

THE FUTURE: KEY FOCUS AREA #1 DOWNTOWN HARLINGEN AND THE CORE AREAS OF HARLINGEN

“It’s really kind of hard to be a suburb of nothing. If you don’t have a downtown, you really don’t have anything. It’s hard to build a community around parking lots and subdivisions.”

-Ed McMahon

Downtowns play a unique role in attracting talented people to a city, and the vitality of Downtown will continue to be important as Harlingen pursues economic growth. Today, Downtown Harlingen is one of the most attractive and strongest downtowns in the Rio Grande Valley, and one of Harlingen’s greatest strengths. The long-term economic growth of all of Harlingen is tied to the growth and strength of the Downtown and the Core Areas of the City.

The current Downtown Improvement District goes from 4th Streets to the railroad (east/west) and Madison/Monroe to Van Buren/Harrison (north/south). At the time of this plan, the area had more than 170 businesses and organizations, over 80 property owners, and had an occupancy rate approaching 90%. A public improvement district (PID) helps fund infrastructure maintenance and improvements, and several incentive programs aid in the revitalization of the area.

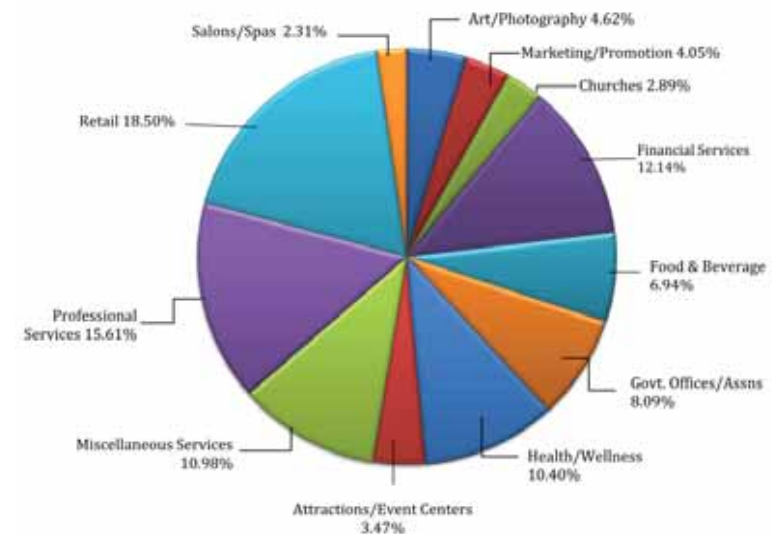
Downtown Harlingen is closely connected to the commercial and residential areas that surround it, and recommendations for a larger Core Areas of Harlingen are also included.

Having a strong residential base is critical to continued transformation of the area. Residents are integral to neighborhood stability, and city governments tend to invest more in public facilities such as parks and other public services where there are residents. Moreover, a residential base will help ensure a comprehensive mix of commercial offerings in Downtown Harlingen. Residents and visitors have different retail and service demands. With a residential base mixed with visitor attractions, the commercial base will become diversified and much better able to withstand economic fluctuations.

The Harlingen 100 Plan identified Downtown as one of its key areas of focus, stating that “Harlingen will focus on its downtown as a key to development of place.”

Since that strategic plan was adopted, multiple successful actions have taken place that point to the revitalization of Downtown and the greater Core Areas of Harlingen area. These include:

- Improved landscaping and aggressive maintenance of streets, alleys and sidewalks.
- Renovation of the Reese Building and the addition of Colletti’s Restaurant as a prime Downtown attraction.
- Ever-increasing popularity of Jackson Street Market Days, held on the first Saturday of every month.
- New art galleries in Downtown Harlingen.
- Expansion of the Downtown Harlingen mural program into one of the best in Texas.
- Several new Downtown Harlingen residences that illustrate the possibilities of adaptive reuse of existing buildings.
- Increasing number of visitors and businesses in Downtown Harlingen.



Businesses in Downtown Harlingen.

Strengths of the Core Areas of Harlingen

The Core Areas of Harlingen have multiple strengths that can serve as building blocks for continued revitalization. These include:

- Easy access without significant traffic constraints - Tyler, Harrison and Commerce provide easy and direct access from any part of the city.
- High traffic volumes - those same roads, with over 20,000 trips

per day on each roadway, provide a significant nearby market for area businesses.

- Significant stock of affordable buildings that can be transformed into a variety of uses.
- Multiple existing renovation examples that serve as prototypes for adaptive re-use.
- Attractive landscaping along Jackson Street that serves as a model for other areas.



- Multiple high quality murals throughout the area.
- Many very close in neighborhoods and residential areas that can provide a market for businesses and walkable living.
- Nearby Lake Harlingen as an attractive area asset.
- A strong core of governmental uses in the area, lead by the city and Harlingen Waterworks.
- A very strong and experienced existing Downtown Harlingen program and staff.

Core Areas of Harlingen Concerns

Significant obstacles and issues also exist within the greater Core Areas of Harlingen. These include:

- Disagreement about how to proceed, meaning that the benefits of even small individual projects can get lost.
- Difficulties in transforming older buildings created by sometimes limited options while still following city codes.
- Key un-renovated landmark/high visibility structures.
- Nearby blight caused by the shift away from center-city and rail related industrial uses.
- Deterioration of close-by residential neighborhoods.
- New development that is completely out of context (but follows applicable city regulations) with the historic urban qualities of the Core Areas of Harlingen (example - new drugstore at one of the most important downtown gateway locations at the corner of Commerce, Tyler and Harrison).



The renovation of the Reese into a mixed use development has transformed a key area of Downtown Harlingen and provides an example for redevelopment efforts. Sources: City of Harlingen, Megamorphosis Design

Recommendations for Downtown and the Core Areas of Harlingen

The following actions include key recommendations for Downtown Harlingen and the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Objective 1 Create additional district(s) to implement Core Areas recommendations.

Action 1-1 Create a Core Areas of Harlingen District. Identify and create a larger district surrounding the Downtown that should be considered for area wide actions. Address actions not only within small targeted areas, but within different parts of this larger area that all contribute to strengthening the heart of the city. This area might include La Placita, the areas north of Downtown to Jefferson Street and Lake Harlingen, neighborhoods to the east adjacent to 6th Street, and the areas south of Downtown to encompass both Tyler and Harrison Avenues.

This action does not replace the current Downtown Improvement District, which would remain. Rather, it is intended to draw attention and funding sources to a broader area.



Goal Statement - Downtown and the Core Areas of Harlingen

“Downtown Harlingen and the greater surrounding neighborhoods will be transformed into the most vibrant and active downtown and core city area in the Rio Grande Valley, known as a unique and desirable place to work, play and live. The area contributes significantly to the economic strength and attractiveness of Harlingen.”

Objective 2 Improve the perception and physical appearance of Downtown Harlingen and the new Core Areas of Harlingen.

Portions of Downtown Harlingen are exceptionally well landscaped, and indeed are textbook examples of how to develop streetscapes. But this falls off on nearby streets, and the remaining undeveloped buildings contribute to the overall perception of the area.

Action 2-1 Enhance Tyler and Harrison Avenues through the Core Areas of Harlingen, and create gateways into Downtown Harlingen. Downtown Harlingen is also relatively hidden and unannounced from nearby highly travelled roadways. Both Tyler and Harrison carry over 20,000 vehicles per day in the vicinity of the Downtown area. Enhancements to these streets, starting near F Street and extending to 6th Street, would help incorporate them as an integral part of the Core Areas of Harlingen and would help create gateways into this larger area.

Individual gateways leading north into Downtown Harlingen along 1st, 3rd, and 6th Streets would further link these two major roadways to Downtown.

Action 2-2 Examine the costs and benefits of converting one-way streets back to two-way travel. With the exception of Tyler and Harrison, little reason remains for the one-way streets in the greater Core Areas of Harlingen. For example, Van Buren, with

three one-way travel lanes, has the capacity for upwards of 15 to 20,000 vehicles per day, a number that probably exceeds current volumes by 300%.

Recent research also points to the benefits of two way travel for commercial businesses, since vehicles coming from both directions can see and react to a business.

Finally, the increased activity along all streets would give Downtown Harlingen a much stronger sense of activity and vibrancy.

A detailed assessment of the impact of this recommendation should be conducted. It should also determine the extent of the conversion both on Downtown streets and in nearby neighborhood streets. Striping and in some cases landscaped islands would have to be reconfigured along some streets, and some additional traffic signals would have to be added. The source of funding for the conversion also needs to be identified.

Action 2-3 Revitalize the Jefferson/Madison/Monroe Avenues area. The area immediately north of the Jackson Street District is a mix of commercial and residential uses, but is not strongly linked to the more active Downtown area along Van Buren and Jackson. With its proximity to Lake Harlingen as an area amenity, this area could become an attractive close in location for live/work residences.

Action 2-4 Create a strong pedestrian link between the Lake Harlingen/Library area and the greater Downtown area. The lake area is separated from the remainder of Downtown Harlingen by the railroad corridor and physically feels like it is miles away. Create a strong pedestrian corridor to the Core Areas of Harlingen along 6th street, using streetscaping, wider sidewalks and even a narrowing of the pavement section (still leaving capacity for a lane in either direction).

Action 2-5 Connect the Downtown and the Lake Harlingen area to the 25th Street Trail corridor. The 25th Street Trail connects to North 77 (Sunshine Strip) along Jefferson. A short 1/2 mile extension along Jefferson would connect a major section of Harlingen to the library and the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Objective 3 Aggressively attract redevelopment and new development in Downtown and the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Continue to use incentives and development standard adjustments to attract development to the Core Areas of Harlingen. Encourage innovative ideas and uses for Core Areas buildings that allow them to be re-purposed.

Action 3-1 Adjust city codes and processes to smooth the redevelopment process. City ordinances and building requirements need to be reviewed and updated to create specific standards for redevelopment in the urban core of the city. While adjustments have been made, a new set of policies, guidelines and performance measures needs to be put in place that provide reasonable flexibility when developing in the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Action 3-2 Adopt a form based overlay. Connected with Action 3.1 above, Harlingen should adopt a form based approach to development standards in the Core Areas of Harlingen. Explained in detail in the implementation section of this plan, a form based approach focuses more on the compatibility of the structure and how it performs with the area around it, rather than tailoring the building to a particular use. This results in buildings that are

inherently more flexible, and can be adapted for a variety of uses as market conditions evolve.

Action 3-3 Allow and encourage more mixed use development in the Core Areas of Harlingen area. Also connected with actions 3.1. and 3.2, a specific zoning category that allows and indeed encourages a mix of uses in one development should be incorporated into Harlingen’s zoning standards.

Action 3-4 Strengthen incentives for investment in the Core Areas of Harlingen area. In recognition of the importance of revitalizing the Core Areas of Harlingen, much stronger financial incentives should be developed to encourage center city redevelopment. These may include tax abatements, the waiver of building fees, special Chapter 380 agreements for major developments (where some developer funded improvements are repaid through future sales or property tax revenue). They may also include special incentives generated from 4B sales tax revenues.

These incentives should be configured to significantly raise the bar from current levels. They can be adjusted or phased out after five to ten years as deemed appropriate. Most importantly, the greater Harlingen area already has a significant supply of buildings that can be adapted for smaller scale office or commercial uses. Rather than encourage the development of new smaller commercial developments that will only further increase the city’s supply, incentive emphasis should be placed on the renovation of properties within the Core Areas.

A key component of this incentive is also smoothing out of the city development approval and code process (Action DT 3.1), so that the cost of the Core Areas of Harlingen redevelopment is comparable to new development on the outskirts.

Action 3-5 Relocate Harlingen’s City Hall into Downtown Harlingen. Harlingen’s current City Hall building is a historical gem but is very small, resulting in city offices being spread in multiple buildings.

The city can make a bold statement and create a significant catalytic effect by relocating to a new central City Hall in Downtown Harlingen. Under-utilized office buildings in the area provide options for private/public partnerships, and by jointly collaborating on parking solutions, can benefit other high profile projects such as the Reese Building and the Historic Baxter Building.

Action 3-6 Pursue redevelopment of the Historic Baxter Building as a key Downtown landmark. As the most prominent building in Downtown Harlingen, the tower can provide a major catalytic impact. By being redeveloped, it makes a statement about Downtown as a location in which to work and live. Conversely, being unoccupied and a blighted landmark, it creates uncertainty about investing in Downtown.

The lack of designated parking is a potential hurdle to redevelopment of the building, but also opens the door to bigger picture shared parking arrangements with other area buildings and the City of Harlingen.

Action 3-7 Address parking needs in the vicinity of the Historic Baxter Building and the Reese Building. Evaluate need for and develop parking structure in return for the conversion of existing parking areas in the area into new development. A shared parking structure could speed up redevelopment of the Historic Baxter Building, facilitate investment in the Reese Building for residential or office uses, and help consolidate city offices in a new Downtown location. By increasing the supply of close-in parking, a new structure could also spur new investment.

Other satellite parking areas should be identified and development sources for each of those identified.

Action 3-8 Encourage revitalization and redevelopment in the La Placita area. Promote the use of incentives to further encourage new uses in the La Placita area. Use tools mentioned throughout this section in this area.

Action 3-9 Target key catalyst properties for improvements.

Through a targeted planning process, efforts should be focused on key properties and mini-districts that can have a spin-off effect, rather than diluting limited resources across the larger area. City efforts should focus on helping to find solutions to hurdles to development, such as uninterested property owners, infrastructure issues, zoning issues, and bringing developers and property owners together. Potential catalytic areas could include:

- Undeveloped railroad owned lands along Jefferson (could be redeveloped in a combination residential/linear park configuration).
- Existing property at the Southwest corner of Commerce and Jackson.
- Specific dilapidated residences along the highly travelled 6th Street.
- Former car dealership properties on West Jackson.

Action 3-10 Encourage adaptive reuse of existing warehouse/ industrial buildings in the new Core Areas of Harlingen.

Area industrial buildings often can be converted to different uses. These may include both residential and non-residential uses, with the intent to encourage activity within the buildings. Codes and building requirements should be carefully reviewed to ensure that they are not overly restrictive and de-incentivize the restoration of older buildings.

Objective 4 Make Downtown Harlingen and the Core Areas of Harlingen an attractive place to live.

Action 4-1 Aggressively encourage the development of renovated inner city housing. Attracting a larger, resident-occupied residential base is a key to revitalizing the Core Areas of Harlingen. Develop specific incentives and standards that encourage the renovation of older residences and nonresidential buildings as living quarters.

Action 4-2 Enhance the Core Areas of Harlingen neighborhoods. Many residential properties near Downtown are deteriorating and lack owner investment. Actions discussed in the housing section should be targeted in particular to inner city neighborhoods.

Objective 5 Create a united approach to the redevelopment of the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Action 5-1 Develop a formal Core Areas of Harlingen plan with individual subdistrict recommendations. Creating a formal plan, with specific recommendations that add detail to the recommendations of this bigger picture comprehensive plan, serves as a catalyst for investment in the area. Once a formal plan of action is developed and funding sources are identified, it can lead to a better sense of comfort on the part of investment entities. It also provides clear direction for future actions and targets implementation efforts.



New businesses in historic buildings on Jackson Street attract residents and visitors to Downtown. Source: City of Harlingen

*"By far the greatest and most admirable form
of wisdom is that need to plan and beautify
cities and human communities."*

Socrates

