

APPENDIX C: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement is a key part of Harlingen's vision for the future. Understanding current issues, concerns and hopes for the future wouldn't be possible without citizen input. This plan is crafted to respond to what residents of Harlingen want to see happen in their city, to respond to the hopes and concerns of today, and to accomplish the dreams for what Harlingen should become in the future.

To provide as much input as possible, an extensive public engagement process was incorporated into the development of One Vision, One Harlingen. This appendix summarizes the key direction and ideas developed as part of that input.

Public engagement is the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into city decision making.

How was citizen input collected?

A variety of methods were used to collect citizen input, and provided a range of opportunities for involvement. All surveys were available in both English and Spanish. Citizen input methods include:

Intercept Survey - This was a survey handed out to people at the mall and at three different citywide events including Freedom Fest, Market Days, and National Night Out. Over 500 surveys were collected. These responses helped generate an initial list of concerns and opportunities.

Mail-out Survey - This consisted of 36 questions and asked participants to share their likes and dislikes about Harlingen, important issues to tackle now and in the future, thoughts about improvements as well as their age and other characteristics. Over 330 people responded to the mail-out survey.

Online Survey - A link was provided to the same questionnaire used in the mail-out survey. Over 350 people

responded to the online version of the survey.

Public Workshops -

These were organized discussions and presentations where city staff and local residents talked about present issues and future goals. Public workshops served to establish key values and principles that become the foundation for the plan. Four workshops were held between October 2013 - January 2014. Each provided a specific platform for discussion: Community Vitality Workshop; Land Use/Growth/Infrastructure Workshop; Core Areas Workshop; and the Economic Vitality Workshop.

THIS APPENDIX INCLUDES:

1. A VISION THROUGH PUBLIC INPUT
2. PUBLIC WORKSHOPS
3. WHAT WE LEARNED



Citizens filling out intercept surveys at Market Days, June 1, 2013.

Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee - A CPAC was formed to help guide the development of the comprehensive plan. The CPAC met multiple times throughout the planning process.

RESULTS

The results of all these methods were combined and compared to get a better understanding of what people want to see Harlingen become.

Key results from the various methods of public engagement are as follows:

Information about survey participants:

- About 9% of survey respondents live outside Harlingen city limits.
- The majority of respondents have lived in Harlingen for more than 20 years (51%).

The largest age group, by survey, was:

- Intercept - 26-45 years old
- Mail-out - over 65 years old
- Online - 19-35 years old

These differences allow for various options between age groups.

The majority of survey participants feel satisfied with the overall quality of life in Harlingen and think that Harlingen has changed for the better.

Intercept Survey Results

Key Strengths of Harlingen:

- Community events (Market Days, Blues on the Hill)
- Peaceful, clean, family friendly city
- Public amenities (schools and parks)

Key areas of concern:

- Need more businesses, restaurants, stores, shopping
- Need more attractions and activities for families, youth and tourism
- Crime

Key desired improvements for Harlingen:

- More business, restaurants, retail
- More activities and attractions
- Improve mobility issues - Street repairs, more sidewalks and bicycle lanes, mitigate delays caused by railroad, traffic

When asked, "What do you think is the single most important item for the City of Harlingen to take care of in the next few years," the majority of respondents answered:

- Increase attractions and events for families, youth and tourism

Online and Mail-Out Survey Results

Most important areas to address:

- Job opportunities
- Quality of retail
- Code enforcement
- Appearance of the city

Least Important areas to address:

- Bikeability
- Art or cultural opportunities
- Improve garbage pickup
- Traffic flow in the city

Most important neighborhood (residential or business) issues for the city to address :

- Feeling of safety
- Flooding
- Address streets in poor condition

Most important improvements related to the Jackson Street District and La Placita:

- Enhance feeling of safety with more activity, lights and security
- Add more things to do during the evening such as shopping, restaurants or events
- Encourage the renovation of buildings in disrepair

The majority of both the online survey respondents (over 50%) and the mail-out respondents expressed that adding more interesting shops and places to eat would make them visit the Jackson Street District and La Placita more often.

Online and mail-out survey participants were asked this question:

“How strongly would you support or oppose paying slightly higher fees or taxes to improve services? Note that some may be outside of the city’s direct jurisdiction, but may be important enough for the city to try to influence.”

The following items received more than 50% support from online or mail-out survey participants.

- Maintain Valley International Airport as a strong regional airport and economic engine.
- Recruit new businesses that would increase revenue and provide job opportunities.
- Attract new businesses and services.
- Work to improve higher education opportunities.
- Attract more diverse retail and commercial services.
- Improve the appearance of key

corridors in the city such as Tyler Avenue, Harrison Avenue, Commerce Street and Sunshine Strip.

- Target medical and educational employment opportunities.
- Address areas that flood frequently.
- Improve existing parks, pools, recreation and open spaces.



Citizens filling out intercept surveys at Market Days, June 1, 2013.

PUBLIC WORKSHOP RESULTS

Public Workshop #1

The first workshop was held on October 12, 2013 and covered Quality of Life/Community Vitality issues including:

- Image/Physical Space/Appearance
- Tourism Facilities and Events
- Public Safety
- Parks and Recreation

The following tables highlight key points from the discussions at the first public workshop.

Image	
Positive	Great parks and green spaces
	Low traffic
	Central location
	Focus on renovating old buildings
Needs Improvement	Railroad corridors
	Sign clutter in some areas
	Needs an identity
	Focus on entrance corridors
	Sometimes resistance to change



The first public workshop on October 12, 2013.



Discussing issues at the first public workshop on October 12, 2013.

Tourism Facilities and Events	
Positive	Birding Center - need to play up
	Minimal border violence influence
	Sporting events
	Rio Grande Birding Festival
Needs Improvement	Need hotel infrastructure
	More promotion for sports events
	Build on World Birding Center
	Expand Casa de Amistad
	Focus on making airport an international destination
Better training for customer service	

Public Safety (Police/Fire)	
Positive	Crime going down
	Eliminating structures that foster criminal activity
	Improved neighborhood presence and visibility
Needs Improvement	Patrolling of trails
	Fire code flexibility on older buildings/ review fire codes
	Fire station needs improvement

Parks & Recreation	
Positive	Lots of park space
	Potential to connect trails
	Tony Butler Golf Course
	Quality sports facilities
	Lots of activities at parks
Needs Improvement	Not enough trails
	More lighting
	Not enough funding for maintenance
	Better promotion/getting the word out about park events

“ What do you like best about Harlingen’s image, physical space and appearance?”



Discussing issues at the first public workshop on October 12, 2013.



Public Workshop #2

The second workshop was held on October 26, 2013 and covered Quality of Life/Infrastructure issues, including:

- Zoning/Land Use and Growth
- Harlingen Water Works/Public Works
- Housing CDBG/Housing Authority/Board of Realtors

The following tables summarize discussion on these topics.

Zoning/Land Use	
Positive	Not many bottlenecks
	Generally good transition from residential to commercial areas
Needs Improvement	Perceived as being not user-friendly/ not friendly to development
	Need more proactive code enforcement
	Control duplex development in some neighborhoods
	Lack of walkability, need sidewalks
	Non-uniformity of signs
	Need to create sectors or areas that attract investment
	Need better infrastructure in some areas to encourage development
	More zoning flexibility in the downtown area for new development
	Create entertainment district

Waterworks and Public Works	
Positive	No water restrictions, good supply, looking ahead
	Long term water rights
	Grants for drainage projects
Needs Improvement	More street lights needed in some areas
	Drainage issues in some areas
	Unpaved alleys and streets
	Areas to be annexed need to have reliable infrastructure
	Sidewalks needed in some areas

Housing/ Neighborhoods	
Positive	Public housing has been upgraded
	Demolition of abandoned buildings
	Code enforcement efforts improving
Needs Improvement	Still too many dilapidated houses
	Substandard housing in some areas
	Not enough elderly housing
	Lack of good jobs affects ability to purchase homes



Discussing issues at the second public workshop on October 26, 2013.

Public Workshop #3

The third workshop was held on November 16, 2013 at the Jackson Square Events Center. This workshop covered Economic Vitality – Core Areas and included presentations on Downtown Harlingen, La Placita District, surrounding neighborhoods and revitalization strategies.

“ What do you like best about this central area of Harlingen? What is working well? What are the area’s strengths?”

Downtown Area	
Positive	Great mural program
	Good beautification projects
	Ongoing efforts to eliminate blight in the central area and surrounding neighborhoods.
	Market days are a great attraction
	Great places to eat are located in the downtown area
Needs Improvement	Lack of shade
	Need better sidewalks in some areas
	Need public restrooms
	Need more night life
	Lack of connection to Tyler/Harrison
	Need consistency and flexibility in development codes
	Poor appearance of some buildings

Vision for the Core Areas of Harlingen
Beautiful with lots of lights
Stronger connection to the airport
Connected via trails from all over the city
Railroad is relocated out of the downtown area
Trolley connects all areas of the downtown
Has strong identity

Strategies/ Ideas for the Core Areas of the City
Add mixed use zoning to encourage more live/work
Renovate tower
Enhance historic preservation efforts
Create link to Ecotourism and Arts
Continue blight removal
Renovate sidewalks and add trees that provide shade
Make it easier to renovate older buildings
Consider community arts center in the downtown area



Discussing issues at the third public workshop on November 16, 2013.

Public Workshop #4

The fourth and final workshop was held on January 18, 2014 and covered:

- Education
- Healthcare
- Economic development

Participants discussed these three topics and came up with a series of recommendations. Strategies for improving each included:

Education

- Enhance the medical school (dentistry, for example)
- More education for the youth - transport to and from college, importance of high school diploma, magnet school for excellence.
- Encourage more parental involvement
- Embrace regional approach/ partnerships (to provide free internet to Harlingen students, for example)

Healthcare

The majority of participants expressed that investing in healthcare education is the best investment the city can make. Ideas included:

- Invest in a residency program
- Partnerships between academia and healthcare providers
- Help bring a full service Veterans Affairs hospital

Other ideas related to veteran's issues included:

- Invest money on a VA Poly Trauma Clinic for Veterans with Multiple Injuries.
- Bring a Fisher House to the Valley for Families of Veterans to stay at.
- Invest money on a Veterans Resource Center to help homeless veterans with behavioral issues

Economic Development

When asked what kind of strategies should be prioritized to increase economic opportunities in Harlingen, the majority of responses revolved around educational opportunities. Recommendations include:

- Create more nursing programs and physician assistance programs
- Bring a School of Dentistry to TSTC

The feedback from all the surveys and public workshops provided insight into what the people of Harlingen value and their vision for the future.

“Cities are the most extraordinary human creation. They are this phenomenon which has unbelievable capacity to solve problems, to innovate, to invent, to create prosperity, to make change, and continually reform.”

Ken Greenburg

WHAT WE LEARNED

Overall, the majority of the survey respondents feel as though Harlingen provides a good quality of life and the improvements the city has already implemented are moving the city in a good direction. Participants emphasized that the family- friendly, peaceful atmosphere of the city provides a comfortable place to live and that well maintained public amenities, such as schools and parks, are greatly valued.

The survey participants also specified what they felt were the weaknesses of Harlingen and where the city should focus its redevelopment efforts. One of the biggest similarities throughout all three surveys was the desire for better commercial development, such as restaurants, retail, and local business. In addition, although many cited Harlingen as a family-friendly city, the majority of participants felt that the most important issue for the city to focus on was having more events that capitalize on this to attract families, youth, and tourists. Enhancing security through improved lighting, patrols, and a greater number of activities was also mentioned, along with improved maintenance of roads and older buildings.

Zoning and land use issues often surfaces, and recommendations concentrated on revising the current zoning system and ordinances to encourage development. Residents felt good about water supply and rights, but drainage issues and the quality of construction in annexed areas of the city were noted as needing improvement. Housing issues centered on the large amount of dilapidated and “sub- standard” dwellings for residents, as well as a lack of housing for the elderly.

Residents felt downtown has made a lot of progress with efforts such as the mural program and events like Market Days, but the

public infrastructure left much to be desired. Better sidewalks, lighting, public restrooms, and building aesthetics were all cited as essential to achieving the desired vision for Downtown Harlingen. This vision encompasses mixed-use development, an intersection for trails that connect all parts of the city, historic preservation, new amenities such as a Community Arts Center, and an aesthetic for downtown that gives a unique character and sense of place to the core areas of Harlingen.

Residents felt healthcare was the “... best investment the city could make” to capitalize on both educational and economic opportunities for the city.

The final workshop focused on education, healthcare, and economic development. These three topics overlapped in a number of ways as residents discussed their vision for economic growth. Education improvements covered both higher and elementary education, where residents expressed support for a medical school as well as increased educational outreach for youth through school programs and greater parental involvement.

Suggestions for healthcare included expanding medical employment and expanding the medical entities present in the city through a Veterans’ Affairs Hospital, VA Trauma Clinic, and Fisher House as well as investing in a residency program and creating opportunities for partnerships between existing medical institutions.

Economic development was centered in both the educational and healthcare sectors, as residents expressed the desire for a number of tactics to generate more income within the city. Adding more professional schools was also suggested. In addition, the creation of more nursing and physician’s assistant programs was mentioned to expand upon Harlingen’s identity as a medical destination and stimulate the economy through education and healthcare services.

Both the surveys and workshops provided valuable insight into the concerns, hopes, and needs of Harlingen residents. The recommendations in this plan address and incorporate this feedback to create a plan for Harlingen that serves the city now and well into the future.



**“Vision without action is merely a dream.
Action without vision just passes the time.
Vision with action can change the world.”**

**— Joel A. Barker
Author, Lecturer, Film Maker**

