CITY OF HARLINGEN TEXAS

Harlingen Horizon – A City on the Rise



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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 Wesseln, AICP-C

Fred Lopez, FAICP, CTP, CNU-A

Samuel Schulte

Travis James, MBA

Plan Steering Committee

Norma Sepulveda, Mayor

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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 Pearcy, 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

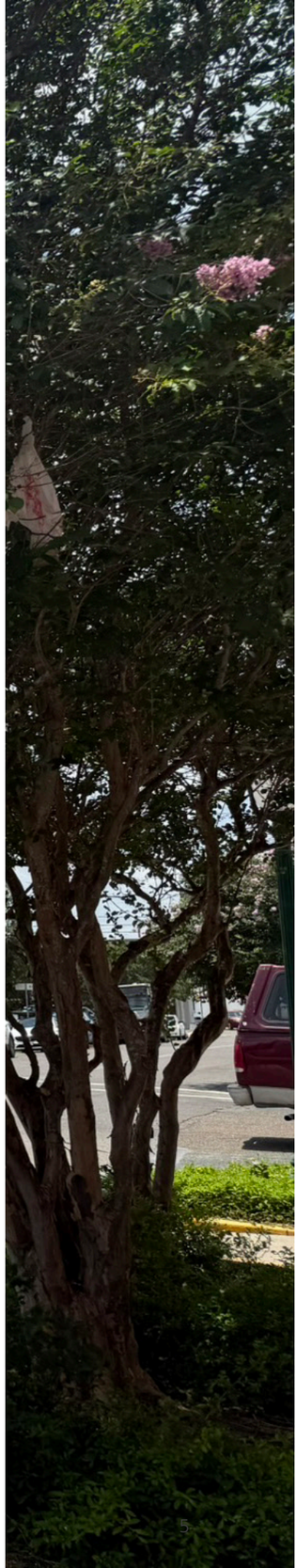
Alexis Riojas, Downtown Director

Roberto Hernandez, City Engineer



Table of Contents

Community Snapshot 6
Land Use and Development 46
Complete Communities 84
Public Facilities and Infrastructure 104
Transportation 130
Economic Development 164
Implementation 184



CHAPTER 1

Community Snapshot

Planning Harlingen's Future



Introduction

The Harlingen Comprehensive Plan is a strategic framework designed to guide growth and development over the next 25 years. It serves as a decision-making tool for city officials, ensuring that policies reflect the community's needs and aspirations. The Plan covers key areas such as land use, infrastructure, economic development and public facilities, helping shape a sustainable and vibrant future for the City. Additionally, the Plan integrates its recommendations with area hazard mitigation plans to enhance community resilience and safety. The Harlingen Comprehensive Plan was developed and funded as part of the Resilient Communities Program (RCP) sponsored by the Texas General Land Office (GLO).

What is the Comprehensive Plan?

A city's comprehensive plan can be defined as a long-range planning tool that is intended to be used by City staff, decision-makers and residents to guide the growth and physical development of a community for long periods of time. The state of Texas has established laws with regard to the way in which incorporated communities can ensure the health, safety and welfare of their residents through a comprehensive plan.

Importance of Comprehensive Planning

- To engage local residents in the decision-making process and achieve consensus on the future vision for Harlingen and its ongoing development needs
- To ensure public facilities can accommodate future growth and development
- To foster coordination between public and private investment sectors
- To minimize potential conflicts between land uses
- To ensure the long-term protection and enhancement of the community's visual image and appearance

Legal Basis for Planning

Chapter 211 of the Texas Local Government Code permits municipalities to implement zoning regulations, while Chapter 212 authorizes the governing body of a community to oversee subdivision development within City limits, with regulations varying based on the community's population. It's crucial to understand that a comprehensive plan is not a zoning ordinance; instead, it serves as a tool to guide future development, infrastructure and land-use decisions. However, the comprehensive plan does provide a foundation for zoning decisions, as outlined in Chapter 211 of the Texas Local Government Code.

In Texas, cities are not mandated by the state government to create or maintain a comprehensive master plan, unlike some other states. Nevertheless, Section 213 of the Texas Local Government Code allows a community's governing body to adopt a plan aimed at promoting sound development decisions and enhancing public health, safety and welfare. Texas cities have the flexibility to define the content and structure of the plan, resulting in a long-term blueprint tailored to the unique needs and capacities of each community.

How to Use this Plan

1. The Comprehensive Plan is a strategic tool, not a zoning ordinance, designed to guide future policy and development decisions for the City.
2. It serves as a reference for daily decisions, such as evaluating zoning requests, purchasing land and planning infrastructure or public facilities.
3. For developers and investors, the Plan outlines broad concepts and policies that promote growth aligned with the community's vision.
4. The Plan is dynamic, adapting to changes in political, economic, physical, technological and social circumstances, as well as unforeseen challenges.
5. Regular reviews keep the Plan aligned with the community's changing needs and priorities.

A Brief History of Harlingen

Early Harlingen

Before the arrival of European settlers, the Rio Grande Valley was inhabited by several indigenous tribes, including the Coahuiltecan and Carrizo-Comecrudo people. Under Spanish colonialism the region became part of various land grants with land ownership eventually shifting between Spanish, Mexican and American rule. Harlingen's modern history began in 1904 when Lon C. Hill, a visionary entrepreneur, established the townsite at what was then called "Six Shooter Junction", naming it after Harlingen, a city in the Netherlands. Hill aimed to create an agricultural hub, capitalizing on the fertile soils and irrigation potential of the Rio Grande Valley. In 1910, the City of Harlingen was officially incorporated into Cameron County with a population of 1,126 people.

Agriculture & Irrigation

Harlingen's growth surged in the early 20th century with the creation of Harlingen Irrigation District in 1914, which transformed the arid land into fertile farmland. The area became a major producer of crops like citrus, cotton, vegetables and sugarcane, attracting settlers and migrant workers. The construction of railroads facilitated trade and the shipment of agricultural products, cementing Harlingen's role as a regional economic center.

Harlingen Airforce Base

During World War II, Harlingen gained national significance with the establishment of the Harlingen Army Airfield in 1941, later renamed Harlingen Air Force Base. The base was a major training site for bomber crews and contributed to the city's population growth and economic development. The base closed in 1962 resulting in a significant population loss for the City; its facilities were repurposed for civilian use as the Rio Grande Valley International Airport.

Modern Development

The City of Harlingen continued to expand throughout the second half of the 20th century, diversifying its economy with healthcare, education and manufacturing. The City became known for its affordable living and central location, which attracted retirees and businesses. Harlingen is also recognized for its medical institutions, including the Valley Baptist Medical Center and UT Health RVG.

Cultural Heritage

Harlingen's culture reflects its proximity to Mexico, with a vibrant blend of Anglo and Hispanic traditions. In 1994 the Free Trade International Bridge opened approximately 11 miles south of Harlingen further cementing the city's cultural and economic ties with Mexico.

Events like the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival and the Harlingen Art Night highlight the City's natural beauty and artistic community. Murals and public art across the City celebrate its diverse history and people. Today, Harlingen remains a vital part of the Rio Grande Valley, balancing its historical roots with modern growth while preserving its unique identity.



Lon C. Hill Building, 1908
Source: MyRGV

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.

Population Estimate and Projection

As of 2023, Harlingen's estimated population is approximately 72,000 residents. Based on regional growth projections from the Texas Water Development Board, the population is expected to grow to approximately 85,400 by 2030, 97,400 by 2040 and 111,000 by 2050, reflecting a 2.5% compound annual growth rate (CAGR). This population study provides a current estimate and future projection to guide long-range planning and infrastructure investment decisions.

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



111,072 BY 2040

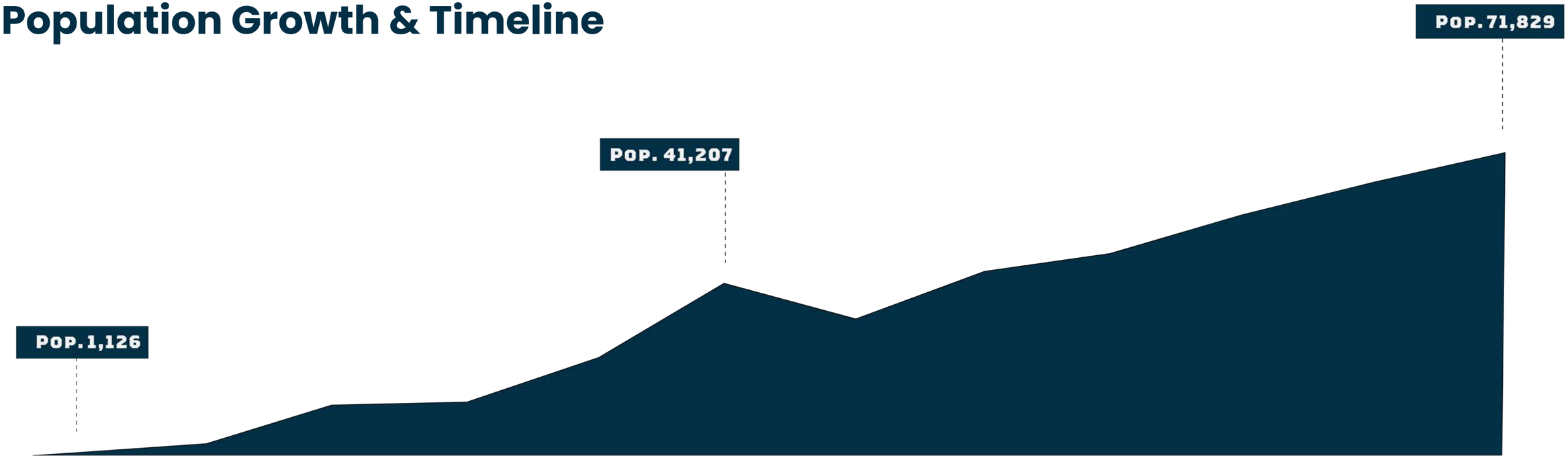
Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2026 RWP Municipal Data

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 Growth & Timeline



1910

The City of Harlingen was officially incorporated into Cameron County on April 15, 1910.



1925

Valley Baptist Hospital opened in Harlingen as a not-for-profit community hospital on January 22, 1925.



1941

The Harlingen Army Airfield, later Harlingen Air Force Base, receives it's first class of gunnery students for training on August 4, 1941.



1952

The Port of Harlingen opens for operations on February 27, 1952 becoming the second largest port in Cameron County.



1992

The Free Trade International Bridge opens eight miles south of Harlingen on November 1, 1992.



2002

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), then UTHSCSA, opens it's Medical Education Division in Harlingen in 2002.



2024

The Valley International Airport completed an extended runway, enabling increased passenger and cargo aircraft capacity.



1 MyRGV. (2018). The Rise and Demise of Harlingen Historical Preservation Society. MyRGV. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://myrgv.com/uncategorized/2018/04/15/the-rise-and-demise-of-harlingen-historical-preservation-society/

2 Valley Baptist Health System. (n.d.). Valley Baptist History. Valley Baptist Health System. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://www.valleybaptist.net/about/our-history

3 Valley International Airport. (n.d.). History of VIA. Valley International Airport. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://flythevalley.com/history/

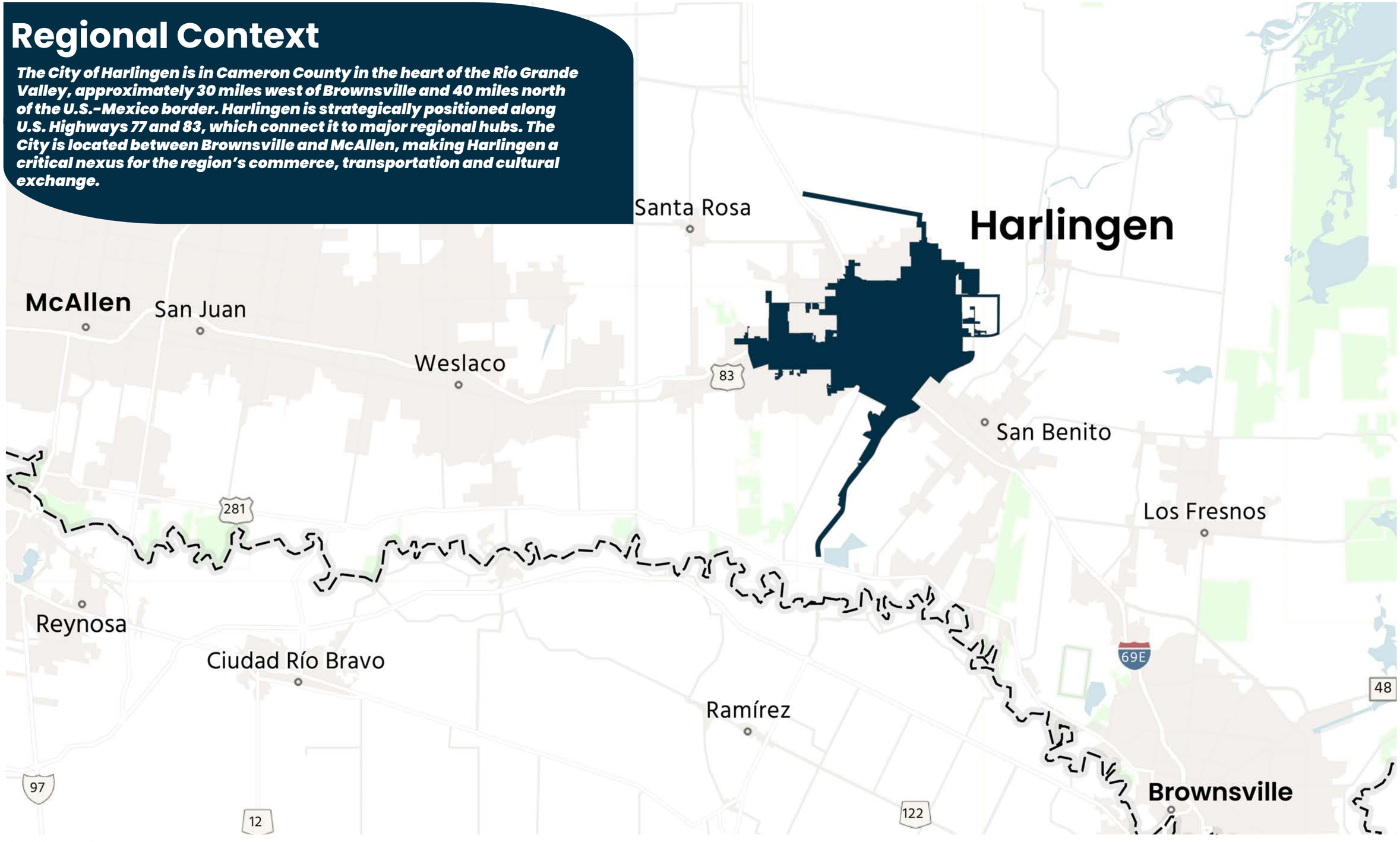
4 Port of Harlingen Authority. (n.d.). Celebrating 70 Years in Operation. Port of Harlingen Authority. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://portofharlingen.com/70th-anniversary/

5 Cameron County International Bridge System. (n.d.). Free Trade Bridge. Cameron County International Bridge System. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://www.ccibstx.us/bridges/free-trade-bridge

6 The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. (n.d.). UTRGV Harlingen Clinical Education Site. Locations. The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Retrieved January 29, 2025, from https://www.utrgv.edu/about/locations/index.htm

Regional Context

The City of Harlingen is in Cameron County in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, approximately 30 miles west of Brownsville and 40 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Harlingen is strategically positioned along U.S. Highways 77 and 83, which connect it to major regional hubs. The City is located between Brownsville and McAllen, making Harlingen a critical nexus for the region's commerce, transportation and cultural exchange.

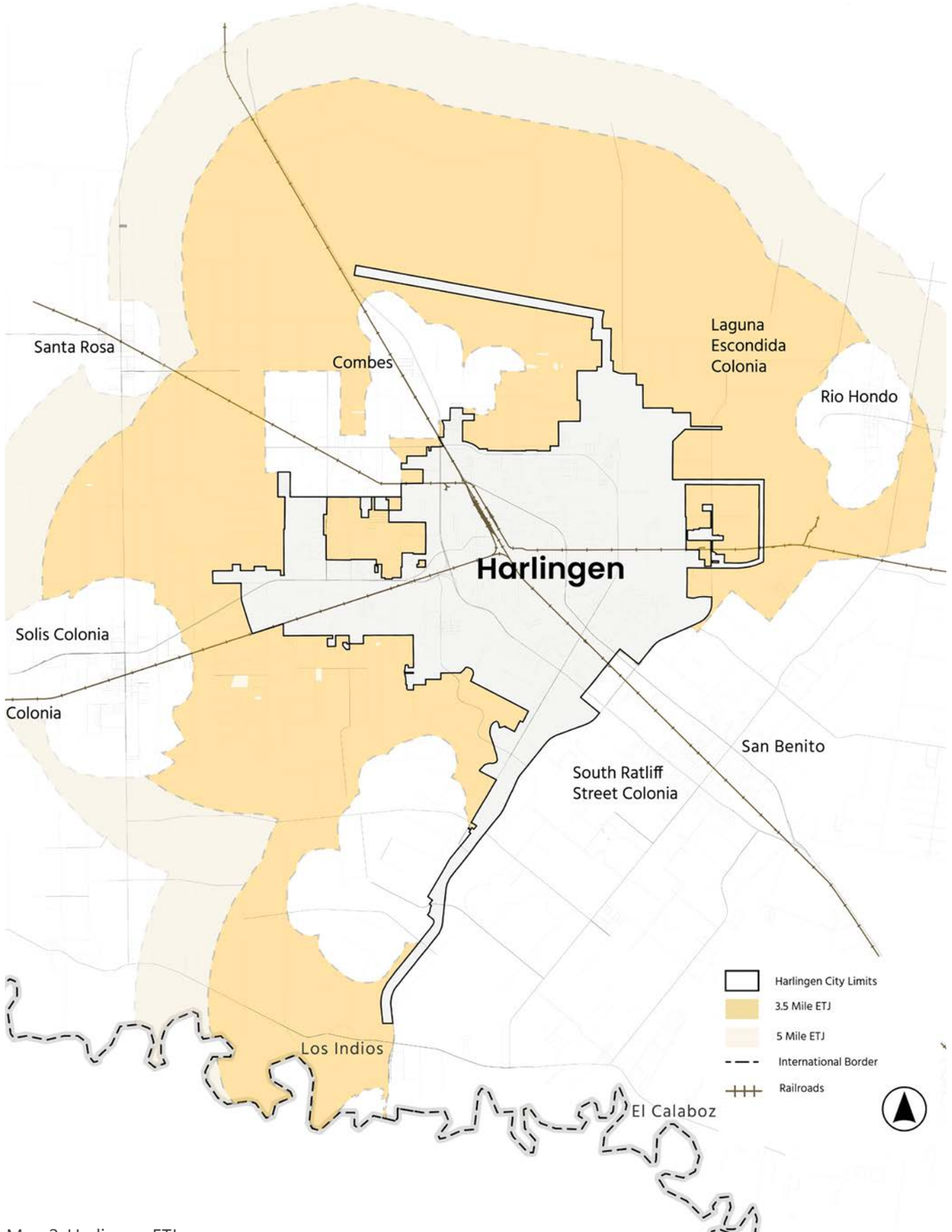


Map 1. Harlingen Regional Context

What is an ETJ?

In Texas, an ETJ (Extraterritorial Jurisdiction) is the area just outside a city's boundaries where the city can regulate certain aspects of land use and development to manage growth in areas that may be annexed. While cities can't enforce full regulations in the ETJ, they often apply subdivision and infrastructure standards to promote orderly development near city limits.

Harlingen has both a 3.5-mile and a 5-mile ETJ. Cities with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 have a 3.5-mile ETJ, while those with more than 50,000 residents can extend theirs up to 5 miles, allowing for greater influence over development just beyond city limits.



Map 2. Harlingen ETJ

Community Engagement

Community Engagement Approach

The comprehensive planning process for Harlingen was built on a foundation of meaningful community engagement. The approach combined both in-person and online tools to ensure broad participation, with a focus on reaching diverse voices across the city. Engagement was designed to be accessible, bilingual, and inclusive, so that residents, businesses, community groups, and institutions could all play a role in shaping the plan. This input directly informed the vision, priorities, and recommendations that guide the Comprehensive Plan.

The planning team integrates quantitative data and research, like the information discussed earlier in this chapter, with the lived experiences and needs of residents shared throughout the process. This qualitative input from community members shapes the community vision, which then informs the guiding principles and, ultimately, the Plan recommendations.

Plans Steering Committee (PSC) Meetings

The PSC consists of dedicated community members who volunteered their time to collaborate with the planning team throughout the process. Their involvement ensured that a diverse range of perspectives was considered and integrated into the Plan recommendations.

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.

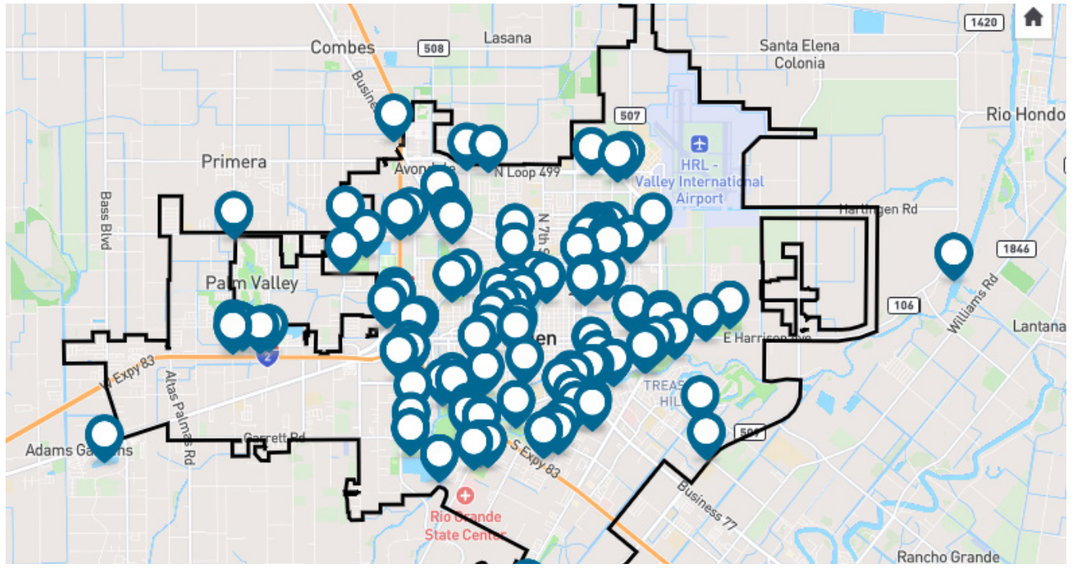
Stakeholder Conversations

The planning team facilitated focused discussions with various community stakeholders, each representing unique needs or perspectives. These sessions included meetings with both forward-thinking community leaders and technical experts across different fields. Stakeholders engaged in the planning process included: non-profits and community groups, small business owners, real-estate developers and representatives from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Virtual Engagement

In addition to in-person events, the planning team conducted an online survey, virtual engagement sessions and a project website to gather broader community input. These digital tools provided residents with flexible opportunities to access information, share feedback and contribute to the planning process.

A summary of engagement efforts throughout the comprehensive planning process can be found in the Appendix A.



Online Engagement- Interactive Map Activity



Public Open House #1, November 18, 2024



Public Open House #2, February 24, 2025

Current Conditions

Harlingen is Growing

Harlingen is witnessing steady population growth, which brings opportunities for economic development and community vitality. However, this growth underscores the need to balance new residential neighborhoods with retail development to sustain a thriving local economy.



Housing Market Dynamics

Harlingen faces challenges in providing a variety of housing options. With an increasing need for luxury and affordable homes, the City's housing market must adapt to changing middle-class expectations. Addressing absentee ownership and underutilized vacant properties remains critical to unlocking development potential.



Workforce Retention and Educational Barriers

Educational attainment remains a barrier to attracting higher-paying jobs and industries such as technology. Many workers commute outside Harlingen for employment, highlighting the need for localized workforce development and investment in education to meet employer needs and retain talent.



Strong Sense of Community with Opportunities for Growth

Harlingen is known for its close-knit community, with cultural events and festivals reinforcing its local identity. However, strategic efforts to capitalize on available vacant land, expand retail opportunities and align new developments with community needs, such as placemaking and creating a desirable sense of place, are crucial to ensuring sustainable growth.

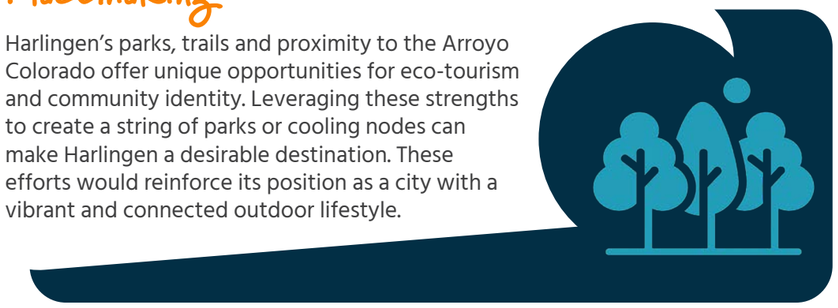


Transportation and Connectivity

Infrastructure barriers like railroads present challenges to connectivity within the City. Enhancing transportation networks, including overpasses and improved wayfinding, can address community mobility concerns and foster better access to amenities like parks and retail.

Natural Assets and Placemaking

Harlingen's parks, trails and proximity to the Arroyo Colorado offer unique opportunities for eco-tourism and community identity. Leveraging these strengths to create a string of parks or cooling nodes can make Harlingen a desirable destination. These efforts would reinforce its position as a city with a vibrant and connected outdoor lifestyle.



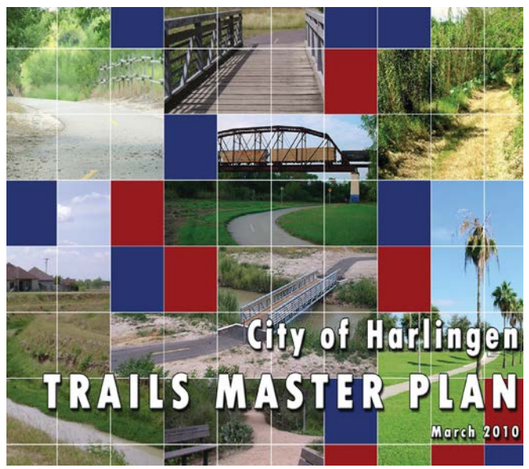
Previous Planning Efforts



One Vision, One Harlingen Comprehensive Plan (2016)

The One Vision, One Harlingen Comprehensive 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). This Plan update replaces the 2016 plan, ensuring a renewed vision that reflects current community needs and priorities. 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 calls for expanding Harlingen's trail network to improve connectivity and recreation throughout the City and ETJ. The Plan identifies critical areas to be developed through public participation and stakeholder input. The focus areas of the Plan include:

- Expanding trails and access points
- Enhancing connections between parks and neighborhood areas
- Improving safety and accessibility
- Promoting health and wellbeing through recreational activities
- Preserving natural areas and scenic corridors.



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 Park System based on community engagement and stakeholder feedback. Key priorities include:

- Securing land for the development of new parks and open areas
- Enhancing and maintaining current facilities
- Broadening the scope of recreational activities and programs
- Creating multi-use trails
- Enhancing accessibility and inclusive parks



Cameron County Hazard Mitigation Action Plan (2021)

The Cameron County Hazard Mitigation Action Plan outlines strategies to decrease the impacts of natural disasters and increase resilience in Harlingen and the broader county. Developed through community engagement and stakeholder participation, the Plan highlights key areas:

- Improving flood risks through infrastructure improvements.
- Promoting public education on hazard mitigation.
- Strengthening building codes and land use regulations.





Rio Grande Valley
Metropolitan Planning
Organization

RGVMPO Bicycle Plan (2019)

The RGVMPO Bicycle Plan outlines a strategy for increasing the number of bike lanes across the Rio Grande Valley, including downtown Harlingen and its ETJ, to encourage safe and accessible cycling. Developed with input from the community and stakeholders, the Plan highlights key areas:

- Expanding bike lanes along key corridors like Tyler and Harrison Avenues to improve connectivity.
- Enhancing safety with intersection upgrades and bike-friendly infrastructure in high-traffic areas.
- Developing multi-use trails linking Hugh Ramsey Nature Park to Arroyo Park for recreation and eco-tourism.



RGVMPO 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (2020)

RGVMPO's 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan outlines proposed long-range transportation investments in the Rio Grande Valley, including Harlingen. In the Plan, current trends are identified, progress over the previous three years is outlined, future projects are explored and project funding is addressed. The 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan highlights key goals:

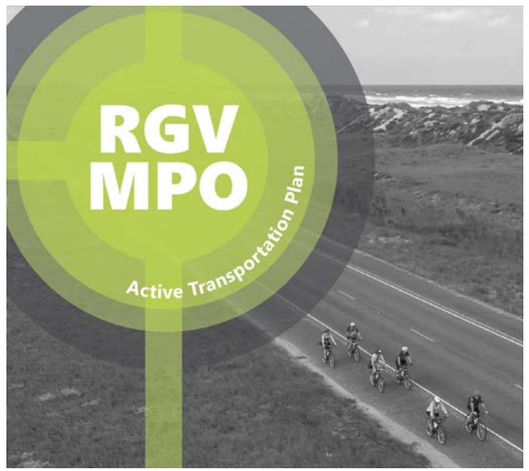
- Creating and maintaining an efficient multimodal transportation system.
- Upgrading U.S. Highway 77/I-69E to improve traffic flow and regional connectivity.
- Expanding Valley Metro services to enhance public transit access in Harlingen.
- Developing bike lanes and pedestrian paths to support sustainable transportation options.



RGVMPO Transit Development Plan (2020)

RGVMPO's Transportation Improvement Plan (2020) provides a roadmap to improve public transportation throughout the Rio Grande Valley, including Harlingen. Developed via community engagement and stakeholders, the Plan highlights key areas:

- Expanding Valley Metro routes to better serve Harlingen neighborhoods and key destinations.
- Increasing service frequency on routes connecting Harlingen to nearby regional hubs like Brownsville and McAllen.
- Upgrading transit stops and facilities in Harlingen to improve passenger safety and comfort.



RGVMPO Active Transportation Plan (2020)

The RGVMPO Active Transportation Plan (2020) provides a strategic plan to improve walking, biking, and other transportation options in the Rio Grande Valley, including Harlingen. Developed with community input and stakeholder participation, the Plan highlights key areas:

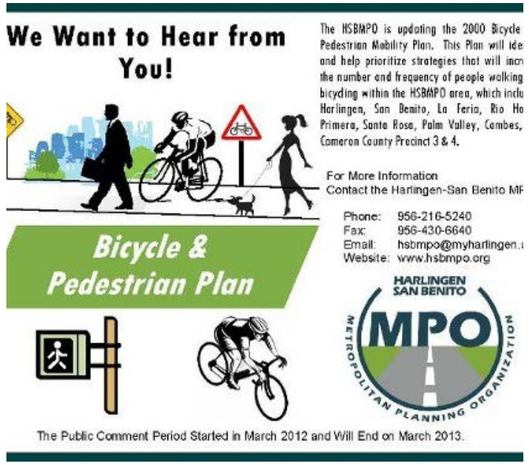
- Extending the Arroyo Colorado Trail to connect neighborhoods and parks, enhancing recreation and mobility in Harlingen.
- Adding bike lanes in downtown Harlingen to improve safety and promote active transportation.
- Creating safer pedestrian routes near schools to encourage walking and biking for students.



Drainage Master Plan (2008)

The City of Harlingen's 2008 Drainage Master Plan provided a citywide evaluation of drainage infrastructure and identified improvements to reduce flooding and enhance stormwater management. The plan established priority projects, cost estimates, and strategies to address localized flooding issues. It also set the foundation for future drainage studies, including the HUC10 watershed analysis.

- Evaluating system-wide drainage capacity and deficiencies.
- Recommending priority channel and pipe upgrades.
- Identifying opportunities for regional detention facilities.
- Establishing a long-term framework for reducing flood risks.



HSB MPO Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan (2021)

The Harlingen-San Benito Metropolitan Planning Organization's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan builds on earlier regional bicycle planning efforts and provides a more recent, comprehensive strategy to expand safe and accessible active transportation. The plan identifies key corridors, safety priorities, and infrastructure improvements to support both cyclists and pedestrians across the region.

- Expanding on-street and off-street bicycle facilities to improve connectivity.
- Enhancing pedestrian safety at high-traffic intersections and corridors.
- Linking neighborhoods to schools, parks, and employment centers through multi-use trails.
- Promoting active transportation as a tool for health, equity, and economic development.



Physical and Regulatory Features

Natural Features

The City of Harlingen lies almost 30 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The terrain is relatively flat with gentle slopes along the City's canals and waterways. The Arroyo Colorado watershed flows through the City to Laguna Madre, serving as a shipping route and natural drainage system that protects low-lying areas from flooding.

The Rio Grande Valley's fertile ground is a mixture of sandy loams and clay rich soils supporting a variety of crops from corn to citrus trees. These soil types play a significant role in determining the area's natural vegetation, water absorption and overall landscape management. Sandy loams are more permeable, allowing for efficient drainage and supporting a variety of native plants, while clay-rich soils in some areas tend to retain water, limiting infiltration and increasing surface runoff after rainfall.

Harlingen's parks and open spaces offer year-round opportunities for outdoor recreation while also providing a habitat for local wildlife including whitetail deer, javelinas, and hundreds of bird species. Located in the Central Fly Zone, where over 50% of birds migrate both in the spring and fall, the City is popular among bird watchers and outdoor enthusiasts.

Constructed Features

Harlingen's urban landscape is defined by a blend of residential, commercial and recreational constructed elements. The City is primarily comprised of single-family homes with neighborhoods radiating along the key thoroughfares of U.S. Highway 77 and State Highway 107. New multi-family developments have been introduced in various parts of the City but particularly along Ed Carey Drive and Loop 499. Harlingen's primary commercial hubs offering shopping, dining and services are located along these primary thoroughfares. These roads provide essential connectivity throughout Harlingen and link the City to neighboring communities in the Rio Grande Valley region.

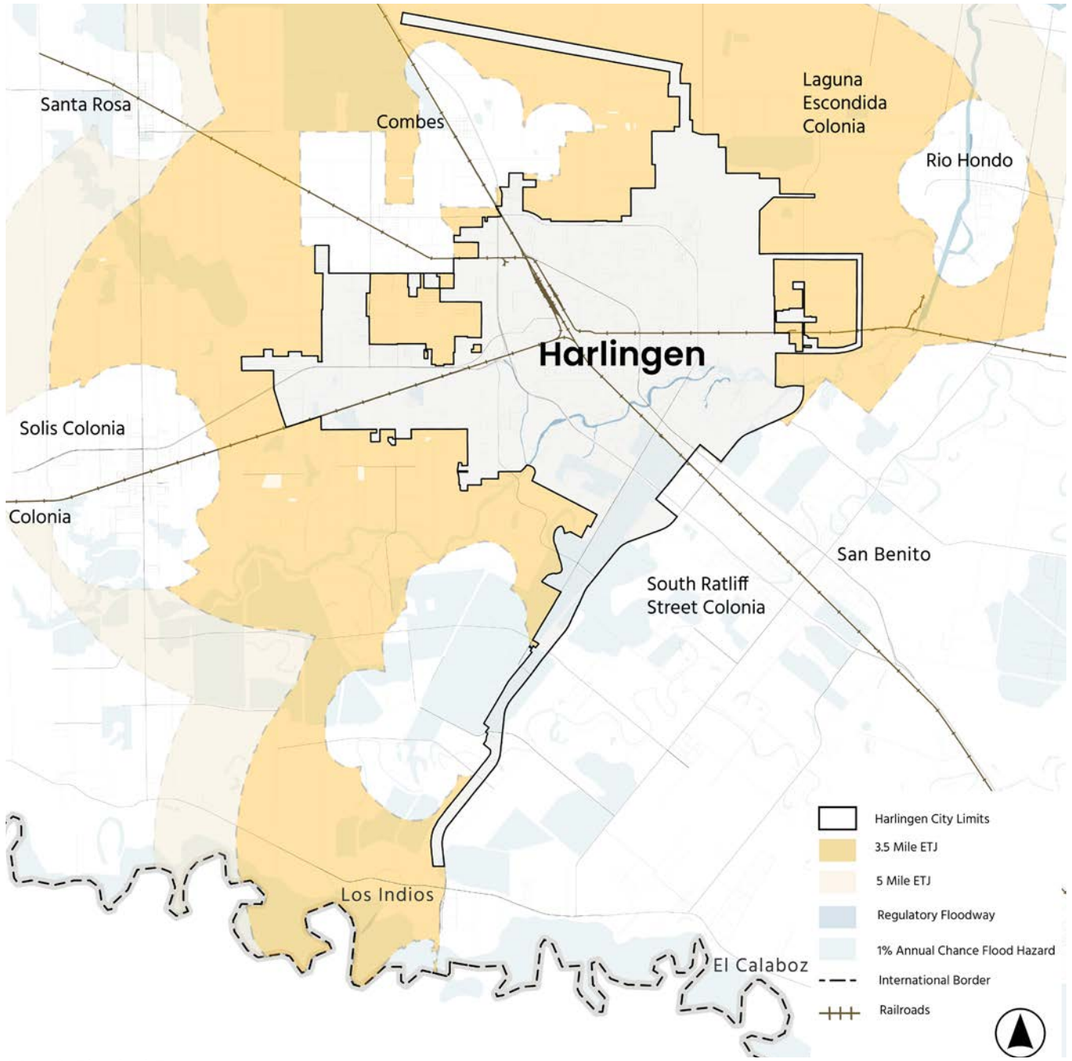
Harlingen's key public amenities, like Pendleton Park and the Harlingen Public Library, are centrally located, making them easily accessible for residents. The City has also invested in pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, incorporating sidewalks, shared-use paths and bike lanes along Ed Carey Drive and Tyler Avenue. These enhancements reflect Harlingen's commitment to walkability and safe, accessible routes for cyclists and pedestrians.

Notable infrastructure projects include upgrades to the City's stormwater drainage system, particularly in flood-prone neighborhoods in close proximity to the Arroyo Colorado. These projects, in collaboration with the Texas Water Development Board and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, reflect Harlingen's efforts to build robust infrastructure that supports future growth while safeguarding residents from water-related challenges. Additionally, Harlingen serves a key node in the Rio Grande Valley's freight network, with tracks operated by Union Pacific and Rio Grande Valley Switching Company transecting the City. These railroads support local industry and connect Harlingen to major national and international markets.

Jurisdictional Features

Harlingen, Texas, spans approximately 40 square miles and is supported by a range of essential services and infrastructure designed to meet the needs of its residents. The City ensures public safety through over 100 first responders operating across eight fire stations managed by the Harlingen Fire Department.

Water, wastewater, and stormwater services are provided by the Harlingen WaterWorks System (HWW), a municipally managed utility board, ensuring reliable and efficient utility operations throughout the City. Education is a cornerstone of the community, with the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) offering a variety of elementary, middle, and high schools, along with specialized academies to support the educational needs of young residents.



Map 3. Physical Features

Integrating Resilience Across Plan

Resilience is built into every part of this Comprehensive Plan. Each chapter, including Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Infrastructure, and Transportation. It includes strategies to help Harlingen prepare for, respond to, and recover from future challenges. This approach ensures that everyday decisions strengthen the city's long-term safety, sustainability, and prosperity.

What is Resilience?

Resilience is defined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), as the capacity to anticipate and prepare for potential threats and hazards, adjust to evolving conditions and withstand and quickly recover from disruptions. In planning, resilience considers both sudden shocks, like extreme weather events, and ongoing stressors, such as prolonged water shortages, which a community may face. It also involves identifying the potential social, economic and environmental impacts of these challenges and exploring strategies for mitigation or adaptation to reduce their adverse effects.

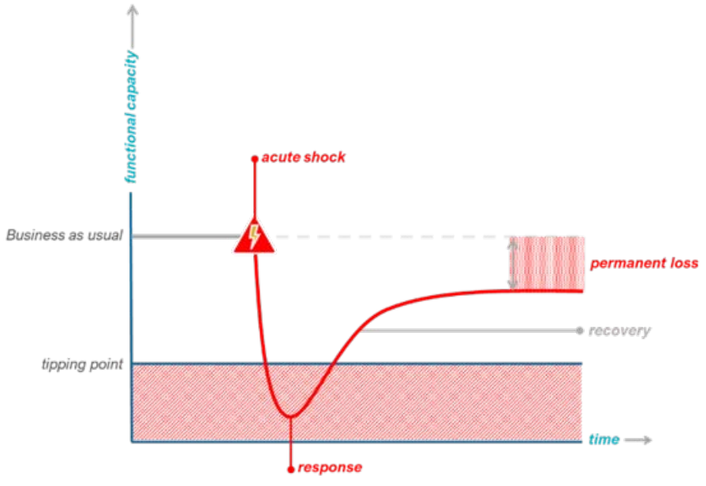


Conventional Recovery Scenario

A community system will operate at a steady state (business as usual) until an impact event, such as an acute shock occurs or a long-term stressor finally reaches a breaking point. If the capacity or function of that system drops below a "tipping point", the system or community will attempt to recover but will have experienced permanent losses.

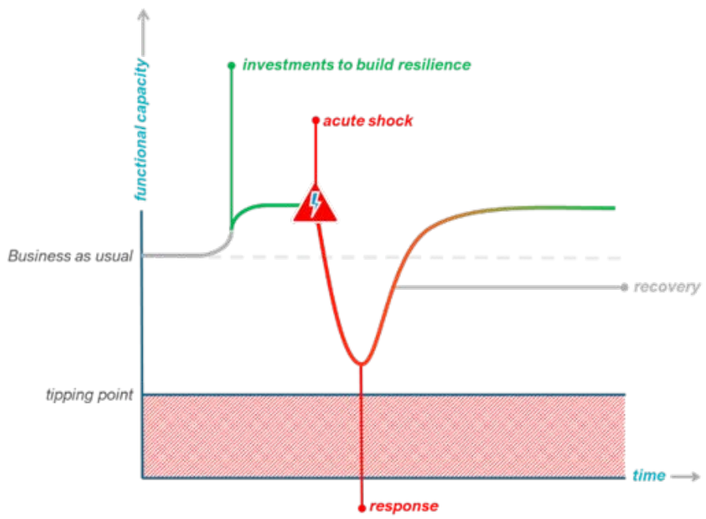
Figure 3. What is resilience?

Adapted from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)



Resilient Recovery Scenario

Investment in resilience projects that improve the overall condition of systems and communities will increase baseline capacity and functional levels prior to an impact event. From this higher baseline, the same event may still require a period of recovery, but irreversible damage and permanent losses are minimized.



Resilience Dashboard

The resilience dashboard offers an overview of the current risk landscape affecting the City of Harlingen. This tool, along with other risk assessment data, should be integrated into the site planning and design stages for any public facility within the city to ensure a comprehensive consideration of potential risks.

Flooding

Flooding is the most significant and recurring hazard in Harlingen, affecting residents, businesses, and critical facilities more than any other risk. According to the Cameron County Hazard Mitigation Action Plan, between 1996 and 2019 the City experienced nine damaging floods, resulting in nearly $221,000 in local property damage. Cameron County as a whole has faced more than seventy flood events during this time.



70+ floods since 1996

The 2025 HUC10 Drainage Study (Draft) highlights the city's high vulnerability to flooding due to flat terrain, clay soils, rapid development, and aging stormwater systems. Nineteen critical public facilities are located in the floodplain, placing essential services such as health, safety, and disaster response at risk. Harlingen has experienced multiple severe flood events, including Hurricane Dolly in 2008, the June floods of 2018 and 2019, Hurricane Hanna in 2020, and the historic March 2025 flood. Future rainfall is projected to intensify by 10 to 20 percent by 2050, further increasing flood risk.



19 critical facilities in floodplain

To strengthen resilience, the city must combine structural solutions with non structural strategies. Priority projects include expanding detention basins, upgrading storm sewers and pump stations, retrofitting resacas, and widening channels. Non structural measures include routine system maintenance, a real time flood warning system, and expanded use of green infrastructure such as rain gardens, permeable pavement, and street tree canopy. Together, these actions will improve safety, protect critical facilities, and support long term sustainable growth.



$221,000 damages (1996–2019)



Increasing rainfall intensity

Winter Storms

As indicated in the Cameron County HMAP, between 1996 and 2019 the county experienced 34 occurrences of winter storm watches, warnings, freezing rain, sleet or wind chill advisories. Most recently in February 2021, the City of Harlingen was subject to Winter Storm Uri which brought average temperatures in the high 20s to low 40s. Public facilities should be designed with high-quality insulation and energy-efficient heating systems to maintain indoor temperatures to serve as relief centers for residents facing hardships due to the extreme cold and winter storm. Additionally, ensuring backup power sources and well-sealed building envelopes can prevent heat loss and maintain operations during power outages.

Extreme Heat

As reported by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in 2023, the City of Harlingen experienced 55 days of extreme heat, defined as days with temperatures reaching 100 degrees or higher. From July 30 to August 20, the city endured 22 days of extreme heat, threatening children, the elderly, and those living in poverty.

Public buildings should be equipped with reliable cooling systems and be ready to serve as relief centers during heatwaves. These centers can provide water stations, shaded areas, and medical support for residents who need a safe place to recover from extreme conditions. Planting more trees along streets and sidewalks can also increase shade, cool pavement, and create safer and more comfortable walking environments while helping to reduce the city's overall heat risk.

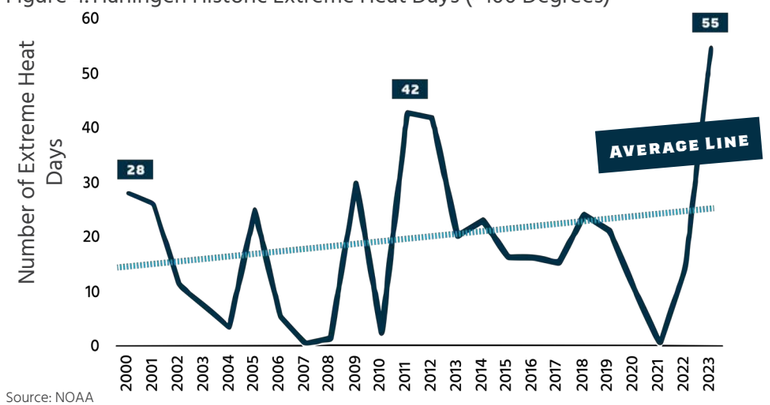
Wildfire

Between 2005 and 2015, Harlingen faced three wildfire events, with 23.3% of its population living in the high-risk Wildfire Urban Interface. Southwest Harlingen is rated moderate to high for wildfire threats. To protect public safety, key facilities should be placed for clear emergency access, surrounded by defensible space through vegetation management, and equipped with air filtration systems to reduce health risks from wildfire smoke

Tornado

According to the Cameron County HMAP, between 1953 and 2019, Cameron County, which includes the City of Harlingen, experienced 63 tornado events. The most recent tornado, an EF0, occurred in July 2019. Harlingen is situated in the FEMA Zone III Wind Zone, where tornado winds can reach up to 200 mph. There is a high likelihood of future tornado events occurring, particularly during the spring months. The 2,657 manufactured homes in Harlingen are especially vulnerable to the impacts from tornadoes. Public facilities should be constructed utilizing reinforced construction techniques and materials, as well as incorporating safe rooms designed to withstand high winds and flying debris prevalent during a tornado event.

Figure 4. Harlingen Historic Extreme Heat Days (>100 Degrees)



Source: NOAA

Resilience Themes Across the Plan

Building Connections Between Hazards and Strategies

The Resilience Dashboard identifies the major hazards that Harlingen faces, including flooding, extreme heat, winter storms, wildfires, and tornadoes. These risks do not exist in isolation. Each one directly shapes the way the City plans for land use, housing, infrastructure, transportation, parks, and economic development.

Hazards and Related Strategies

- **Flooding** – Guide growth away from floodplains, expand stormwater systems and green infrastructure, and design parks that also serve as detention.
- **Extreme Heat** – Promote weather-resilient housing, shaded transit amenities, and parks that expand tree canopy and cooling.
- **Winter Storms** – Improve infrastructure reliability, strengthen backup power and water systems, and encourage safe housing standards.
- **Wildfires** – Apply land use buffers in the Wildland/Urban Interface, manage natural resources, and enhance community safety.
- **Tornadoes** – Strengthen building codes, support resilient housing design, and provide safe public facilities.

By linking hazards to planning strategies, resilience becomes a guiding principle across the entire Comprehensive Plan, not a stand alone program.

Hazard	Land Use	Housing	Infrastructure and Utilities	Transportation	Economic Development
Flooding	Direct growth away from floodplains	Flood resilient housing	Drainage upgrades and green infrastructure	Elevate roadways and improve evacuation routes	Protect jobs and downtown
Extreme Heat	Encourage shaded development	Weather resilient housing	Tree canopy and reliable power	Shaded bus stops and cooling transit amenities	Shaded downtown for business and tourism
Winter Storms	Siting of critical facilities	Safe housing standards	Harden energy and water systems	Winter-proof transit and reliable emergency routes	Business continuity planning
Tornadoes	Safe siting standards	Wind resistant construction	Safe public facilities	Designated safe transit shelters	Protect key employers

Hazard–Strategy Crosswalk Table

How Resilience is Integrated

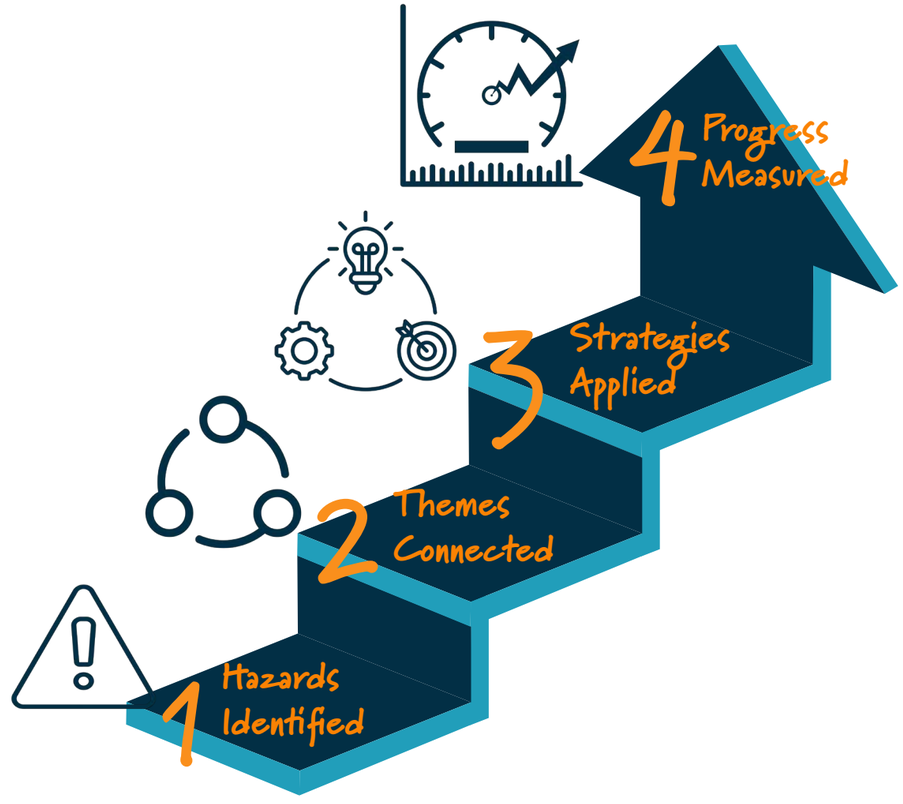
A Framework for Citywide Resilience

Resilience in this Comprehensive Plan is carried through four connected steps:

- **Hazards Identified:** The Resilience Dashboard defines the key risks facing Harlingen.
- **Themes Connected:** Each hazard is tied to planning areas, showing how risks influence land use, housing, infrastructure, transportation, parks, and economic development.
- **Strategies Applied:** Every topical chapter includes a Resilience Connection page, linking hazards to specific strategies such as green infrastructure, housing diversity, or energy efficiency.
- **Progress Measured:** The Implementation Matrix tracks how resilience strategies are put into action, ensuring progress is tangible and measurable.

This framework ensures that resilience is woven throughout the Comprehensive Plan. Each decision, whether about land use, infrastructure, housing, or economic development, strengthens Harlingen's ability to prepare for, withstand, and recover from shocks and stresses.

How Resilience is Integrated Across the Plan



How Community Values Shape the Plan

Community values identified by residents form the foundation of the Comprehensive Plan. These values shape the vision, which provides the framework for city planning. The vision is then carried forward into goals and objectives that guide specific actions and strategies.



THE VALUES COME FROM YOU

Why are they important?

They inform the vision

VALUES FORM THE VISION

THE VISION STATEMENT

Why is it important?

Provides the framework for all city plans





VISION ELEMENTS

GOALS



Provide direction, set expectations for what the Plan can do to help achieve the vision, and establish a decision-making framework

OBJECTIVES

Recommended actions to help achieve the goals

Community Values

A City that Celebrates Culture and Arts

Harlingen residents highly value the City's cultural diversity and artistic expression. There is a strong desire to promote community events, public art installations and cultural programs that reflect the City's rich heritage. This vision emphasizes fostering a sense of pride and belonging through vibrant cultural opportunities.

"Cultural events and festivals are a cornerstone of what makes Harlingen unique."

A Thriving Local Economy with Job Opportunities

Residents expressed the need for more local, high-paying jobs and support for small businesses. Enhancing workforce opportunities and attracting diverse industries are key to fostering economic prosperity and retaining talent in Harlingen.

"We need more opportunities for high-wage jobs in Harlingen to support families and encourage young professionals to stay."

A Hub for Eco-Tourism

Survey respondents emphasized the importance of preserving Harlingen's natural assets while enhancing eco-tourism opportunities. Expanding trails, parks and wildlife areas will strengthen the City's identity as an outdoor recreation destination.

"The Arroyo trails and natural spaces are incredible assets that should be expanded."

Diverse Housing Options for All

There is a strong call for a variety of housing types to meet the needs of all residents, from affordable starter homes to upscale developments. Providing inclusive housing options will ensure that Harlingen remains welcoming to families, seniors and young professionals alike.

"We need affordable housing options that work for families and young people starting out."

Mobility and Connectivity

Improving transportation options, from walkability to bike paths and public transit, is a major priority for the community. Creating safe and accessible connections throughout the City will enhance quality of life and reduce reliance on personal vehicles.

"It's important to have better sidewalks and bike lanes to make it easier for people to get around safely."

Vibrant Public Spaces and Recreation

Expanding parks, playgrounds and gathering spaces emerged as a critical value for residents. Harlingen's public spaces should be welcoming, inclusive and provide opportunities for families to enjoy leisure activities close to home.

"Parks and public spaces are key to making Harlingen a great place to live."



STRENGTHS

A community survey was conducted from October 30th, 2024, to January 23rd, 2025, receiving feedback from 166 respondents. The insights gathered through this survey were instrumental in establishing the community values, guiding principles and overall vision of the Harlingen Comprehensive Plan. Additionally, the survey enabled the identification of strengths and opportunities, helping to shape a comprehensive and forward-looking plan for the City.

Affordability



The City offers a lower cost of living, making it appealing to families, retirees and young professionals. This affordability allows residents to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle without the high expenses found in other Texas regions.



Accessibility

Harlingen enjoys a prime location at the center of the Rio Grande Valley, offering significant strategic advantages. Its proximity to the Mexican border facilitates international trade and cultural exchange. The Harlingen International Airport and the Port of Harlingen also enhance the region's local connectivity and economic trade. This strategic positioning makes Harlingen a vital hub for the Rio Grande Valley.

Recreational Assets



The City provides 612 acres of parkland and recreational facilities for residents, along with 25.5 miles of trails. These parks, trails and the Arroyo Colorado contribute in creating a distinctive identity for Harlingen which stands out among the Rio Grande Valley.



Sense of Community

Harlingen is known for its welcoming, small-city feel that fosters strong community bonds. Local events and gatherings such as the Lighting of the Arroyo create opportunities for local connection.

Educational Opportunities



Harlingen offers a variety of educational opportunities for residents close and nearby, including the Texas State Technical College (TSTC), which offers specialized technical training and degrees, as well as the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), which has its School of Medicine in Harlingen. While these institutions provide excellent educational resources and opportunities, there is a growing need for expanded higher education outreach and workforce training programs to better support local career pathways and economic growth.

OPPORTUNITIES

Vacant Property Development



Utilize underused areas, such as the land near Bass Pro Shops, the Valle Vista Mall and downtown's warehouse district, for economic and residential growth. This economic growth should include an expansion of shopping, dining and entertainment enterprises.



Eco-Tourism Expansion

Capitalize on the Arroyo Colorado, trails and parks to position Harlingen as a destination for eco-tourism. Attract birding enthusiasts and outdoor adventurers by enhancing accessibility and promoting nature-based activities. Develop guided tours, events and unique experiences to further showcase the City's natural assets.

Placemaking Initiatives



Create a unique sense of place in Harlingen through public art, trails into downtown and revitalized public spaces to foster greater opportunities for community interaction and connection.



Retail and Dining Growth

Focus on attracting higher-quality retail, sit-down restaurants, entertainment establishments and innovative shopping experiences to meet the changing expectations of residents, as well as to attract residents from neighboring cities.

Infrastructure Improvements



Address the railroad barrier and expand multimodal transit options, including sidewalks, bike paths and public transportation. In addition to mobility improvements, prioritize enhancements to drainage and flood prevention infrastructure, as these were major community concerns. Additionally, expand street lighting improvements to enhance safety, particularly in parks and downtown areas, ensuring a well-lit and secure environment for residents.



Community Vision Statement

Harlingen will emerge as a dynamic hub for culture and arts, fostering economic growth and eco-tourism while embracing its rich heritage and natural assets. With diverse housing options, enhanced mobility, and connectivity, Harlingen will cultivate a thriving local economy, offering an exceptional quality of life and opportunities for all residents.

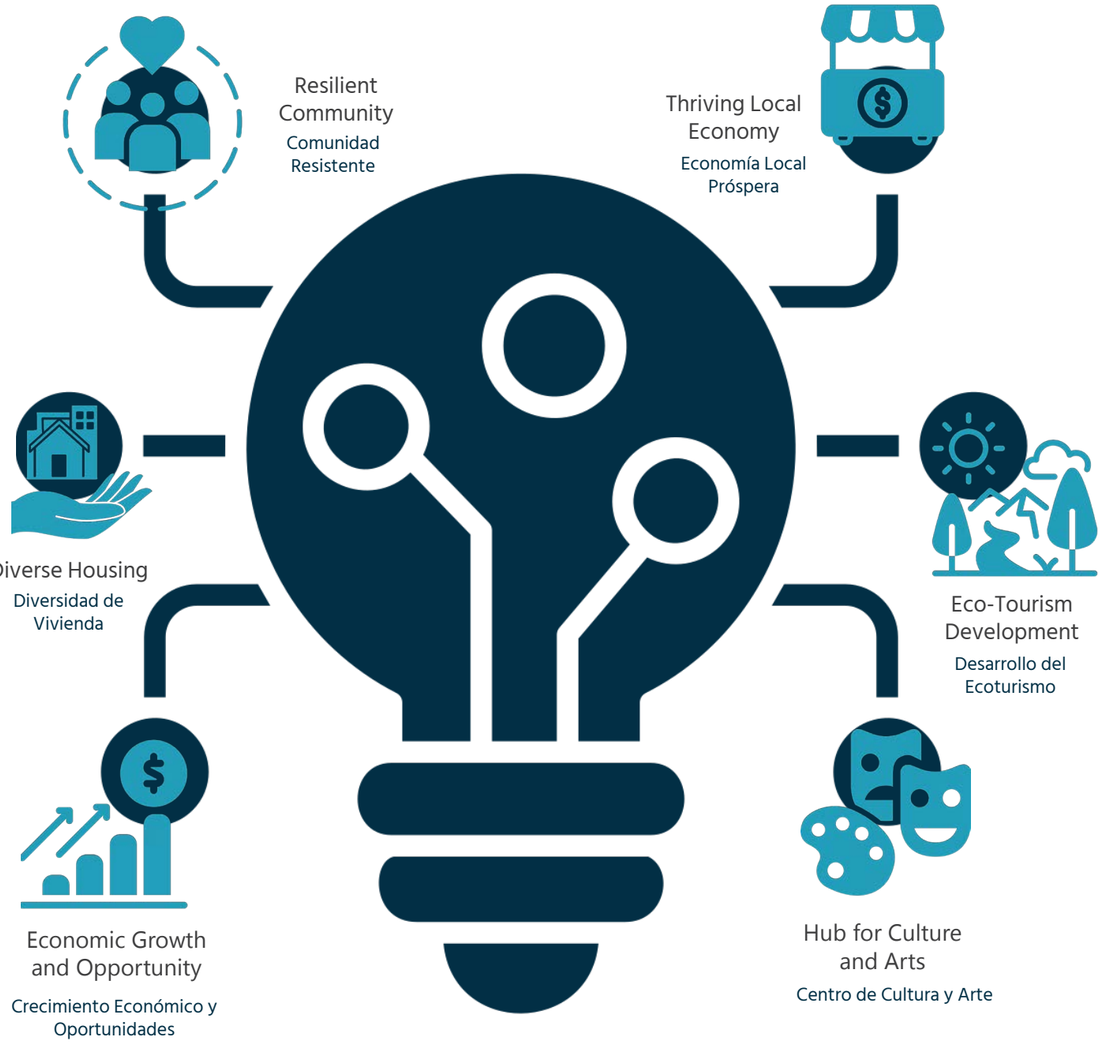
Declaración de visión comunitaria

Harlingen se consolidará como un centro dinámico para la cultura y las artes, impulsando el crecimiento económico y el ecoturismo, a la vez que valoriza su rico patrimonio y recursos naturales. Con diversas opciones de vivienda, mayor movilidad y conectividad, Harlingen impulsará una economía local próspera, ofreciendo una calidad de vida excepcional y oportunidades para todos los residentes.

Vision Elements

Your vision for Harlingen

Community input shaped six key “vision elements” that form the foundation of the Comprehensive Plan. These elements guide the plan’s goals and ensure Harlingen’s growth reflects community priorities and long-term aspirations.



Vision Elements



Resilient Community



Diverse Housing



Economic Growth and Opportunity



Thriving Local Economy



Eco-Tourism Development



Hub for Culture and Arts

Goals

In 2050

Harlingen aspires to foster a resilient community that supports its people through inclusivity, safety and robust support systems.

In 2050

Harlingen will offer diverse housing options to accommodate all income levels, life stages and family types.

In 2050

Harlingen will focus on creating opportunities for economic growth that benefit all residents and future generations.

In 2050

Harlingen will develop a thriving local economy that attracts businesses, jobs and investment while supporting small businesses.

In 2050

Harlingen will embrace eco-tourism by enhancing its natural assets and promoting sustainable tourism opportunities.

In 2050

Harlingen will become a vibrant hub for cultural and artistic expression, celebrating diversity and creativity.

Objectives

- Strengthen public safety and emergency preparedness for natural disasters and community challenges.
- Expand programs and facilities for youth, families, and seniors to ensure well-being across generations.
- Implement strategies for long-term resilience to economic and climate-related challenges.

- Increase the availability of affordable housing for low- and middle-income families.
- Encourage development of “missing middle” housing such as townhomes, duplexes and small-lot single-family homes.
- Desire for luxury housing to attract professionals and boost economic growth.
- Provide resources and initiatives to address poverty and affordable housing.
- Provide rental assistance and homeownership programs.
- Promote mixed-use developments that include residential options for all income levels.
- Align housing strategies with transit-oriented development to enhance connectivity.

- Expand infrastructure for industrial and tech-focused industries.
- Promote workforce development initiatives tailored to local industries.
- Establish partnerships to provide higher education and technical training opportunities.
- Encourage investment in underutilized areas such as downtown and vacant properties.
- Provide financial incentives for small businesses and local entrepreneurs.
- Expand access to public transportation to connect people to job centers.

- Establish incubators and grants to foster small business growth and entrepreneurship.
- Attract diverse industries to create high-paying jobs for residents.
- Develop vibrant commercial nodes with retail, dining and entertainment.
- Expand mixed-use developments to integrate business, housing and public spaces.
- Promote tourism through cultural, historical and eco-tourism attractions.
- Invest in infrastructure improvements to attract new businesses and retain existing ones.

- Expand and enhance the Arroyo Colorado trail system for recreational activities and active transportation.
- Protect and restore local ecosystems to promote biodiversity.
- Develop new parks and green spaces to attract visitors and support outdoor activities.
- Create eco-tourism programs such as birdwatching and kayaking.
- Partner with local organizations to host eco-friendly festivals and events.
- Promote Harlingen as a destination for sustainable travel through targeted marketing.
- Install interpretive signage in parks and natural areas to educate visitors.

- Invest in public art installations, including murals and sculptures, in key areas like downtown.
- Develop venues for live performances, including theaters and outdoor amphitheaters.
- Support local artists through funding, workshops and gallery spaces.
- Create an art incubator program to nurture emerging artists and creative professionals.
- Leverage Harlingen’s cultural diversity to promote inclusive cultural events.
- Incorporate cultural elements into urban design, including streetscapes and public spaces.