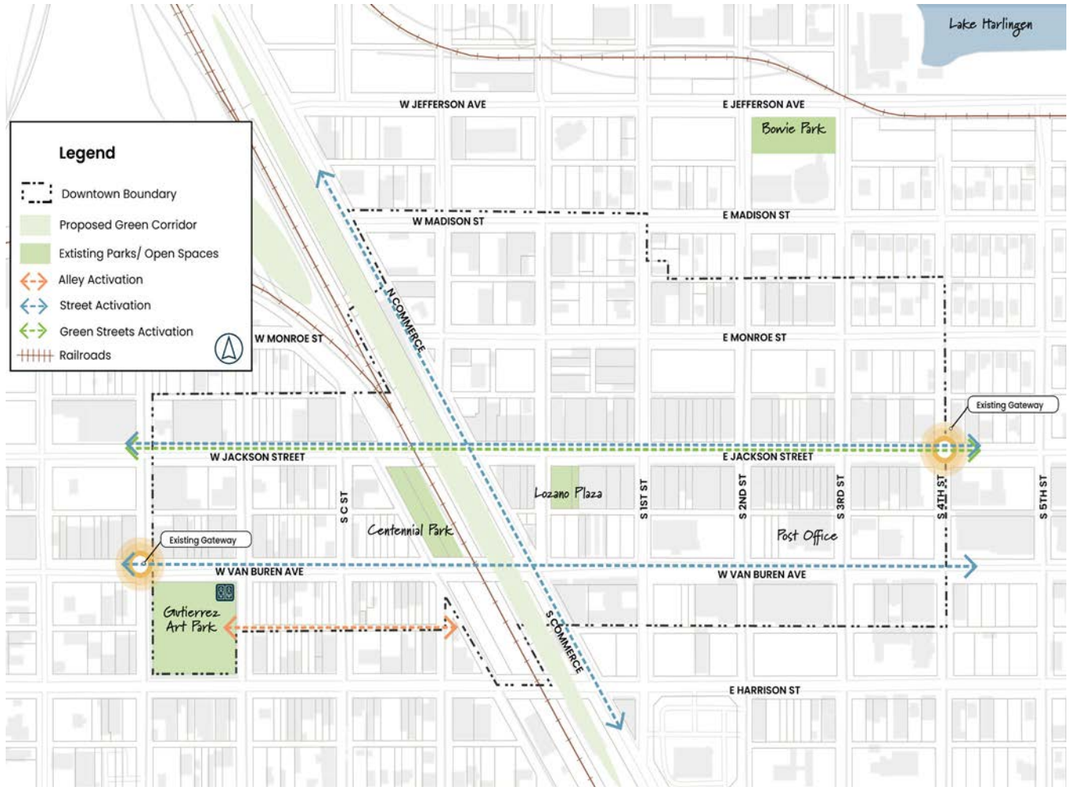
Connecting to Nature and the Arroyo

Opportunities also exist to expand Downtown's relationship with the Arroyo Colorado through the creation of a green corridor that links urban spaces with natural landscapes. Though physical access is limited today, future efforts should explore ways to connect the Downtown to the Arroyo through green spines, wayfinding and active transportation infrastructure. Proposed bike lanes along Commerce offer a key opportunity to enhance this corridor and support multimodal access to natural areas. These connections can build on Harlingen's identity as a nature-oriented city, known for birdwatching and ecological tourism.

By integrating parks, plazas and green corridors into the everyday fabric of Downtown, Harlingen can create an open space system that supports community health, ecological function and economic vitality, making public space a cornerstone of its downtown revitalization.



Mobility Framework



Map 9. Downtown Mobility Framework

The Mobility Framework for Downtown Harlingen is centered on creating safe, vibrant and walkable streets that connect neighborhoods, civic destinations and public spaces through intentional design. Rather than prioritizing cars, this framework emphasizes street activation, re-imagining streets not just as corridors for movement, but as places where people linger, gather and interact.

Street activations, green corridors and alley enhancements are key strategies to establish a complete network for pedestrians and cyclists, making Downtown Harlingen easier to explore and more welcoming for everyday activity and special events alike.

Street Activation: Streets as Social Spaces

The core of the framework focuses on activating key east-west and north-south streets to connect Downtown's destinations. Jackson Avenue and Van Buren Avenue are envisioned as vibrant east-west spines that link surrounding neighborhoods to major civic anchors such as Centennial Park, Gutierrez Park and City Hall. Meanwhile, North and South Commerce Street will serve as the primary north-south connector, tying together the Downtown Core, cultural destinations and future open spaces.

Along these corridors, targeted improvements can bring life to the street, including:

- Wider sidewalks, tree canopies and lighting for safety and shade.
- Seating, art installations and wayfinding to create an inviting pedestrian environment.
- Pop-up spaces for vendors, community events or food trucks.
- Integration of public art and storytelling that reflects Harlingen's culture.

Street activation ensures that these corridors function not only for movement, but as active, flexible spaces that support daily use, social interaction and special events.

Green Streets: Connecting Nature and Neighborhoods

Green street opportunities include an east-west corridor along Jackson Street, offering a chance to integrate nature and sustainability into the mobility network. This corridor will feature:

- Native landscaping and shade trees for comfort and ecological value.
- Bioswales and permeable paving for stormwater management.
- Pollinator-friendly and bird-supportive planting, reinforcing Harlingen's identity as part of a key migratory flyway.
- Walkable, shaded paths that link Downtown with nearby neighborhoods and open spaces.

Green streets serve as both transportation routes and green infrastructure, creating a calm, shaded alternative to high-traffic roads and enhancing quality of life for all users.

Alley Activation: Small-Scale, Big Impact

The alley between Harrison and Van Buren holds strong potential for activation and reuse, and can become a vibrant pedestrian path and economic incubator for small businesses, artists and vendors.

Alley activation strategies may include:

- Cafe seating, murals and string lighting to create welcoming walkable zones.
- Dual-frontage retail, where one side faces the street and the other activates the alley.
- Flexible spaces for pop-up markets, performances and seasonal events.
- Opportunities for art walks, night events and cultural programming.

By transforming underused spaces into active corridors, alleys become vital components of a layered, people-friendly downtown experience.

Two-Way Street Restoration: Improving Circulation and Access

Restoring downtown's one-way streets to two-way circulation will improve navigation, reduce confusion, and create safer conditions for people walking or biking. Madison, Monroe, Jackson, and Van Buren currently move traffic efficiently but discourage direct access to businesses and make the grid less intuitive for visitors. Converting them to two-way streets will calm vehicle speeds, support storefront activity, and strengthen the overall street network. Specific improvements would include:

- Reconfiguring street markings and signals to safely accommodate two-way flow
- Enhancing intersections with pedestrian refuges and shorter crossings
- Supporting storefront visibility and easier access to businesses along each corridor
- Using conversion projects to incorporate lighting, shade, and bicycle facilities

Making these streets two-way will create a more intuitive grid, strengthen business access, and provide opportunities to improve the pedestrian and bicycle environment.

Accessibility and Universal Design: A Downtown for All

A walkable downtown must be accessible to residents and visitors of all ages and abilities. Today, some sidewalks and crossings lack features that make movement easy for people with mobility challenges. Upgrading infrastructure through universal design will ensure that everyone can take part in downtown life, whether traveling by foot, wheelchair, or stroller. Priority actions would include:

- Upgrading curb ramps, tactile paving, and crosswalk timing for ADA compliance
- Ensuring continuous, unobstructed sidewalks with smooth and durable surfaces
- Adding shaded rest areas, benches, and water fountains along major routes
- Prioritizing accessibility improvements near civic buildings, transit stops, and public spaces

These upgrades will make downtown welcoming and convenient for everyone while setting a higher standard for safety and comfort.

Parking Solutions: Balancing Convenience and Access

Downtown has parking options, but many visitors perceive a shortage. A coordinated strategy can improve how parking is used while supporting walkability and business activity. Future approaches should balance convenience for drivers with the goal of keeping downtown safe and comfortable for people on foot. Potential measures include:

- Exploring pay parking to encourage turnover of prime spaces
- Evaluating the feasibility of a centrally located parking structure with ground-floor activation
- Improving signage and wayfinding to highlight available public parking areas
- Pairing parking strategies with enhanced pedestrian routes between lots and destinations

Managing parking effectively will improve convenience for visitors while reinforcing a pedestrian-oriented downtown

Bicycle Network Enhancements: Strengthening Active Transportation

Bicycling offers a healthy and affordable way to move around downtown, but many connections remain incomplete or lack safe facilities. Downtown's compact grid makes it well-suited for bike improvements that can increase access and reduce reliance on cars. Expanding the bicycle network will also support local businesses by bringing more people directly to storefronts. Steps to strengthen the network include:

- Adding protected bike lanes along corridors that link neighborhoods to downtown and the trail system
- Installing bike racks and repair stations at civic, cultural, and retail destinations
- Using signage and pavement markings to clearly indicate shared lanes and bike-priority routes
- Coordinating new lanes with two-way street restoration to ensure smooth circulation

Improved bicycle facilities will strengthen connectivity and encourage more residents and visitors to choose active transportation.

Transit Connections: Linking Downtown to the Network

Expanding transit access directly into downtown Harlingen offers an opportunity to better connect the city's core with the broader Valley Metro network. While service currently runs nearby along Harrison and Tyler, and flex service is available, no fixed routes stop within the downtown grid itself. Establishing dedicated downtown stops would improve visibility for the system, expand mobility choices, and make transit a more reliable option for reaching businesses, civic spaces, and events. Improvements could include:

- Establishing dedicated Valley Metro stops within the downtown grid to provide direct service
- Extending existing routes or adjusting alignments so that at least one regular line serves the downtown core
- Adding branded stops downtown that are clearly visible, with signage and real-time arrival information
- Designing new stops with shade, seating, and ADA-compliant access to encourage regular use

Adding dedicated transit stops downtown will improve access, strengthen the regional network, and make transit a more convenient option for everyday trips.

Street Lighting and Safety: Creating a Welcoming Downtown

Lighting is essential to creating a safe, welcoming, and vibrant downtown environment. Well-designed illumination along sidewalks, alleys, and crossings can encourage evening activity and make the district feel more comfortable after dark. A coordinated lighting strategy can improve perceptions of safety while also showcasing downtown's character through thoughtful design. Enhancements could include:

- Replacing outdated lighting with energy-efficient LED and solar fixtures.
- Prioritizing crosswalks, alleyways, and transit stops for targeted upgrades
- Integrating decorative fixtures that reflect downtown's identity and heritage
- Coordinating lighting with public safety efforts in key gathering areas

Improved lighting will support nighttime activity, strengthen perceptions of safety, and make downtown more inviting after dark.

Jackson Avenue: Celebrating Harlingen's Main Street

Jackson Avenue is the historic heart of Downtown Harlingen and has long been the center of community life and commerce. Its role as the city's main street makes it both a place to arrive and a place to spend time. Future design options such as restoring two-way travel and improving conditions for walking, biking, and driving can reinforce Jackson's identity while making access to businesses, civic spaces, and events more comfortable and intuitive. In this way, Jackson Avenue can serve as a model for how downtown streets balance mobility with the life of the city. Enhancements could include:

- Restoring two-way operation to simplify circulation, improve storefront access, and encourage safe vehicle speeds
- Improving walking conditions with wide sidewalks, frequent crossings, and shade to make the street comfortable and inviting
- Strengthening bicycle access with visible, low-stress connections that link riders to downtown destinations
- Ensuring Jackson is directly accessible from transit, with stops that are visible, shaded, and easy to reach on foot
- Maintaining parking that supports businesses while improving the experience of moving between cars, sidewalks, and storefronts
- Supporting public life through design choices that shape travel lanes, sidewalks, and planting areas so Jackson functions as a place for gathering as well as movement

Together, these improvements would celebrate Jackson Avenue as Harlingen's main street and demonstrate how mobility design can reinforce both access and downtown identity. The following cross-section options illustrate how these goals could take shape along the street.

Jackson Avenue: Cross Section Options

The following cross sections illustrate different ways Jackson Avenue could be organized to celebrate its role as downtown's main street. Each option explores how space can be balanced between vehicles, sidewalks, and planting areas to restore circulation and create a more welcoming environment for people.

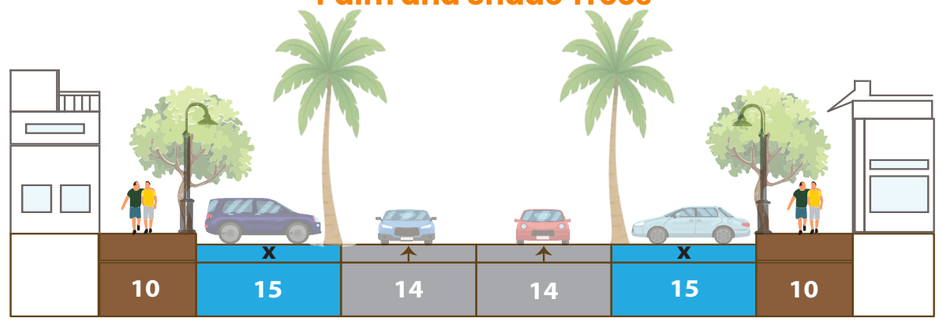
- Palm and Shade Trees: Introducing small planting areas along the curb creates space to relocate palms and add shade trees. This begins to restore the comfort and identity of Jackson Street, making walking more enjoyable while keeping parking and travel lanes in place.
- Two-Way Street Restoration: With shade trees in place, this option also restores Jackson to two-way travel. The return to its historic circulation pattern makes the street easier to navigate, strengthens storefront access, and brings the balance between movement and public life closer to what a main street should be.
- Planting Area Option: This option builds on these improvements by reducing Jackson to a single one-way lane. The reclaimed space becomes a generous planting strip that can support large shade trees and space for pedestrian amenities. This approach celebrates Jackson as a place to walk, gather, and enjoy downtown while continuing to provide access for cars.
- Parallel Parking and Complete Street: This option replaces angled parking with parallel parking and expands sidewalks to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment. Both sides of the street incorporate a shared-use path, giving space for people walking and biking alongside storefronts. Existing palms remain in place, with new shade trees added in planting areas to enhance comfort and identity. The result is a complete street that supports walking, cycling, storefront activity, and vehicle access in balance.

Jackson Ave - Cross Section Options

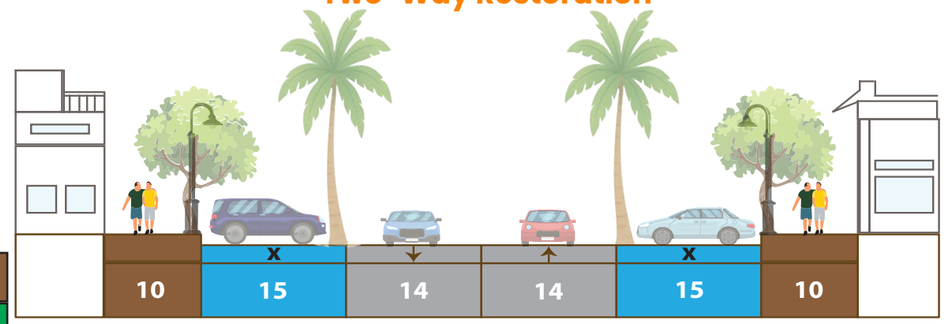
Key

- Sidewalk
- Planting Area
- Angled Parking
- Parallel Parking
- Shared-use
- Travel Lane

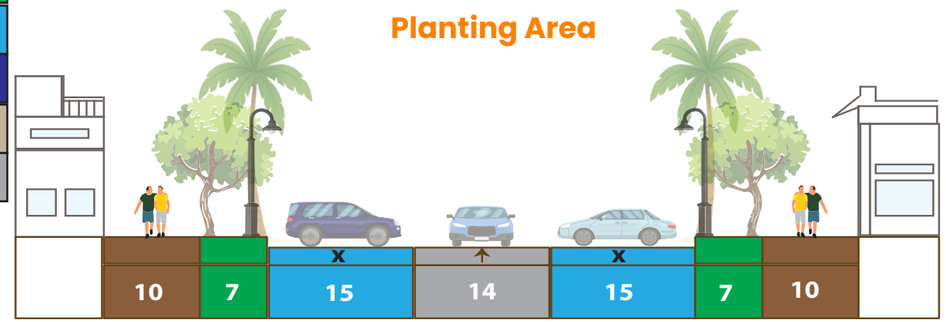
Palm and Shade Trees



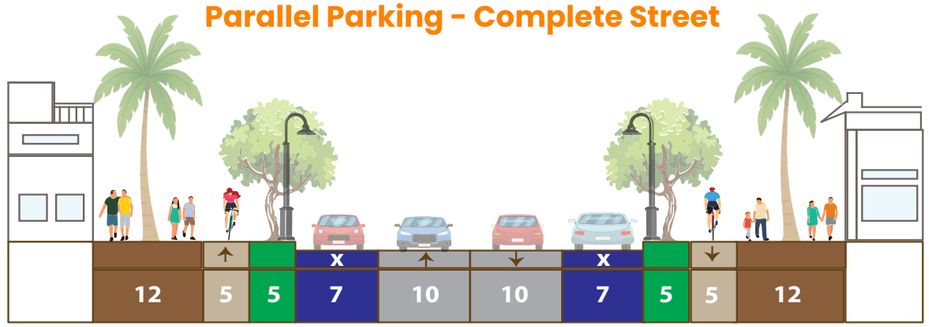
Two-Way Restoration

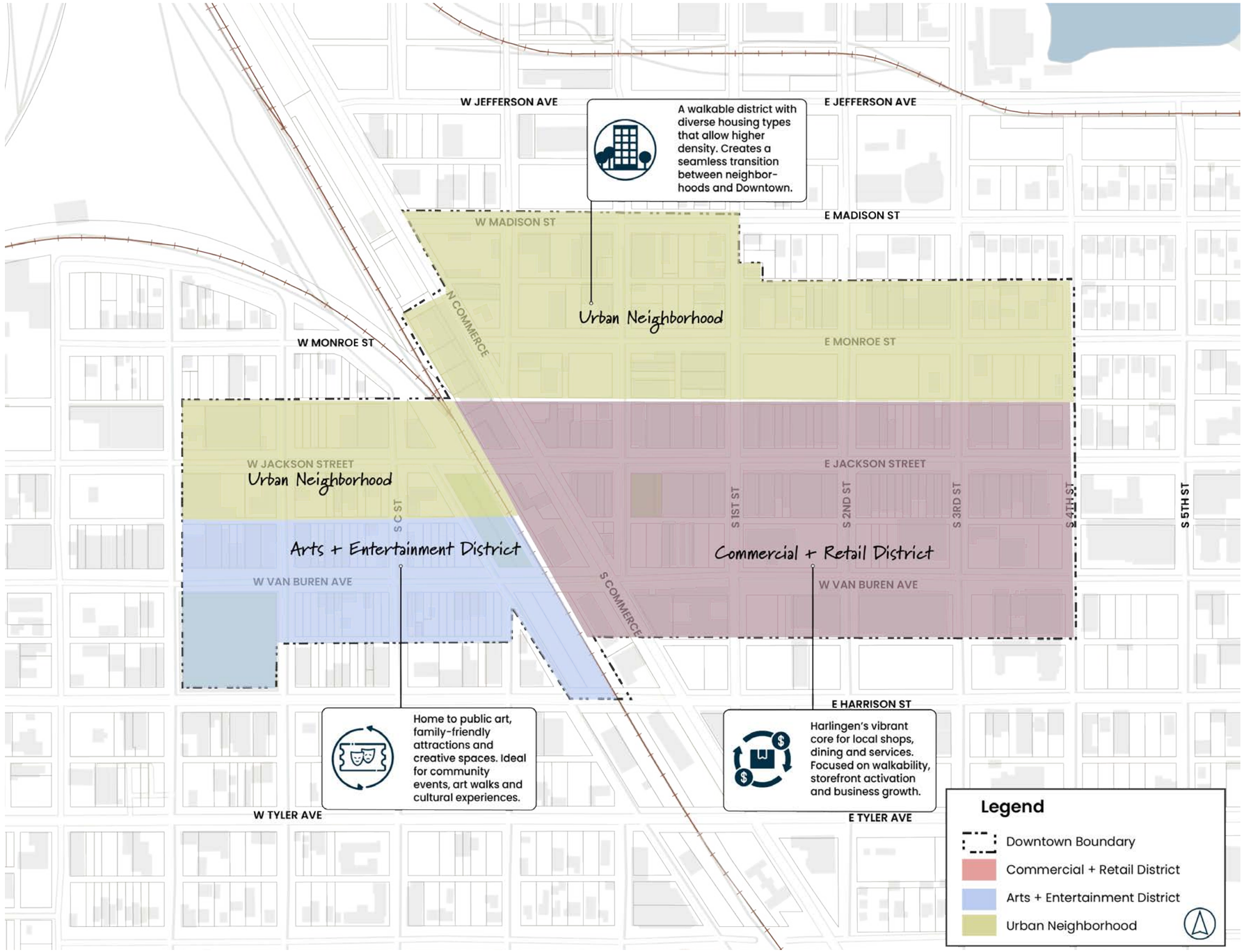


Planting Area



Parallel Parking - Complete Street





Map 10. Downtown District Character Areas

Character Areas

Downtown Harlingen is made up of a diverse mix of places each with its own identity, opportunities and role in the community's future. Instead of treating the downtown as a single unified zone, this Framework Plan recognizes that a more strategic approach is needed. By organizing Downtown Harlingen into distinct character areas, the City can guide public investment and private development in ways that reflect local context, maximize impact and build on existing momentum.

Each area contributes something different to the downtown experience from vibrant retail streets to arts-focused gathering spaces to walkable residential neighborhoods. These areas are not rigid zones, but flexible guides that reflect both existing conditions and future potential. By understanding the unique strengths and needs of each character area, Harlingen can create a more connected, accessible and inclusive downtown that supports long-term economic vitality and community pride.

Commercial + Retail District

The Commercial + Retail District forms the economic backbone of Downtown Harlingen. Centered along East Jackson and Van Buren, this area is home to a concentration of local businesses, restaurants, service providers and small shops that create a walkable, active environment. As Harlingen continues to grow, this district presents a key opportunity for infill development, facade improvements and sidewalk upgrades that enhance the customer experience and attract more foot traffic.

This area should serve as a model for how downtown can balance small business vitality with streetscape improvements, outdoor dining opportunities, public art and enhanced lighting. Strengthening storefront visibility and promoting mixed-use development will further support business retention and recruitment, while reinforcing this area as the heart of downtown life.

Arts + Entertainment District

Located just west of the Commercial + Retail District, the Arts + Entertainment District is a vibrant cultural area centered around Gutierrez Park and Van Buren Avenue. This district is envisioned as a family-oriented destination, featuring interactive public art, creative programming, performances and informal gathering spaces. Opportunities include a bandstand, splash pad, food truck plaza and enhanced lighting to support evening activity.

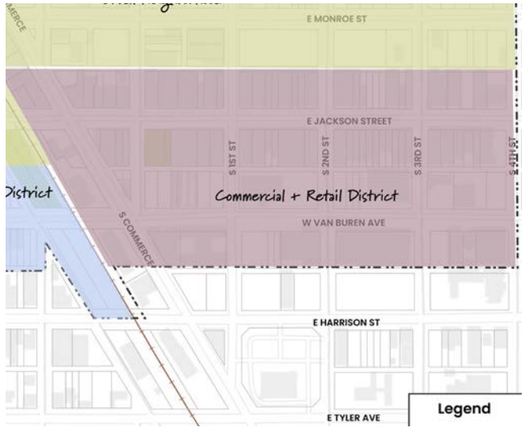
Building on Harlingen's creative identity, this area celebrates art and expression through murals, sculptures and community-driven events. Future improvements should focus on activating public spaces, supporting artists through live-work housing or small studios, and enhancing connectivity with nearby neighborhoods and attractions.

Urban Neighborhood

The Urban Neighborhood district spans both north and west of Downtown and offers a variety of housing types from townhomes and duplexes to small multi-family developments that support increased residential density near the core. This walkable neighborhood creates a seamless transition from downtown's commercial activity to surrounding residential areas, making it ideal for those seeking a more connected, urban lifestyle.

As demand for downtown living grows, the district is primed for infill housing, improved streetscapes and upgraded sidewalks and crossings. Enhancements like tree planting, wayfinding and neighborhood gateways can strengthen its identity. The Urban Neighborhood supports a diverse, mixed-income community and reinforces Harlingen's downtown not only as a destination, but as a place to call home.

Commercial + Retail District Character Area



Key Points

- Harlingen's core district for shopping, dining and small businesses.
- Anchored by Jackson Street, this area supports local entrepreneurship and business visibility.
- Focus on enhancing walkability, storefront activation, lighting and streetscape improvements.
- Significant opportunities for infill development and public realm upgrades.
- A high-priority investment area to support long-term economic growth.

Anticipated Uses

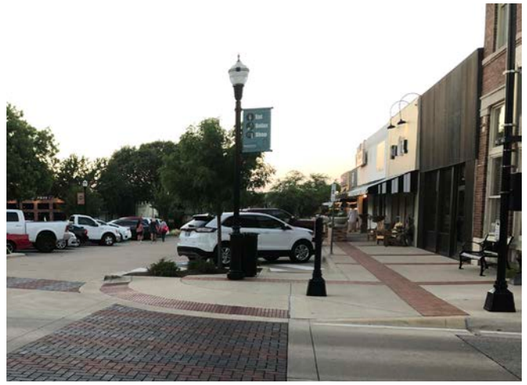
- Dining, retail and personal services.
- Office or co-working uses.
- Local boutiques, cafés and downtown events.
- Facade improvements, patios and pop-up spaces.

Scale

- 1–9 stories

Special Considerations

- Maintain historic storefront character where possible.
- Encourage adaptive reuse and small-scale infill.
- Enhance pedestrian crossings and slow traffic measures.
- Develop branding and wayfinding for the retail district.





Arts + Entertainment District Character Area

Key Points

- A creative district for arts, culture and public events.
- Home to art walks, murals, all-age attractions and event spaces.
- Focus on activating underutilized parcels and promoting cultural identity.
- Lighting, pedestrian comfort and evening activities are key enhancement areas.
- Builds on Harlingen's legacy of arts and community engagement by integrating nearby public spaces like Gutierrez and Centennial Parks as anchors for cultural programming and events.

Anticipated Uses

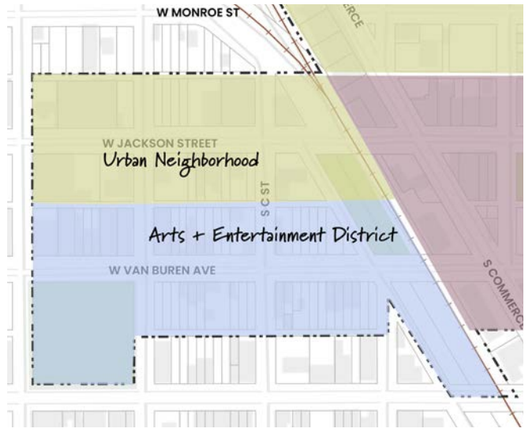
- Public art installations and performance venues.
- Flexible community gathering spaces.
- Artist studios, pop-up markets and galleries.
- All-age entertainment and dining.
- Live/work spaces for creatives.

Scale

- 1–2 stories with opportunity for outdoor placemaking.

Special Considerations

- Emphasize placemaking with seating, shade and lighting.
- Explore partnerships with local artists and organizations.
- Activate spaces through regular programming and community events.
- Improve connections to nearby neighborhoods.







Urban Neighborhood Character Area

Key Points

- A walkable residential area bridging nearby neighborhoods and the downtown core.
- Mix of duplexes, townhomes and higher-density housing options.
- Supports infill development to increase housing choice and affordability.
- Public improvements focused on walkability, safety and connectivity.
- Plays a key role in supporting a "living downtown".

Anticipated Uses

- Vertical and horizontal mixed-use development.
- Neighborhood-scale retail or services.
- Live-work or cottage commercial formats.
- Parks, trails and passive open spaces.

Scale

- 1–5 stories

Special Considerations

- Prioritize safe pedestrian access and crossings.
- Strengthen physical connections to other Downtown Districts.
- Provide wayfinding and street lighting upgrades.
- Encourage housing variety through flexible zoning.





