APPENDIX

A

Downtown Plan Engagement Summary

Steering Committee Meetings

The Plans Steering Committee (PSC) plays a pivotal role in the development of the Downtown Plan, as well as the Comprehensive and Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails (PROST) Plans. 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. 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 following members were appointed to the Plans Steering Committee (PSC):

- City of Harlingen Mayor Norma Sepulveda
- City Commission: Ford Kinsley (District 1) and Daniel Lopez (District 2)
- Planning and Zoning Commission: Luis Villarreal and Sergio Perez
- Parks and Recreation Board: Adele Clinton-Solis and Diana Esparza
- Downtown Advisory Board: Lars Keim and John Pearcy

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 each 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



PSC Meeting (November 19, 2024)

Stakeholder Meeting

As part of the Downtown planning process, a focused stakeholder listening session was held on Feburary 24th, 2025 to gather in-depth feedback from key user groups. Participants included local business owners within Downtown Harlingen, as well as those apart 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:

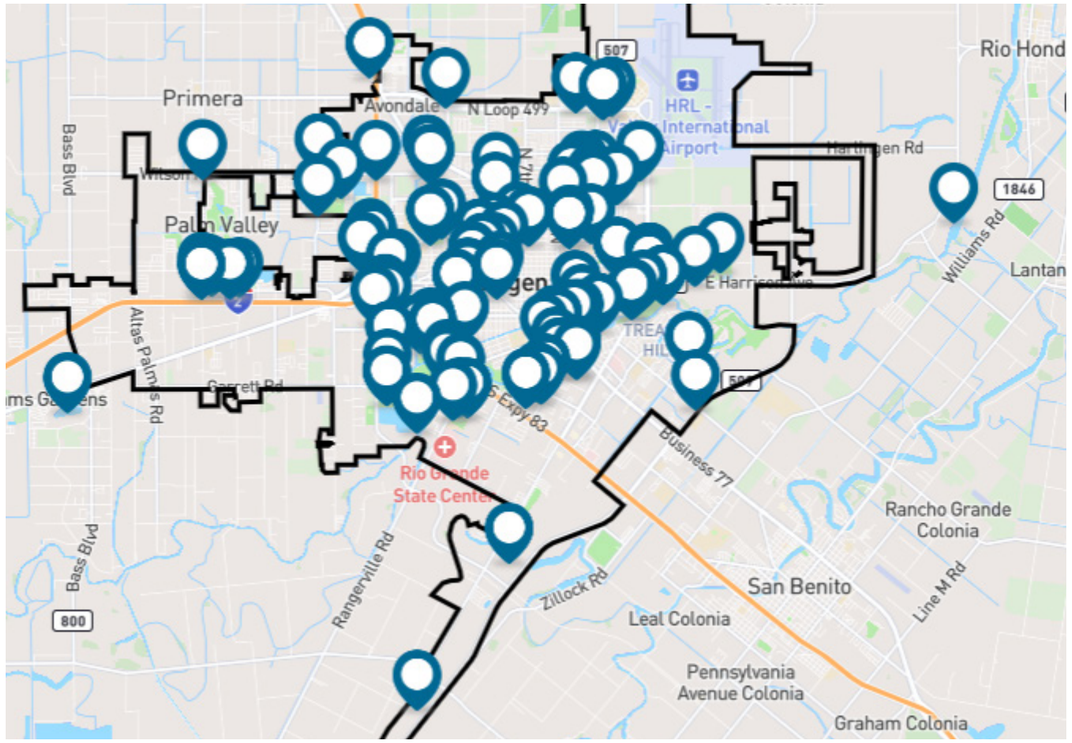
- A common complaint is the lack of consistent store hours among shops.
- Downtown infrastructure has problems, specifically with clay pipes, sidewalks and curbs.
- The Fire District Overlay poses challenges for the Downtown District.
- Harlingen's Downtown has a bad reputation, and there are concerns about accessibility, with people reluctant to walk.

Online Pin Map

The primary mechanism for greater virtual engagement for this plan was an online mapping activity where participants could leave georeferenced comments on a map of Harlingen. Website visitors could read and vote on others' comments to express agreement or disagreement. This feature helped the project team identify the comments that were most relevant and helpful for developing recommendations. Key themes that emerged from the online map comments included:

- There are concerns about outdated or absent infrastructure in Downtown Harlingen, specifically inconsistent sidewalk connections and a lack of public restrooms.
- Requests for better pedestrian and cyclist access to downtown, including the addition of improved pathways and extended bike trails, to make the area more accessible and connected for residents.
- There is a desire to enhance the vibrancy of Downtown Harlingen by developing a greater number of bars and restaurants and hosting more events to attract residents to the downtown area.
- Concerns about safety and security in downtown, with suggestions for improved lighting, increased law enforcement, and measures to address issues such as homelessness and drug activity to create a safer environment.

The online mapping activity opened after the project launched in October 2024 and was available for continuous participation throughout most of the project process.

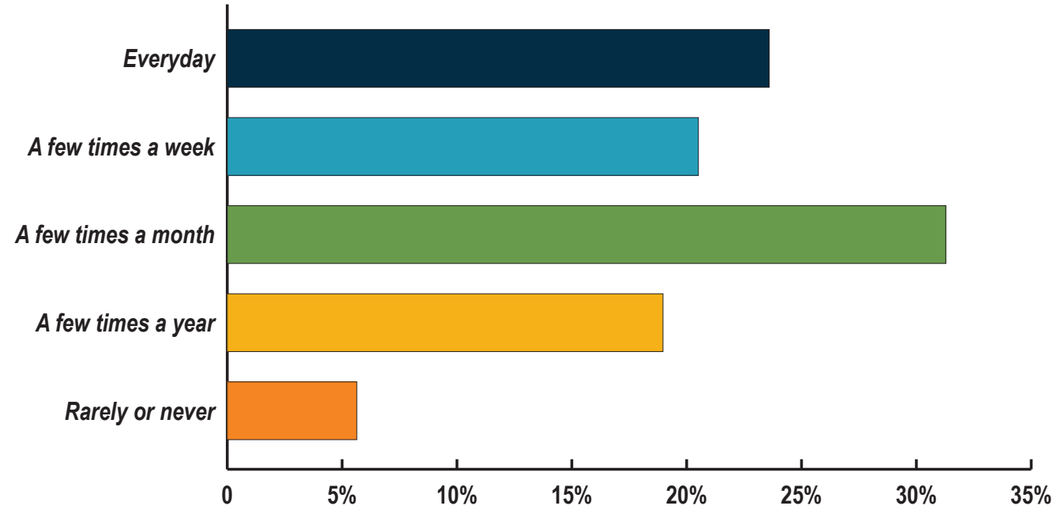


Screenshot of the Online Pin Mapping Tool

Downtown Community Survey Responses

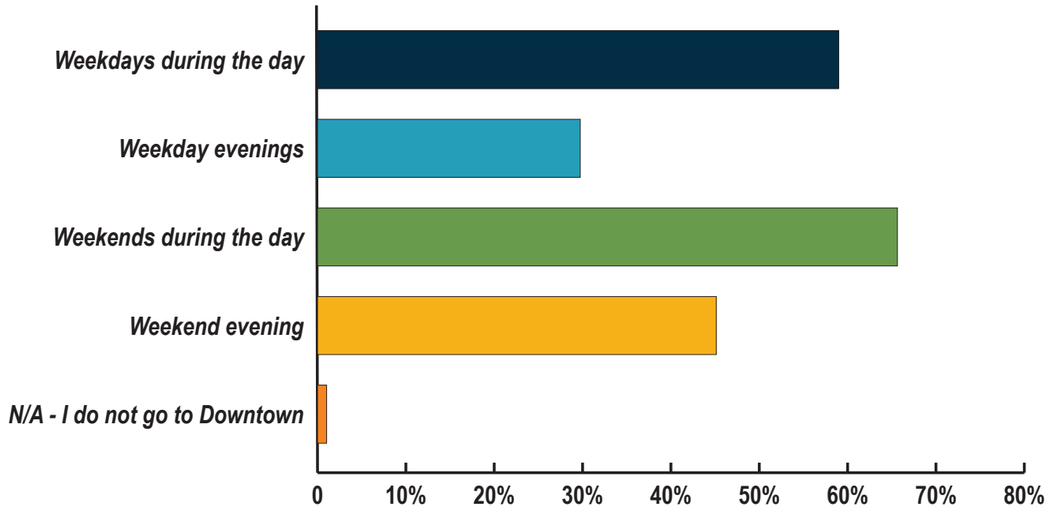
From October 30, 2024, to February 8, 2025, an online community survey was hosted on the Harlingen project website. Open to all, the survey featured translation tools to accommodate multiple languages and was accessible on both desktop and mobile devices. Outreach efforts to promote participation in the online survey included distributing flyers, promoting the survey on the local news and sharing information through the City's social media platforms. The survey received 196 responses while it was available to the public, and below is a summary of the public feedback received. This survey, as well as insights from public engagement events and the stakeholder group, provided the project team with essential baseline data and community priorities to guide the project's development.

Question 1. How often do you go to Downtown Harlingen?



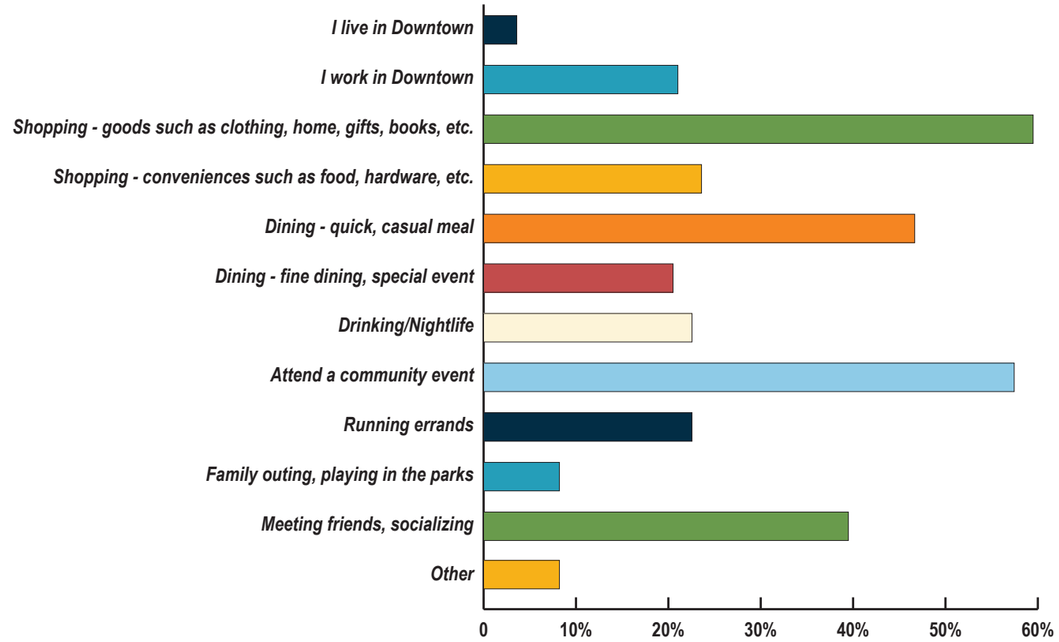
Most respondents (31.28%) only visit Downtown Harlingen a few times a month, while nearly a quarter (23.59%) are there every day. Less than 6% of respondents rarely or never go to the downtown.

Question 2. When you go to Downtown Harlingen, when are you usually there?



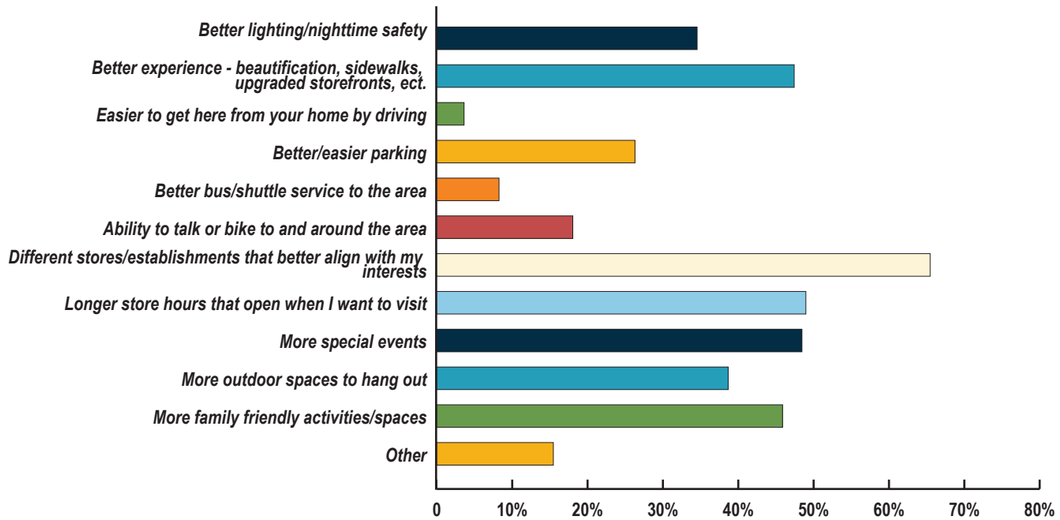
Those who do visit Downtown Harlingen are usually there on weekdays (58.97%) or weekends (65.64%) during the day, with some activity on weekends during the evening (45.13%). Downtown Harlingen receives the fewest visitors on weekday evenings (29.74%).

Question 3. What kinds of things do you do when you go to Downtown Harlingen?



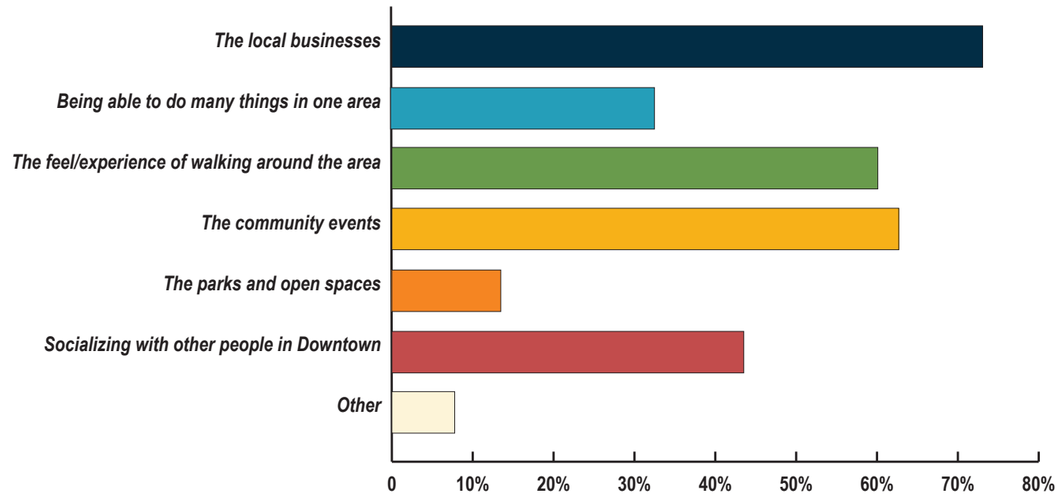
Respondents typically go to Downtown Harlingen to shop for things like clothing, gifts, and home goods (59.49%), attend a community event (57.44%), or grab a quick, casual meal (46.67%). Other reasons people go downtown include meeting friends or socializing (39.49%), shopping for conveniences (23.59%), enjoying nightlife (22.56%), and running errands (22.56%).

Question 4. Is there anything that would make you come to Downtown Harlingen more often?



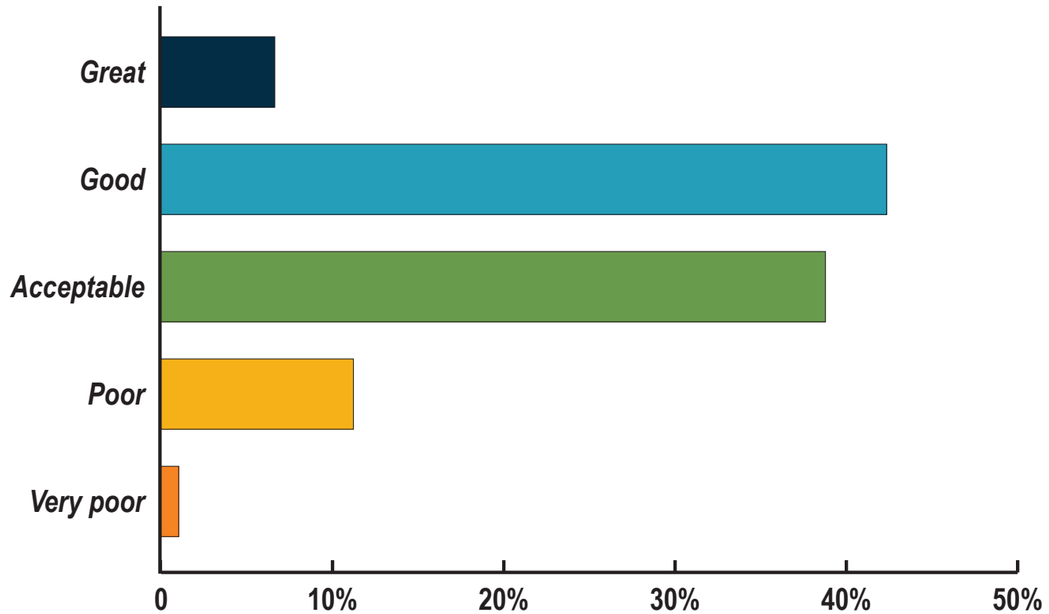
The biggest thing that would attract more people downtown is a wider variety of stores and establishments that align with respondents' interests (65.46%). This is followed by longer store hours (48.97%), more special events (48.45%), and an overall better downtown experience (47.42%).

Question 5. What do you love about Downtown Harlingen?



What respondents love most about Downtown Harlingen is its local businesses (73.06%). In terms of the public realm, respondents enjoy the community events (62.69%) held downtown as well as the experience of walking around the area (60.10%)

Question 6. How would you currently rank the experience of walking in Downtown Harlingen? (consider sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, etc)

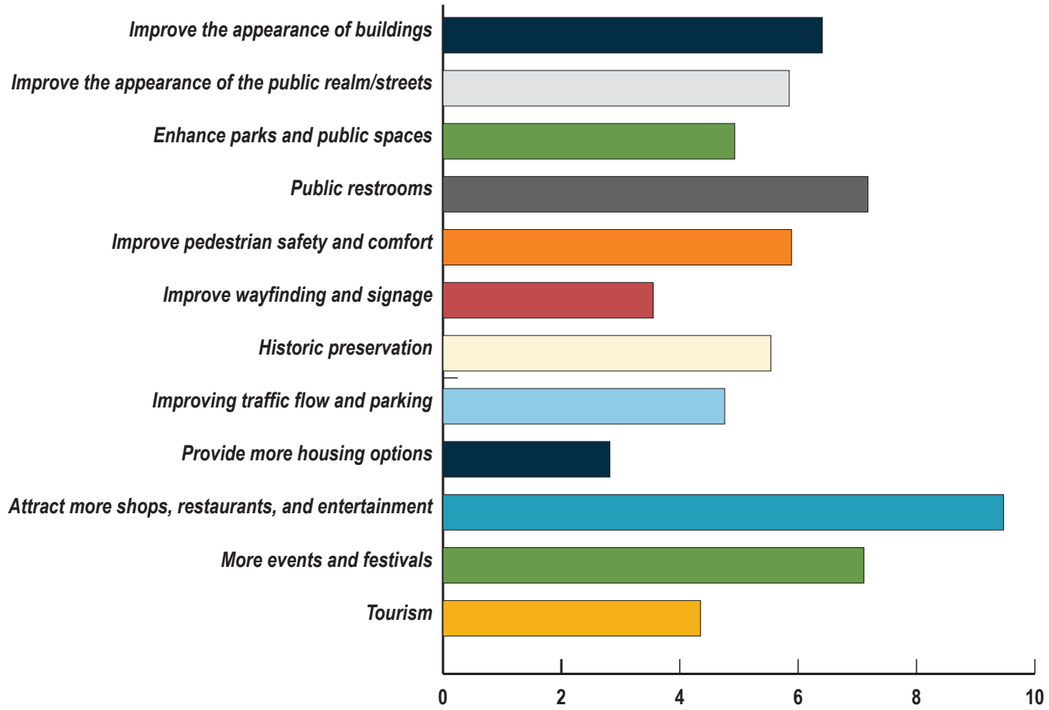


There is room for improvement in Downtown Harlingen, with most respondents ranking the current experience of walking in the area as good (42.35%) or acceptable (38.78%). Approximately 12% of respondents rank the experience as poor (11.22%) or very poor (1.02%), while 6.63% think the current downtown experience is great.

Question 7. If poor or very poor, please explain your rating:

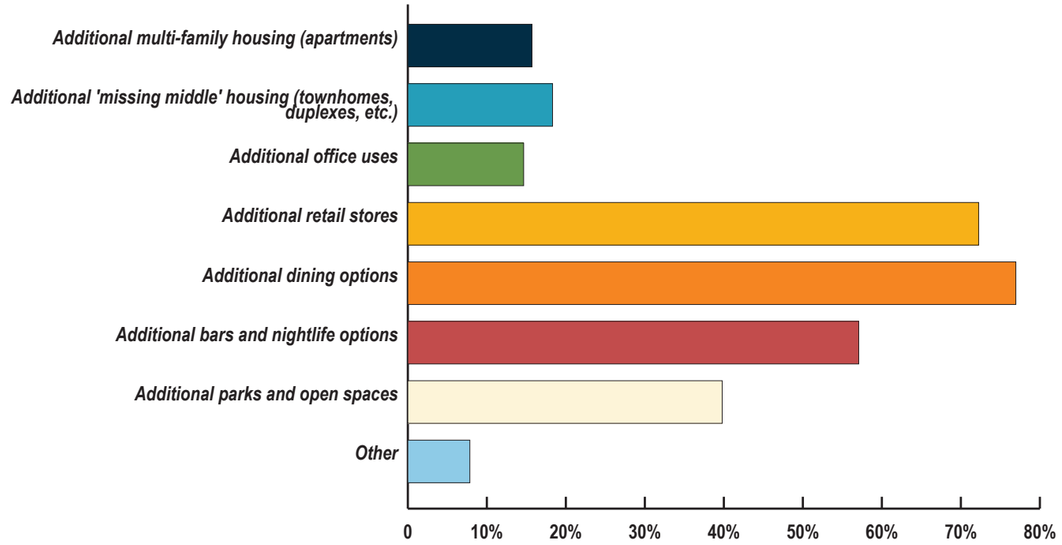


Question 8. Rank the following in terms of priority for downtown:



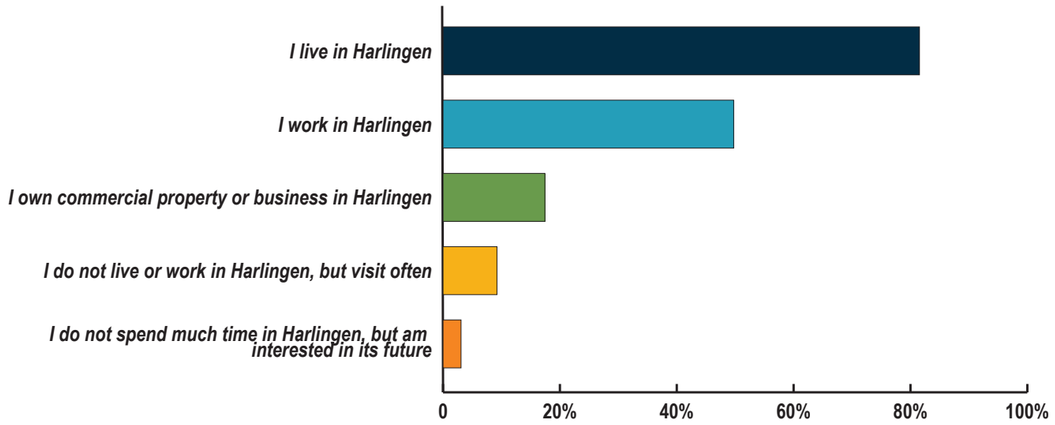
Based on the survey responses, the top priority for Downtown Harlingen is attracting more shops, restaurants, and entertainment. The second priority is to improve access to public restrooms, followed by hosting more community events and improving the appearance of buildings downtown. Providing more housing is the lowest priority for the area.

Question 9. In your opinion, what types of land uses does Downtown need:



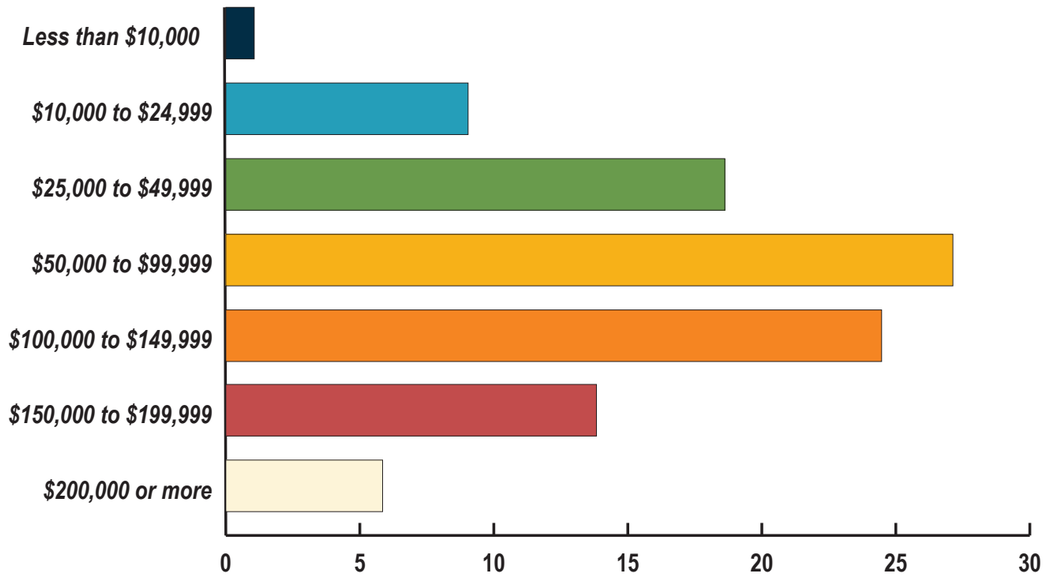
Respondents generally want to see more dining (76.96%) and retail (72.25%) options in Downtown Harlingen as well as increased nightlife (57.07%). For many respondents, additional parks and open spaces (39.79%) are also a priority for the area.

Question 10. Which of the below describes you?



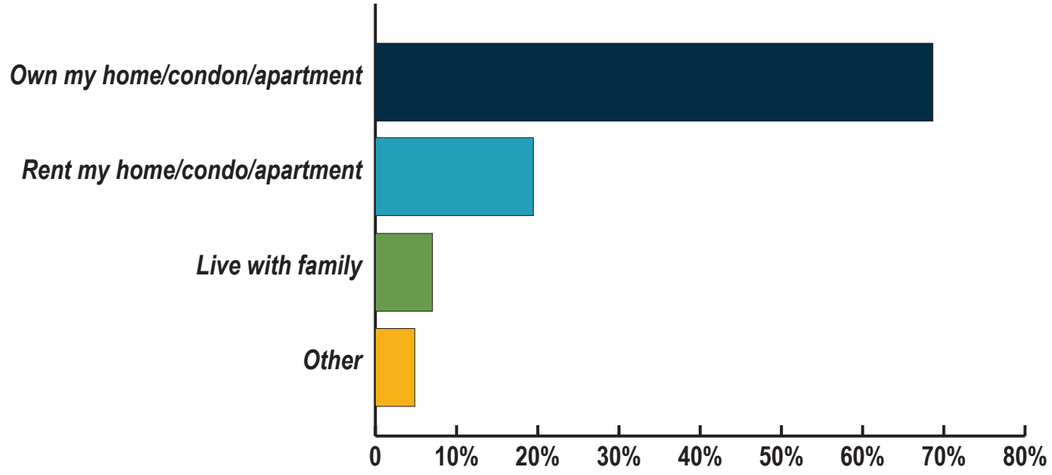
The majority of respondents (81.54%) live in Harlingen and nearly half (49.74%) work in the City. Almost 18% of respondents own commercial property or a business in Harlingen, and (9.23%) do not live in the City but visit frequently. A few (3.08%) do not spend much time in Harlingen but are interested in the City's future.

Question 11. What is your household income in the last 12 months?



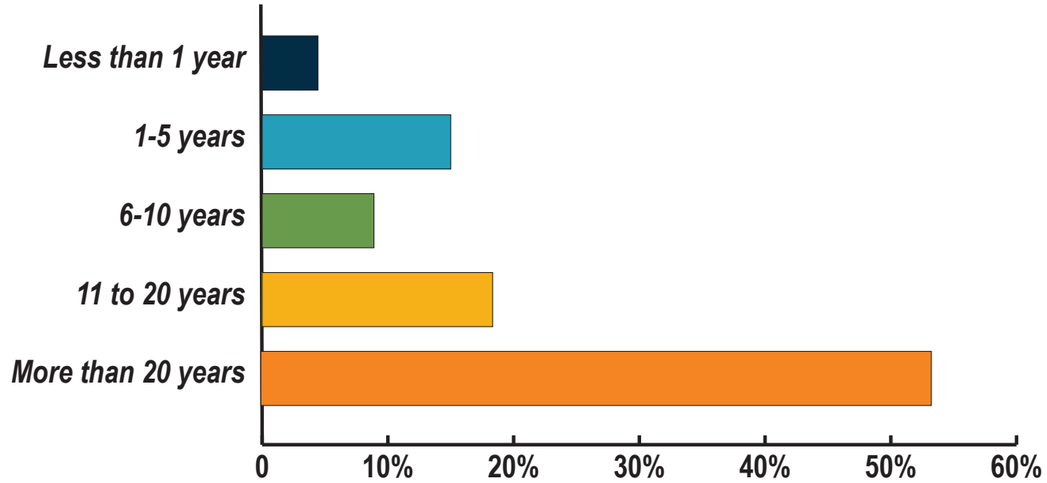
Most respondents (27.13%) to the downtown survey have an annual household income between $50,000 and $99,999. The second largest group of respondents fell in the $100,000 to $149,999 range (24.47%), followed by those with an annual household income of $25,000 to $49,999 (18.62%). The total percentage of respondents with a six-figure household income is 44.15%.

Question 12. If you live in Harlingen, what best describes your living situation?



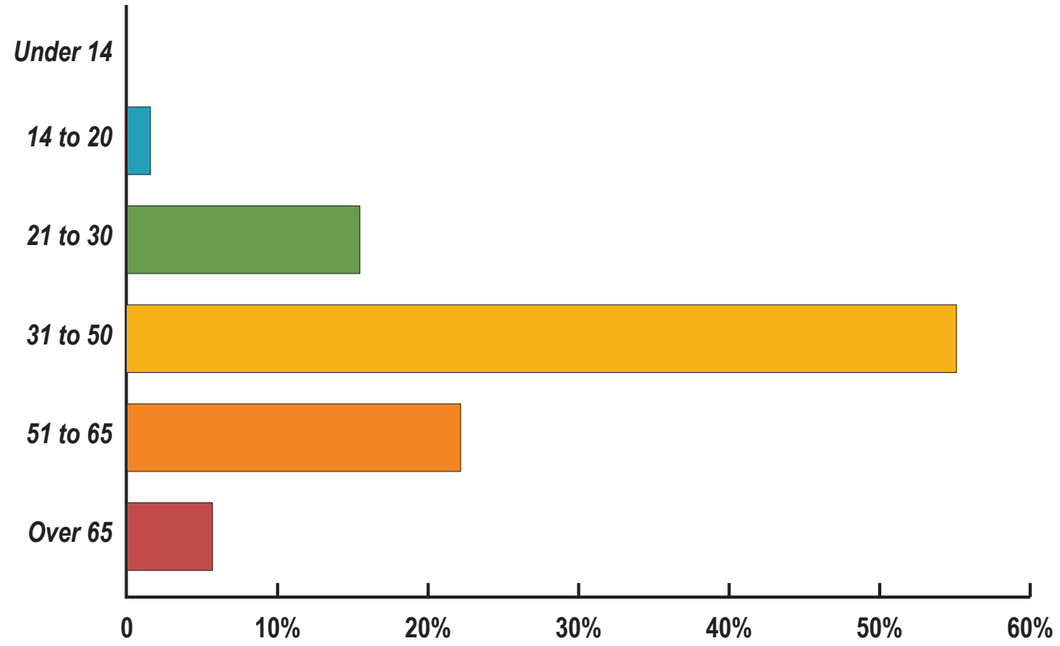
Most respondents (68.65%) own a home, while nearly 20% are renters (19.46%). Less than 12% live with family (7.03%) or describe their living situation as "Other" (4.86%).

Question 13. If you live in Harlingen, how many years have you lived here?



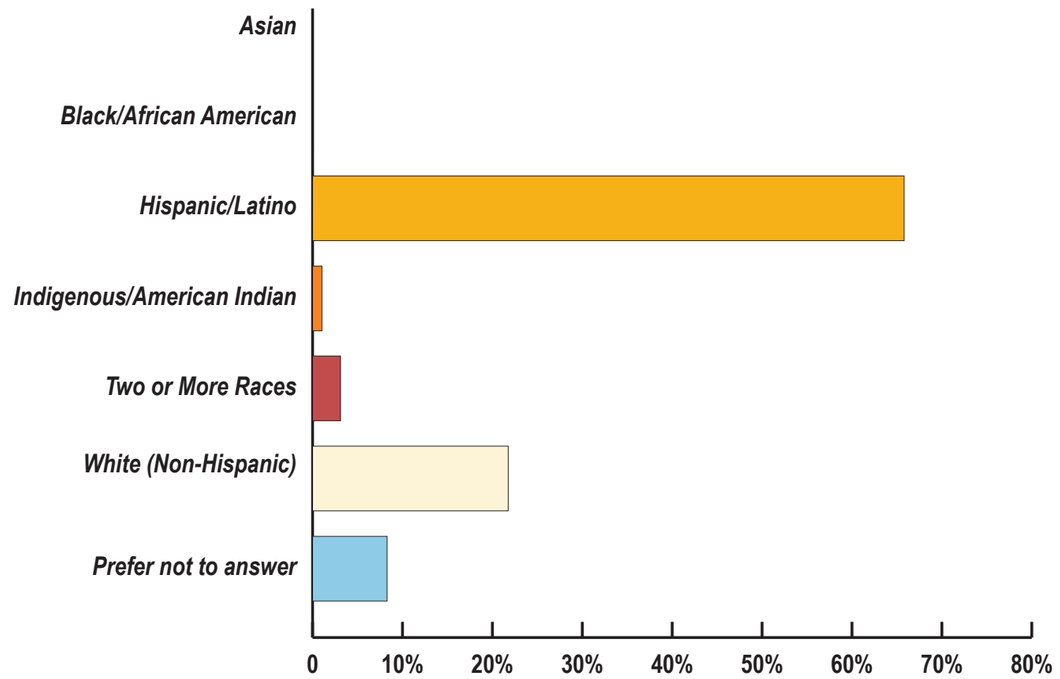
Most respondents have lived in Harlingen for more than 10 years, with more than half (53.33%) living in the City for more than 20 years. The second largest group of respondents are those who have lived in Harlingen between 11 and 20 years. In comparison, 28.33% of the respondents have lived in the City for less than 10 years. The third largest group is respondents who have lived in Harlingen between 1 to 5 years (15%), while the smallest is those who have lived in the City less than a year (4.44%).

Question 14. What is your age?



More than half of the survey respondents (55.15%) fell into the 31 to 50 year-old age group, followed by those in the 51 to 65 year-old (22.16%) age group. Participation was lowest among teens and young adults.

Question 15. Which best describes your race/ethnicity?



A majority of respondents identify as Hispanic or Latino (65.8%). In a far second are the respondents who describe themselves as White (21.76%). Notably, 8.29% of respondents preferred not to answer this question.

Public Engagement #1

On February 24, 2025 at 6pm at the Harlingen Community Center the planning team held the second community engagement event, but the first engagement event related to the Downtown Plan. The meeting was hosted by the City of Harlingen and facilitated by Freese & Nichols, the City's consultant. 21 participants signed in on the meeting sign in sheets. Advertisements were made via the City's communication channels, social media, and the project website. Advertisements and all meeting materials were made available in both English and Spanish.

The purpose of this event was to present and discuss the baseline assessments, and gather feedback on Downtown Plan topics that would help generate future recommendations. The evening began with a formal presentation by the consultant team, followed by an open house with interactive stations and one on one conversations with the participants. City staff were also in attendance and available to talk with residents.

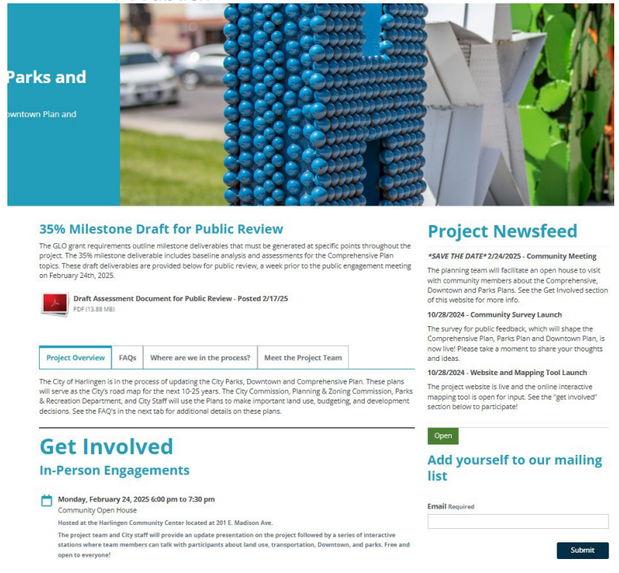
The meeting agenda included:

- Project and Process Overview
- Review of Community Feedback
- Key Takeaways from Assessments
- Next Steps
- Open House Activities (Interactive Stations)

The interactive stations topics included:

- Project and Website Information
- Overview of Public Feedback Received
- Draft Vision and Goals
- Resilience and Baseline Assessments (Land Use, Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure, and Economics)
- Land Use, Transportation, Downtown and Parks Feedback



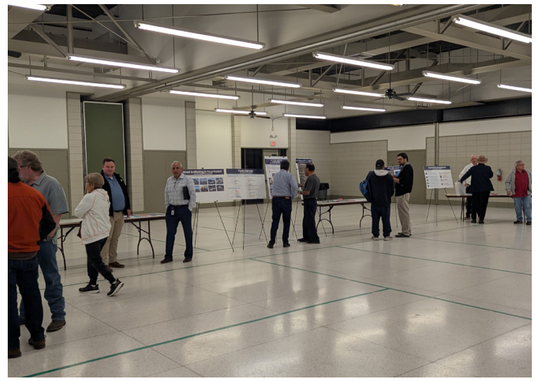


A screen capture of the meeting advertisement on the City's Facebook page and the meeting information on the project website. Additionally, this shows the 35% milestone document made publicly available on the project website a week prior to the meeting.



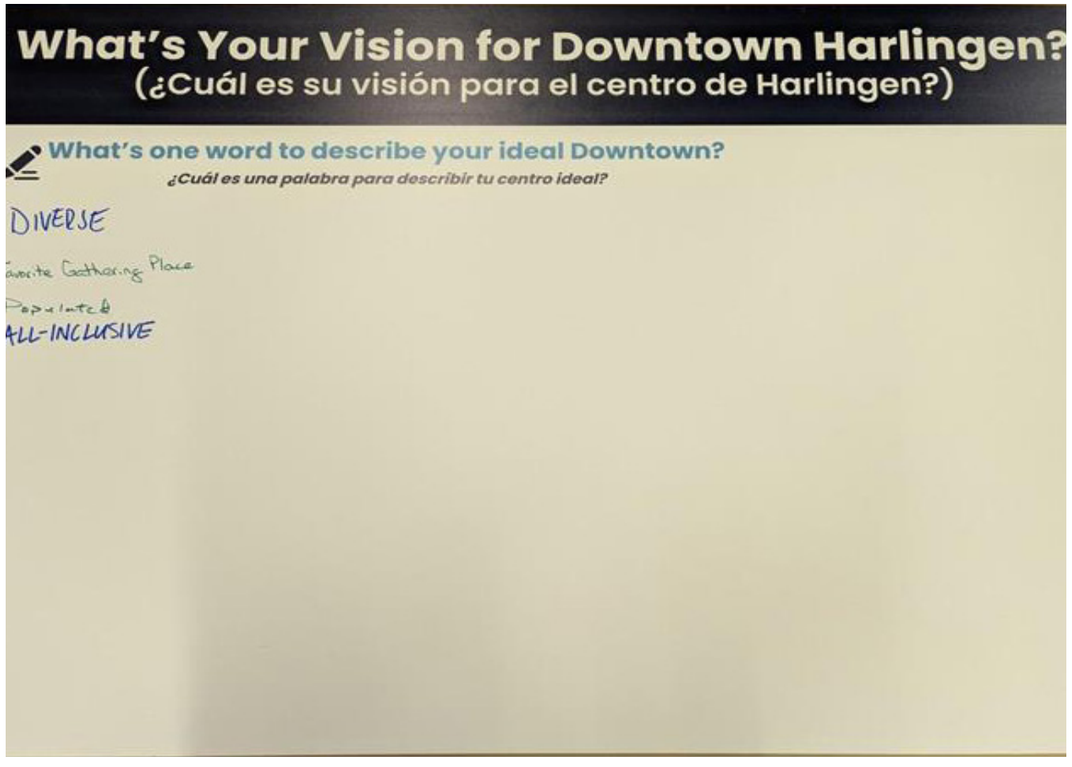








Images from the public meetings in February 2025. Top row: the presentation done by the consultant team. Middle and bottom rows: the interactive stations and one-on-one conversations.



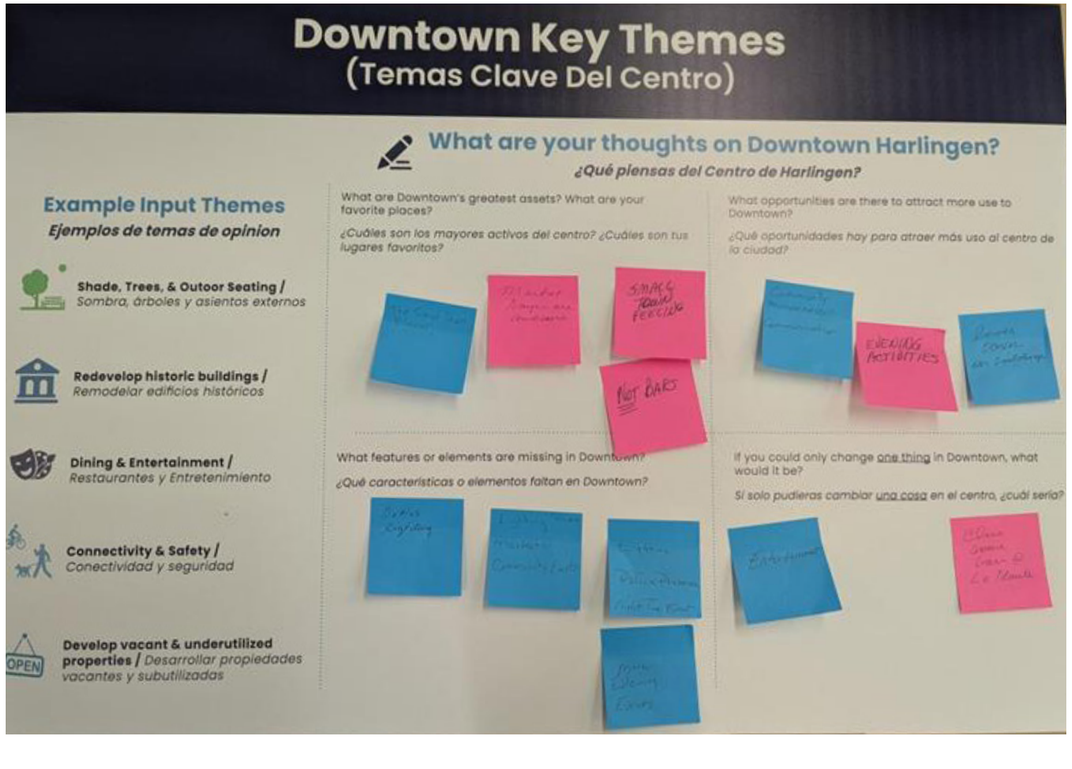
Responses indicate a desire for a vibrant and lively Downtown where people of all ages and abilities can gather.

What's Your Vision for Downtown Harlingen?

Responses

What's one word to describe your ideal Downtown?

- Diverse
- Favorite Gathering Place
- Populated
- All-Inclusive



Residents love Downtown Harlingen's small town feel and community events like Market Days. There is a desire to enhance the area's nightlife with more events taking place during the evening as well as better lighting to improve safety at night.

Downtown Key Themes

Responses

What are Downtown's greatest assets? What are your favorite places?

- The small town flavor
- Market Days are awesome
- Small town feel
- NOT bars

What opportunities are there to attract more use to Downtown?

- Community Awareness/Communication
- Evening Activities
- Lower taxes on buildings

What features or elements are missing from Downtown?

- Better Lighting
- Lighting, markets, community events
- Lighting, police presence, nighttime events
- More evening events

If you could only change one thing in Downtown, what would it be?

- Entertainment
- Close some bars at La Placita



Participants identified several types of land uses they wish to see in Downtown Harlingen including mixed-use residential, restaurants, and bars.

Downtown Land Uses & Development

Responses

Residential Types

- Mixed-Use w/ Residential

Commercial Types

- Restaurant
- Restaurants and Bars
- Boutique Retail

Other

- Live, eat, have a small park Downtown, already prime for it



Lighting was identified as the primary sidewalk improvement needed in Downtown Harlingen with a preference for solar lighting. Commerce Street was identified for potential street improvements. Strategies like alley activation can be used to enhance public gathering spaces.

Downtown Streetscape & Public Spaces

Responses

Sidewalk Improvements

- Safer lighting
- Solar lighting

Street Improvements

- Commerce Street

Public Gathering Spaces

- Alley Activation
- White with stadium as a concert venue

Public Engagement #2

On June 3, 2025 at 6pm at the Casa de Amistad the planning team held its second community engagement event. The meeting was hosted by the City of Harlingen and facilitated by Freese & Nichols, the City's consultant. 14 participants signed in on the meeting sign in sheets. Advertisements were made via the City's communication channels, social media, and the project website. Advertisements and all meeting materials were made available in both English and Spanish.

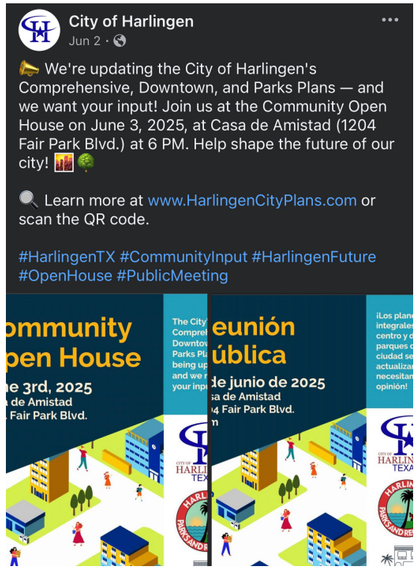
The purpose of this event was to present and discuss Comprehensive Plan recommendations and to generate additional thoroughfare map feedback. The evening began with a formal presentation by the consultant team, followed by an open house with interactive stations and one on one conversations with the participants. City staff were also in attendance and available to talk with residents.

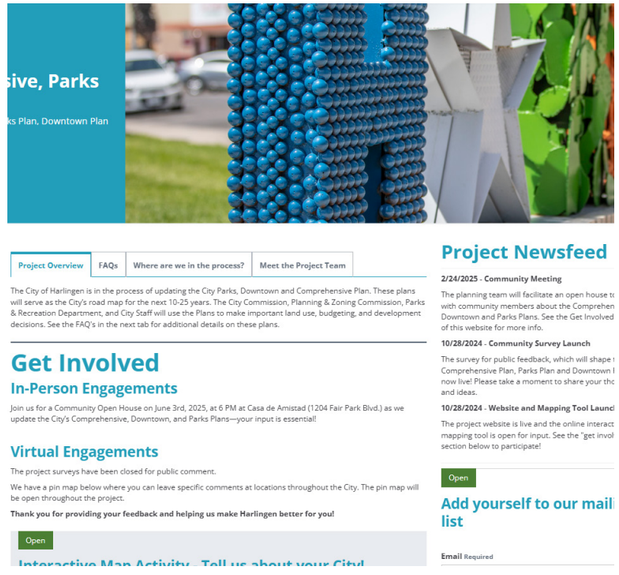
The meeting agenda included:

- Project and Process Overview
- Review of Community Feedback
- Key Takeaways from Assessments
- Next Steps
- Open House Activities (Interactive Stations)

The interactive stations topics included:

- Project and Website Information
- Draft Vision and Goals
- Plan Recommendations (Land Use, Housing, Infrastructure, and Economics)
- Transportation Feedback
- Downtown and Parks Plan Feedback





A screen capture of the meeting advertisement on the City's Facebook page and the meeting information on the project website.



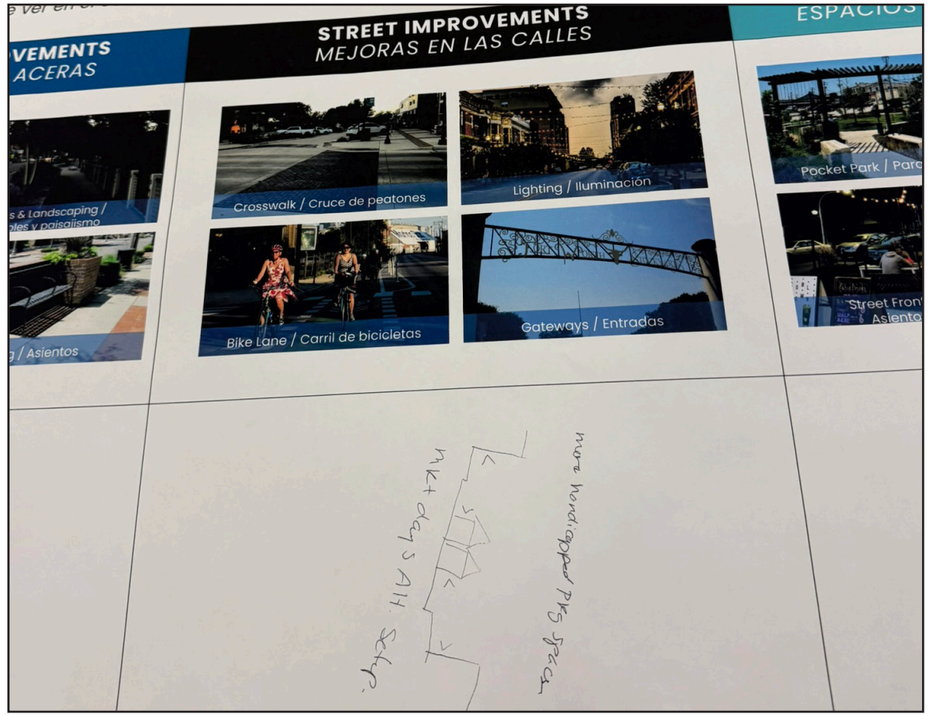








Images from the public meetings in June 2025. Top row: the presentation done by the consultant team. Middle and bottom rows: the interactive stations and one-on-one conversations.



Participants indicated an alternative Market Days vendor set-up to better highlight existing businesses as well as the need for more handicapped parking.

Downtown Streetscape & Public Spaces

Responses

More handicapped parking spaces

Alternative Market Days set-up

Downtown Walkshops & Design Charrettes

On June 4, 2025 at 8am and 1pm the planning team held two walkshops with the Downtown Merchant's Association and the Downtown Advisory Board/Property Owners. The walkshops were hosted by the Downtown Harlingen Association and facilitated by Freese & Nichols, the City's consultant.

The purpose of the walkshops were to discuss present conditions of Downtown Harlingen with participants and to brainstorm imrpovements and future recommendations. Throughout the day at the Downtown Harlingen office, the City and consultants also conducted two design charrettes with local stakeholders and City Staff, envisioning a future for Downtown Harlingen based on participant feedback.





Images from the walkshops and design charrettes on June 4, 2025. Left: Morning walkshop in Downtown Harlingen. Right: Afternoon design charrette with stakeholders and City Staff.