

# City of Harlingen

## Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails Plan





# Acknowledgments

## City Commission


- Norma Sepulveda, Mayor
- Ford Kinsley, Commissioner - District 1
- Daniel Nemecio Lopez, Commissioner - District 2
- Michael Mezmar, Commissioner - District 3
- Frank Morales, Commissioner - District 4
- Rene Perez, Commissioner - District 5

## Planning and Zoning Commission

- Nicholas P. Consiglio, Chair
- Carlos A. Sanchez, P.E., Co-Chair
- Olga Vanessa Cantu
- Wandy E. Cruz-Velazquez
- Raul L. Flores
- Sergio Perez
- Luis Villarreal

## Consultant Team



- Chance Sparks, FAICP, CNU-A
- Caitlin Admire, AICP, LEED ND, ENV SP
- Lahari Peluri
- Seth Pilger, AICP-C
- Christopher WesselIn, AICP-C
- 
- Fred Lopez, FAICP, CTP, CNU-A
- Samuel Schulte

## Plan Steering Committee

- Norma Sepulveda, Mayor
- Ford Kinsley, Commissioner - District 1
- Daniel Nemecio Lopez, Commission - District 2
- Luis Villarreal, Planning and Zoning Commission
- Sergio Perez, Planning and Zoning Commission
- Adele Clinton-Solis, Parks and Recreation Board
- Diana Esparza, Parks and Recreation Board
- Lars Keim, Downtown Advisory Board
- John Percy, Downtown Advisory Board

## City Staff

- Gabriel Gonzalez, City Manager
- Dr. Josh Ramirez, Assistant City Manager
- Oscar Garcia, Assistant City Manager
- Ana Hernandez, AICP, Planning and Development Director
- Joel Olivo, Assistant Planning and Development Director
- Soledad Nunez, CNU-A, City Planner
- Daniel Diaz, Director of Parks and Recreation
- Juan Mendiola III, Assistant Director of Parks and Recreation
- Alexis Riojas, Downtown Director
- Roberto Hernandez, City Engineer





# Table of Contents

**Community Context .....6**

**Inventory .....22**

**Needs Assessment..... 46**

**Recommendations..... 72**





CHAPTER

1

# Community Context



# Introduction

## Purpose

Parks and recreation opportunities are crucial quality-of-life amenities for Harlingen residents. Development of a high-quality parks and recreation system doesn't happen overnight. Likewise, decisions about park amenities and recreational offerings should not happen in a vacuum. Rather, a cohesive vision for the community's parks and recreation system must be determined and then guidance provided toward incremental implementation over time. This Plan, in concert with the overall Comprehensive Plan, provides that guidance.

This Parks Master Plan:

- Identifies the implications of current community demographics and projected population growth as it relates to parks and recreation.
- Analyzes the current state of the City's parks, recreation and open spaces.
- Identifies parks and recreation deficiencies and needs.
- Establishes goals, objectives and recommendations for the next five to 10 years.
- Prioritizes improvements to the parks and recreation system.
- Aids the City in seeking funding opportunities.

This document should be used as a planning tool by City staff, elected and appointed officials, citizens and the private development community to understand community desires and move toward long-term community success. The Plan is intended to help coordinate local efforts for Harlingen and to work in conjunction with Cameron County, area school districts, local organizations and sports leagues.

## Benefits of Parks

Access to quality parks and recreation is an important component of a high-quality community. Planning for a successful, equitable parks system ensures that all residents can experience these key benefits:



### Overall Well-Being Benefits

- Contact with nature helps to improve overall well-being and quality of life.
- Recreation provides multi-generational opportunities for mental, physical, social and emotional stimulation.

### Health Benefits

- Access to nature and recreation increases frequency of fitness and improves psychological health.
- Play provides crucial developmental opportunities for children.
- Physical activity helps to reduce obesity, depression and many other health problems.

### Environmental Benefits

- Parkland helps to mitigate climate, air and water pollution impacts.
- Preserved open space protects vital habitat for plants and wildlife.
- Parks foster environmental stewardship in citizens.

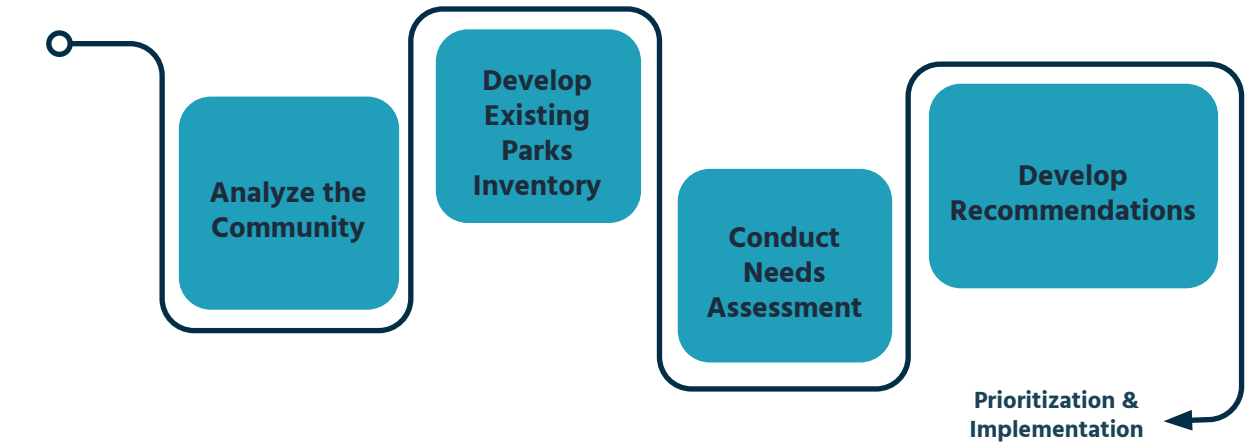
### Economic Benefits

- Parkland increases property values within close proximity.
- Quality parks and recreation can attract new residents and businesses.
- Unique park and recreation amenities can encourage tourism and associated economic benefits.

## Planning Process & Time Frame

In 2024, the City commissioned Freese and Nichols, Inc. to prepare a new Comprehensive Plan and Parks Master Plan. The Comprehensive Plan's engagement outcomes, vision and goals, and recommendations influence Harlingen's parks and recreation system and carry over heavily into this Parks Plan.

The Parks Plan follows a specific process to produce a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) compliant plan. Recommendations should be re-evaluated periodically to ensure they are still valid. TPWD master plan guidelines recommend updating the Plan every five years or before any new major developments occur that significantly change the parks and recreation needs of residents.



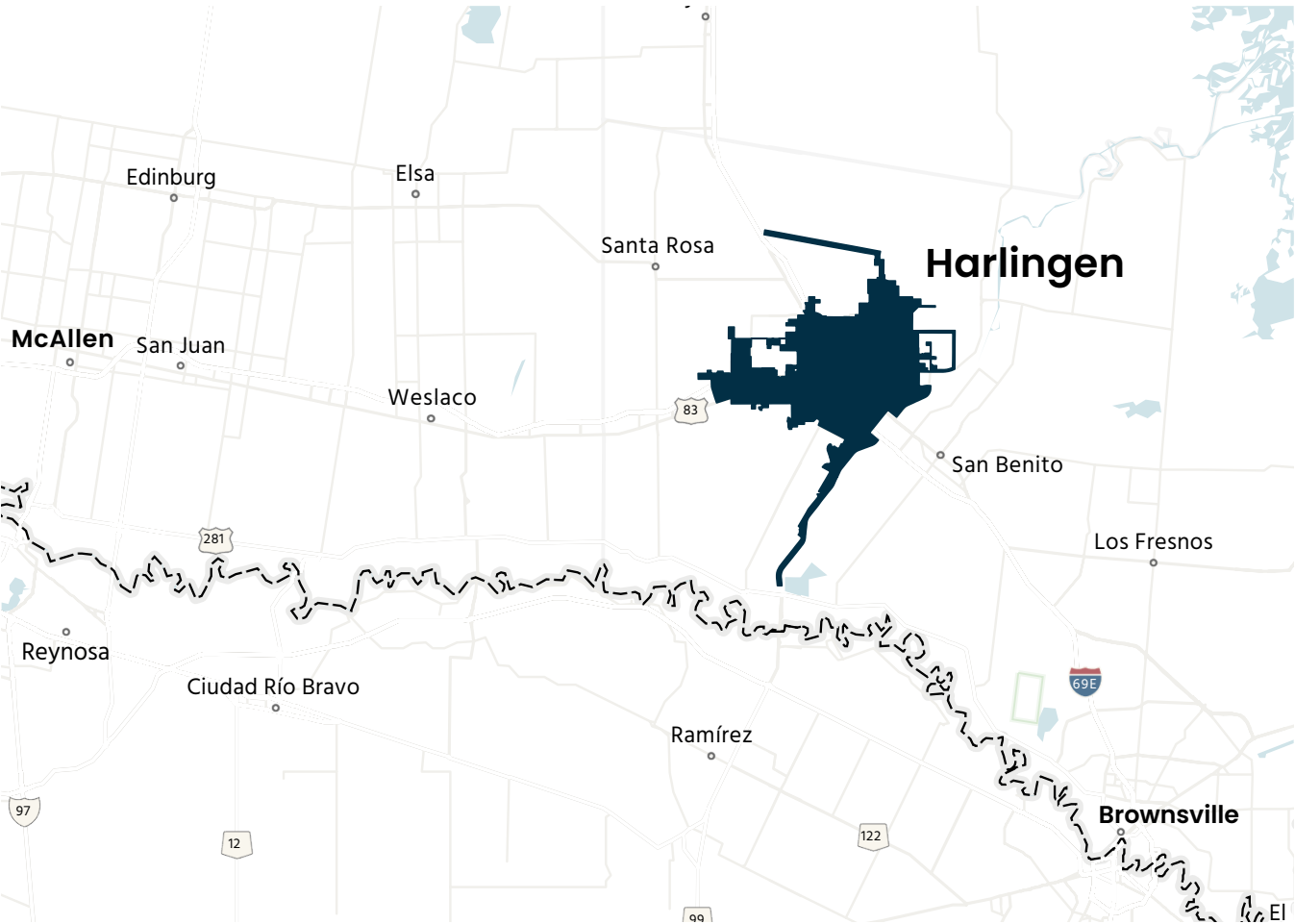


Planning Area

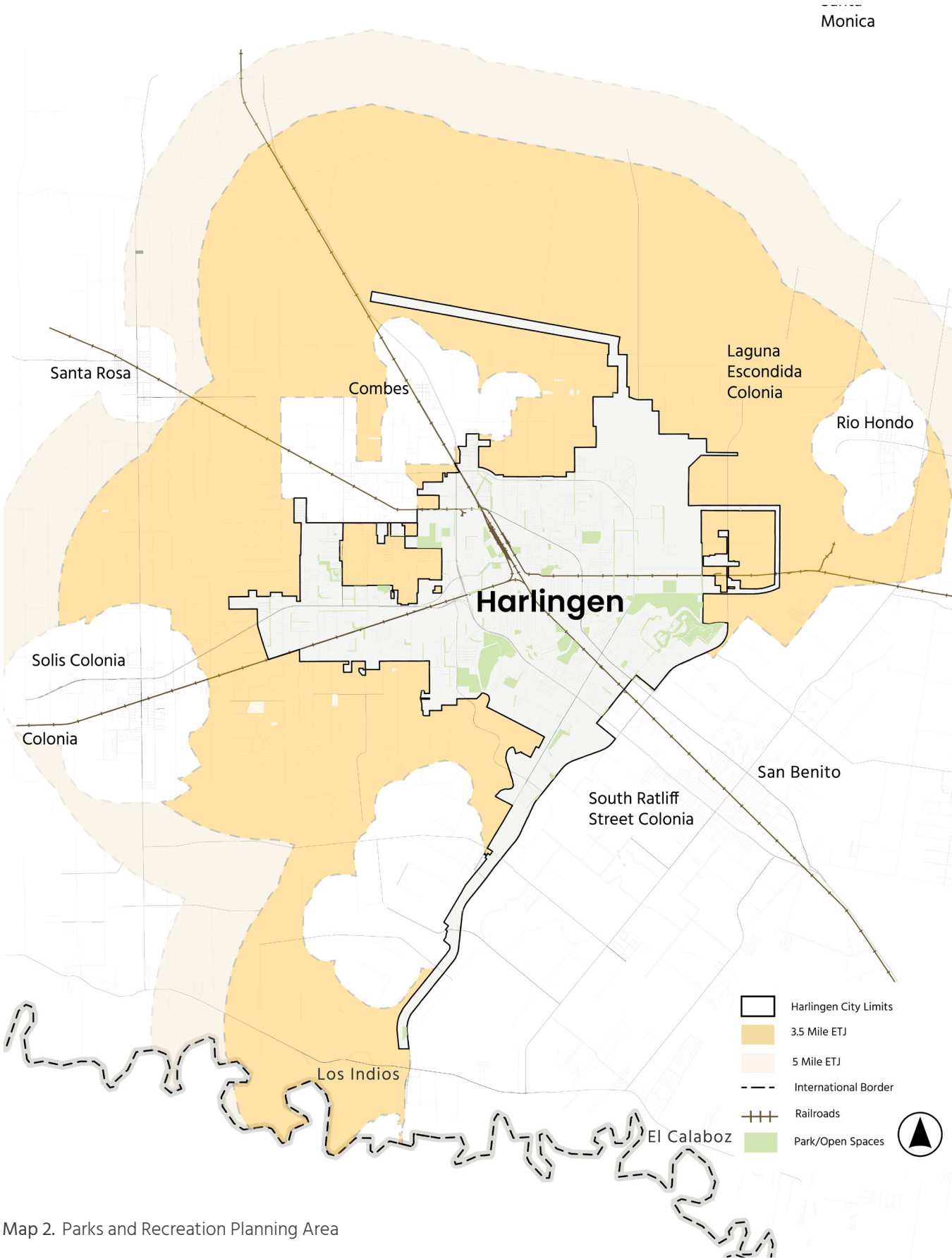
The planning area outlined in this Plan includes the entire city limits of Harlingen, along with its extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ), as depicted in the map on the following page. Located in Cameron County, Harlingen is advantageously positioned in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, with close access to both the U.S.-Mexico border and the Gulf Coast, and in proximity to other major regional cities like Brownsville and McAllen.

The City of Harlingen is the principal governmental entity responsible for planning and development services, which include parks, recreation and community facilities. While the City leads the implementation, the success of these initiatives

relies heavily on the active participation and support of the entire community. This includes residents, local organizations and businesses. Together, these partners play a crucial role in ensuring the continuous improvement and success of Harlingen’s parks and recreational facilities.



Map 1. Regional Context of Harlingen



Map 2. Parks and Recreation Planning Area



Previous Planning Efforts

Parks & Recreation Master Plan (2016)

The Plan outlines a vision for improving parks and recreation areas in the City and ETJ and identifies priorities for the Harlingen Parks System based on community engagement and stakeholder feedback. The focus areas included:

- Parkland Expansion: Secure land and enhanced recreational spaces at Pendleton Park and Hunter Park.
- Facility Enhancements: Upgraded amenities at Victor Park and Tom Wilson Sports Complex.
- Trail Development: Extended West Harlingen Drainage Corridor Trail and Commerce Street Trail.
- Inclusive Recreation: Improved accessibility at Windsor Park and Vestal Park.



Figure 1. Parks & Recreation Master Plan Action Status

Action	Description	Status
1	Identify funding sources and priorities for critical initial phase of existing park improvements.	In Progress
2	Complete the Arroyo Colorado Trail as the premier trail corridor in the Rio Grande Valley from Dixieland Park to Hugh Ramsey Park.	In Progress
3	Establish land use patterns for undeveloped areas adjacent to the Arroyo.	Not Started
4	Develop Phase II of the Harlingen Soccer Complex.	Not Started
5	Develop a destination/inclusive play area (located in Victor, Pendleton, Lon C. Hill Park, or Wilson Sports Complex).	Complete
6	Improve Hugh Ramsey Park as a major birding and wildlife attraction.	Not Started
7	Work with Harlingen CISD to create “school parks” in West Harlingen and in North Harlingen.	Not Started
8	Reorganize and improve Lon C. Hill Park.	Complete
9	Establish additional high priority trail segments (Jackson Street corridor, West Harlingen trail, Commerce Street trail, connection to Soccer Complex).	Not Started
10	Conduct an indoor recreation center feasibility review to address indoor recreation needs.	In Progress
11	Address additional medium and high priority improvements to existing parks.	In Progress
12	Develop a nature center facility.	Not Started
13	Construct an indoor recreation center	In Progress

One Vision, One Harlingen Comprehensive Plan (2016)

The Plan establishes a strategic framework for the growth and development of Harlingen. It emphasizes the creation of a vibrant and sustainable community within both the City and its Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ). Developed through community engagement and stakeholder participation, the plan outlines five key areas:

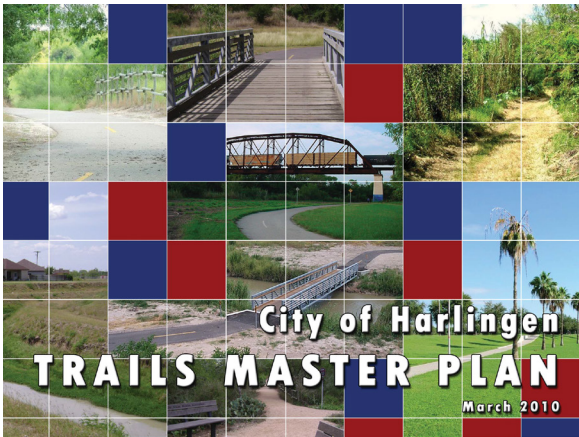
- Improving economic development and creating job opportunities.
- Expanding neighborhoods and diversifying housing options.
- Developing transportation systems and connectivity.
- Expanding parks, recreation, and open spaces.
- Encouraging environmental sustainability and resilience.



Trails Master Plan (2010)

The Plan outlines an expansion of Harlingen’s trail network to enhance connectivity and recreation throughout the City and ETJ. It identifies priority areas for development through public participation and stakeholder input. The critical areas include:

- Expansion of the Arroyo Colorado Trail to enhance connectivity and provide recreational opportunities along the natural corridor.
- Development of new hike-and-bike trails to improve pedestrian and cyclist access across Harlingen, linking neighborhoods and parks.
- Enhancement of trail access points and safety features to increase usability and accessibility for residents of all ages and abilities.
- Strengthening trail connections between parks, schools and key destinations to encourage active transportation and recreation.





Harlingen Parks and Recreation Department

The Harlingen Parks and Recreation Department is the primary entity responsible for planning, maintaining and developing the City's parks and trails, as well as organizing community festivals and events. This includes facilitating several youth and adult sports leagues and operating several summer recreation programs. The Department is comprised of 35 full-time staff members, 11 part-time staff members and 55 seasonal workers. Parks

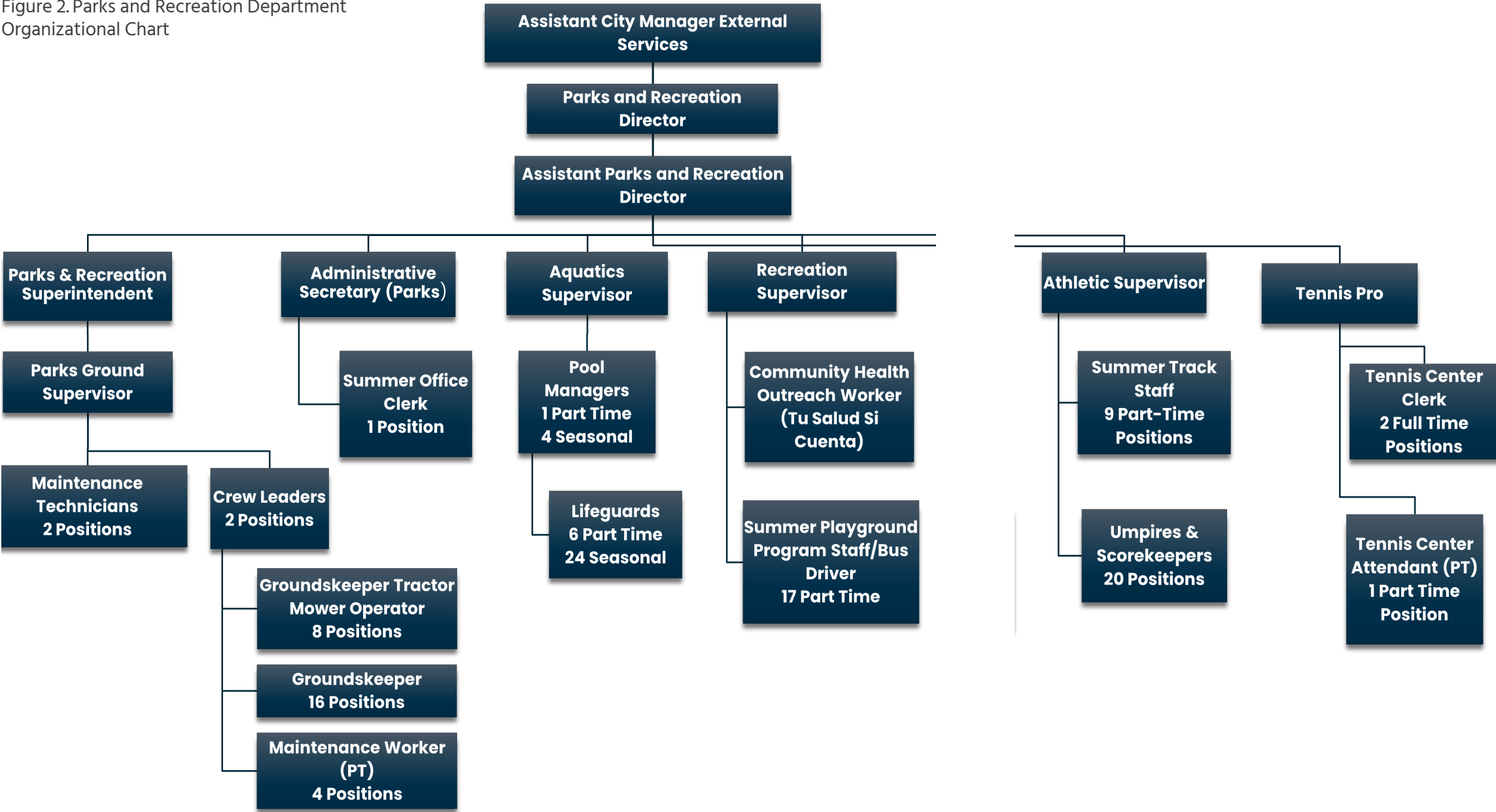
and Recreation staff maintain non-parkland owned by the City, which requires approximately 30% of their weekly time. They also assist with special events hosted by the City accounting for 20% of their weekly time.



At present, there is a desire to hire two seasonal track coaches, five full-time grounds maintenance staff, a full-time aquatic facility operation technician and a community event director. These positions will support the department in maintaining the quality of existing facilities, ensuring the smooth operation of new and expanded services and facilitating current event offerings. As new facilities and events are considered in the future, it will

be crucial to ensure that there are sufficient staff available to operate and adequately maintain these areas and events.

Figure 2. Parks and Recreation Department Organizational Chart





# Community Demographics

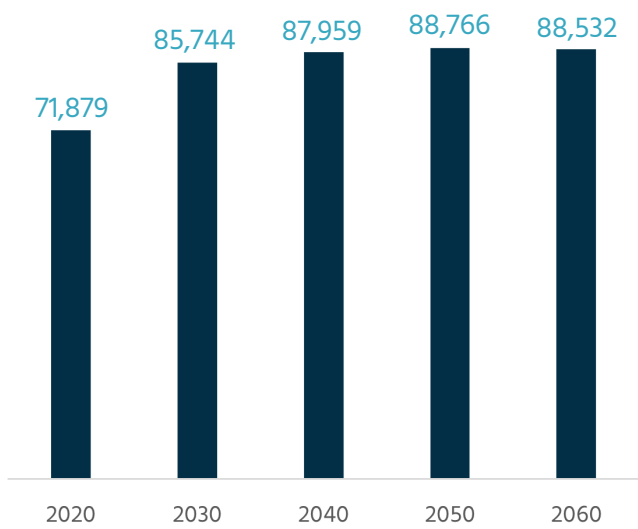
Demographic insights are crucial in parks planning, as they guide decisions on park locations, sizes, amenities and programming to address the varied needs and preferences of different population groups. In addition to current demographic data, it is important to consider projected community growth to ensure adequate parkland and facilities for future residents.

## Population Growth

The City of Harlingen has experienced significant population growth, with an increase of 24.8% between 2000 and 2020. According to projections from the Texas Water Development Board, Harlingen is expected to continue its upward trajectory, boasting a compound annual growth rate of 0.52% per year, which surpasses that of Cameron County (0.27%).

As Harlingen’s population continues to expand, the need for thoughtful parks and recreation planning becomes more crucial. A growing community demands a wider array of recreational facilities to meet the needs of its residents. This includes the development of additional parks, playgrounds, sports fields, walking trails and other amenities that cater to individuals of all ages.

Figure 3. Population Projections



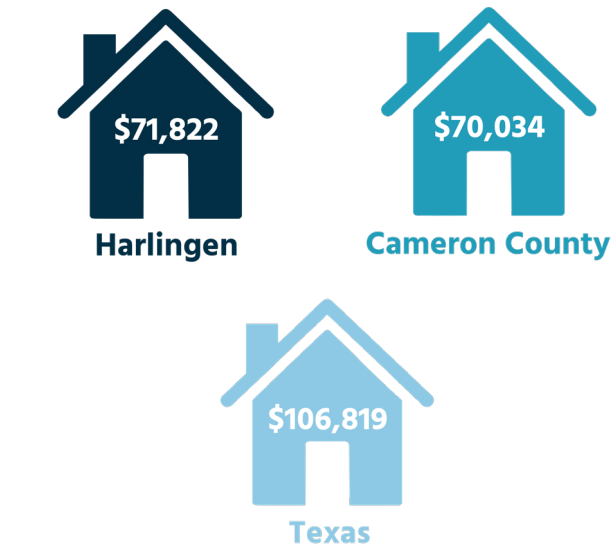
Source: Texas Water Development Board

## Household Income

According to recent data, the average household income in Harlingen is \$71,822, which is slightly higher than the countywide average at \$70,034, but lower than the state average at \$106,819. The City also has a per capita income of \$26,217, which is also higher than Cameron County (\$23,142), but lower than the state (\$39,466).

Household income plays a significant role in determining the balance between fee-based and free recreation opportunities offered to the community. Some residents may be willing and able to pay for enhanced recreational options. Additionally, household income levels can impact the types of facilities and programs that are prioritized, the availability of financial assistance or subsidies for low-income families, and the overall budget and funding available for parks and recreation services.

Figure 4. Average Household Income



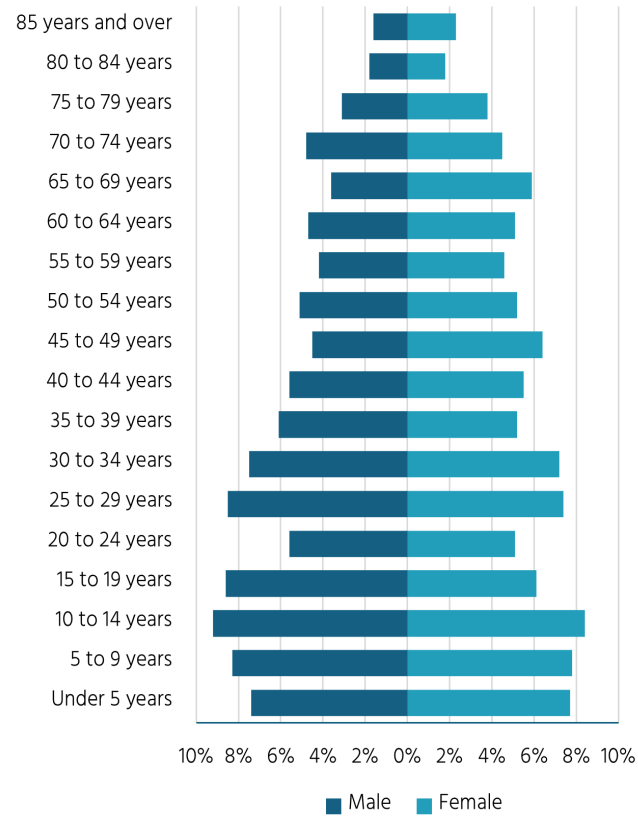
Source: 2019 - 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

## Age Distribution

Parks and recreational facilities play a vital role in accommodating the diverse needs of community members of all ages. For instance, playgrounds and sports fields are frequently enjoyed by families with young children, while walking trails offer a versatile option for people of all generations. Fitness areas, on the other hand, often appeal to both adults and seniors seeking to maintain their physical health. When planning and designing parks and recreational spaces, it is essential to take into account the age distribution within the community. Different age groups have unique recreational requirements, and creating inclusive spaces that address these needs is key to fostering a vibrant and active community.

Harlingen has a median age of 33.2 years, slightly higher than that of Cameron County (32.4), but lower than Texas (35.5). This is indicative of a relatively young population. The largest population groups in Harlingen are those of children, teenagers and young adults. This indicates a need for parks and recreational facilities that cater to families with children and active young adults. These amenities may include the incorporation of new playgrounds, sports fields or fitness areas to support these growing populations.

Figure 5. Age Distribution

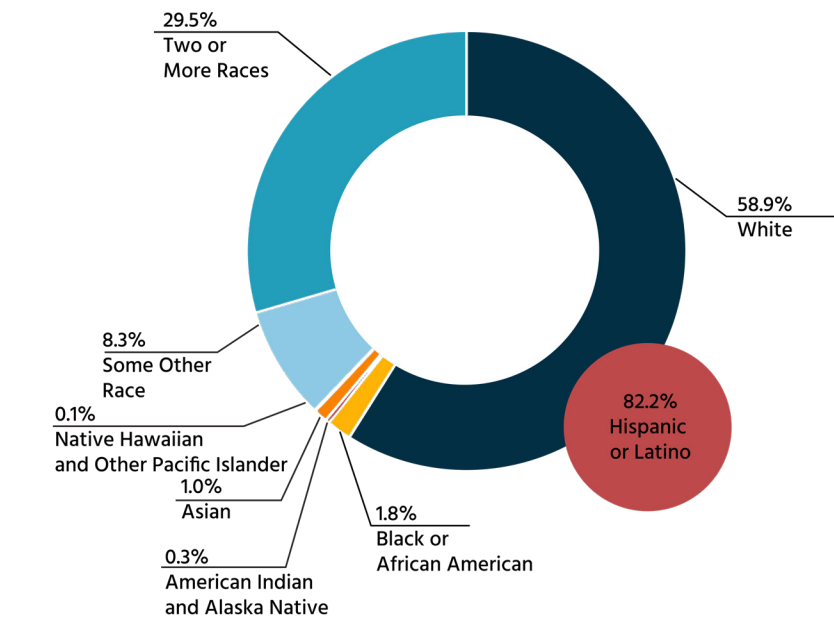


Source: 2019 - 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

## Race and Ethnicity

Harlingen boasts a diverse population, with a large portion identifying as White (58.9%) and Two or More Races (29.5%). There is also a notable population within the city who identify as Hispanic or Latino (82.2%), which is significantly higher than the statewide percentage of 39.5%. This rich diversity contributes to the cultural fabric of Harlingen and underscores the importance of inclusive community planning. Considering this diversity in parks and recreation planning is crucial. It ensures that the facilities and programs offered meet the varied cultural and recreational needs of the community.

Figure 6. Race and Ethnicity



Source: 2019 - 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates



# Residential Growth Areas

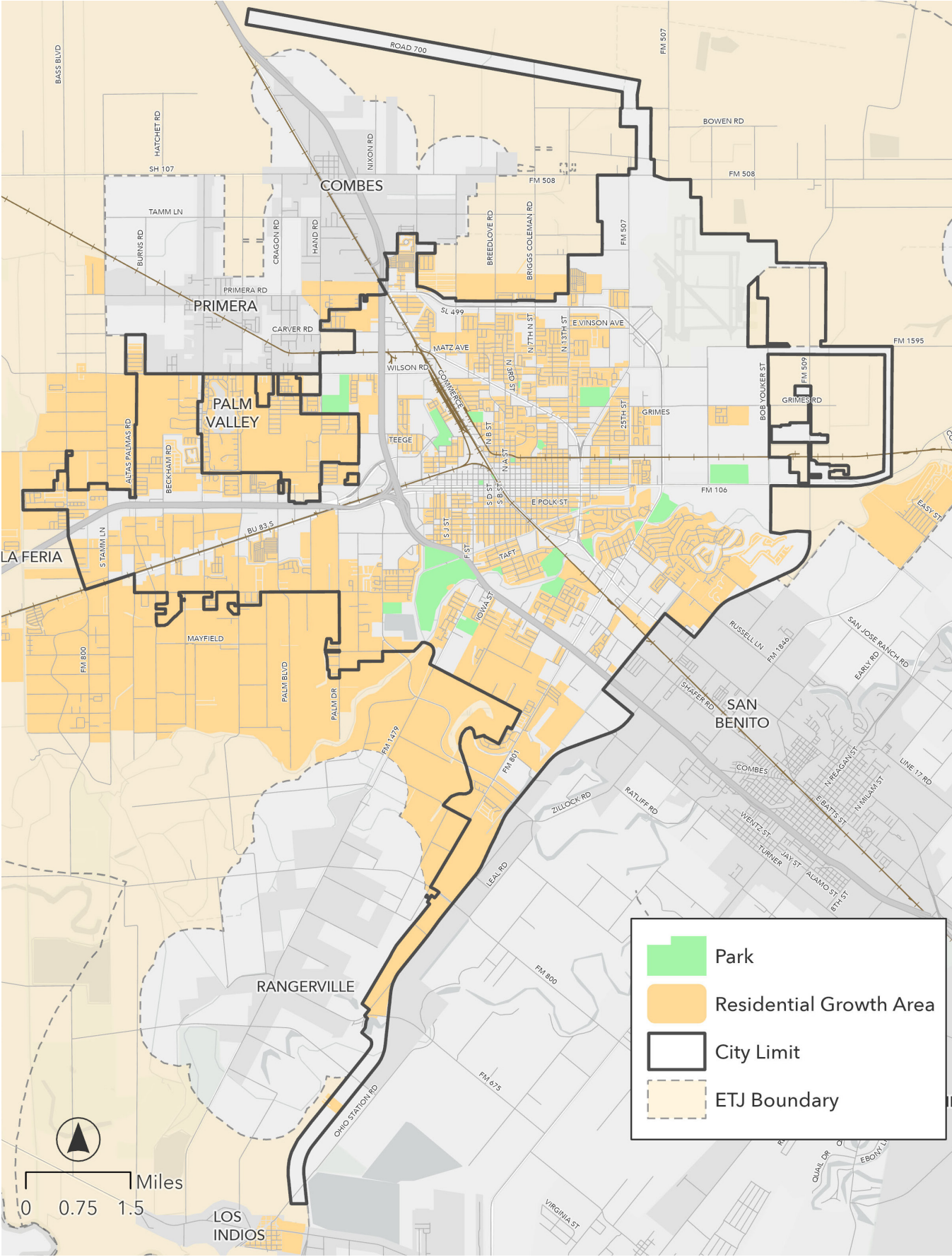
As highlighted in recent population projections, Harlingen is experiencing notable growth. Between 2023 and 2024, several key areas within the City saw significant in-progress developments. These developments include:

- **Roosevelt Industrial Park:** The forthcoming industrial development spanning over 26 hectares between Roosevelt Road and Primera Road, is set to bolster the City’s manufacturing and logistics capabilities. This development is anticipated to create new job opportunities and stimulate economic growth, as well as increase the demand for nearby housing.
- **Medical District Development:** The medical district in Harlingen is witnessing substantial growth, prompting a heightened demand for residential developments to accommodate professionals and support staff in the area.
- **Residential Construction:** The City continues to see steady growth in residential construction, with more than 1,000 single-family or multi-family lots under development, and over 46 subdivision developments in progress.
- **Downtown Revitalization:** Ongoing efforts to revitalize Downtown Harlingen aim to create a vibrant area with economically viable and unique businesses. These initiatives are designed to enhance the quality of life, attract visitors and encourage additional housing in the downtown area.



While much of the City and ETJ remain undeveloped, there is potential for future residential development throughout the majority of the City and portions of the ETJ. The orange zones on the Residential Growth Areas Map highlight regions where current or planned development might incorporate a residential element.

As Harlingen considers the future of its parks system, it’s important to locate parks in close proximity to residential areas. Future parkland acquisitions and/or development should aim to provide adequate parkland resources to serve any under-served neighborhoods in these areas. The assessment chapter further identifies target areas for future parks based on these growth areas.



Map 3. Growth Area



# Community Engagement

The planning process offered numerous avenues for public engagement, ensuring community input shaped the Plan effectively. These opportunities included:

- Feedback on parks collected during the concurrent Comprehensive Plan update.
- Plans Steering Committee meetings.
- Stakeholder focus groups.
- A community survey.
- Public outreach events.
- A project website with an interactive mapping exercise.
- Summarization of the parks-specific outcomes and feedback are presented in the demand-based assessment section of this Plan.

## Comprehensive Plan Engagement

During the update of the Comprehensive Plan, community input was actively collected through various channels, including community events, an interactive digital map, an online questionnaire, focus groups and sessions with the Plans Steering Committee (PSC). A significant portion of the feedback centered around parks and recreation, which played a crucial role in shaping this Parks Plan and its development process.

## Plans Steering Committee Meetings

The Plans Steering Committee oversaw various stages of the planning process to ensure it aligned with the community’s vision and needs. Their responsibilities included advocating for the planning process, providing input on the analyses conducted by the planning team, shaping recommendations and ultimately recommending the final draft to the City Commission for approval. The PSC served as the advisory committee for all three plan processes running concurrently, the Comprehensive Plan, Downtown Plan and Parks Plan. This ensured a holistic approach to all three planning processes.

## Public Outreach Events

The planning team organized three community outreach events throughout the process, varying in time, location and format to engage different segments of the community. These events included a community open house to introduce the project and receive initial feedback on the community’s vision for the plan. Additionally, materials from these in-person engagements were made available online through the project website.

## Stakeholder Focus Group

Feedback was gathered from stakeholders during a focus group session. The session began with an overview of the Plan and its objectives, followed by interactive discussions. Participants were encouraged to evaluate the current parks and recreation system, identifying its strengths, areas for improvement and key priorities for the overall enhancement of the parks system.

## Online Survey

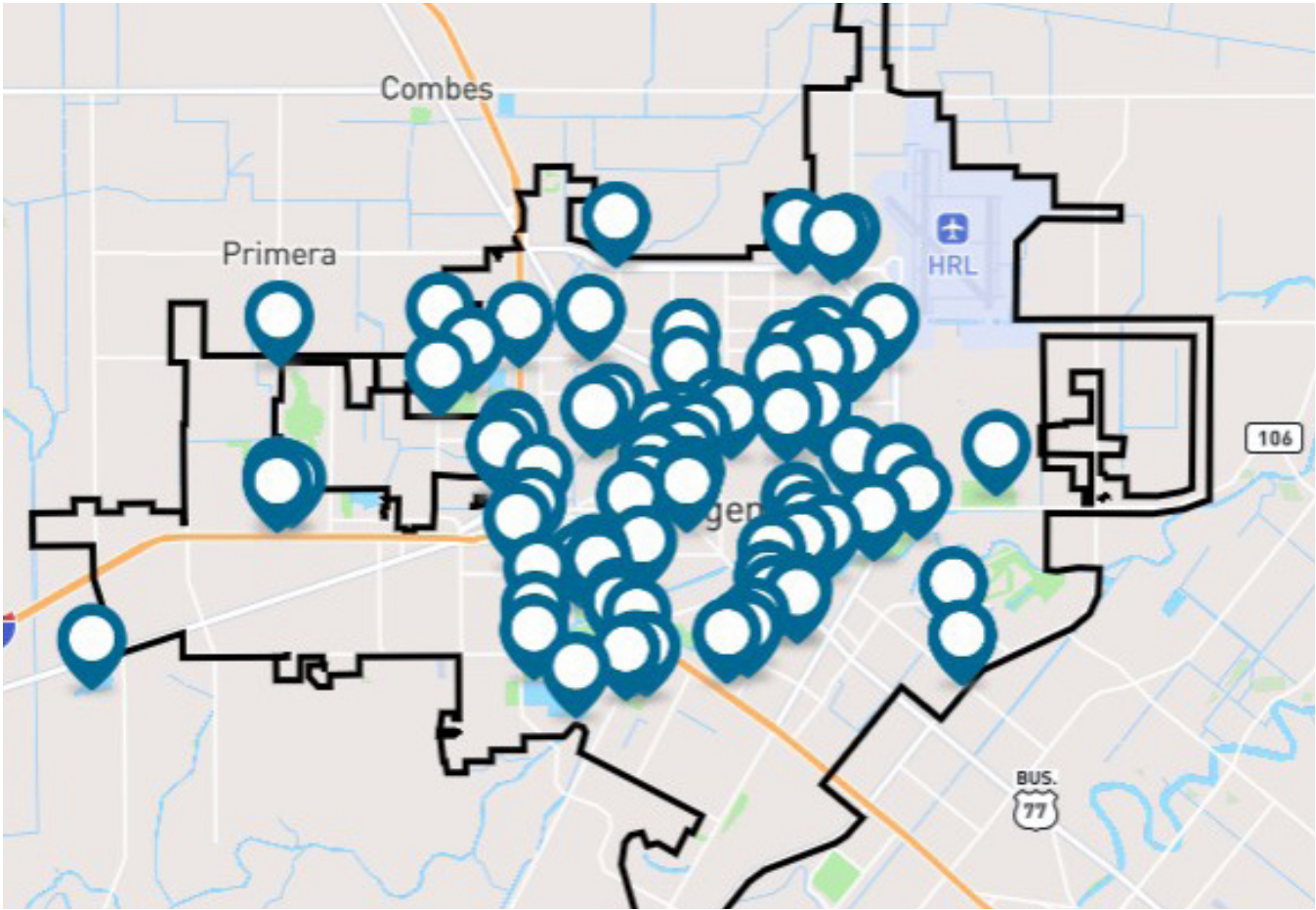
The Harlingen Parks Plan survey was open from October 30th through February 10th, 2025, and was promoted via the project website, the City’s various social media channels and the local news. The survey was also available in paper format during the November 18th engagement event. A total of 159 respondents participated in the survey while it was open.

## Project Website and Interactive Map

To ensure all stakeholders had easy access to resources and updates regarding the Parks Plan, a dedicated project website was created. This site offered comprehensive information about previous planning efforts, an outline of the planning process, details on upcoming engagement events and a direct contact option for the project team. Additionally, an interactive map was included to gather feedback and concerns about specific parks and recreation facilities, as well as to collect input on the Comprehensive Plan and the Downtown Plan. The map attracted 28 participants, who contributed a total of 92 comments.

159 Survey Responses

117 Map Comments



Map 4. Harlingen Interactive Map