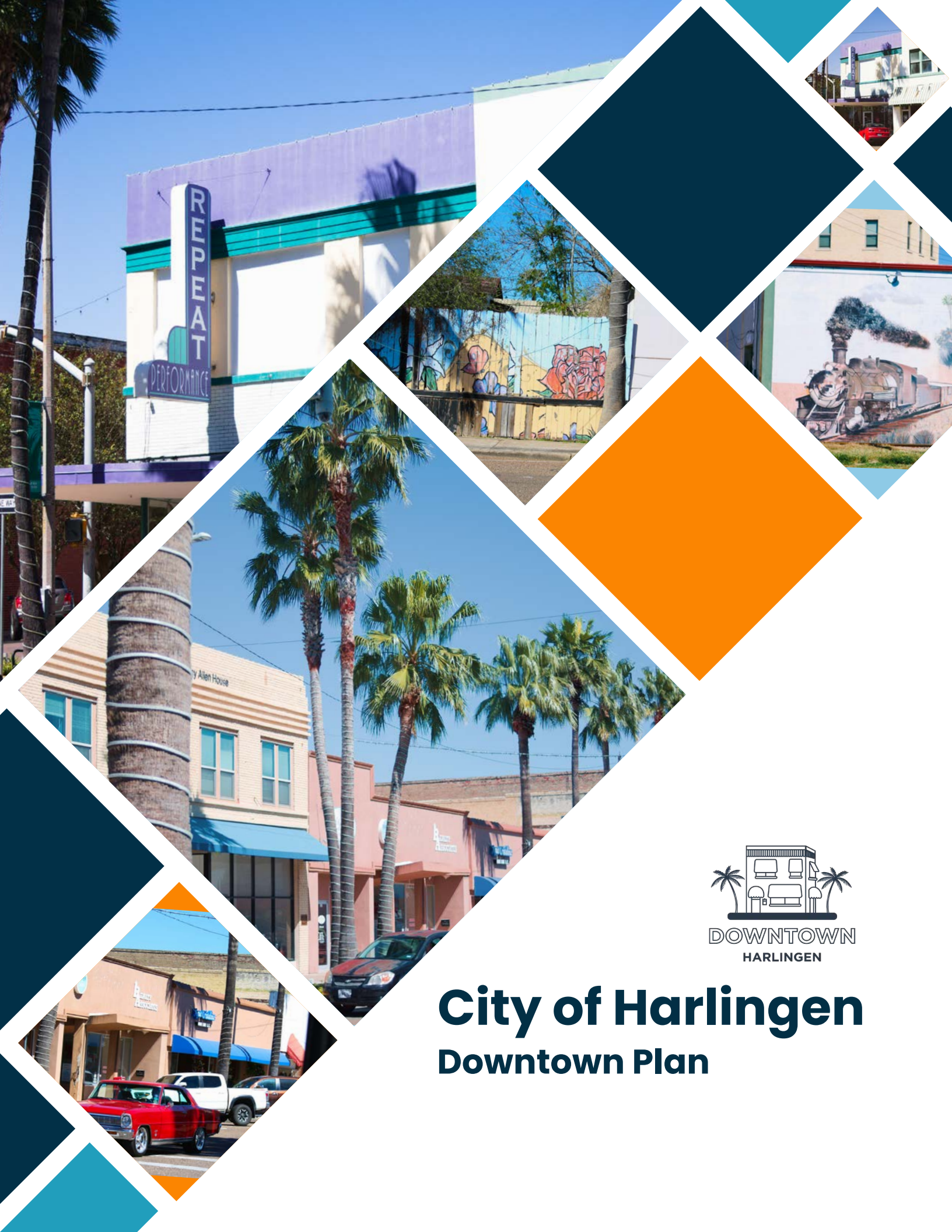


DOWNTOWN
HARLINGEN

City of Harlingen

Downtown Plan



Acknowledgments

City Commission

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Daniel Nemecio Lopez, Commissioner - District 2

Michael Mezmar, Commissioner - District 3

Frank Morales, Commissioner - District 4

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Table of Contents

Downtown Analysis 6

Downtown Framework.....30

Implementation.....52

CHAPTER 1

DOWNTOWN ANALYSIS

Downtown Plan

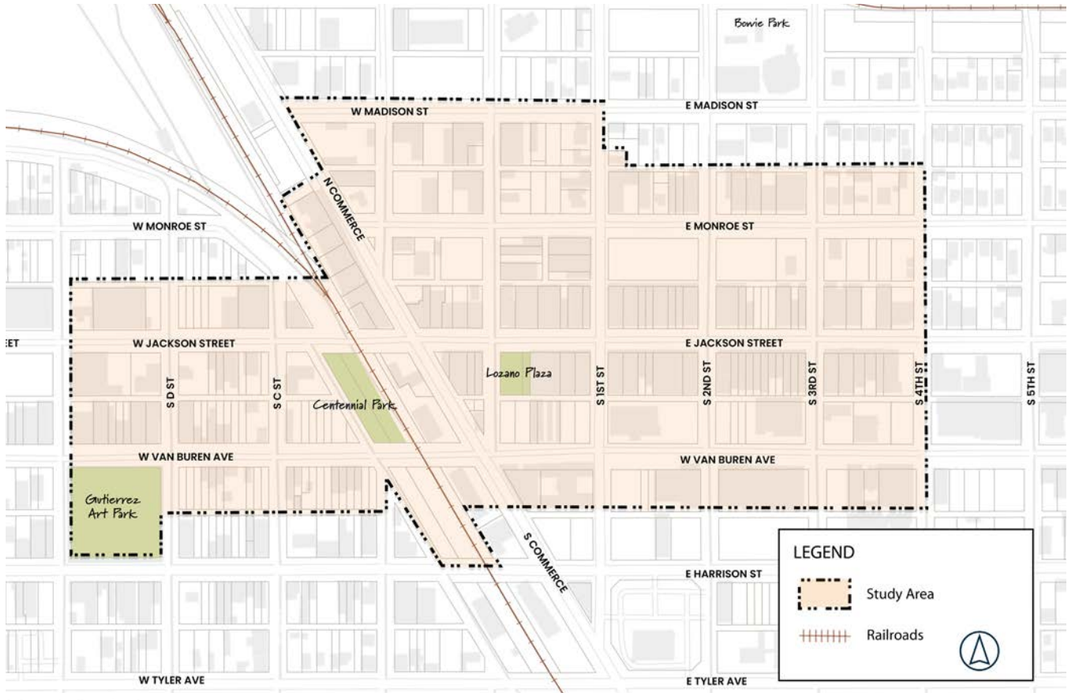
About the Plan

The Harlingen Downtown Plan outlines a strategic vision and framework for the future development of downtown. It guides streetscapes, public spaces and branding strategies to enhance the area's identity and functionality. This Plan aims to create a vibrant, economically thriving downtown that fosters business growth, community engagement and a strong sense of place while preserving Harlingen's unique character.

Study Area

The study area is defined by the Downtown boundary, which encompasses the historic and commercial core of Downtown Harlingen. This area serves as the center for civic, retail and cultural activities, surrounded by residential neighborhoods and public spaces. Defining this boundary is essential to directing revitalization efforts, guiding infrastructure improvements and enhancing economic opportunities in the heart of the City.

While the primary focus is Downtown Harlingen, some recommendations will extend beyond this boundary to improve connectivity, wayfinding and accessibility. These efforts will link downtown with key destinations, including major thoroughfares, public parks and transit corridors, ensuring stronger regional integration and multimodal accessibility.

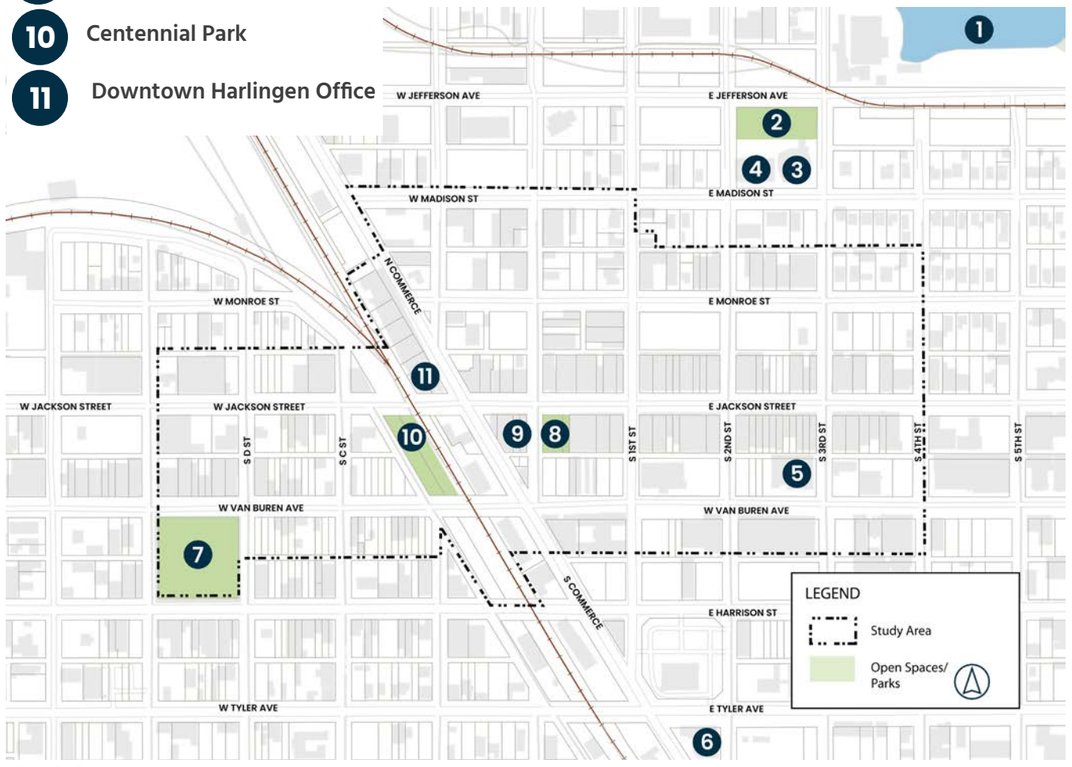


Map 1. Study Area

Points of Interest

1. Lake Harlingen
2. Bowie Park
3. Casa Del Sol
4. Harlingen Community Center
5. Post Office
6. Harlingen City Hall
7. Gutierrez Park
8. Lazano Plaza
9. Baxter Lofts
10. Centennial Park
11. Downtown Harlingen Office

Downtown Harlingen is home to a diverse mix of civic, cultural, recreational and residential destinations that help define its unique character. These key points of interest include public parks, community facilities, historic landmarks and emerging residential anchors, each contributing to the vibrancy and accessibility of the district. Whether it's gathering at Centennial Park, enjoying nature at Lake Harlingen, accessing services at City Hall or living downtown at Baxter Lofts, these sites represent the social and functional heart of the community. The map below highlights eleven significant locations that support everyday activity and long-term investment in Downtown Harlingen.



Map 2. Points of Interest

Introduction & Analysis

The Evolution of Downtown Harlingen

Early Growth (1900s–1930s)

Early growth driven by the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway, iconic 1920s landmarks and the Harlingen Air Force Base, established Downtown as a hub for trade, agriculture and commerce.



Downtown Harlingen in the 1920s[1]

Mid-Century Decline (1970s–1990s)

The shift to suburban retail, loss of passenger rail and the rise of Valle Vista Mall in the 1980s led to business closures and reduced foot traffic in Downtown.


Baxter Building Construction (1926)[2]

Cultural Resilience

Despite the decline, Downtown preserved key historic structures and remained a meaningful community gathering space.

Revitalization (2000s–Today)

Main Street Harlingen, the Downtown Improvement District, events and public art has brought new energy to Downtown, blending history with fresh vibrancy and community gathering spaces.



Downtown Harlingen Market Days (2024)[3]

Today & Beyond

Downtown Harlingen continues evolving as the City's vibrant urban core, balancing preservation with progress.

[1, 2, 3] Texas Historical Commission. (n.d.). Why Harlingen?. Harlingen - Downtown, TX. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://downtowntx.org/harlingen-texas

Population Demographics

Population Trends

The City of Harlingen has experienced consistent population growth since the early 1900s, with only one decade of negative growth. The upward trend is projected to continue, as evidenced by a 10.8% increase in population over the past decade. A growing population benefits city government by leading to increased economic opportunities, greater tax revenue and enhanced community services.

Harlingen boasts a relatively young demographic, with a median age of 33.2 years compared to the statewide median of 35.5 years. Notably, nearly a quarter of its residents are 14 years old or younger, indicating a vibrant and youthful community. Such a youthful population can be advantageous for a city, often leading to a more dynamic workforce, innovative ideas and a thriving future economy.

Figure 1. Harlingen Historic Population

Year	Population	% Change
1910	1,126	-
1920	1,784	+ 58.4%
1930	12,124	+ 579.6%
1940	13,306	+ 9.7%
1950	23,229	+ 74.6%
1960	41,207	+ 77.4%
1970	33,504	- 18.7%
1980	43,543	+ 30%
1990	48,735	+ 11.9%
2000	57,564	+ 18.1%
2010	64,849	+ 12.7%
2020	71,829	+10.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census

Figure 2. Age Comparisons

	Harlingen	Cameron County	Texas
Median Age	33.2	32.4	35.5
Children 14 and Under	24.3%	23.9%	20.8%
Young Adults (20-24)	5.3%	7.6%	6.9%
Mid-Career (35-54)	21.8%	23.4%	26.3%
Senior (65 and Over)	15.9%	14.8%	13.2%

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

Population Projections

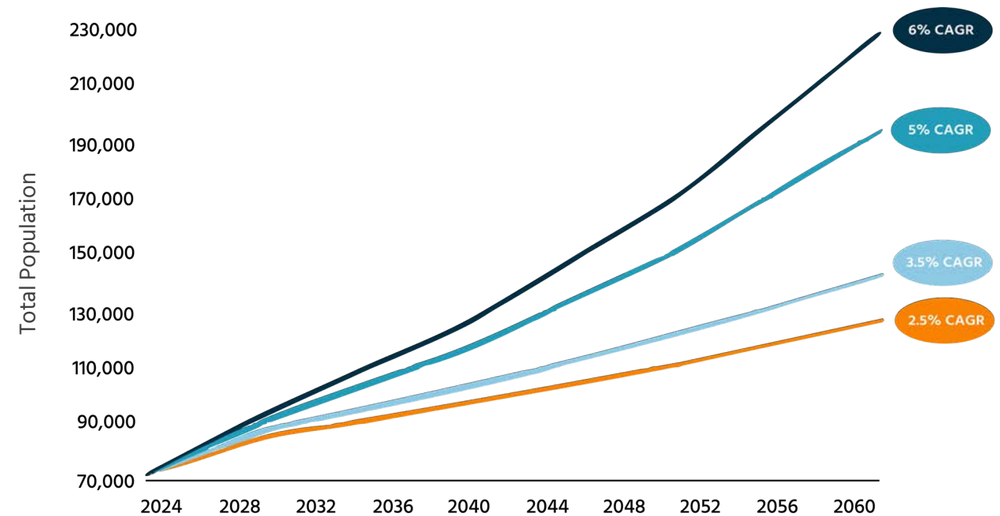
In recent decades, Harlingen's population has grown steadily at just over 1% annually. However, the evolving economic dynamics of the Rio Grande Valley region indicate the potential for higher growth rates. With its strategic location, economic opportunities and ongoing urban development, annual growth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

Figure 3. Harlingen Growth Scenarios

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

Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data

Figure 4. Harlingen Growth Scenarios Line Graph



Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data

Income & Poverty

Income and poverty rates are key indicators of the spending power of a city's residents. The amount of disposable income that residents have can effect retail sales, dining and entertainment, particularly in the Downtown. According to the 2023 American Community Survey, the City of Harlingen has a mean household income of $50,367 with 20% of families living beneath the poverty line.

Lower-income households are more likely to prioritize essential goods and services over discretionary spending, potentially limiting the growth of businesses that rely on higher consumer spending. However, understanding these economic factors can help policymakers and business owners tailor their strategies, such as offering more affordable retail options, creating job opportunities and attracting outside visitors with higher spending power to boost downtown economic activity.

Race and Ethnicity

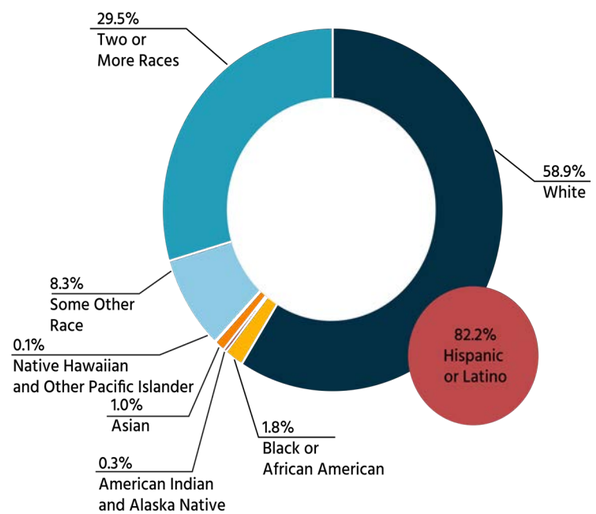
The City of Harlingen has a rich cultural heritage with approximately 82% of residents identifying as ethnically Hispanic or Latino. Downtown revitalization efforts should leverage the City's unique cultural identity to attract locals and tourists alike while fostering economic and community pride. Notably, Harlingen has a large Spanish speaking population, so it is important to accommodate them through bilingual signage and programming in Spanish as well as English. By embracing the linguistic and cultural diversity of its residents, the Downtown area can provide an inclusive environment. Celebrating local traditions, cuisine and art while ensuring accessibility through bilingual initiatives will not only strengthen community engagement, but also enhance the area's appeal to visitors. These efforts will help drive economic growth, support local businesses and solidify downtown Harlingen as a vibrant hub that reflects the rich heritage of its people.





1 in 5 families in Harlingen live below the poverty line (2023 American Community Survey)

Figure 5. Race and Ethnicity



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

Previous Planning Efforts

Harlingen Downtown Revitalization Plan

Previous local and regional planning efforts have shaped the vision for Downtown Harlingen. These efforts provide a foundation for this Plan by addressing economic development, mobility, public spaces and historic preservation. This Section highlights key past initiatives relevant to the revitalization of downtown.

The Harlingen Downtown Revitalization Plan guides strategic improvements to enhance economic vitality, walkability and identity while preserving historic character, supporting local businesses and strengthening Downtown as a regional destination. Key priorities outlined in the plan included:

- Streetscape Enhancements: Improving sidewalks, lighting and landscaping to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.
- Historic Preservation: Encouraging the adaptive reuse of historic buildings while maintaining the district's unique architectural character.
- Public Space Improvements: Activating downtown plazas, parks and gathering spaces to foster community engagement.
- Economic Development Strategies: Supporting small businesses, retail growth and mixed-use development to attract new investment.
- Mobility & Accessibility: Enhancing multimodal transportation, including pedestrian and bicycle connections, to improve downtown access.
- Placemaking & Branding: Establishing wayfinding signage, public art installations and downtown marketing campaigns to strengthen identity.

Alignment with Comprehensive and Park Plans

The Downtown Plan builds on and aligns with Harlingen's Comprehensive Plan and Parks Master Plan. While the Comprehensive Plan guides long-term growth and land use citywide, the Downtown Plan focuses on implementing those goals in the urban core. The Parks Plan complements both by identifying open space and connectivity improvements that support a more walkable, livable downtown. Together, these plans ensure coordinated investment across the City.

Policy and Regulatory Framework

Downtown Harlingen's development is guided by a robust policy framework that promotes economic growth, preserves historic character and enhances urban design. These policies and regulations ensure the district remains a vibrant, safe and accessible hub for businesses, residents and visitors.

Building and Fire Regulations

Harlingen follows the International Building Code (IBC) and International Fire Code (IFC) to ensure all construction and renovations meet modern safety standards. These codes support adaptive reuse while preserving historic structures and enhancing resilience.

Zoning and Land Use Regulations

The City's zoning supports a walkable, mixed-use downtown, with districts like Downtown Core, General Commercial and Mixed-Use Transition. The Subdivision Ordinance promotes orderly development, while the Planning & Zoning Commission helps ensure growth aligns with the area's character.

Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) and Incentives

The Downtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) funds key improvements, such as utility upgrades and façade restorations to attract private investment. Incentives like preservation grants further support property owners committed to revitalization.

Historic Preservation Efforts

Harlingen is a designated Texas Main Street City, with downtown revitalization efforts led by Main Street Harlingen and supported by the Downtown Improvement District. These programs focus on restoring historic buildings, enhancing public spaces and promoting local businesses, with design guidelines in place to preserve the area's historic character.

Economic Development Initiatives

Beyond the TIRZ, the City uses grants to support downtown infrastructure, business recruitment and beautification. The Harlingen Economic Development Corporation (EDC) works to attract and retain investment in the area.

Comprehensive Planning

Harlingen's ongoing Comprehensive Plan update prioritizes downtown revitalization. Through public input and long-term strategies, the Plan focuses on improving land use, transportation, housing and public amenities to strengthen downtown's role as a regional hub.

Parking Policies

Special downtown regulations remove off-street parking requirements for reuse of existing buildings or similarly sized new ones. This encourages adaptive reuse and supports a pedestrian-friendly environment.

Overlay District and Design Standards

Harlingen's Downtown Overlay District introduces additional design guidance to preserve character and enhance walkability.

Downtown Zoning Districts

Downtown Harlingen is shaped by a combination of base zoning districts that work together to support a walkable, vibrant and historically rooted urban center.

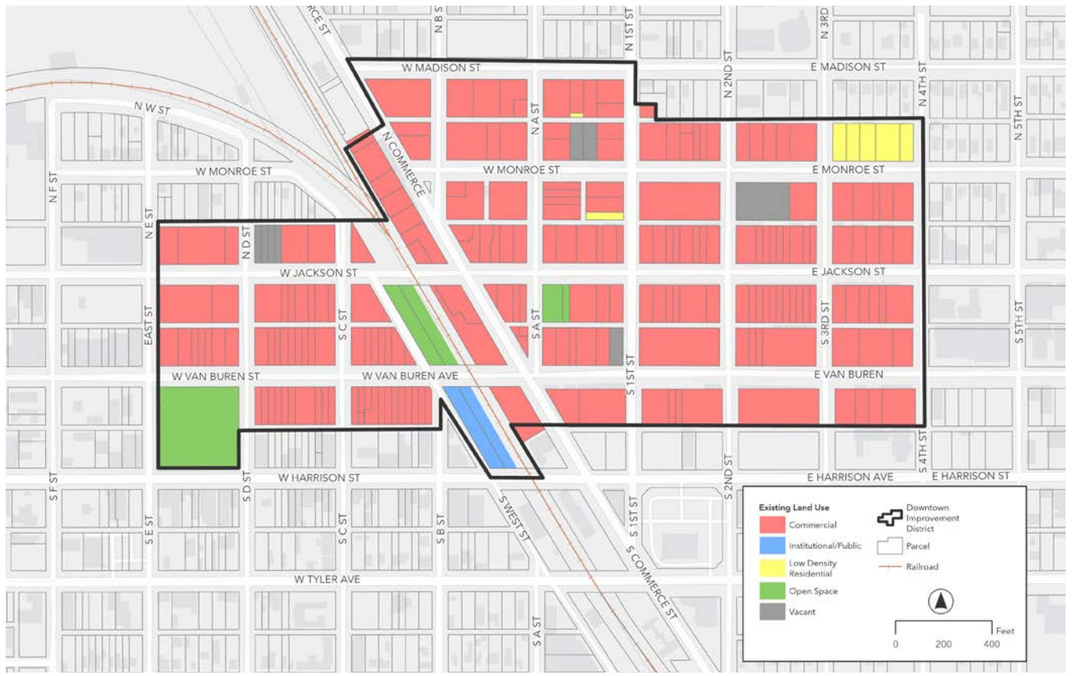
The base zoning districts in the downtown area include categories such as General Retail, Central Business and Commercial, which allow for a flexible mix of uses such as retail, dining, office space and residential development. This zoning mix encourages active street life and supports reinvestment in existing buildings.

Design criteria ensure new development and renovations contribute to a cohesive and pedestrian-friendly environment. These standards address:

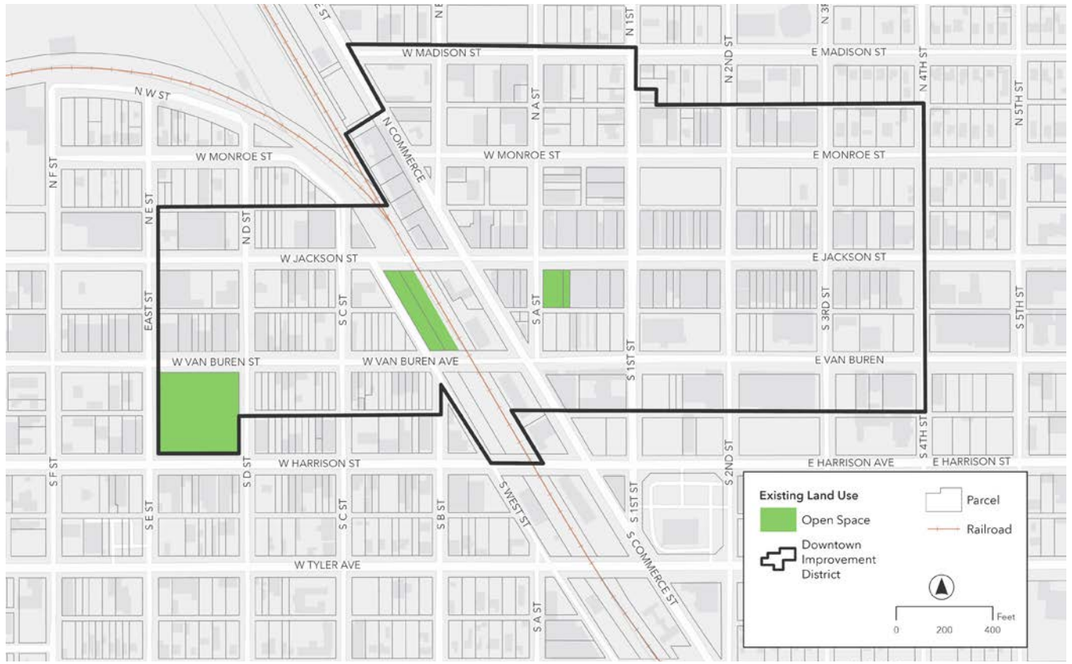
- Building placement and setbacks to support active streetscape.
- Facade transparency and entrance orientation for walkability.
- Signage regulations that respect the historic character.
- Compatibility with surrounding context, particularly for infill projects.

The zoning framework also promotes historic preservation and adaptive reuse, helping to retain the unique identity of Harlingen's historic core.





Map 3. Existing Land Use Map



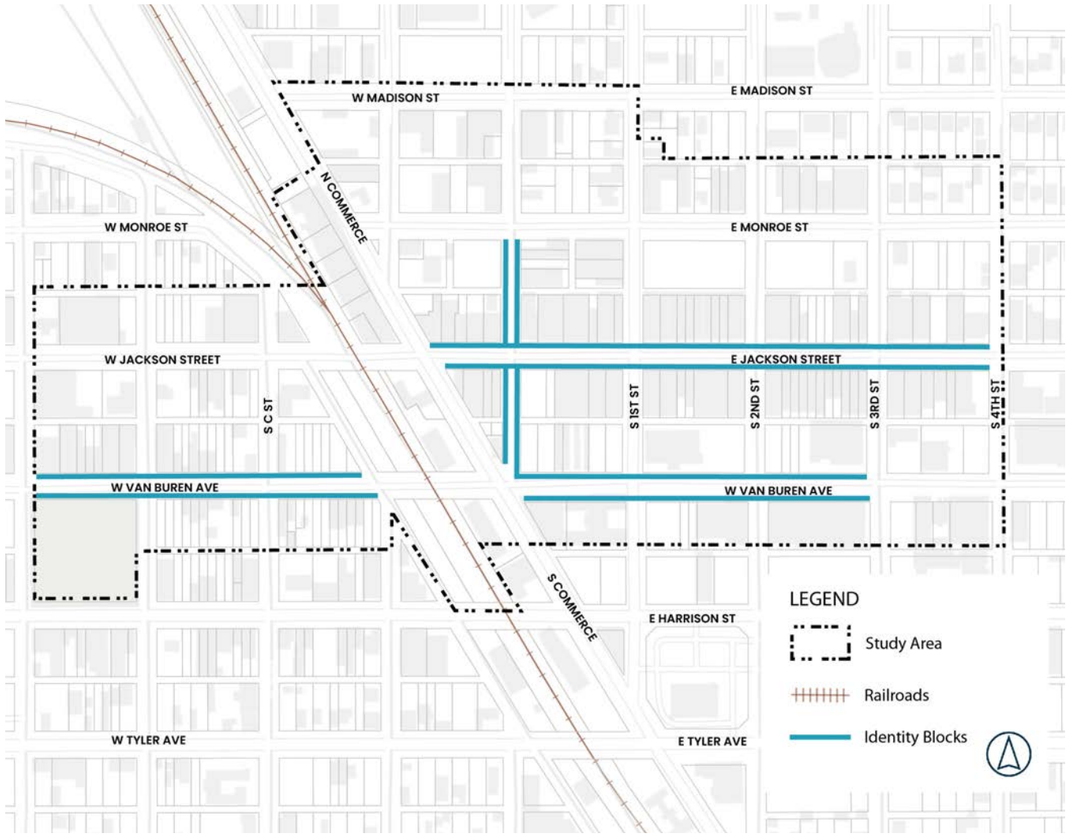
Map 4. Downtown Open Space Map

Identity Blocks

The areas identified in blue are blocks with the strongest existing identity and investment based on current conditions in Harlingen. Identity relates to an area's character, look, feel and activity level. Among the blocks in the study area, the following generally attract the highest number of visitors. The largest portion of identity blocks are located along the primary thoroughfares connecting Downtown Harlingen, including Jackson Street and Van Buren Avenue. There is also increasing investment in the west side of Downtown along Van Buren Avenue.

Identity Blocks include:

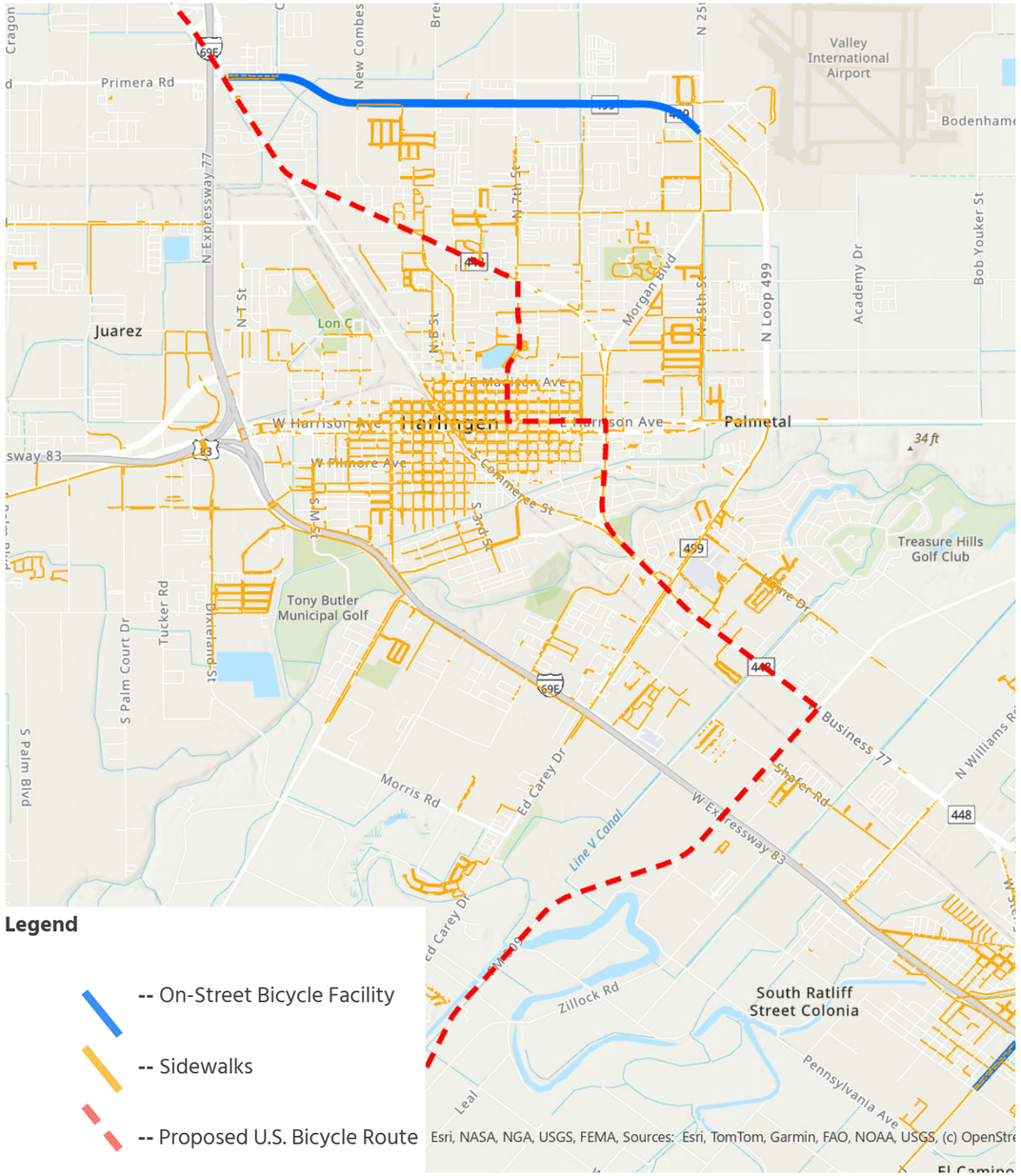
- Jackson Street between N Commerce Street to S 4th Street.
- A Street between W Van Buren Avenue and E Monroe Street.
- W Van Buren Avenue between A Street and S 3rd Street.
- W Van Buren Avenue between S West Street and S E Street.



Map 5. Existing Strongest Identity Blocks

Existing Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure

Harlingen's existing sidewalk and bike network provides key connections across the city, particularly around Downtown and major corridors. The proposed U.S. Bicycle Route will further enhance regional connectivity and active transportation options.



Public Input Summary

Plans Steering Committee

The Plans Steering Committee (PSC) plays a pivotal role in the development of the Downtown Plan. The PSC works to ensure City staff and consultants are in close alignment with the community's needs and vision, as gathered during various opportunities for public input and feedback. The PSC not only provides guidance but also shapes the general vision for the plan, offering insights into effective community engagement strategies. The PSC served as a key bridge between the Comprehensive Plan, Downtown Plan and Parks Plan, ensuring alignment and integration across all three planning efforts. By leveraging their expertise and taking into account public input, the PSC is integral to both the process and development of plan recommendations. Apart from the consultants and City staff who form the "primary" project team, the PSC members are the individuals most closely involved in the process.

The Steering Committee conducted three meetings at Harlingen City Hall during the process, which were open for public observation. Each session reviewed the progress of the plan, public input received and requested feedback on draft deliverables to lay the groundwork for future recommendations. The meetings centered on the following topics:

- Kickoff and Data Analysis
- Public Engagement Plan
- Community Feedback
- Vision and Goals
- Draft Deliverables
- Plan Implementation



Plans Steering Committee Meeting

Stakeholder Meeting

As part of the Downtown planning process, a focused stakeholder listening session was held on February 24th, 2025 to gather in-depth feedback from key user groups. Participants included local business owners within Downtown Harlingen, as well as those a part of the Downtown Advisory Board. The session provided an opportunity for these stakeholders to share firsthand experiences, challenges and priorities related to Downtown Harlingen.

Key Priorities Identified:

- Shops need extended business hours to stay open later, and more office space is required to attract businesses to Downtown.
- Increase the number of Downtown events and enhance security.
- Develop a dedicated district to boost nightlife and dining options.
- Encourage residential uses in Downtown to generate interest in local businesses and stores.

Key Concerns Raised:

- A common complaint is the lack of consistent store hours among shops.
- Downtown infrastructure has problems, specifically with clay pipes, sidewalks and curbs.
- The Fire District Overlay poses challenges for the Downtown District.
- Concerns about walkability and accessibility remain a barrier for some visitors in Downtown Harlingen, contributing to ongoing image challenges.

Public Engagement

As part of the broader Harlingen Comprehensive Plan engagement process, the first opportunity for public input on Downtown Harlingen took place on February 24, 2025, at the Harlingen Community Center. Hosted by the City and facilitated by Freese & Nichols, the open house invited community members to learn about the overall planning process and share their ideas. Among several topic areas, a dedicated station focused specifically on Downtown allowed attendees to provide input on downtown-related issues such as land use, transportation, housing, parks and public space.

Key Priorities Identified:

- Enhance the nighttime environment with more lighting, events and safety improvements.
- Attract more dining, retail and entertainment options that align with community interests.
- Improve walkability and pedestrian safety through upgraded sidewalks and streetscape enhancements.
- Increase awareness of downtown offerings and encourage more community-wide participation.

Key Concerns Raised:

- Many residents noted infrastructure issues, including outdated sidewalks and a lack of public restrooms.
- Safety concerns were common, with several requests for more lighting and increased law enforcement presence.
- Some participants felt downtown needs more inviting spaces and activities for families and young people. Accessibility for walking and biking remains a challenge, especially for those with mobility concerns.

STRENGTHS

Downtown Feedback

The following SWOT analysis reflects insights gathered through the Downtown Harlingen planning process, including community surveys, public open houses, the Plans Steering Committee and stakeholder meetings. Residents and stakeholders shared firsthand perspectives on Downtown's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges.

Community Spirit & Identity

Harlingen's people are proud of their small-town charm, cultural roots and family-oriented environment. Events like Market Days and Art Nights reflect strong community bonds and a desire to gather, connect and celebrate.





Mixed-Use & Redevelopment Potential

There's growing interest in transforming Downtown's upper floors into housing and promoting live-work-play spaces. Stakeholders and residents support mixed-use developments, boutique retail and adaptive reuse projects.

Social Gathering Spaces

Downtown Harlingen is a valued hub for meeting friends, attending events and engaging with neighbors. Its social role is central to how residents experience and enjoy the district.





Strong Desire for Activation & Investment

Residents are eager for improvements, calling for more dining, upgraded storefronts, safer lighting and family-friendly spaces. Community feedback shows strong momentum for revitalizing downtown.

Bi-Cultural Economic Gateway

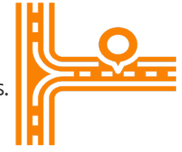
With strong international ties and border proximity, Harlingen benefits from cultural richness and economic potential tied to bi-national trade, tourism and commerce.



WEAKNESSES

Infrastructure Deficiencies

Sidewalks, curbs and drainage systems across Downtown are in poor condition, making walking difficult and deterring investment in upper-floor residential uses.





Lack of Evening Activity

Shops often close early, and many residents feel there aren't enough restaurants, activities or events to keep Downtown lively and safe after dark.

Underutilized Second Floors

Fire safety codes and outdated infrastructure limit the ability to develop second-floor spaces, especially for residential or mixed-use purposes.





Limited Public Amenities

There are no consistent or accessible public restrooms, minimal shade or benches, and limited space for families or children, which reduces dwell time.

Lack of Consistent Business Hours

Downtown businesses do not follow regular or extended hours, making it difficult for visitors to plan shopping, dining or leisure around store availability.



OPPORTUNITIES

Second-Floor & Infill Activation



Vacant second floors and underutilized properties like the Madison Hotel and PNC Bank offer potential for new residential, office or creative spaces. Addressing fire code and infrastructure barriers could unlock major investment.



Strong Desire for Activation & Investment

Downtown Harlingen has strong public support for transformation, with clear demand for new experiences and improved aesthetics. Targeted investments can unlock economic vitality and year-round activity.

Placemaking & Public Realm Enhancements



Invest in alley activations, improved lighting (solar preferred) and beautification efforts along key corridors like Commerce Street and Van Buren. These improvements can elevate Downtown's experience and boost safety.



Mobility & Transit Improvements

Downtown lacks pedestrian infrastructure and a modern transit hub. Residents support the construction of a new central bus station, safer crossings, bike lanes and better Valley Metro connections.

Cultural & Nightlife Growth



The public is asking for more evening activities, diverse restaurants and entertainment options. Establishing a bar and restaurant district, and promoting night markets and seasonal events, can increase vibrancy and economic impact.

THREATS

Flooding and Climate Impacts



Frequent flooding, especially near schools and Downtown, combined with extreme heat, threatens infrastructure and discourages pedestrian activity.



Lack of Sustainable Funding

Losing PID funding, many downtown projects from maintenance to programming lack the consistent financial support needed to succeed.

Increasing Economic Vulnerability



Ongoing poverty, aging infrastructure and housing shortages pose risks to long-term Downtown vitality, particularly without targeted equity investments.



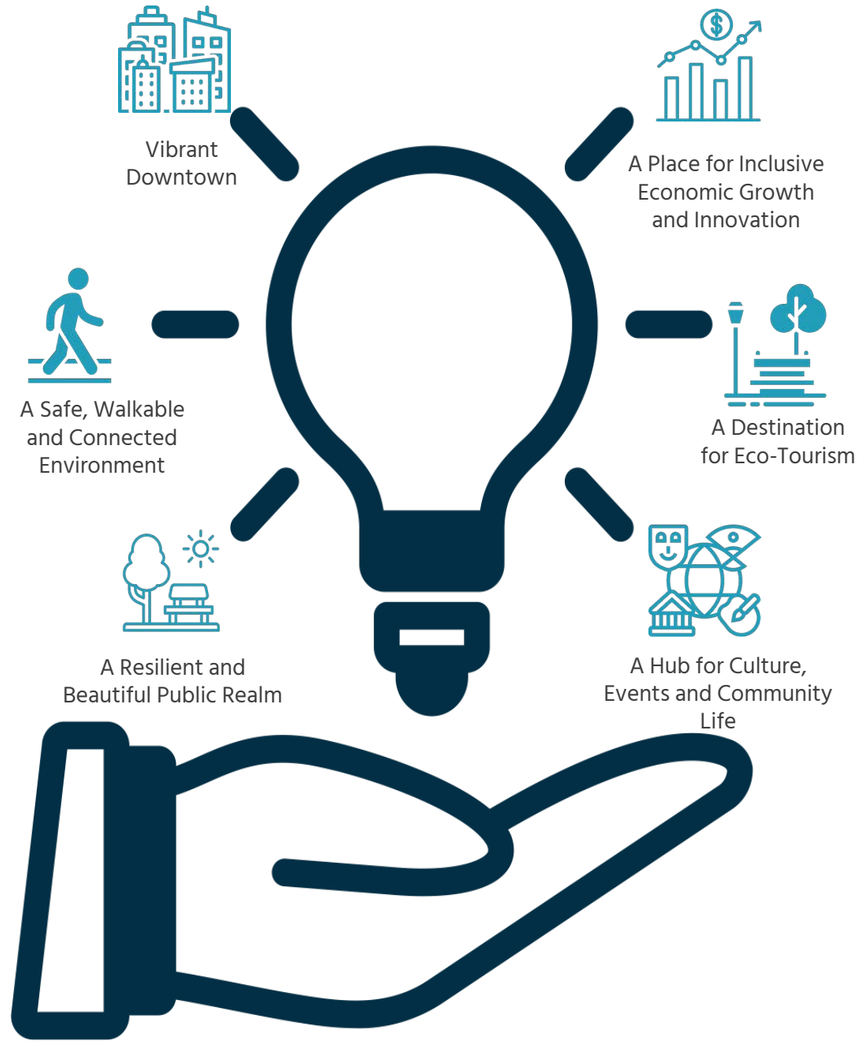
Community Vision Statement

Downtown Harlingen will be a vibrant, mixed-use center where people live, work and gather. Its walkable streets, safe connections and accessible transit will invite movement and exploration. Cultural events, local dining and community spaces will foster a lively and inclusive atmosphere. The Arroyo and surrounding trails will connect nature lovers to Harlingen's unique eco-identity. Downtown will be a welcoming and active place for everyone.

Vision Elements

Your vision for Harlingen

You helped planners identify six key "vision elements" that form the foundation of the Downtown Plan. These elements guide the plan's goals, ensuring Harlingen's growth aligns with community priorities and long-term aspirations.



Vision Elements



Vibrant Downtown



A Safe, Walkable and Connected Environment



A Resilient and Beautiful Public Realm



A Place for Inclusive Economic Growth and Innovation



A Destination for Eco-Tourism



A Hub for Culture, Events and Community Life

Goals

In 2050

A lively district where housing, retail, dining and community life thrive together in a walkable, human-scaled environment.

In 2050

A Downtown where everyone, regardless of age or ability, can move safely and comfortably on foot, bike or transit.

In 2050

A place where Harlingen's creativity and community spirit come alive through public art, festivals and shared experiences.

In 2050

A Downtown that is clean, green, flood-resilient and visually inviting for everyday use and special occasions alike.

In 2050

A gateway to the Arroyo, birding trails and the natural beauty that defines Harlingen's sense of place.

In 2050

A Downtown that welcomes investment and entrepreneurship while ensuring access for all residents and business types.

Objectives

- Promote mixed-use zoning that supports diverse housing and commercial uses.
- Convert vacant or underused properties, including second floors, into active spaces.
- Offer incentives for small businesses and creative startups to locate downtown.
- Establish consistent business hours to support evening and weekend activity.
- Encourage locally owned restaurants, boutiques and experiential retail.
- Attract anchor uses like co-working hubs or public markets to increase foot traffic.

- Build and maintain wide sidewalks, street trees and ADA-compliant crossings.
- Expand solar lighting and visibility features to improve nighttime safety.
- Complete bike lanes and shared paths that link Downtown to nearby parks and neighborhoods.
- Improve Valley Metro bus service and complete the new central station.
- Calm traffic with design interventions like curb bump-outs and crosswalk art.
- Prioritize pedestrian access to key destinations like parks, schools and civic buildings.

- Expand regular events like Market Days, Art Nights and seasonal festivals.
- Activate alleys, courtyards and underused plazas for pop-ups or performances.
- Encourage mural programs and local art installations across Downtown.
- Establish a bar and restaurant district with coordinated programming and safety.
- Create flexible public spaces that can host concerts, farmers markets or community gatherings.

- Upgrade outdated drainage and address flooding hot spots in the Downtown core.
- Enhance landscaping with native plants, trees and sustainable materials.
- Redevelop vacant lots into small plazas, pocket parks or community gardens.
- Maintain alleys, signage, trash areas and lighting to ensure cleanliness and safety.
- Use public art and street furnishings to enhance identity and comfort.
- Design new spaces to be flexible, durable and responsive to future needs.

- Improve signage, access and trailheads for the Arroyo Colorado trail system.
- Promote birdwatching, hiking and eco-tourism as part of Downtown identity.
- Host nature-centered events and interpretive programming in parks or along trails.
- Protect green corridors that connect Downtown to natural features.
- Encourage eco-friendly businesses such as bike rentals and outdoor gear shops.
- Incorporate native landscaping and stormwater features in new public spaces.

- Provide façade, signage and tenant improvement grants for small businesses.
- Use local government tools to incentivize private reinvestment.
- Attract a mix of businesses that serve diverse income levels and interests.
- Support underrepresented entrepreneurs through outreach and partnerships.
- Encourage redevelopment of vacant buildings into coworking or incubator spaces.
- Promote jobs and training tied to creative, tech and maker industries.