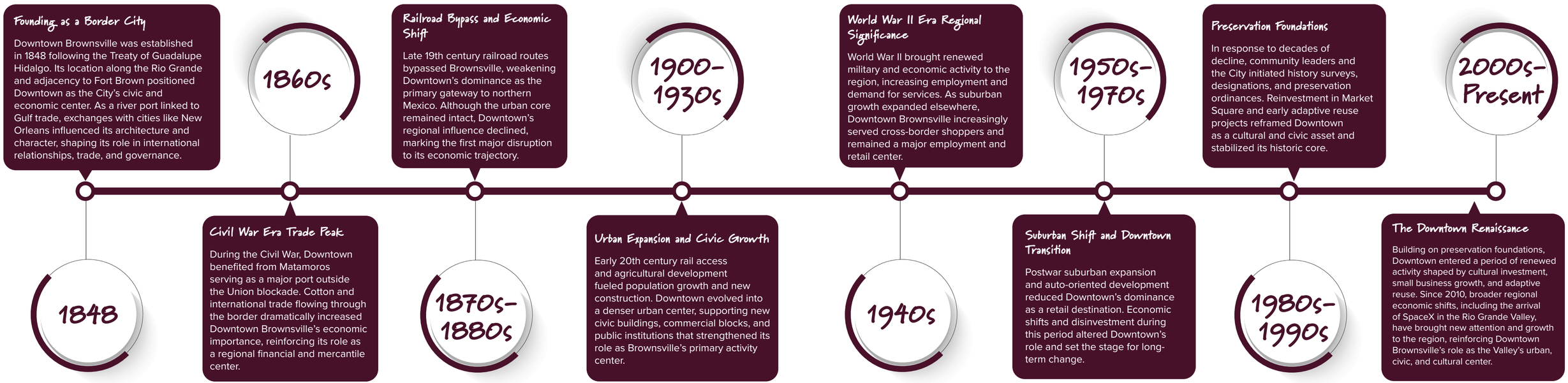
DISCOVER
DOWNTOWN BROWNSVILLE

This section of the Plan outlines Downtown Brownsville's existing conditions, assets, and challenges. It establishes a baseline understanding of Downtown's physical setting, economic role, historic character, and community context based on data, mapping, and field observations.

DOWNTOWN BROWNSVILLE HISTORY

From its founding as a border trade gateway to its ongoing revitalization, Downtown Brownsville has continually adapted to regional and economic change. The timeline below illustrates the major periods that influenced how Downtown evolved from a border trade center into the Valley's present civic and cultural heart.



Sources:
Garza, A. A., & Long, C. (2023). Brownsville, TX. Handbook of Texas Online. Texas State Historical Association.
Fox, S. (2019). Gateway Historic District, Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas: Statement of Significance.

Historic Subdistricts

Downtown

The original business district along Elizabeth Street grew into a vibrant commercial spine lined with department stores, hotels, and theaters. It served as the retail and civic center for Brownsville and surrounding communities.

Buena Vida

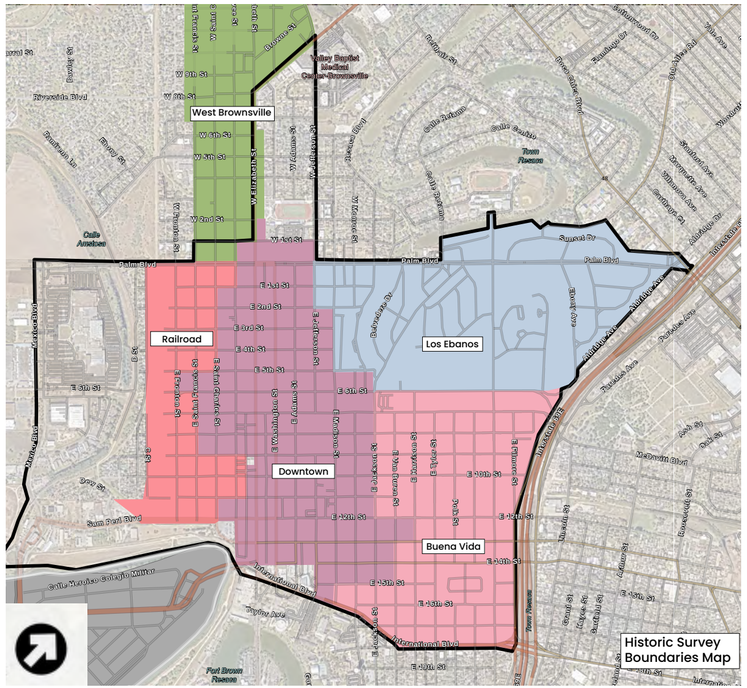
Developed in the early 20th century, Buena Vida featured residential blocks near Downtown jobs, schools, and churches. It retains many historic homes and neighborhood landmarks.

Los Ebanos

Centered around schools, churches, and community facilities, Los Ebanos is known for its cultural and educational institutions and reflects Brownsville's bilingual and bicultural heritage.

West Brownsville

Historically tied to railroad and industrial uses, West Brownsville housed workers and provided vital links between the port, rail lines, and Downtown commerce.



Map 3. Downtown Historic Districts Map

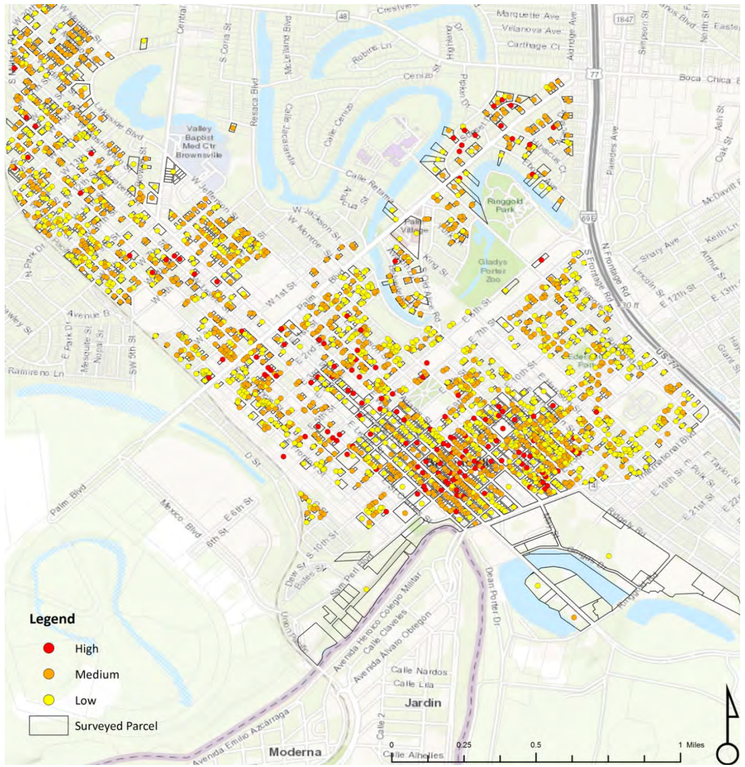
Historic Assets & Character

Downtown Brownsville contains a high concentration of historic and architecturally significant buildings, reflecting multiple eras of development tied to trade, transportation, and cross-border activity. The number and distribution of surveyed parcels shown on this map illustrate the scale and continuity of Downtown's historic fabric and its importance as one of the City's most intact areas.

Key civic, cultural, and commercial landmarks such as Market Square, Washington Park, the Federal Courthouse, and the Historic Brownsville Museum anchor the Downtown Core. These assets are supported by surrounding blocks of contributing buildings that collectively reinforce Downtown's historic character, walkability, and sense of place.

Downtown's architecture reflects several influential development periods. Late 19th- and early 20th-century buildings are typically characterized by masonry construction, narrow storefront widths, and street-facing facades that supported early commercial activity. Buildings from the 1920s and 1930s reflect a period of growth and civic investment, introducing larger structures with restrained ornamentation and more formal architectural expression. Mid-century buildings from the 1940s and 1950s add a third layer, often marked by simpler forms, altered storefronts, and evolving materials.

These layered architectural patterns define Downtown Brownsville's visual identity and provide an important framework for future design, preservation, and reinvestment strategies discussed later in the Plan.



Source: City of Brownsville * The High, Medium, and Low categories shown on this map are examples only and have not been officially adopted by the City. This map is intended as a planning reference and should not be used for regulatory decisions.

The Gem/La Joya (1848)

The Gem, also known as La Joya, is one of the earliest surviving commercial buildings in Brownsville and among the City's first brick storefronts, constructed in 1848. Located at the southwest corner of East Levee Street and East 13th Street, the building has served a range of commercial, residential, and civic functions throughout its history, including use as a bookstore during the Civil War. Its long-term adaptability reflects the evolving role of Downtown as a center for trade, public life, and cross-border activity.[1]

1 http://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TX-01-BS2



Source: City of Brownsville

Charles Stillman House (1850)

The Charles Stillman House was built in 1850 by Henry Miller and is considered one of the oldest standing buildings in Brownsville. Named for Charles Stillman, the City's founder, the house reflects the influence of border-era entrepreneurship and the strategic importance of the Rio Grande Valley during the mid-19th century. Over time, the residence housed Stillman and his family, longtime Brownsville mayor Thomas Carson, and the Manuel Treviño de los Santos Coy (Mexican consul) family, highlighting its continued prominence in local civic and social life.[1]

1 https://www.brownsvillehistory.org/stillman-house-museum.html



Source: City of Brownsville

Market Square (1850)

Market Square was originally constructed in 1850 and opened as an open-air public market in 1852, serving as a primary location for residents to purchase fresh food throughout the 19th century. Despite damage from an 1867 hurricane, the building continued to function with market stalls on the ground floor and city offices above. By the 1940s, the open stalls were enclosed, altering the building's original market function. Since 2009, Market Square has been home to the Brownsville Historical Association, housing significant archives and one of the largest South Texas photograph collections in the Rio Grande Valley.[1]

1 https://downtowntx.org/brownsville-texas/1128-e-adams-st-brownsville-tx-78520



Source: City of Brownsville

Immaculate Conception Cathedral (1859)

The Immaculate Conception Cathedral was first constructed in 1859 and is one of Brownsville's oldest religious structures. Established during the City's early development, the cathedral reflects the region's longstanding Catholic traditions and its cross-border cultural ties. Over time, it has served as a place of worship and a venue for major religious and community events. The cathedral remains an important historic and cultural presence in Downtown Brownsville.[1]

1 https://www.brownsvillehistory.org/historic-walking-tours.html



Source: City of Brownsville

Historic Alonso Building (1877)

The Alonso building was constructed by Spanish-born Manuel Alonso in 1877, initially as a one-story residence and later expanded into a two-story mercantile building by 1890. The property housed “Los Dos Cañones,” a mercantile that served local residents and functioned as a neighborhood gathering place. Architectural elements reflect French and Spanish influences common to Brownsville’s late 19th-century development.[1]

1 Brownsville Historic Survey, 2018.



Source: City of Brownsville

Miguel Fernandez Hide Yard (1880)

The Miguel Fernandez Hide Yard was established in 1880 and functioned as a bone and hide yard serving local ranchers. Ranchers brought hides, bones, horsehair, and tallow to the site to barter with merchants for general goods and provisions. The hide yard reflects the ranching-based economy and trade practices that supported Brownsville’s growth in the late 19th century.[1]

1 https://www.brownsvillehistory.org/historic-walking-tours.html



Source: City of Brownsville

Cueto Building (La Nueva Libertad) (1893)

The La Nueva Libertad, also known as the Cueto Building, was constructed in 1893 for Andrés Cueto and historically housed a store, bakery, and pawn shop. The Victorian-style structure incorporates elements influenced by French Creole architecture, reflecting the diverse design influences present in Downtown Brownsville at the time. The name “La Nueva Libertad” translates to “New Liberty” and references Cueto’s earlier business, Libertad.[1]

1 https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=195580



Source: City of Brownsville

Celaya House (1904)

The Celaya House is a Neogothic-style residence constructed for Augustine Celaya, a member of a family involved in establishing Brownsville’s first railroad company. Built using locally cured brick sourced from the banks of the Rio Grande River, the house reflects both regional building practices and the influence of rail-related economic growth.[1]

1 https://www.brownsvillehistory.org/historic-walking-tours.html



Source: City of Brownsville

Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Depot (1926)

The Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Depot was built in 1926 as an extension of the railroad into the Rio Grande Valley. The depot reflects a Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style reflected in its tile roof and other ornamentation. The structure was used as a passenger depot until 1952 and currently serves as the Historic Brownsville Museum. It is a Registered Texas Historic Landmark.[1]

1 https://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/5061004985



Source: City of Brownsville

El Jardín Hotel (1927)

Constructed in 1927, the El Jardín Hotel functioned as a hotel and social venue during a period of Downtown growth in the early 20th century. The building accommodated travelers, hosted events, and contributed to Downtown's hospitality economy for several decades before closing in the late 1980s. After a prolonged vacancy, the property was acquired in 2019 by the Housing Authority of the City of Brownsville. Its ongoing rehabilitation for affordable housing reflects current efforts to adapt and reintegrate historic structures into Downtown's residential fabric.[1]

1 https://www.brownsvillehistory.org/historic-walking-tours.html



Source: City of Brownsville

Old Federal Courthouse (1931)

The former U.S. Courthouse, Custom House, and Post Office was originally completed in 1892 to house federal judicial, customs, and postal functions in Downtown Brownsville. The building was reconstructed in 1931 in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, reflecting an expanded federal presence along the U.S.-Mexico border. Historically, it supported court proceedings, cross-border trade oversight, and postal services. Today, the building continues to serve civic functions as the location of the U.S. Post Office and Brownsville City Hall.[1]

1 https://downtowntx.org/brownsville-texas/1001-e-elizabeth-st-brownsville-tx-78520



Source: City of Brownsville

McNair House (1937)

The McNair House was designed in 1937 by Brownsville architect A. H. Woolridge for Jack and Vivian McNair. Jack McNair was the owner of the McNair Clothing Manufacturing Company, which became the largest private employer south of San Antonio before its sale to Levi Strauss in 1972. The home is a local example of Monterey-style architecture, featuring an L-shaped plan, a second-story balcony, and a painted brick exterior. It was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 2008.[1]

1 https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=221294



Source: City of Brownsville

PREVIOUS DOWNTOWN PLANNING EFFORTS

Previous local and regional planning efforts are important considerations when developing a downtown plan to ensure coordinated recommendations for the study area. This section provides an overview of the City's previous planning efforts and their applicability to this Downtown Plan.

Downtown Revitalization Advisory Committee (DRAC) – 2006

In 2006, the City of Brownsville established the Downtown Revitalization Advisory Committee to guide renewal efforts in the historic Downtown Core. The committee focused on coordinating public and private investment, supporting preservation, and strengthening economic activity, helping lay the groundwork for long-term Downtown revitalization.

Downtown Section of the Comprehensive Plan – 2010

The City's previous Comprehensive Plan included a Downtown-focused section that established early policy direction for revitalization, walkability, historic preservation, and reinvestment in the urban core.

AARP Revitalizing Downtown Brownsville Study – 2013

Completed in 2013, this study examined ways to make Downtown Brownsville more walkable, healthy, and age-friendly. It emphasized integrating active living principles into streetscapes, parks, and public spaces, with a focus on safety, accessibility, and everyday use.



AARP Revitalizing Downtown Brownsville Study (2013)



Mitte Cultural District Master Plan (2015)

Mitte Cultural District Master Plan – 2015

Adopted in 2015, the Mitte Cultural District Master Plan provides strategies to strengthen cultural facilities, expand arts programming, and improve connections between cultural destinations and Downtown. The plan highlights public space activation and the role of arts and culture in supporting economic vitality.

Main Street Program and Market Square Revitalization – 2016-2025

In 2016, Brownsville was designated a Texas Main Street City by the Texas Historical Commission. This designation initiated focused revitalization efforts for Downtown's Main Street corridor and Market Square, emphasizing preservation, economic development, and public space improvements. The City is no longer participating in this program.

Sidewalk & Trails Master Plan – 2021

Adopted in 2021, the Sidewalk and Trails Master Plan provides a framework for improving pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure citywide. The plan identifies priority sidewalk and trail connections, on-street bikeways, and maintenance strategies to improve safety, accessibility, and connectivity.

Gladys Porter Zoo Master Plan – 2022

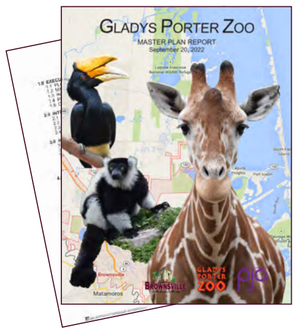
Completed in 2022, the Gladys Porter Zoo Master Plan outlines long-term improvements to amenities, exhibits, and animal care facilities. The plan supports expanded programming and reinvestment in a key Downtown Brownsville destination. It also supports continued compliance with Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accreditation, the industry's gold standard, held by fewer than 10% of the approximately 2,800 USDA-licensed animal exhibitors in the United States. The plan is further supported by the acquisition of the former Brownsville ISD Cummings Elementary School site for future expansion.

City Investments and Quality of Life Projects – 2024

In 2024, the City committed significant funding toward Downtown improvements focused on quality of life and visitor experience. Investments included park enhancements, lighting upgrades, new public spaces, and initiation of the Downtown Renaissance Master Plan.



Sidewalks & Trails Master Plan (2021)



Gladys Porter Zoo Master Plan (2022)

Parks, Health, and Recreation (PHR) Master Plan – 2026

Downtown Brownsville is the place where the Parks, Health, and Recreation Master Plan can deliver early, visible wins that reinforce the City's goals. By treating Downtown public spaces as part of the essential health infrastructure, the City can prioritize shade, safety, accessibility, and daily activation, making Downtown comfortable in Brownsville's climate and welcoming to all ages and abilities. Connected sidewalks, trails, and "last-mile" improvements can strengthen walkable links between Downtown destinations, parks, resacas, transit stops, and civic and cultural anchors, supported by cohesive wayfinding and design standards. Regular programming, cultural storytelling, and stewardship partnerships can build belonging and civic pride while supporting local business vitality. Together, these actions align Downtown projects and policies with citywide objectives for health, connectivity, resilience, and shared prosperity.

This crosswalk (see Figure 1) translates relevant direction from the Parks, Health, and Recreation (PHR) Master Plan into Downtown goals, priority projects, and policy/implementation recommendations that can be inserted into the Downtown Plan narrative.



Parks, Health, and Recreation Master Plan (2026)

Figure 1. PHR and Downtown Brownsville Crosswalk

PHR Directive	What it Means for Downtown Goals	Potential Downtown Projects
Parks and public space as health infrastructure	Downtown becomes a wellness district, not only an event destination, by making everyday trips comfortable in heat and accessible to all ages and abilities.	▪ Shade upgrades (tree canopy, shade structures) on key pedestrian routes and plazas ▪ Comfort amenities at high-use nodes and trail access points (lighting, seating, water, restrooms where feasible) ▪ Small open spaces near civic/cultural anchors
Connected, walkable access to parks and destinations	Arriving to and moving within Downtown should be safe, intuitive, and comfortable for walking, biking, rolling, and transit users.	▪ Last-mile improvements linking Downtown to trails/resacas/transit (address sidewalk gaps, crossings, lighting, access points) ▪ Cohesive wayfinding that stitches together Downtown, trails, and cultural destinations
Activation and inclusive programming	Downtown becomes the City's front porch through recurring, culturally rooted activity that builds belonging and regular use.	▪ Signature parks & recreation event(s) Downtown ▪ Pop-up programming rotation (fitness, youth activities, cultural performances, nature/education activations) ▪ Event-ready amenities and flexible space design (power, seating, shade, staging zones)
Safety, cleanliness, and welcoming operations	Downtown credibility rises with consistent care, including lighting, cleanliness, maintenance, and "eyes on the street" design.	▪ Crime Prevention Through Enviromental Design (CPTED) upgrades in plazas, trailheads, and connectors (lighting, sightlines, activated edges) ▪ Quick-fix program for repairs and routine upkeep for benches, lighting, signage, landscape ▪ Stewardship/ambassador presence for key spaces (events and at peak times)
Culture, identity, and interpretation	Downtown's border identity and heritage are reinforced when culture, history, and recreation are integrated into the public realm and park/trail network.	▪ Cultural/heritage walking loops connecting historic sites, parks, and civic destinations ▪ Public art + storytelling embedded in wayfinding, plazas, and key corridors ▪ Programming partnerships with cultural institutions and local creators
Nature, shade, and resilience (green infrastructure)	Downtown becomes cooler and more flood-resilient while offering everyday contact with nature, especially where green space is limited.	▪ Green infrastructure in streets and plazas (bioswales, rain gardens, permeable paving where feasible) ▪ Targeted tree planting and shade structures on the hottest/most impervious blocks ▪ Nature-forward pocket parks and corridor enhancements near water/resacas where feasible
Economic vitality and shared prosperity	Public-realm improvements support small businesses, visitor, and workforce quality of life while keeping Downtown welcoming and affordable.	▪ Visitor-ready network: branding, maps, and routes that connect Downtown to parks/trails/cultural hubs ▪ Event-driven economic boosts (markets, festivals, tournament tie-ins where appropriate)







Source: City of Brownsville

Downtown Projects - Ongoing

Downtown Brownsville is experiencing active public and private investment that reinforces its role as a regional civic and economic center. Ongoing infrastructure, housing, institutional, and gateway-related projects are improving systems, increasing daily activity, and strengthening Downtown's connection to the university, the international border, and surrounding neighborhoods. These investments reflect long-standing community priorities and create momentum that support the Downtown Renaissance Master Plan's recommendations.

Key Ongoing Investments Include:

- **Utility and Infrastructure Projects:** The City is implementing upgrades to water, wastewater, drainage, and related systems to improve reliability, resilience, and capacity. This includes targeted alley restoration efforts that support Downtown revitalization by improving service and emergency access, enhancing drainage and utility function, and activating underutilized spaces.
- **Public Realm Improvements:** Investments focus on streets, sidewalks, lighting, shade, and wayfinding to enhance safety, walkability, and comfort, while strengthening connections between Downtown destinations, nearby neighborhoods, transit, and the international gateway.
- **Housing and Mixed-Use Development:** New residential and adaptive reuse projects, including the Housing Authority's El Jardin project and SAMANO Studios, expand housing options and support a more active Downtown.
- **UTRGV and Institutional Investments:** Continued investment by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley includes the Majestic Theater renovations and the acquisition and redevelopment of the former Longoria Elementary School into the School of Art and Design, along with other institutional projects that support employment, education, and daily activity.
- **International Gateway and Border-Related Projects:** Improvements near the border crossing and international bridge support cross-border movement, economic activity, and Downtown's binational identity.
- **Mitte Cultural District:** Organizations in the Mitte Cultural District are advancing major projects, including the Gladys Porter Zoo expansion, reopening of the Mitte Cultural Museum, and the City's renovation of the Cannery building in Linear Park.
- **BTX Connect:** The City launched the BTX Connect Downtown Circulator Pilot, an all-electric micromobility service that reduces parking demand and improves access by providing free, frequent evening service between the La Plaza Parking Garage and key destinations Thursday through Saturday.

DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

This snapshot examines regional, citywide, and Downtown demographic data and trends to build a clearer understanding of the community and its needs. It is important to note that this data-based, quantitative analysis should be paired with qualitative insights gathered through community engagement and conversations with residents to provide a more complete picture.

Population

The City of Brownsville has a population of 186,738, making it the largest city in the Rio Grande Valley. The wider Cameron County population is 423,163, with Brownsville accounting for nearly half. Population growth has been steady over the last decade, driven by its role as a regional employment and cultural center.

Age

The median age in Brownsville is 30.8 years, notably younger than the Texas median. Over half of residents are in their prime working years (ages 20–59), while about one-third are under the age of 20. This youthful population presents opportunities for workforce development, education, and recreation planning.

Income and Affordability

The median household income is $59,491, which is lower than the Texas average; however, housing costs remain relatively affordable, with a median home value of $139,900. The poverty rate is 25.6%, underscoring the importance of inclusive economic growth. Renters and lower-income households are concentrated in and around the Downtown area, highlighting the need for diverse and attainable housing options.

Employment

Downtown Brownsville is anchored by public administration, education, healthcare, and other institutional employers that support consistent daytime activity. Retail, dining, tourism, and cultural uses contribute to visitor activity and special events and present opportunities to further strengthen Downtown's live-work environment.

Commuting

The average commute time for Brownsville residents is 21.3 minutes. Most Downtown workers live outside the core and drive to work, with few living and working within Downtown. This points to opportunities for expanding residential development to create a stronger live–work balance.

POLICY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Much of what gets built anywhere in a City is the result of things you can't see, such a development policies and regulations. The regulations most applicable to Downtown Brownsville are found primarily in the City's Unified Development Code (UDC) and Historic Preservation Ordinance, with related provisions in the Building and Fire Codes. These ordinances guide building form, permitted uses, signage, landscaping, and preservation in the Downtown area.

Building and Fire Regulations

The City of Brownsville will be adopting the 2024 International Building and Fire Codes with minor local amendments. These codes establish updated standards related to life safety and accessibility, and address flood and wind considerations that are particularly important to Downtown's coastal location.

Street Activation

The City Manager may approve temporary street or alley closures for public events such as Market Days or Charro Days. Permits are also required for sidewalk cafés, parklets, and special events involving food vendors or amplified sound. These allowances support the activation of public spaces and encourage pedestrian activity in Downtown.

Landscaping and Signage

The UDC includes landscaping standards for commercial frontages, with specific requirements for street trees, planters, and irrigation along public rights-of-way. Sign regulations address placement, size, and illumination. In historic areas, signage must be compatible with the building's architectural character, with allowances for projecting and wall-mounted signs.

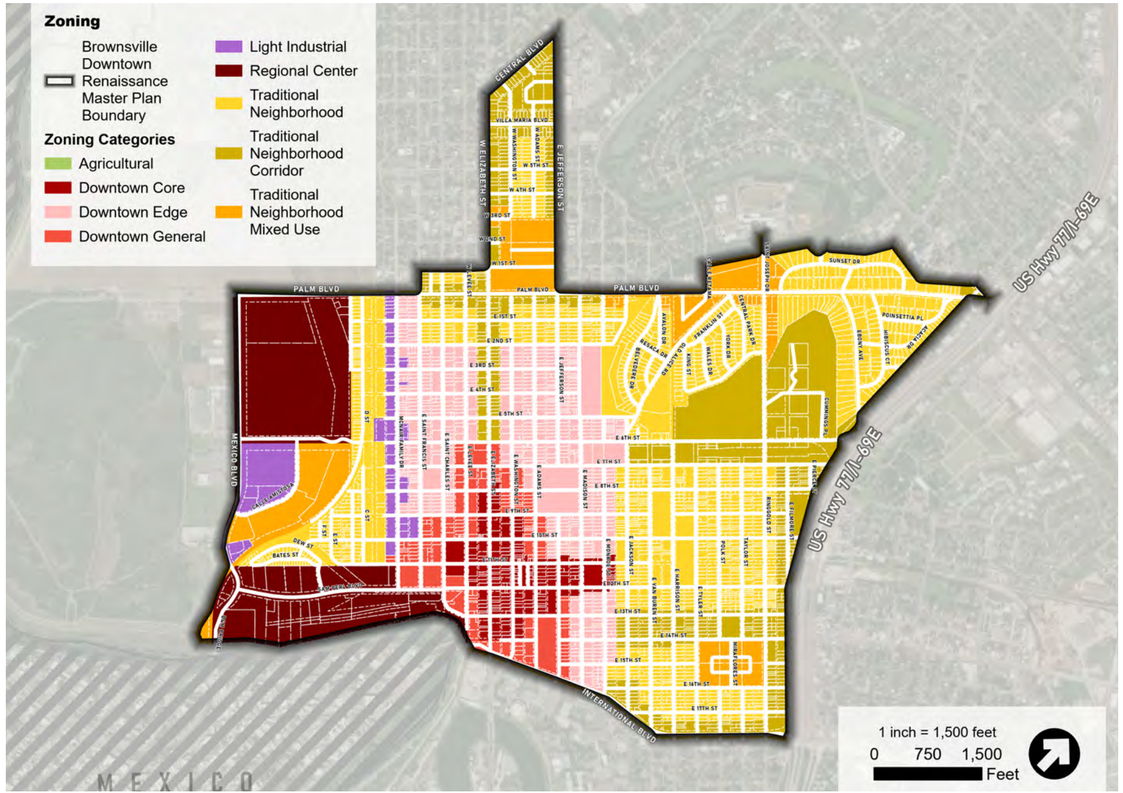
Zoning and Development Standards

Zoning districts most relevant to Downtown include the Downtown Core, Downtown General, and Downtown Edge, along with the Traditional Neighborhood, Traditional Neighborhood Corridor, and Traditional Neighborhood Mixed Use districts that surround and connect to the Downtown area. These districts provide a flexible, form-based zoning framework zoning framework that enables mixed-use development and supports a walkable, urban development pattern.

Downtown Zoning Districts

Downtown Brownsville is primarily designated as Downtown Core and Downtown General, with surrounding areas transitioning to Traditional Neighborhood and Traditional Neighborhood Corridor zones. The creation of the UDC in 2021 have modernized zoning regulations, creating a flexible framework that supports reinvestment and growth in Downtown while re-legalizing historic development patterns. The Downtown Core allows a mix of retail, office, residential, and civic uses that promote walkability and active street life, particularly along Elizabeth and Washington Streets. The Downtown General area supports lower-intensity mixed-use development, accommodating housing and small businesses that connect to nearby neighborhoods.

To the west and south, Regional Center and Light Industrial zones accommodate employment, warehousing, and institutional uses, while Traditional Neighborhood Mixed Use zones near the edges provide opportunities for infill housing and small-scale commercial growth. This zoning pattern reflects Downtown's historic form and supports a transition between the commercial core and surrounding residential neighborhoods.



Map 4. Downtown Existing Zoning Map

Brownsville Unified Development Code (UDC) - 2020

In 2020, the City of Brownsville pursued an effort to modernize its development regulations and replace a complex, outdated system with a clear, unified framework. The resulting Unified Development Code (UDC) streamlined zoning and development standards, improved usability through graphics and bilingual accessibility, and promoted walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods with diverse housing options, specifically supporting reinvestment and revitalization in Downtown Brownsville.

By removing outdated barriers and supporting small-scale development, the UDC encouraged reinvestment while preserving community character. It was widely embraced by the City and development community and received the APA Texas Gold Award for Best Practice.

Simplified & Unified Approach

- Combined zoning and development regulations into one clear system
- Streamlined processes with graphics and bilingual accessibility

Flexible, Context-Sensitive Development

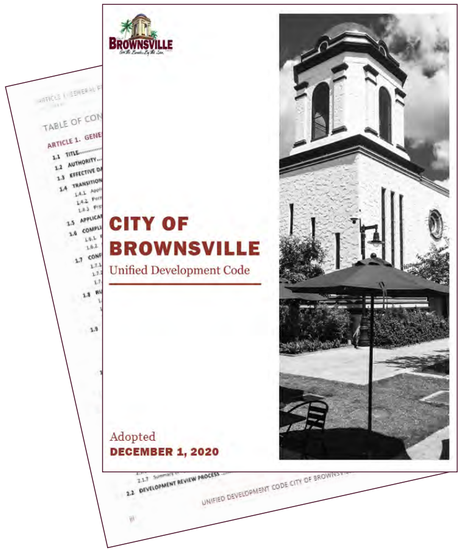
- Incorporated hybrid/form-based standards in key areas
- Supported walkability, mixed-use development, and housing diversity

Reduced Barriers & Expanded Opportunity

- Removed exclusionary zoning practices and reduced or eliminated parking requirements
- Lowered barriers for small businesses and encouraged reinvestment, especially in Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods

Demonstrated Impact

- Was adopted unanimously ahead of implementation
- Achieved strong early opt-in and increased infill development



City of Brownsville Unified Development Code (2020)

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Historic Preservation

Downtown Brownsville includes several locally and nationally recognized historic districts, such as the Central Brownsville Historic District. Properties located within designated historic districts, or individually designated as historic, are subject to additional review to ensure that changes respect their architectural and cultural significance. Exterior alterations, new construction, relocations, and demolitions affecting historic properties require approval through a Certificate of Appropriateness issued by the Historic Preservation Officer or the Landmark Commission.

The preservation framework is intended to balance protection with reinvestment. While historic buildings must meet design standards that preserve defining architectural features, the ordinance allows flexibility in building code compliance to encourage rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. This approach supports continued use of historic structures while maintaining the character that defines Downtown Brownsville.

Historic Properties

Downtown Brownsville contains one of the highest concentrations of historic and heritage resources in the Rio Grande Valley, reflecting the City's development as a border community and regional trade center. These resources include properties designated at the local, state, or national level, as well as sites recognized for their cultural or historical significance even if they are not formally designated.

Historic properties include buildings, structures, or sites that have received official designation through local, state, or federal processes. These properties are subject to preservation regulations and design review to ensure that alterations maintain their historic character. Designation is typically based on architectural integrity, historical significance, or association with important events or individuals. The status of significant historic properties may change as they reach the age required in Texas (40-50 years), as new research identifies the significance of previously unrecognized buildings, or as their physical condition changes.

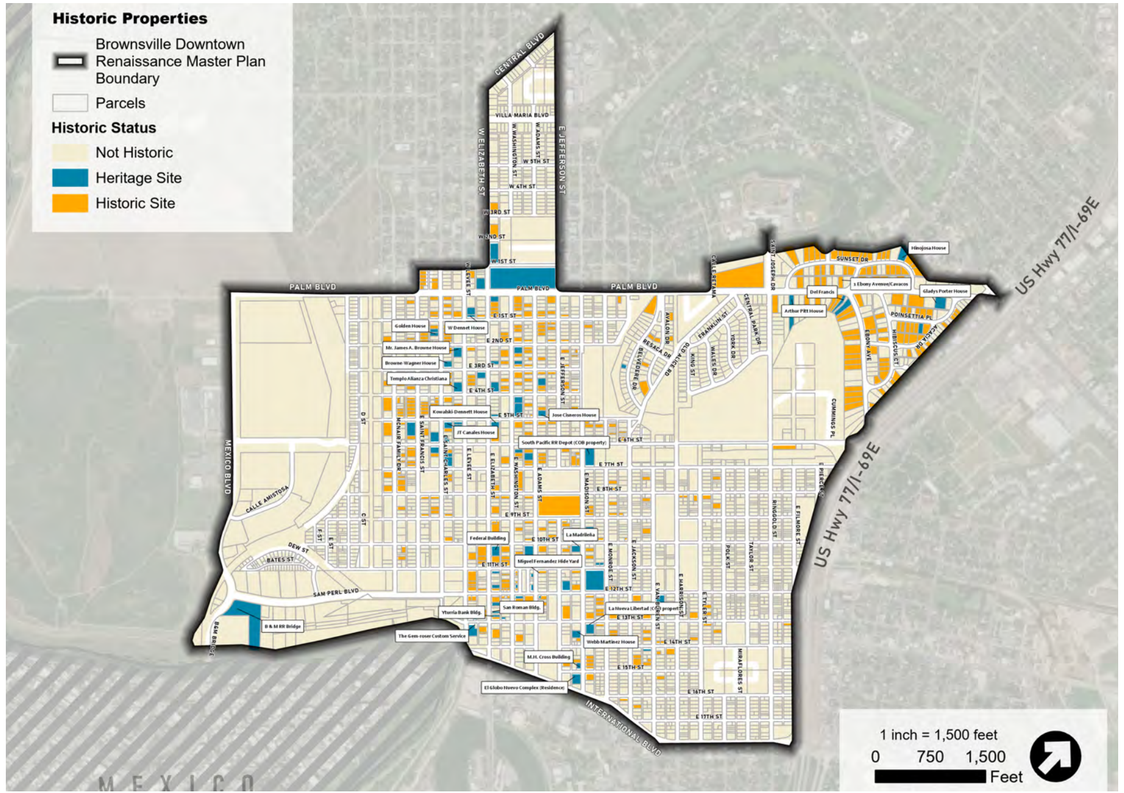
Heritage properties, by contrast, are sites that contribute to Brownsville's cultural identity, community history, or collective memory but may not meet the criteria for formal historic designation or have not yet been designated. While heritage sites are not subject to the same regulatory requirements as historic properties, they are important to Downtown's identity and are often considered in planning, placemaking, and revitalization efforts.

Historic and heritage resources are concentrated around Market Square, Washington Park, and adjacent civic and cultural areas, where early commercial storefronts, civic buildings, and residences define Downtown's character. Preservation of historic properties, alongside thoughtful treatment of heritage sites and compatible infill development, is central to maintaining Brownsville's identity while supporting long-term Downtown revitalization.

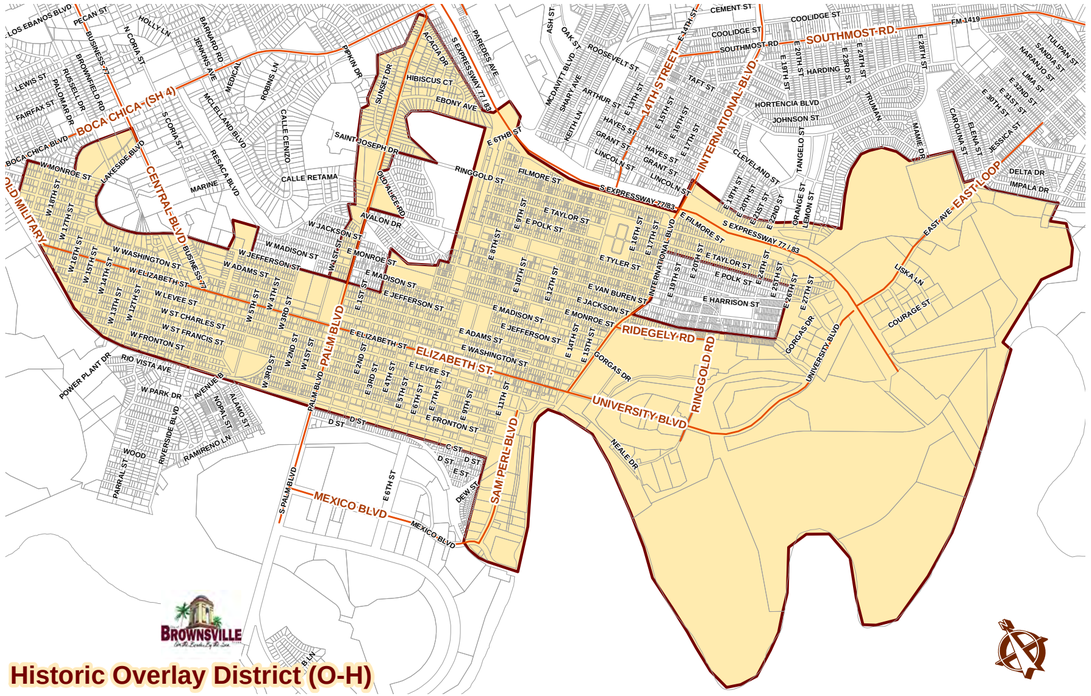
Historic Overlay Standards

All development (new and redevelopment) in the Historic Overlay (O-H) is required to obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). This includes both alterations of existing development and new development. In reviewing applications, the Historic Preservation Officer (HPO) shall apply the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for rehabilitation and any applicable design guidelines previously ratified by the City Commission (there are none used, currently). HPO may defer the decision to the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) for any reason.

Demolition of any buildings within the O-H District shall also be reviewed by the HPO, who may approve demolition of non-contributing minor outbuildings administratively. All other demolitions shall be heard by the HPC. There is a process established to prove unreasonable economic hardship and waiver of certain requirements by the HPC for low income residents. Standards for preventions of demolition by neglect are also included.



Map 5. Downtown Historic Properties Map



Map 6. Historic Overlay District (O-H) Boundary

Source: City of Brownsville

ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES

The Environmental Features framework highlights the natural systems and physical conditions that shape Downtown Brownsville's development, resilience, and public realm experience. These features influence where growth can occur, how infrastructure is designed, and where targeted environmental improvements can provide the greatest benefit.

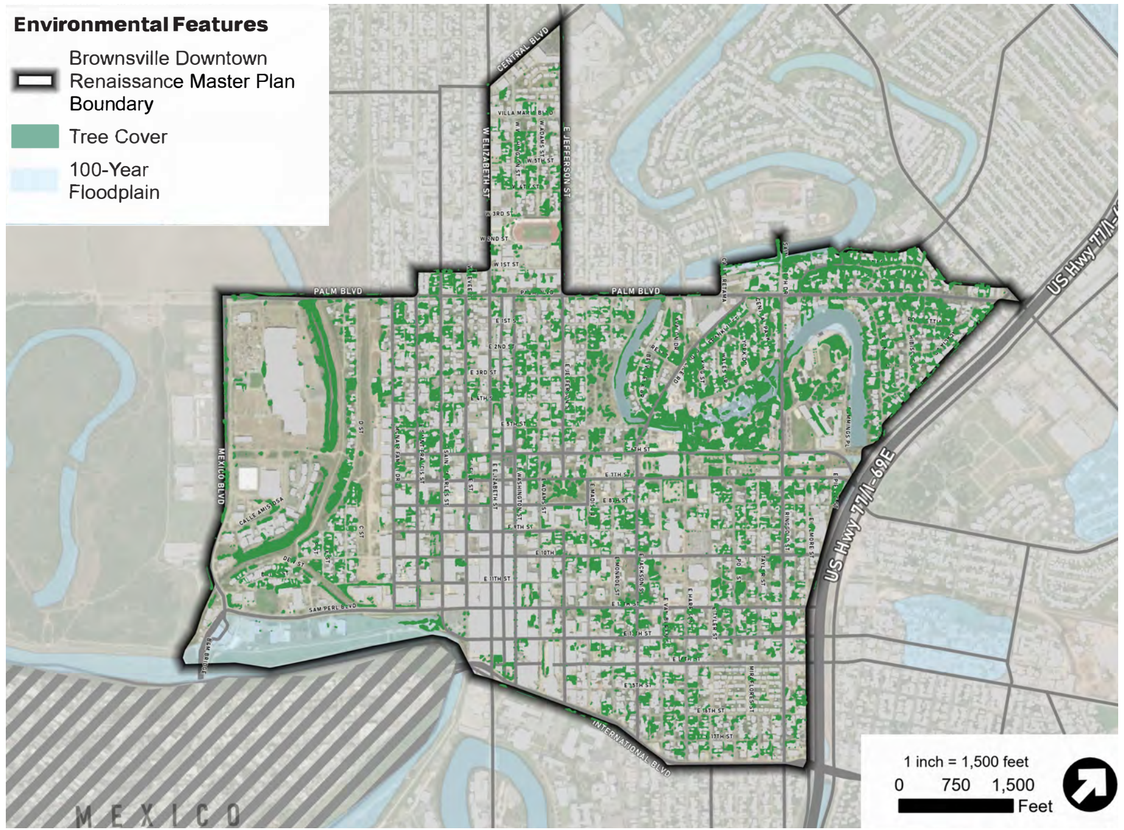
Key environmental elements within Downtown include tree canopy coverage, floodplain areas and proximity to resacas and the Rio Grande. Tree cover varies significantly across the study area, contributing to differences in thermal comfort and walkability. Areas with limited canopy experience higher heat exposure, reinforcing the need for expanded street trees, shade structures, and landscape-based cooling strategies.

Floodplain conditions along portions of Downtown affect development feasibility and underscore the importance of integrated drainage, stormwater management, and flood-resilient design approaches. While these features can function as physical barriers, they also present opportunities for adaptive reuse, trail connections, and enhanced landscape buffers.

These environmental features establish the context for resilience-focused planning and inform recommendations related to green infrastructure, landscaping, stormwater management, and long-term sustainability across Downtown Brownsville.







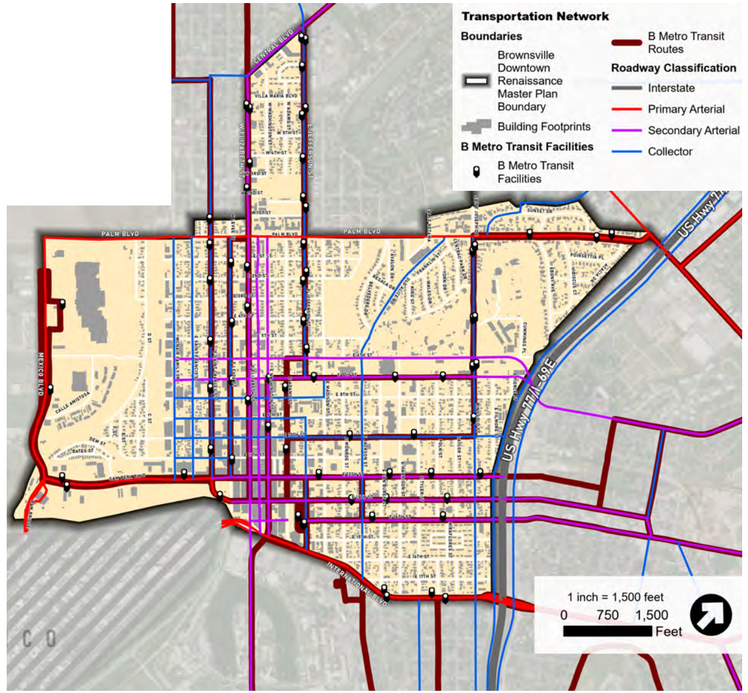
Map 7. Environmental Features Map

MOBILITY ASSESSMENT

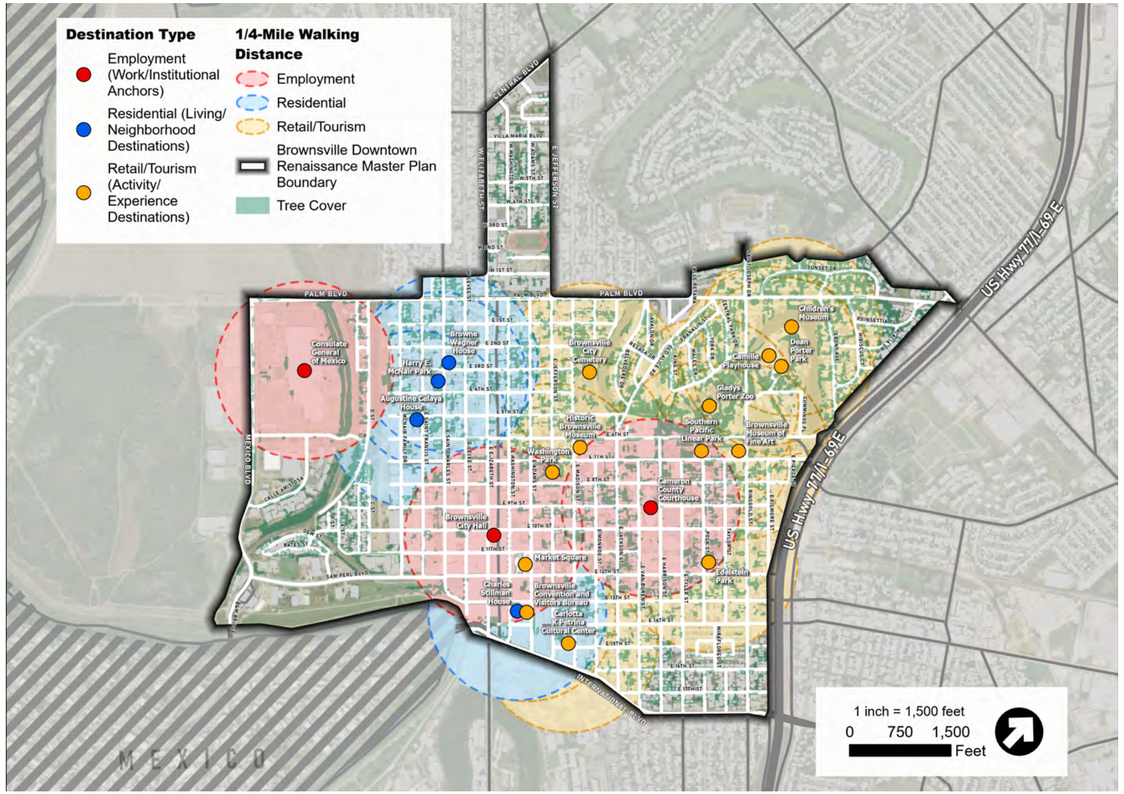
The Downtown transportation network is structured around a traditional street grid that supports multiple travel modes. Major arterials, including International Boulevard, Palm Boulevard, and Elizabeth Street, provide key north-south and east-west connections linking Downtown to regional corridors such as U.S. Highway 77 and Interstate 69E. Collectors and local streets, including Adams, Jefferson, and 6th Streets, support circulation within the urban core and provide access to civic and cultural destinations.

B-Metro serves Downtown with multiple fixed routes and transfer facilities, connecting residents and visitors to major employers, educational institutions, and neighborhoods throughout the City. While the network provides strong connectivity, opportunities exist to enhance pedestrian comfort, shade, lighting, and crossings to strengthen walkability and multimodal access across the study area.

Downtown Brownsville has a strong foundation for walkability, with a connected street grid and many key destinations within a comfortable walking distance. Residential areas, retail, and civic anchors are often located within a 1/4-mile radius, supporting short, everyday trips on foot. However, gaps in shade, pedestrian comfort, and crossing safety can limit the experience. Targeted public realm improvements can strengthen these connections and support a more walkable Downtown.



Map 8. Transportation Network Map



Map 9. Walkable Destinations Map

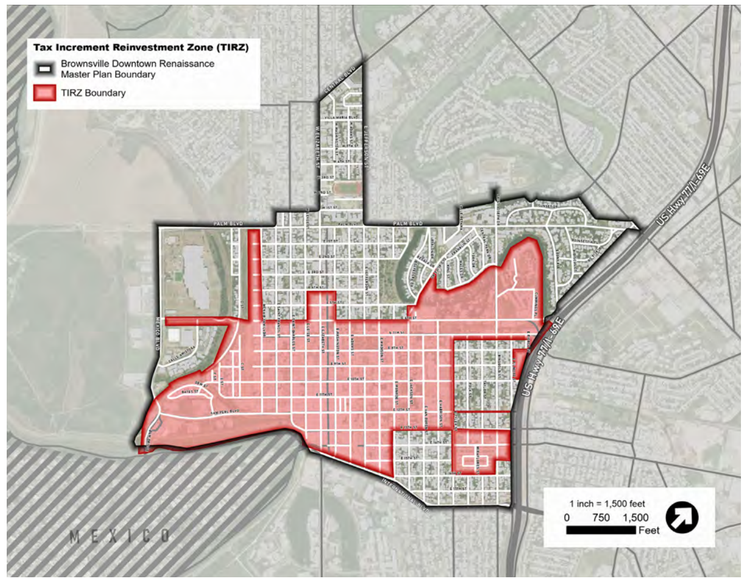
DOWNTOWN ECONOMIC SNAPSHOT

Downtown Brownsville serves as the community's historic economic and cultural hub, anchored by Market Square, Washington Park, and the Mitte Cultural District. Elizabeth and Washington Streets support a vibrant mix of restaurants, shops, and civic activity. Compared to other downtown areas in the Rio Grande Valley, Downtown Brownsville covers a larger geographic area and is home to approximately 400 businesses and public-sector organizations employing more than 6,500 workers. Downtown also hosts major events such as Charro Days and Sombrero Fest, drawing thousands of visitors annually and reinforcing its regional appeal.

While Brownsville's broader economy is anchored by the Port of Brownsville and the space industry, Downtown has remained a long-term focus of public investment. Despite the closure of an H-E-B grocery store in 2019, multiple housing and mixed-use projects are revitalizing the core, including the El Jardin Hotel (44 affordable units), the Samano Building (39 studio apartments with ground-floor retail), and the Buena Vida redevelopment, which will deliver 212 affordable units. Infrastructure investments, including a planned pedestrian walkway at the Gateway International Bridge, are expected to improve access for Matamoros residents and increase activity in southern Downtown.

Arts and culture continue to shape Downtown's identity, with projects such as the Cannery Public Market and ongoing improvements at the Gladys Porter Zoo. To support continued growth, the City established a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) to fund infrastructure and maintenance, which was expanded in 2025 to include Cameron County participation. While smaller than the full study area, the TIRZ represents a key implementation tool.

This section of the report reviews current economic conditions and key indicators to inform future economic development opportunities over the next five to 10 years.



Map 10. Downtown Study Area and Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone

Population

Since 2010, the City of Brownsville has experienced an 8.7 percent increase in overall population, adding over 15,000 new residents. The 2025 population estimate for Brownsville is just over 192,000 residents. In contrast, Downtown Brownsville's population has declined by over 2,000 residents during the same period. Downtown's share of overall Brownsville population is now less than 5.0 percent. **Over the next five years, Downtown's population is projected to decline slightly, unless new market-rate residential projects are developed to increase the local housing supply.**

The median age of a Downtown area resident is higher than both the City of Brownsville and Cameron County. 20.0 percent of Downtown's population is 65+ years old. This older demographic profile suggests that Downtown residents may be less inclined to frequent entertainment, retail, and restaurant options geared toward younger audiences, such as those popular with students attending nearby UTRGV Brownsville or Texas Southmost College.

Figure 2. Population

	2010	2020	2025	2030
Downtown	10,989	9,334	8,812	8,752
Brownsville	174,617	186,850	189,835	191,927
Cameron County	406,220	421,017	427,432	432,080

Source: ESRI

Figure 3. 2025 Population by Age

	Downtown	Brownsville	Cameron County
Total	8,812	186,850	427,432
0 - 4	6.0%	6.6%	6.4%
5 - 9	6.4%	7.8%	6.6%
10 - 14	7.2%	8.8%	7.3%
15 - 24	14.7%	16.7%	16.3%
25 - 34	14.4%	12.6%	13.8%
35 - 44	11.1%	12.3%	11.6%
45 - 54	10.3%	12.1%	11.9%
55 - 64	10.6%	10.0%	10.3%
65 - 74	10.9%	7.9%	9.0%
75 - 84	6.1%	3.9%	5.2%
85 +	2.3%	1.5%	1.6%

Source: ESRI

Figure 4. Median Age

	2010	2020	2025	2030
Downtown	31.2	35.5	36.2	37.7
Brownsville	29.5	33.0	33.9	35.0
Cameron County	30.6	34.0	34.7	35.7

Source: ESRI

Housing

In 2025, there were about 4,000 housing units in the Downtown Study Area. Approximately 27.0 percent of the units are owner occupied, nearly half the rate for the City and county. In addition, the vacancy rate was almost double the City figure. This combination of a high renter population, low owner occupancy, and elevated vacancy levels can contribute to greater neighborhood turnover and reduced long-term residential stability. This can also make it more difficult to attract and sustain neighborhood-serving retail business.

According to the 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, the larger Downtown area—defined by six census tracts—contains approximately 6,200 housing units. Only 25 new units have been added since 2020. Despite several commercial buildings near Market Square being renovated or redeveloped, Downtown has seen very limited market rate residential development. Most housing units in this area are single-family residential detached homes.

Figure 5. 2025 Housing Characteristics

	Downtown	Brownsville
2025 Housing Units	4,066	67,285
Owner Occupied Housing Units	27.3%	55.9%
Renter Occupied Housing Units	56.2%	35.5%
Vacant Housing Units	16.5%	8.7%

Source: ESRI

According to the 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, the six-tract Downtown area contains roughly 6,200 housing units, has added only 25 since 2020, and remains dominated by single-family detached homes despite recent commercial renovations near Market Square.

Figure 6. Year Housing Structures Built as % of Total

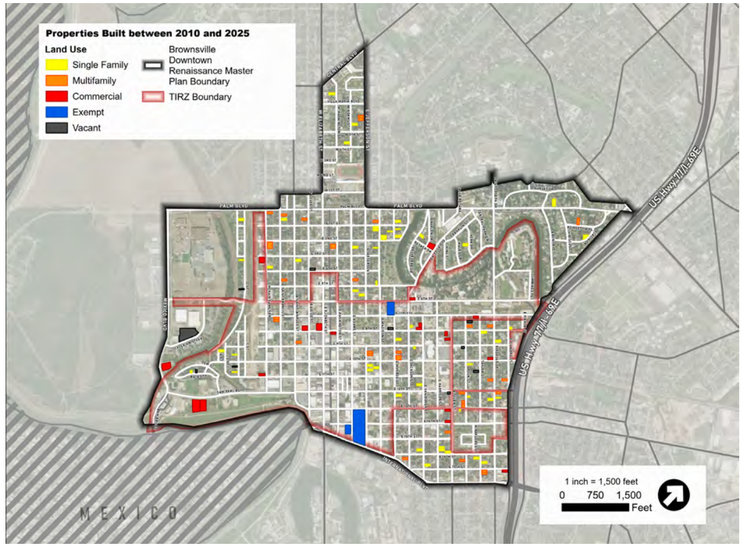
Year	Greater Downtown	% of Total
Built 2020 or later	25	0.4%
Built 2010 to 2019	538	8.6%
Built 2000 to 2009	392	6.3%
Built 1990 to 1999	942	15.1%
Built 1980 to 1989	679	10.9%
Built 1970 to 1979	633	10.2%
Built 1960 to 1969	1.116	17.9%
Built 1950 to 1959	932	15.0%
Built 1940 to 1949	332	5.3%
Built 1939 or earlier	644	10.3%

Source: US Census Bureau 2023: ACS 5-Year Estimates

Figure 7. Units in Structure

Housing Type	Greater Downtown	% of Total
1-unit, detached	5,226	83.8%
1-unit, attached	1,007	16.2%
2 units	13	0.2%
3 or 4 units	35	0.6%
5 to 9 units	334	5.4%
10 to 19 units	266	4.3%
20 or more units	861	13.8%
Mobile home	96	1.5%

Source: US Census Bureau 2023: ACS 5-Year Estimates



Map 11. Properties Built between 2010 and 2025
Source: TXP, Cameron Appraisal District

The limited amount of new housing built in Downtown over the past decade, combined with lower household incomes, suggests that current market demand may be insufficient to support large-scale residential development in the area. However, opportunities remain in the form of second floor residential conversions within existing Downtown buildings and small-scale infill sites surrounding the core district. The challenge moving forward is to stimulate demand for new and renovated housing at price points residents can afford while reducing financial risk for residential developers. Although Brownsville is unlikely to attract the dense, multi-story mixed-use projects seen in the urban cores of larger Texas cities, the addition of 10 to 20 new residential units per year within the larger Downtown area is achievable. To support this growth, the City will need to adopt proactive incentive programs to encourage market rate residential investment and consider adjustments to building code that remove cost barriers to small-scale residential redevelopment.

Income

In 2025, the median household income for City of Brownsville was $53,516 versus $55,003 for Cameron County. By 2030, both median household income and average household income are projected to increase by 10.0 percent. Within Downtown, most income statistics are below the citywide figures. The household income statistics do have a direct impact on the types of retail and entertainment options that will be attracted to this area of Brownsville. However, Downtown's ability to attract regional visitors (domestic and international), in addition to Brownsville residents, can mitigate lower income levels.

Figure 8. Income Characteristics 2025

	Downtown	Brownsville	Cameron County
Median Household Income	$30,144	$53,516	$55,003
Average Household Income	$42,552	$70,218	$73,814
Per Capita Income	$16,460	$22,805	$24,459

Source: ESRI

The table outlines current household spending in Downtown. Sustaining more retail and dining will require either more residents or higher visitor activity to lift overall consumer demand.

Figure 9. Retail Demand Outlook

	2025	2030	Change 2025 to 2030
Apparel and Services	**$3,139,091**	**$3,483,794**	**$344,703**
Men's	$632,999	$702,503	$69,504
Women's	$995,655	$1,104,917	$109,262
Children's	$479,836	$532,637	$52,801
Footwear	$770,202	$854,792	$84,590
Watches & Jewelry	$199,930	$221,843	$21,913
Apparel Products and Services	$60,469	$67,103	$6,634
Food	**$15,890,143**	**$17,635,957**	**$1,745,814**
Food at Home	$10,034,824	$11,137,036	$1,102,212
Bakery and Cereal Products	$1,237,362	$1,373,204	$135,842
Meats, Poultry, Fish, and Eggs	$2,272,046	$2,521,736	$249,690
Dairy Products	$998,652	$1,108,335	$109,683
Fruits and Vegetables	$1,647,097	$1,827,887	$180,790
Snacks and Other Food at Home	$3,879,667	$4,305,874	$426,207
Food Away from Home	$5,855,319	$6,498,921	$643,602
Alcoholic Beverages	$776,274	$861,492	$85,218
Health	**$926,820**	**$1,028,776**	**$101,956**
Nonprescription Drugs	$272,217	$302,146	$29,929
Prescription Drugs	$507,319	$563,160	$55,841
Eyeglasses and Contact Lenses	$147,284	$163,470	$16,186

Source: ESRI

Employment Base

Employment at Downtown businesses has grown slowly over the past few years. Since 2020, Downtown-based business employment has expanded 3.53 percent. Note, the decline in 2021 is likely related to layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The largest employment sectors in the Downtown area are Retail Trade, Health Care and Social Assistance, and the Public Sector. Total employment at businesses located in the Downtown area is about 6,500 workers. Employment statistics can be somewhat misleading; a firm located in Downtown might have satellite locations and employees can be spread out within a community, but all employees are counted at the headquarters location (e.g., school district central office).

Downtown Brownsville functions primarily as a regional employment center rather than a live-work neighborhood despite appearing naturally able to accomplish both. Nearly all Downtown workers commute from outside the area, with most traveling short distances from nearby communities. Combined with visitors accessing government services, healthcare, retail, dining, and events, Downtown supports an estimated daytime population of about 15,500 people.

Employment is concentrated in public administration, healthcare, and social assistance, providing stability but limiting daily retail foot traffic. The loss of major neighborhood-serving retail highlights the need to strengthen housing, services, and amenities that support everyday activity Downtown.

Figure 10. Jobs by NAICS Industry Sector (2023)

Sector	Downtown		Brownsville		Cameron County	
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	5	0.1%	60	0.1%	548	0.4%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	1	0.0%	47	0.1%	148	0.1%
Utilities	0	0.0%	43	0.1%	765	0.5%
Construction	96	1.5%	1,577	2.3%	4,086	2.8%
Manufacturing	156	2.4%	4,025	5.9%	7,201	4.9%
Wholesale Trade	137	2.1%	1,281	1.9%	3,246	2.2%
Retail Trade	447	6.8%	8,803	12.8%	16,463	11.2%
Transportation and Warehousing	51	0.8%	1,839	2.7%	4,553	3.1%
Information	31	0.5%	331	0.5%	1,442	1.0%
Finance and Insurance	261	4.0%	1,595	2.3%	3,088	2.1%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	23	0.3%	548	0.8%	1,854	1.3%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	236	3.6%	1,517	2.2%	4,607	3.1%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	2	0.0%	244	0.4%	622	0.4%
Administration & Support	565	8.6%	4,651	6.8%	9,814	6.7%
Educational Services	6	0.1%	9,021	13.1%	17,960	12.3%
Health Care and Social Assistance	2,866	43.4%	21,923	31.9%	44,536	30.4%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	323	4.9%	750	1.1%	1,401	1.0%
Accommodation and Food Services	238	3.6%	7,202	10.5%	15,863	10.8%
Other Services	76	1.2%	981	1.4%	2,876	2.0%
Public Administration	1,086	16.4%	2,218	3.2%	5,282	3.6%
Total	**6,606**	**100.0%**	**68,656**	**100.0%**	**146,355**	**100.0%**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau OnTheMap LEHD

Downtown Study Area Businesses Characteristics

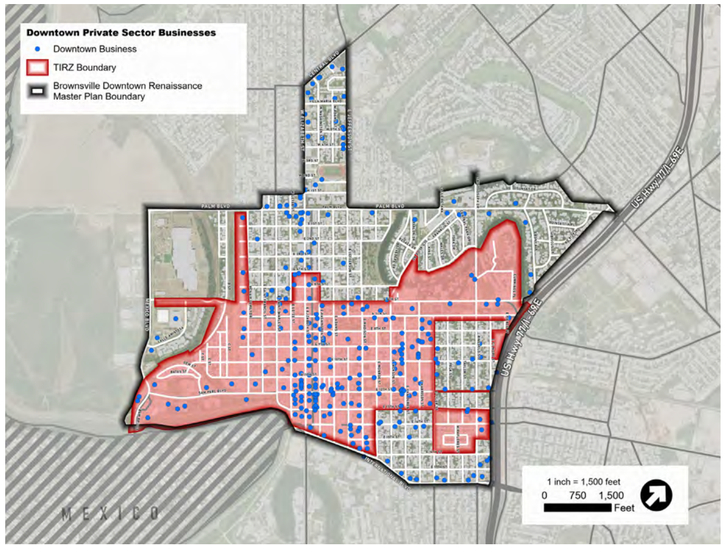
For this assessment, a database of current businesses located in Downtown was acquired from Data Axle—a leading provider of business and consumer data across the United States and Canada. This dataset was used not only to validate the U.S. Census data, but to provide detailed information not found for small areas in public datasets.

According to this dataset, there are about 350 private sector businesses and organizations located within the smaller Downtown Study Area. Most businesses are clustered along Elizabeth and Washington Streets. Nearly 81.3 percent of the firms are classified as small businesses having less than 10 employees. While many older Downtown buildings could physically accommodate larger workforces, most are occupied by tenants that do not require larger staffing levels or make full use of the available space (e.g., upper floors).

Downtown Business Concentration

Downtown Brownsville contains approximately 350 private-sector businesses and organizations, with activity most concentrated along Elizabeth Street and Washington Street. The Downtown business environment is characterized by small establishments, with the majority of businesses employing fewer than ten people. The historic building stock and smaller floor plates typical of Downtown limit the size of individual tenants, reinforcing a fine-grained pattern of storefronts and locally oriented businesses.

This concentration supports walkability and street-level activity but also shapes the scale and type of employment Downtown can accommodate. The existing pattern highlights the importance of public realm investments and building reuse strategies to support small businesses and maintain economic vitality.



Map 12. Downtown Brownsville Private Sector Businesses

Tourism

Visitor activity historically has played an important role in the overall Brownsville economy. Much of this activity takes place at events within the Mitte Cultural District. In 2024, total direct Brownsville visitor spending was $358.9 million and supported over 2,600 local jobs. Just as important, out-of-town guests generated over $12.1 million in local tax receipts. Brownsville's tourism sector has completely recovered from COVID-related slowdown in 2020.

Within Downtown, there are limited overnight lodging options. The two existing older hotels have less than 100 rooms combined. There are also several registered vacation rentals scattered throughout the area. Most of Brownsville's hotel inventory is concentrated along the interstate corridor between Price Road and Alton Gloor Boulevard, leaving the Downtown area underserved despite its growing mix of events, cultural assets, and attractions. This gap in accommodations presents a clear economic development opportunity to recruit new hotel options – potentially boutique inns, adaptive reuse concepts, or mid-scale branded properties – that could better support visitor demand and strengthen Downtown's role as a destination.

Figure 11. Travel Activity in the City of Brownsville

Year	Total Direct	Total Direct Travel Spending	Total Direct Travel Spending	Total Direct Travel Spending
Travel Spending	Total Direct	$43,684,134	$2,050	$6,295,996
Earnings	Total Direct Employment	Local Visitor	$1,950	$6,040,863
Tax Receipts	$254,493,328	$44,256,975	$1,980	$6,361,449
2013	$251,908,578	$45,376,318	$2,030	$6,581,090
2014	$256,027,937	$47,634,969	$2,070	$6,955,652
2015	$252,013,102	$50,897,962	$2,170	$7,217,506
2016	$253,925,123	$52,337,097	$2,260	$7,441,238
2017	$255,780,310	$54,003,549	$2,330	$7,832,752
2018	$275,547,648	$57,189,099	$2,400	$8,609,127
2019	$290,603,853	$62,741,522	$2,580	$9,467,630
2020	$248,247,979	$54,385,640	$2,070	$8,765,749
2021	$329,482,669	$63,903,044	$2,390	$12,068,441
2022	$368,200,704	$72,341,750	$2,560	$12,240,502
2023	$378,892,708	$78,055,294	$2,610	$12,188,448
2024	$385,922,042	$81,845,393	$2,620	$12,067,375

Source: State of Texas, Office of the Governor, Economic Development & Tourism

Figure 12. Visitor Statistics to Downtown 2023

Event	Attendance
Dean Porter Park	650,000
Gladys Porter Zoo	500,000
Market Square	175,000
Sombrero Fest	60,000
Children's Museum of Brownsville	50,000
Charro Days	30,000

Source: Brownsville Convention and Visitors Bureau

Downtown TIRZ Tax Revenue

Since 2019, the taxable value of property within the Downtown TIRZ has increased by 40.3 percent, a growth rate that trails the City of Brownsville's more rapid 74.0 percent increase over the same period. Downtown's property value gains are largely driven by the redevelopment of commercial buildings near Market Square and serve as an important indicator of real estate supply and demand. Sales tax data provided by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts shows that Downtown TIRZ businesses have steadily increased their sales tax contributions in recent years. The temporary decline from 2020 to 2021 reflects the closure of H-E-B and reduced border crossings during COVID-19. Following this dip, sales tax collections rebounded, signaling renewed economic activity and strengthening commercial performance.

TIRZ sales tax and property tax values are two of the most reliable indicators of growth in the Downtown area, reflecting both economic activity and real estate performance. Although the TIRZ encompasses a smaller geographic footprint than the overall study area, it represents the historic core of the community and therefore provides a meaningful snapshot of Downtown's economic health. In addition to serving as an economic barometer, the TIRZ generates a steady and predictable revenue stream that can be reinvested into future projects. The funds can support improvements, redevelopment initiatives, and public realm enhancements that further strengthen Downtown's vitality.

Map 13. Downtown Brownsville Sales Taxpayers in the TIRZ

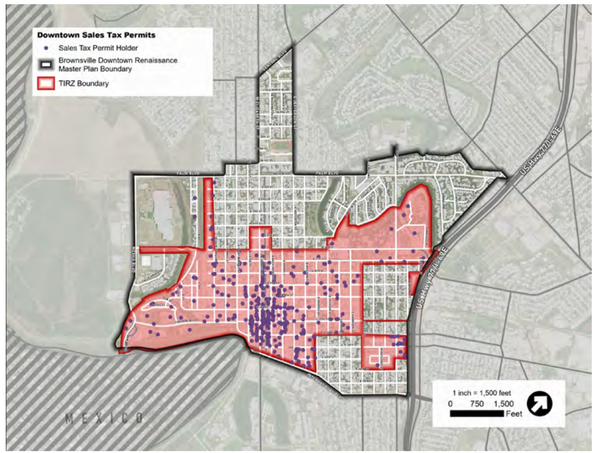


Figure 13. Downtown TIRZ Taxable Property Values

Year	Taxable Value	Increment	TIRZ Revenue
City of Brownsville	$94,535,212	$0	$0
2020 (FY21)	$98,977,243	$4,442,031	$22,150
2021 (FY22)	$100,178,997	$5,643,785	$27,923
2022 (FY23)	$101,041,203	$6,505,991	$32,662
2023 (FY24)	$113,272,918	$18,737,706	$84,073
2024 (FY25)	$117,460,618	$22,925,406	$102,170
2025 (FY26)	$132,602,411	$38,067,199	$168,408
Total	N.A.	N.A.	$437,385

Source: TXP, Cameron Appraisal District
* Excludes expansion in 2025 and Cameron County joining in 2025

Figure 14. Sales Tax Revenue Generated

Year	Downtown TIRZ	City of Brownsville
2020	$5,703,869	$40,932,113
2021	$1,007,709	$49,250,232
2022	$1,210,359	$55,592,999
2023	$1,297,650	$58,136,168
2024	$1,404,451	$60,656,607

Source: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts