

THE FUTURE: COMMUNITY CHARACTER, IDENTITY & IMAGE

“Community character is something a community has inherently, not something that can be applied like makeup.

It is conveyed by not only grand buildings and public spaces but a whole range of urban elements: residences of all sizes and scale; commercial, government, and institutional buildings; street cross-sections; street furniture and graphics; public places, large and small; ceremonial buildings; informal activities such as street markets and fairs; and the food, language, and personalities that contribute to a community’s narrative.

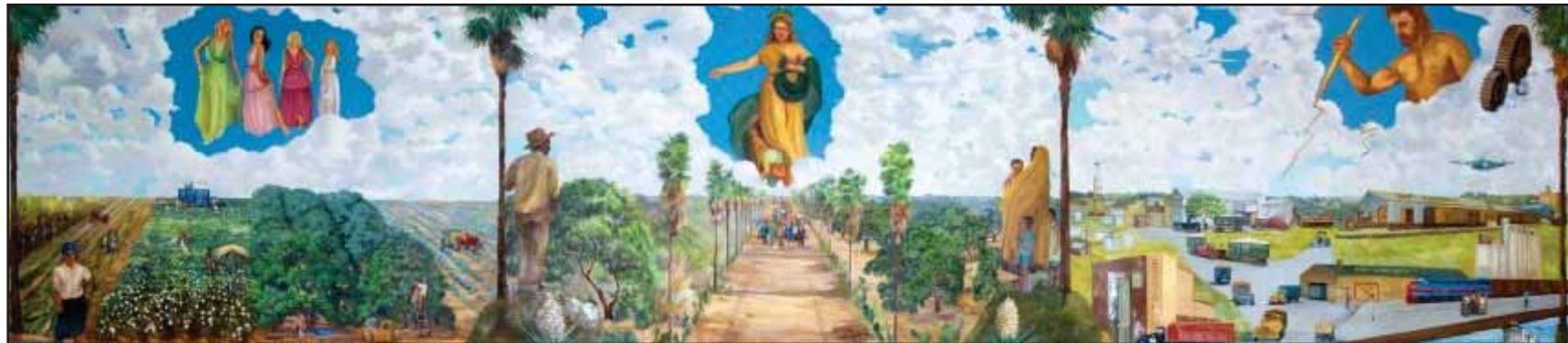
Only through the understanding and reinforcement of its character can a community flourish civically and economically.”

~American Planning Association

Building a unique community identity and character will help distinguish Harlingen from surrounding communities in the Rio Grande Valley.

The One Vision, One Harlingen comprehensive plan envisions Harlingen’s future as the community of choice to live in the Rio Grande Valley. The city’s character, appearance and image are a vital part of achieving that goal.

Recent studies tracking the happiness of adults points to the image and attractiveness of a city as one of the elements that add to a sense of well-being and happiness. Many components of a city contribute to its character. Many exist in Harlingen today, while the potential to create others can be found all over the city today. Features of the city that contribute to its character are shown below and on the following pages. These form the basis for recommendations to enhance Harlingen’s image and create the most unique city in the region.



Unique architecture, iconic spaces and world class murals are a few of the features of Harlingen that help give the city its own special character and identity. Sources: Megamorphosis Design, Harlingen CVB, City of Harlingen

Key Opportunities Streets and Boulevards

Streets and roadways are powerful unifying elements in our cities. In Harlingen, they are the one component of the city that everyone, without exception, experiences every day. Streets should be functional and safe, but beyond that, they represent a huge opportunity to convey what Harlingen is and can be.

When thinking about a street or boulevard, the edges are just as important as the street itself. Think of everything that can be seen when driving, from one side to the other. Landscaping, not making a street excessively wide, creating pleasant sidewalks for pedestrians, the placement of buildings near the street as opposed to parking lots, and managing sign placement all can help make Harlingen’s streets stand out and create a strong impressions.



Attractive medians along Ed Carey (Loop 499) help calm traffic and create a gateway image for Harlingen.



Jackson Street storefronts combine with the area streetscape to create an interesting and pedestrian friendly area.



The Historic Baxter Building can make a strong statement about both Harlingen’s history as well as its future.



A Farmer’s Market is held every Saturday in the Downtown District.



Narrow streets can help calm traffic and create a sense of place within the neighborhoods of Harlingen.



Amenities in public spaces such as Gutierrez Park help create a distinct Harlingen look.



Well done renovations such as the Reese Building in Downtown Harlingen provide enormous character building opportunities.



Attractive medians along Ed Carey (Loop 499) help calm traffic and create a gateway image for Harlingen.

Buildings and Architectural Character

Buildings go hand-in-hand with streets to create the spaces that we travel through in a city. Buildings in Harlingen range from historic homes and repurposed commercial buildings to the modern hospital buildings that are found in the medical district area. When buildings have features that create a sense of style and place, such as the Reese Building, they impact a large area around them. Similarly, a deteriorated building makes a strong statement about the area around it.

As shown in the images on this page, streets in Harlingen vary from the high speed experience of Loop 499 to the busy downtown vibrancy of Tyler and Harrison, to the quiet country back roads of West Harlingen.

The Natural Environment

Much of the former natural environment of the area has been converted to agricultural uses over the past 100 years, making the Arroyo Colorado, a water feature that runs through Harlingen, so unique. It creates a continuous green area from the eastern edge of the city to well beyond the western limits of Harlingen.

Residents of the area have a love/hate relationship with palm trees, but the reality is that the “tropical” feeling of the Rio Grande Valley extends well beyond palm trees. Flowering plants and native grasses, as well as many other unique trees can and should be used extensively to set the city apart.

Cultural Features and Events

Events help to foster and strengthen a city’s image, and Harlingen has multiple events that have become long-standing traditions. They range from the Jackson Street Market Days in the Downtown

area, to the acclaimed Blues on the Hill music events, to the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival, now in its 23rd year, the Jalapeño 100 at its 26th year, and the Harlingen Half Marathon. These events play off Harlingen’s easy access via Valley International Airport and its central location in the Rio Grande Valley.

This plan envisions Harlingen as the community of choice in the Rio Grande Valley in which to live. Preserving and enhancing the city’s character is a vital part of achieving that goal.



The Arroyo Colorado is an unparalleled natural area traversing the city. Source: Halff Associates



A tropical feeling is conveyed not only by palm trees but by flowering native vegetation. Source: Halff Associates



The “History of Mexico and Mankind” mural in downtown Harlingen is a unique cultural icon. Source: City of Harlingen



Palm trees and landscaped medians create a unique appearance in key areas. Source: Halff Associates



Water, especially in public areas such as Dixieland Park, Lake Harlingen and the Sports Complex park, softens the landscape. Source: Halff Associates



Jackson Street Market Days attracts thousands of visitors and residents to Downtown. Source: City of Harlingen



The Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival annually attracts birders from around the world. Source: City of Harlingen



The summer concert series, Blues on the Hill, have become popular events in Harlingen Source: harlingencvb.com

Iconic and Unusual Features

Unique features create surprises in our cities, and if interesting and well done create a strong and memorable impression. From gateway features to murals to unique facilities such as Harlingen Field, the city has many memorable buildings and features, and also has many other opportunities to pleasantly surprise.

Most cities in the region and indeed throughout Texas lack a strong collection of iconic features, and Harlingen can set itself apart by adding to what the city already has.

Community Identity - Goals And Actions

Creating a unique community identity for Harlingen is a key component of this Comprehensive Plan. It builds upon actions started as part of the Harlingen 100 Strategic Plan and continued by many partners.

Goal Statement - Community Identity
 "Both the City of Harlingen and all of its residents and developers will foster a one-of-a-kind image, building on the city's unique assets and constantly seeking to improve the appearance of the city. The image of the city will be considered by both public and private developments in Harlingen."



Distinctive buildings in visible locations add interest to the area around them. Source: Halff Associates



Harlingen Field is a unique and historic city asset. Source: Halff Associates



Bass Pro Shops and surrounding developments create a strong landmark center at Harlingen's front door. Source: Harlingen Economic Development Corporation



Gateway features create front doors into Harlingen along major roadways, and also help convey the image of the city. Source: Halff Associates



Downtown murals are inexpensive and brighten up the areas around them while conveying the history of the city. Source: Halff Associates



The Texas Travel Information Center at the intersection of I-69E and I-2 is an important gateway into Harlingen and the entire Rio Grande Valley. Source: Harlingen CVB



The Jackson Street and La Placita arches announce arrival at these key areas. Source: Halff Associates

Objective 1 Project a distinctive, attractive and consistent image in and along public spaces throughout the city.

Adopt consistent standards and devote funds for beautification throughout the city, and accelerate installation in key areas.

Action 1-1 Adopt uniform standards for installation and maintenance of landscaping in public spaces, streets and facilities around the city. In high profile areas include easy to maintain and distinctive materials. Consider maintaining the current tropical theme with distinctive and colorful plant material.

Action 1-2 Identify and target specific areas for building improvements. Focus on key areas instead of trying to address all parts of the city at one time. Concentrate on highly visible gateway areas, key corridors or boulevards.

Action 1-3 Target key streets and boulevards for landscape treatments. Install islands for trees, improve light fixtures, and address sign clutter and building facades. Key streets should include Tyler, Harrison, Spur 54, F Street, Ed Carey, Commerce, and Business 77 (Sunshine Strip).

Action 1-4 Install “mini medians” at key locations to improve street character. These medians or islands may extend only for a short distance, but should have distinctive landscaping and be well maintained.



*Beautification of features around the city such as medians and landscaped islands provides the opportunity to create a strong citywide image.
Source: Halff Associates*

Action 1-5 Enlist civic organizations to “adopt” key landscape areas and support their maintenance with funding contributions.

Action 1-6 As a signature element of Harlingen, selectively expand the mural program both in the Core Areas of the city and to other parts of Harlingen. Consider expand the scope of the mural program’s standards, partners and goals to monitor the placement and type of murals. Invite artists to participate, and unveil at least one new mural every year. Create standards to encourage private development to complement the city’s mural program. For example, consider a mural program in the expanding medical district area to give it a more pleasant and friendly feeling. Allocate resources to protect and maintain new murals.

Objective 2 Improve the image of buildings throughout the city. Focus on addressing building appearance in key high visibility areas of the city.

Action 2-1 Target blighted or dilapidated buildings at key locations for improvement by property owners or removal. Expand incentive programs to cover high visibility districts. Identify a variety of funding sources, such as 4B funds.





Action 2-2 Recommend that HEDC consider tying business incentive grants to building or site improvements. Require that selective types of exterior property improvements be accomplished when business grants are provided by HEDC.

Action 2-3 Work with new development or re-development efforts to add distinctive features to buildings throughout the city. Consider providing a review committee or architectural guidance to provide oversight.

Action 2-4 Upgrade requirements for signage and facade treatments to ensure that new development contributes to the overall appearance of Harlingen.

Action 2-5 Where feasible, screen existing parking areas, and require landscaping for new developments. Provide development incentives where appropriate to encourage additional landscaping.

Simple installation of curb extensions helps protect parked cars and provides a location for new boulevard tree installation along Tyler and Harrison Avenues (Harrison at C Street shown above).



Action 2-6 Incorporate a strong cultural identity into the next City Hall and other key civic buildings. Create civic architecture that is distinctive and that can be clearly identified with Harlingen. Don't do "cookie cutter;" use the opportunity to create unique statements about Harlingen.

Objective 3 Expand cultural amenities and events. Focus on events and public features that celebrate Harlingen's assets, including its natural areas, its multi-cultural diversity, and its historic qualities.

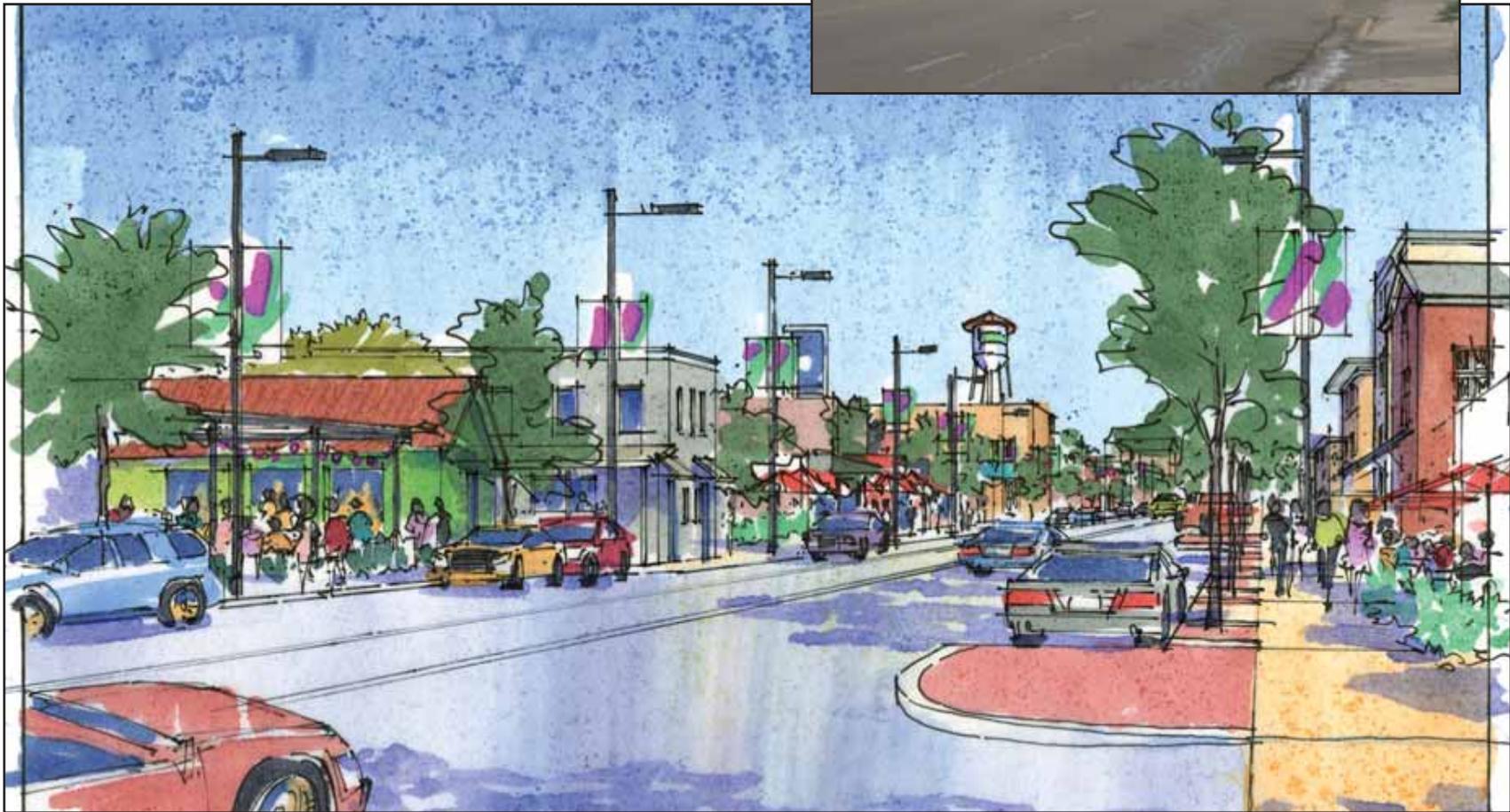
Action 3-1 Incorporate public art at key civic facilities and parks throughout the city. Consider more murals and art at Valley International Airport, at the Public Safety Facility, at City Hall, at the Harlingen Public Library, and in the Core Areas of Harlingen .



Long range transformation of Sunshine Strip with strategically placed medians and landscaping. Source: Halff Associates

Action 3-2 Continue to support and promote unique events such as Blues on the Hill and the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. Consider adding one to two additional events that are unique to Harlingen that attract visitors to the city.

Action 3-3 Promote the city’s unique assets, such as nature tourism, unique museums and murals. Evaluate the web presence and use of other media outlets by all entities (CVB, City of Harlingen, EDC, Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Harlingen and others) to create a very user friendly and consistent identity to actively promote Harlingen.



Installation of islands and street features can transform the character of F Street near Tyler and Harrison. Source: Halff Associates

THE FUTURE: PARKS, RECREATION, TRAILS & OPEN SPACE

Parks are also one of Harlingen's strengths, with a park to population ratio that is among the best in the region.

This element of the Harlingen Comprehensive Plan addresses specifically parks, recreation, and open space in the city. It covers components such as improvements to and maintenance of existing parks, opportunities for trails and connecting parks, accessibility of the park system in terms of proximity to residents of Harlingen, opportunities to preserve Harlingen's natural resources, and recreational opportunities that exist in Harlingen. At the time of this comprehensive plan, the city has also conducted a planning process to update its Park and Recreation Master Plan, last done in 2005. Due to the timeliness of this study, it significantly informs the recommendations for parks and recreation.

Existing Park, Recreation, and Open Space Amenities

According to the land use analysis, there are 577.33 acres of parks and preserved open space owned and maintained by the City of Harlingen. In total, the city operates 24 parks and recreation facilities. The smallest park is Gordon Hill Park, which is 0.6 acres and the largest (excluding golf courses) is the Harlingen Soccer Complex at 76.9 acres.

Since the previous comprehensive plan or parks master plan were updated, Harlingen has built several phases of the 76.9 acre Soccer Complex (one phase remains) and has developed the Thicket Nature Trail in the 46 acre Harlingen Thicket. The 25th Street Trail Corridor has also been largely completed, and multiple replacements of play areas and pavilions have occurred. Finally, at Pendelton Park, the pool cover has been rehabilitated, tennis courts and the trail have been renovated, and we opened The Harlingen's Veteran's Memorial. The major recreational facilities developed at Harlingen's parks include playscapes, basketball courts, soccer and football fields, baseball/softball fields, rental pavilions, and picnic areas.

Most parks include picnic tables, playgrounds, and benches.

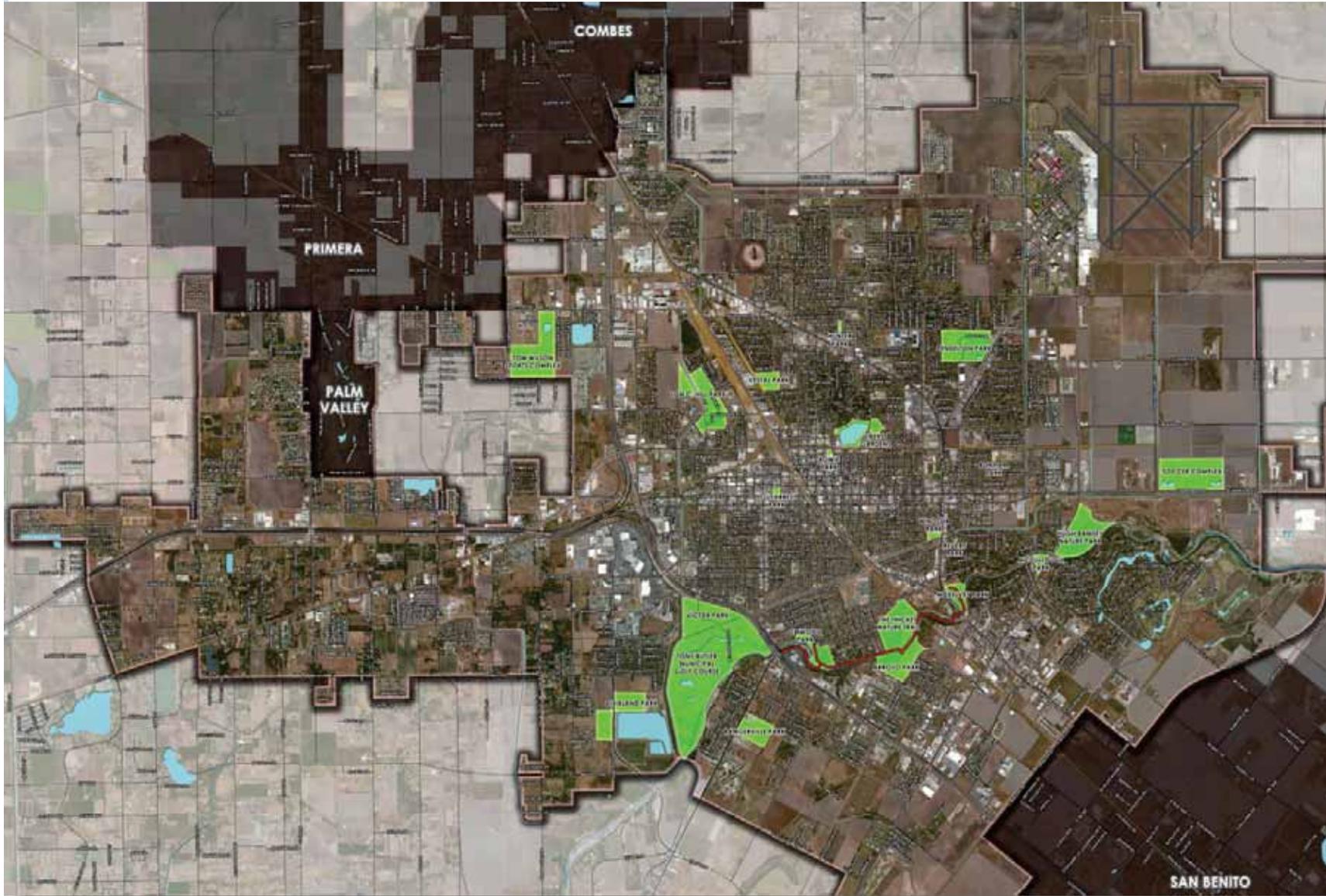
In addition, there are 21 baseball fields, 19 football/soccer fields, a splash pad, three swimming pools, trails, outdoor exercise equipment and 21 tennis courts in the Harlingen parks system.

Harlingen has many facilities that are located within parks. In addition to these more traditional recreation facilities, some of Harlingen's parks include unique amenities, such as:

- Dixieland Park - A disc golf course.
- Bowie Park - Community center, an exhibit hall, and shuffle board courts.
- Lon C Hill Park- Municipal auditorium, lighted baseball stadium, outdoor swimming pool and splash pad.
- Lt. George Gutierrez Veteran's Memorial Park - World War II memorial and bandstand gazebo.
- City Lake area - Location of Harlingen's Public Library, Cultural Arts Center, Liberty Gardens, and lake-side trail.
- Pendelton Park - A tennis complex and pro shop.
- A new dog park at Victor Park.



Harlingen's parks offer facilities and programs for all ages and interests Sources: City of Harlingen and Halff Associates



Locations of existing parks in Harlingen

A more comprehensive discussion on the park and recreation facilities is found in the city's 2016 Parks & Recreation Master Plan. The location of existing parks is shown on the previous page.

Park Categories and Standards

National standards identify three broad categories of parks: local close to home parks; regional parks; and unique parks. Each category serves a different purpose to a community. As such, the facilities will differ based on the parks purpose and targeted service area. These broader categories are also broken down into more specific park types.

GENERAL PARK CATEGORIES

Local Close to Home Parks are those usually located within the community served by the facility and their main focus is to serve that local community. These parks include mini parks, neighborhood parks, and community parks. Trail corridors, greenbelts, and in some cases, linear parks may also be considered close to home parks.

Regional Parks serve a larger population beyond the local community. They are usually located within an half hour to one hour driving distance for most of its visitors. Parks in this category serve a number of communities, and include city regional parks, park reserves, state parks, and national parks.

Unique Parks can be either local or regional. They are defined as areas that are unique in some way, whether because of the physical features of the park, or because of the types of facilities provided within them. Parks in this category may include linear parks, special use parks, land conservancies, nature preserves, sports complexes, golf courses, or botanical gardens.

Trails

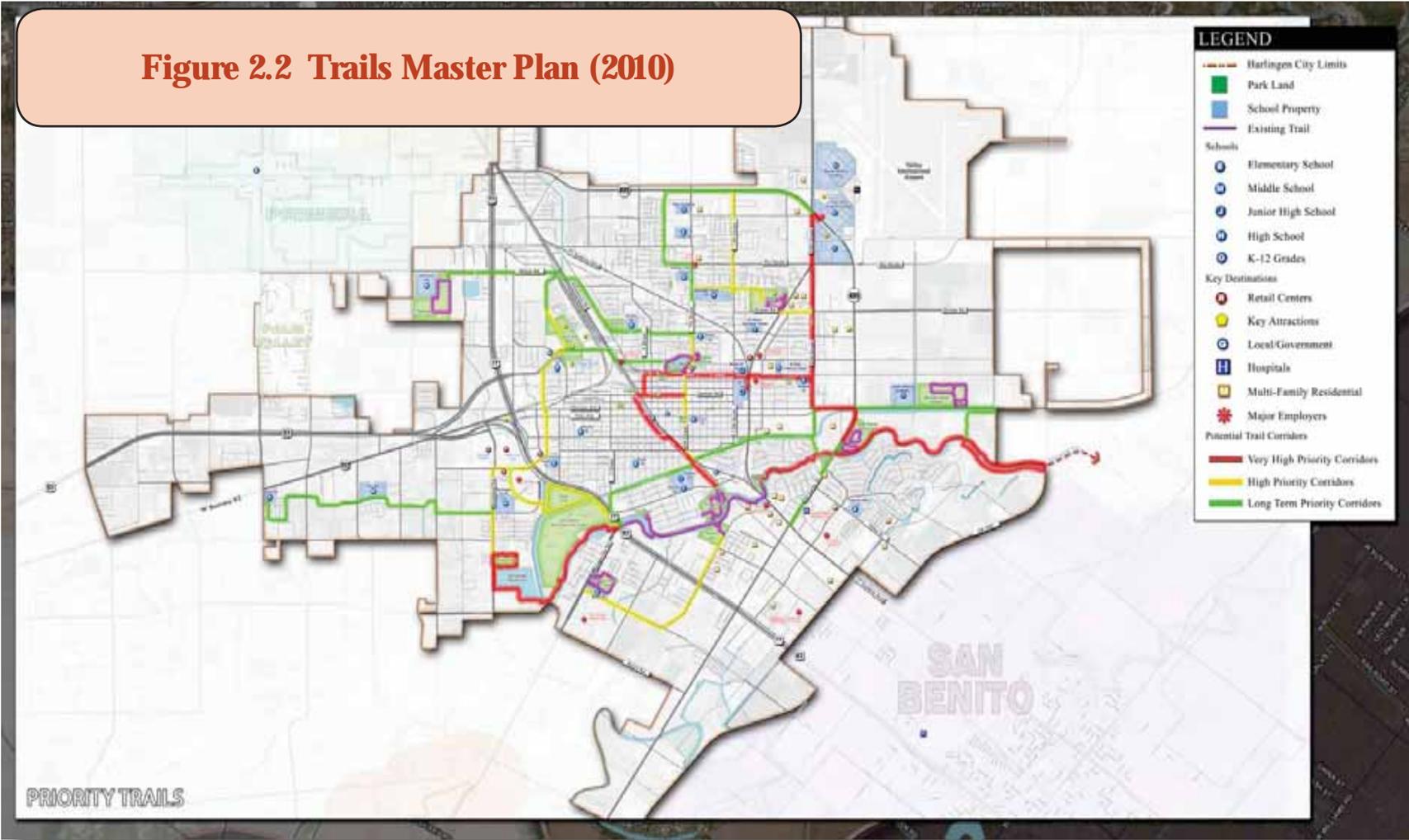
In 2010, the city completed the Trails Master Plan that recommended a network of trail facilities and standards for trail development. At the time of this comprehensive plan, the city has nine miles of trails at ten parks or corridors. Nearly all existing trails are loops within parks, except for 1.7 miles along the Arroyo Colorado (extending from US 69E and McKelvey Park, with connections also to CB Wood Park, Harlingen Thicket, and Arroyo Park), the new 25th Street Trail, a 3+ mile trail corridor in northeast Harlingen), and the 1 mile extension of the Harlingen Hometown Heroes Trail..

The Trails Master Plan establishes a network of a core regional trail system supported by neighborhood trails. The plan also identifies opportunities for trail development, such as along the irrigation channels, streets, rail corridors and natural corridors like the Arroyo Colorado.

The high priority, near-term recommendations of the Trails Master Plan included the development of 14.1 miles of trails along these corridors:

- **Arroyo Colorado**, from Dixieland Park to the eastern city limit east of Ed Carey Drive.
- **Jefferson Avenue Trail**, between City Lake, Jefferson Avenue and Bonham Elementary.
- **Centennial/Thicket rail trail**, from Centennial Park to the Harlingen Thicket.
- **Jackson Street Pedestrian Corridor**, from Centennial Park to 6th Street.
- **Dixieland Park/Reservoir**, from terminus of existing Arroyo Colorado Trail to Dixieland Park.

Additionally, the plan recommended an aggressive program of trail construction at a rate of one to two miles per year for the first ten years.



HARLINGEN PARK NEEDS ASSESSMENT: SPATIAL AND ACCESS LEVEL OF SERVICE

Park Type	Target Spatial LOS (per 1,000 residents)	Existing Park Acreage	2014 Park Acreage Needed	2014 Park Acreage Deficit	2025 Park Acreage Need (Deficit)	2035 Park Acreage Need (deficit)	Recommended Access LOS	Existing Access LOS
Neighborhood	1.5 ac	51.56 acres (0.85 ac/1,000)	95.8 acres	-42.7 acres	124.3 acres (-68.5 acres)	143.8 acres (-88 acres)	Within 1/4- to 1/2-mile	67% within 1/2-mi 29% within 1/4-mi
Community	5.0 ac	253.61 acres (6.4 ac/1,000)	328 acres	No deficit	414.5 acres (no deficit)	479 acres (61 acres)	Within 2 miles	80% within two miles
Open Space	10-15 acres	770 acres (11.7 ac/1,000)	657-985 acres	No deficit	829-1,243 acres	959-1,438 acres	NA	NA

(Source: 2014 Harlingen Parks Plan)

Park Needs Assessment

The 2013 Park Needs Assessment uses three methods for identifying Harlingen’s current and future park needs. These techniques follow general methodologies accepted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for local park master plans. All three methods are important in their own regard, but individually do not represent the entire picture.

Standard-Based Needs Assessment uses locally developed level of service ratios of facilities to population so as to project where the city is today and where it might be in the future as the population grows. This master plan utilizes the existing level of service in the city as a starting point and determines whether that level of service is adequate, or whether it needs to be increased or decreased based on public input, anticipated growth, and analyzing geographically how the park needs are or are not being met. Therefore, three level of service determinations are made: spatial (acreage of parkland per population); access (geographic ease of accessing parks); and facility (number of facilities per population).

Based on an assessment of the provision of various facilities throughout Harlingen, the facilities with the highest level of need include:

- Playgrounds
- Practice fields
- Splash pads
- Picnic facilities
- Trails
- Indoor recreation facilities

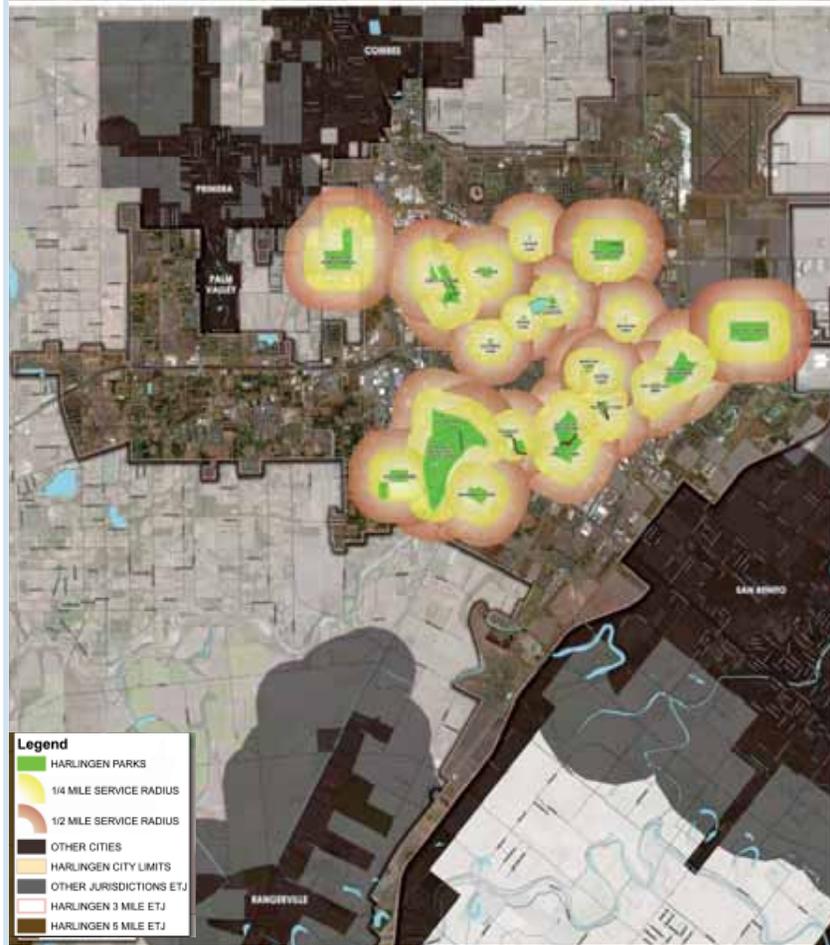
Resource-Based Assessment recognizes that Harlingen has many unique physical features, and explores how to convert these into recreation or open space assets that help to meet the demand for recreation in the city.

The city has two unique features that should be preserved and adapted for limited recreational use where feasible: the Arroyo Colorado and the numerous irrigation canals that cross the city. The arroyo lands are already undevelopable, so their value is in their use as open space preserves for all of the residents of the city. The arroyo can also provide a corridor for sensitive soft surface trails, scenic overlooks, and wildlife viewing blinds. The irrigation canals throughout the city can provide linear corridors for walking, jogging and bicycle riding.

Demand-Based Assessment uses actual and/or anticipated usage growth data, as well as citizen input on the types of activities they would like to engage in, to determine which facilities and programs are most in demand. Based on citizen input the most important needs for the parks and recreation system in Harlingen include:

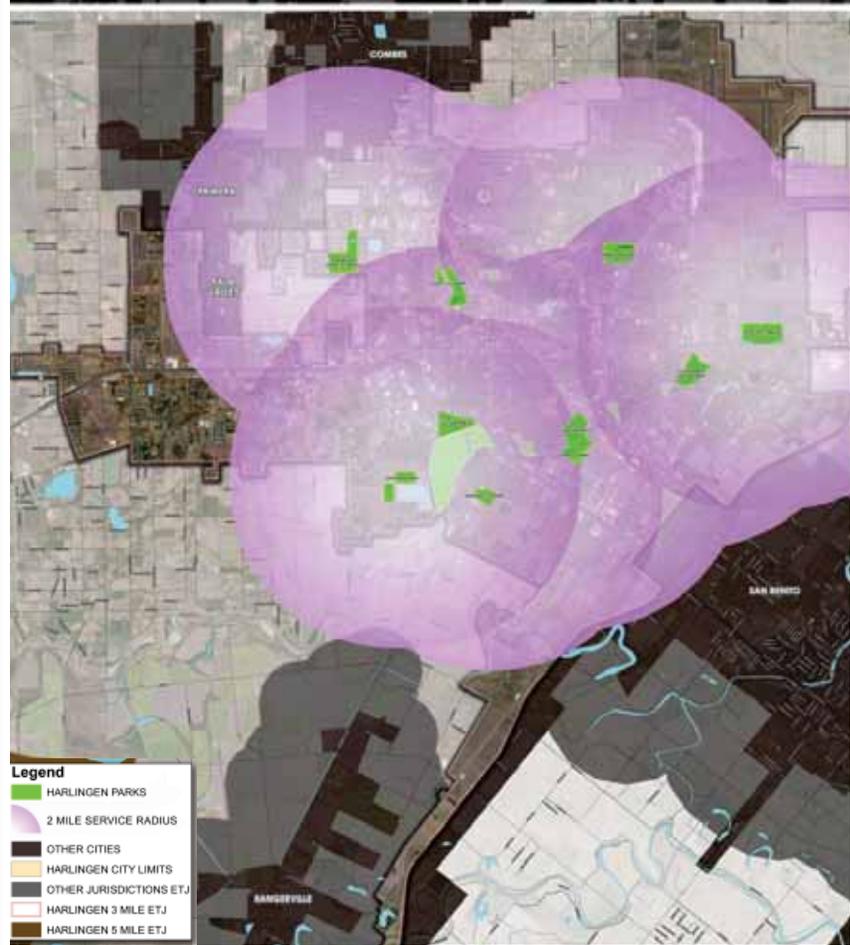
- Upgrade facilities at existing parks
- Renovate or expand existing pools
- Add more trails or places to ride a bicycle
- Preserve scenic open space that are publicly accessible
- Add an amphitheater

NEIGHBORHOOD PARK SERVICE AREAS



Most areas of Harlingen have excellent nearby access to a park. Growing areas in West Harlingen can be addressed through the use of school play areas that double as parkland.

COMMUNITY PARK SERVICE AREAS



At almost 6.5 acres for every 1,000 residents, Harlingen has an exceptional access to community parks, which are where most active recreation takes place. Long term, a community park should be considered for far West Harlingen.

Key Issues and Opportunities

Harlingen’s parks should enhance the quality of life in the city, and support, indeed “showcase” Harlingen’s character, but should also provide innovative recreation facilities that new residents are seeking. In order to achieve this vision, park recommendations focus on quality, beauty and sustainability.

- **Quality** - Provide high-quality parks and recreation facilities in order to attract and retain residents and employers.
- **Beauty** - A commitment to providing attractive places for people to linger, play, and pass by.
- **Sustainability** - A commitment to developing and operating in a sustainable matter, so that they cost less to maintain and are durable over time.

Key priorities for the parks system are as follows:

1. Improvements and Renovations to Existing Parks

Harlingen residents noted time and time again during the public involvement phase of the Comprehensive Plan that making improvements to existing parks is a key priority. These improvements range from pavilion and shade shelter replacements, lighting and irrigation system upgrades, and completing key facilities such as the Soccer Complex. These renovations made across the entire parks system will establish a uniform “Harlingen” level of service or expectation for all parks. An assessment prepared by the city indicated improvements to each park in the city. Beyond those key needs, other upgrades can also provide shade (either with trees or structures over playgrounds), landscaping and beautification with native plants and materials, ensuring parks meet ADA requirements, and adding Wi-Fi access to all parks. Day to day maintenance of parks needs to be addressed.

2. Trail Development

Trails were consistently ranked as a high priority among Harlingen’s residents. There are approximately 10.31 miles of trails at 13 parks or corridors in Harlingen, most of which are trail loops located within parks. In 2010, the city completed a Trails Master Plan with detailed recommendations for building a trail system, such as along the Arroyo Colorado and other natural and road corridors that connect neighborhoods and key destinations. The first key priority is to extend the Arroyo Hike and Bike Trail east and west of its existing location to a total of 9 miles connecting Hugh Ramsey Nature Park to Dixieland Park. **When completed, this trail will put more than 75% of the city’s population within a mile from a trail.**

3. Land Acquisition for Parks as the City Grows

Harlingen has a good ratio of parks to population, and it is recommended that it maintain the level of service it currently has. However, in order to ensure access to parks as the population continues to grow, Harlingen needs to be proactive in acquiring new parkland. The city currently has no parkland dedication ordinance requiring the construction of parks as land is developed or contribution of in-lieu-of fees for park development by the city. This will make it easier for the city to ensure proximity to parkland as new development occurs.

Harlingen has an excellent amount of parkland, including the highest ratio of community parks to population of any city in the region. The focus now should be on maintaining and enhancing the quality of facilities in those parks.



The Bark Park in Victor Park is an example of the type of park amenity that is expected in cities with high quality of life standards Source: City of Harlingen



A state of the art indoor recreation center provides a focal point for many unique recreation programs and classes.
Source: Half Associates

Goal Statement - Parks, Recreation and Trails
 “Harlingen will have an exceptional system of parks, trails and indoor recreation facilities that promotes the city’s reputation as an excellent place to live and visit.”

4. Indoor Facility Needs

Indoor recreation programming is a key component of most modern cities’ recreation system and critical to quality of life and residential health and fitness. There is currently no dedicated public facility for indoor recreation programming in Harlingen. The city should begin planning for a citywide indoor recreation facility that can be developed in the future. However, given the cost to build and operate such a facility, funding and development is recommended to be deferred into the next decade.

Parks, Recreation, Trails and Open Space Recommendations and Key Actions

The following actions include key recommendations for Harlingen’s parks and trails.

Objective 1 Focus on enhancing and upgrading existing parks throughout the city.

Assessments by the Parks and Recreation Department in 2013 identified 25 specific needs within existing parks in all parts of Harlingen. These ranged from minor playground improvements to the renovation of pavilions and restrooms.

Action 1.1 Identify funding sources and priorities for critical existing park improvements. As identified in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, target funding for the initial five year capital improvements

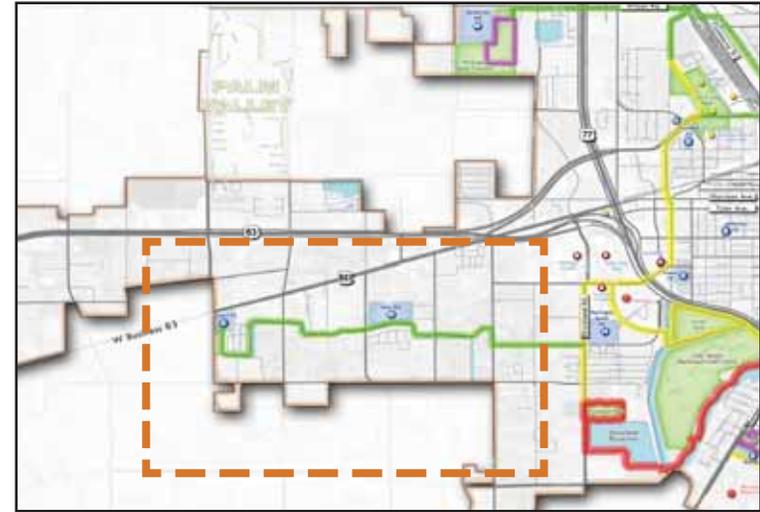
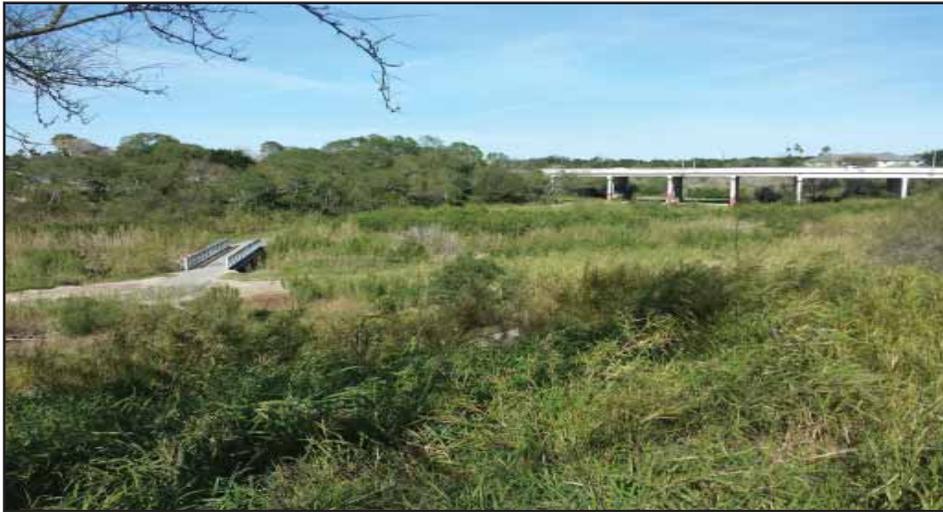
program for parks. Pursue funding sources in addition to 4B sales tax funds including grants, general fund expenditures, bond funds, user fee revenues or other special assessments. Target development of the top 50% of existing park needs, excluding major areas such as the Soccer Complex, which can be addressed through bonds. Establish a non-profit “Friends of the Parks” foundation to encourage donations to the park system.

Objective 2-1 Continue to develop a citywide network of trails for both recreation and transportation.

The 2010 Trails Master Plan identified high priority trail corridors that could eventually create a citywide trail system. The city should aggressively pursue park and trail grants to complete these corridors.

Action 2.1 Complete the Arroyo Colorado Trail as the premier trail corridor in the Rio Grande Valley (from Dixieland Park to Hugh Ramsey Park).

- Missing segments from McKelvey Park to Hugh Ramsey Park and from I-69E to Dixieland Park would add 4 miles of trail and would create one of the longest and certainly most scenic trails in the entire Rio Grande Valley area.



As a high priority, extend existing trails along the Arroyo Colorado to Hugh Ramsey Park and to Dixieland Park Source: Halff Associates

- Include first class interpretive and access amenities to make this one of the premier attractions in the Rio Grande Valley.
- Aggressively pursue grant opportunities for the trail extension, putting together first class grant submittals.

Action 2.2 Complete other high priority trail segments within 10 years. Complete the remaining high priority trail corridors identified in the 2010 Trails Master Plan (a total of an additional seven miles of trail).

- These would link the 25th Street Trail to Lake Harlingen and Downtown Harlingen, would connect the Arroyo Trail to the Medical District, and would connect the Arroyo trail to downtown via Commerce Street and nearby rail corridors. As shown on page 6-32, this would create an unparalleled trail “loop” around much of the city.
- Aggressively pursue both state and federal grants for trails on a regular basis.



Develop trails along drainage corridors to link neighborhoods throughout West Harlingen to Dixieland Park and the Arroyo trails. Source: Halff Associates



Expansion of the Harlingen Soccer Complex, coupled with its proximity to excellent access (via both air and road) and its central location to area cities on both sides of the border, can enhance this major sports tourism facility. Source: Halff Associates

Action 2.3 Develop a linear park/trail corridor along drainage corridors and new streets in West Harlingen.

As West Harlingen continues to develop, development layouts should be adjusted to allow for a major future trail corridor along existing drainage channels in the area.

Objective 3 Continue to expand facilities that create economic development and tourism opportunities.

Special park and open space facilities go beyond meeting local recreation needs, but instead attract outside visitation and tourism.

These include the World Birding Center facilities at Hugh Ramsey Park, a nature center building, the Harlingen Soccer Complex and improvements to the baseball and softball fields at the Wilson Sports Complex.

Action 3.1 Complete development of the Harlingen Soccer Complex. Phase 2 of the Soccer Complex adds 5 more soccer fields, additional support amenities, parking, and could also improve the playing field quality of existing fields.

- While it may require bond funding to implement, it greatly improves the competitiveness of the Complex for regional and statewide tournament play.
- Expenditures on multi-day tournaments may exceed \$300 to \$500 per player in meals, hotel stays and other indirect purchases (by the player and family/friends travelling with the player).

Action 3.2 Improve Hugh Ramsey Park as a major birding and wildlife attraction. Already a known attraction, the park's proximity to Valley International Airport should be touted as a convenient destination for birders. Additional trails, parking lot improvements, interpretive signage and observation blinds, and even kayak launches and tours of the adjacent Arroyo should be considered to enhance the site. Trails connections to the Harlingen Thicket, and McKelvey Park could be considered as well. In the future, a nature center building along the corridor should be considered. Grant funds should be aggressively pursued to help fund improvements to this park.

Action 3.3 Develop a nature center facility. Identify a location for a nature center building that is a focal point for ecotourism and birding in Harlingen.

- Consider locations in the Thicket, Hugh Ramsey Park or near either park.
- The Center should include exhibit spaces, educational exhibits and classrooms, and amenities such as food and restrooms.
- Evaluate development by a concessionaire.
- Explore indoor grant funding sources.

Objective 4 Pursue park opportunities for growing areas of the city that currently are underserved.

Growth areas of the city, particularly in West Harlingen, the northwest area of the city, and neighborhoods north and south of North Loop 499, do not have access to nearby parks. Three strategies are recommended: a) work with new developments to create parks; b) pursue sharing of school sites with Harlingen CISD facilities in each of these areas; and c) where available, consider acquiring land for long term community park development for the area.

Action 4.1 Work with Harlingen CISD to create “school parks” in West Harlingen and in North Harlingen. School parks are much more cost effective, as long as the facilities are set up for dual use. During the day, they are used by school children, and are typically fenced to protect students. After hours, gates allow for the same area youth to use these facilities as area parks and open spaces.

- Work with Harlingen CISD staff to identify sites, needed improvements and operational/ maintenance requirements. These parks are typically much more cost effective for the city (since an entire new park does not have to be developed) and for Harlingen CISD (since needed playground facilities can be installed by the city).



Maintaining park equipment keeps playgrounds safe and useful. Source: Halff Associates

Action 4.2 Identify new developments where dedication of land for future parks may occur. Ensure that the sites are well placed and are accessible. Develop standards and ordinances that guide new developments to reserve park sites and potential trail corridors along drainage/irrigation channel corridors.

Objective 5 Pursue opportunities for indoor recreation facilities

The city currently has no dedicated indoor recreation centers. These facilities are a fast growing component of recreation in many cities, offering fitness programs and indoor gym space for basketball, volleyball and indoor soccer. They typically become the focus of recreation programming in the entire city. As a longer term aspirational goal, Harlingen should consider adding indoor recreation center facilities.

Action 5.1 Conduct an indoor recreation center feasibility review. Such an effort reviews and estimates the potential size of the indoor recreation need in Harlingen, the type of facility that best matches that need, and most importantly, any potential partners for such a facility. In Harlingen, significant potential partners may include the medical facilities and hospitals in the area, HCISD and TSTC. Conduct this evaluation within the next 5+ years.

THE FUTURE: HOUSING & NEIGHBORHOODS

Housing in Harlingen

Quality housing for all income levels and ages is a key aspect of livability in a city. For Harlingen to be recognized as an exceptional place to live, the city must continue to offer a variety of housing sizes, ranging from apartments and smaller houses to estates and luxury homes. Rental and ownership options for every income level should be provided. Unique housing types, such as those with amenities such as golf courses and water frontage should be included.

No matter the cost of housing, all neighborhoods in Harlingen should provide easy access to parks, schools and nearby retail areas. They should be walkable and attractive, retaining and even growing their value for homeowners.

In cities everywhere, in-town housing is increasingly popular. Harlingen is fortunate as it has housing that is centralized within the city. The challenge is to reinvigorate in-town housing and eliminate slums and blight in these areas.

Fortunately, Harlingen’s geography, excellent access and roadway network, schools, parks and natural features provide a strong foundation for excellent and varied housing choices.

Housing Trends

Basic housing trends are similar to those noted in the 2002 Comprehensive Plan. Single-family housing accounts for the majority of the housing options in Harlingen, totalling nearly 62% of dwelling units within the city limits. The chart on this page illustrates the distribution of housing types within the city limits.

Owner occupancy has remained stable at an estimated 60.4% in 2012, just below the national and state averages (65.1% and 63.7% respectively).

The mix of housing has implications across the board for Harlingen. First, the variety of housing impacts the choices people have, affecting who can live in Harlingen, both in terms of lifestyle preferences and affordability. Single-family housing tends to be the housing of choice for families, while multi-family housing, which are usually rented, are attractive to young singles and couples. Even as the population ages, people’s preferences for housing changes, such as the elderly who no longer want a large yard (if any) to maintain.

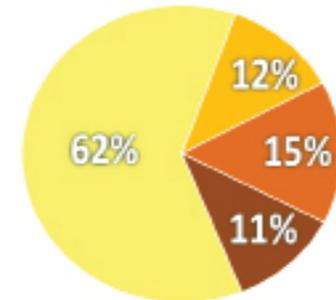
Affordability, despite the housing type, can vary significantly among housing options, both in terms of type and tenure. Purchasing a home (regardless of the housing type) requires savings and long-term investment.

quick housing facts



housing choices:

- SINGLE FAMILY
- DUPLEX/FOURPLEX
- MULTIFAMILY
- OTHER HOUSING



for every 3 units owned 2 units are rented



2.95 persons per household

25,585 total households

\$77,700 median house value

\$34,096 median household income

1980 avg year built

Source: US Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

On the other hand, rental units (including single-family) require less investment and are therefore, considered more affordable. A person living in rental housing has the flexibility to change their housing costs as their income levels vary up or down.

Furthermore, the mix of housing can affect how efficiently a city can accommodate population growth within its land area. Evaluating housing density is a good way to illustrate the impact density has on land consumption. For example, rural single family houses consume significantly more land than the amount of housing they provide, while multi-family developments provide more housing on less land.

In planning for land development, it is important to consider the impact development has on resources, including land consumption. By building more densely, the city will be able to better accommodate diverse housing needs and have land available for recreational or passive uses.

Housing Affordability

When President Harry S. Truman signed the Housing Act in 1949, he did so with the intent of providing a “decent home and suitable living environment for every American family”.¹ A lower median household income and a higher percentage of households living below the poverty line create housing affordability challenges for some households in the city.

As part of the Housing Acts that have been passed over time, federal programs and funds have been provided to aid communities in providing housing for low to moderate income households. The Department of Housing and Urban Development oversees of these programs.

In Harlingen, the Community Development Department of the City of Harlingen is responsible for locally administering HUD programs. Specifically, the city participates in Community Development Block

¹ Harry S. Truman: “Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949.,” July 15, 1949. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13246>

Grant (CDBG) and HOME Investment (HOME) Partnerships programs. The proposed funds allocated from CDBG and HOME programs is approximately \$1 million.

Additionally, Cameron County administers a CDBG program that focuses on housing in unincorporated areas or smaller communities. There are possible partnership opportunities between the city and county housing and community development programs.

The Community Development Department of the city can use the CDBG and HOME funds to administer housing and community development projects itself, or it can distribute funds to non-government organizations (NGOs) to address the city's housing needs. These NGOs, which are usually private non-profit entities, called Community Development Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs) or Community-Based Development Organizations (CBDO), act as the "middle-man" between the government and distribution of funds. Sometimes, funds are used to financially assist the population directly such as with down payment, closing cost, and gap financing assistance. Other times, CHDO/CBDO will purchase properties to create new or rehabilitate existing homes to later sell at affordable prices. The form of assistance varies upon land availability, and ultimately, the needs and goals of the city.

The City is currently trying to develop or recruit a housing development organization that has the capacity to undertake housing activities in compliance with HOME program provisions. In the interim, the duties and responsibilities of administering the City's Affordable Housing are being undertaken by the City's Community Development Department.



Unique and distinctive housing in west Harlingen illustrates how well designed affordable housing can fit in with areas around it and create a strong sense of community. Source: Halff Associates

Programs include administering the City's HOME Program through the acquisition of vacant land for construction of single-family housing, acquisition of existing housing for rehabilitation and resale, and direct home ownership assistance (down payment assistance, closing cost assistance, and gap financing assistance) to low and moderate-income households for the purchase of new or existing housing that meets the City's Property Maintenance Standards. The City may also use HOME funds to rehabilitate or reconstruct homeowner-occupied housing.

Colonias

The term "colonia" means community or neighborhood; however, in Texas it is defined as "a residential area along the Texas-Mexico border that may lack some of the most basic living necessities, such as potable water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe, sanitary housing."² Issues and challenges faced by colonias include: a lack of access to water and sewer services; poor housing

² Texas Secretary of State. "What is a Colonia?" http://www.sos.state.tx.us/border/colonias/what_colonia.shtml

quality and inadequate building structures; poor drainage systems and location in floodplains; health issues proliferated by a lack of adequate water or sewer services, poor shelter, and drainage issues; high unemployment rates; unrecorded deeds; and financial arrangements that result in high interest rates and furthering financial hardships for low-income residents.

The building code and development code of Harlingen prevents the development of colonias within the city limits. That is not always the case for Cameron County, where in Texas counties have limited ability (legally) and sometimes capacity to regulate land development. This in turn presents the possibility of colonias existing in the city's ETJ.

What makes this even more challenging to address is that there is a "market" for housing in colonias, since it may be on a par with what is more typical in Mexico. The Texas Secretary of State identifies almost 200 colonias in Cameron County. Moreover, as discussed earlier, since 1990 border states (including Texas) have been required to set aside a percentage of allocated CDBG funds to meet the needs of colonias. As such, the state administers colonias programs through the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA). The Texas Water Development Board also funds projects specific to colonias.

Despite the limited capacity for Harlingen to get involved with resolving colonias issues, the city is affected by them, particularly in terms of reaching a desired quality of life in and around the city and with regards to future annexation of these areas. As such, the city should continue to review development in areas near the city.

Housing and Neighborhood Conditions

Over two-thirds of the housing stock was built before 1980 (67.2%), with approximately 15% of the housing stock being built since 2000. Housing typically requires significant repairs within 20 years of construction. The median year of construction for households in Harlingen is 1980. A profile of additional household

characteristics for the City of Harlingen identifies that of occupied households, 9.7% did not have a motor vehicle, 2.5% did not have telephone service, and 0.7% did not have complete plumbing or kitchen facilities.³

Areas of Harlingen with higher levels of dilapidated housing tend to be centrally located, as growth expands outward where housing tends to be newer. While there are opportunities to develop housing on "infill" lots in the urbanized area of the city, these opportunities are often passed over by developers who prefer to develop larger subdivisions rather than deal with the challenges associated with infill development. These might include compatibility standards with existing housing and costs associated with tapping into utilities that are not shared among many homes. Targeting the development of quality infill housing in Core Areas neighborhoods, and indeed making living in the center area of the City attractive again is a key goal of this Comprehensive Plan.

Neighborhood revitalization and stability can also play an important role in maintaining acceptable housing. This includes stabilizing existing neighborhoods, revitalizing declining neighborhoods, and ensuring proper development of new neighborhoods. There are several resources and tools to build neighborhood stability, some of which the city already does.

Tools for Neighborhood Stability and Revitalization

Several approaches or tools are available to cities for neighborhood revitalization.

1. Public investment of infrastructure and public services -

Assuming funding is available, this is probably the easiest to implement because it is something the city already does. These are projects that a city can do to enhance the quality of life in a neighborhood through improvements to public facilities such as streets, parks, drainage areas, sidewalks, etc.

³ US Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, Selected Housing Characteristics.

The city's provision and enhancement of public services such as public infrastructure, police and fire protection, and other community services are important to neighborhood stability.

2. Code enforcement - Strong enforcement is another critical tool that Harlingen already utilizes on a regular basis that can be used to improve the quality of housing and neighborhoods. This includes strict enforcement of zoning and building codes as well as condemnation and demolition of derelict property.

3. Target upkeep of rental properties - Some owners of older rental properties are often more interested in monthly cash flow than in tax benefits or keeping up their properties for future resale. To ensure that properties are kept up, very strong code enforcement is a key. Other tools include interior inspections to check for safety code violations, mandatory registration/certification and periodic inspections of multi-tenant properties, and mandatory landlord training. Specific code enforcement staff should be assigned to target blighted areas.

4. Incentivizing new investment Finally, programs aimed at incentivizing private investment in an area, whether it be improvements to existing buildings, new developments, or attracting businesses to an area can be a valuable approach to neighborhood revitalization. These programs recognize the role of private investment in neighborhood revitalization and aim to encourage it. Incentive programs could include development incentives such as improvement grants,

land banking lots, and land acquisition assistance; business development incentives such as fee reimbursement and rent assistance; and residential assistance such as home repair, financial assistance (coupled with housing counseling), tax credits/property tax exemptions for improvements.

Neighborhood Planning

Neighborhood planning is one of the best mechanisms for identifying and implementing the appropriate tools for revitalization efforts. This approach to "small area planning" allows for a toolbox of strategies to be developed that are unique to each neighborhood. Neighborhood planning is also a useful mechanism for developing design standards unique to neighborhoods that will help foster infill development by making development and the process predictable.

The process of developing neighborhood conservation districts or neighborhood planning areas can be arduous and time intensive.



Source: City of Harlingen

Targeting the development of quality infill housing in the Core Areas neighborhoods, and indeed making living in the center area of the city attractive again is a key goal of the One Vision, One Harlingen Comprehensive Plan.

Moreover, with planning at a small scale there is the possibility of resulting in more piece-meal zoning where neighborhoods begin defining their own standards and use regulations separate from the over arching zoning code. This results in confusion on what regulations stand when there is inconsistency. In order to avoid this, it is critical that the regulations of the zoning ordinance remain the basis for lot dimensions, standards, and use, and that neighborhood conservation districts focus only on tools that influence the design of development and identify tools for revitalization, and any other area that is not addressed by the zoning code.

Key Issues and Opportunities

The purpose of this element is to address current and future housing needs in Harlingen, particularly in the context of potential growth and implementation of other elements of this plan. The need to attract more residents and families to Harlingen and to address existing poor housing and neighborhood integrity put housing and neighborhoods issues at the forefront of issues in Harlingen.

Provide Housing Options & Ensure Affordability

Harlingen should pursue having a variety of housing options and choices for both existing residents as well as prospective residents. This is crucial to accomplish many of the goals in One Vision, One Harlingen, including the goals for land development, neighborhood revitalization, and economic development. This includes both higher end housing options, unique housing types, such as urban “downtown” housing or housing overlooking the Arroyo, as well as housing that allows people to “age in place”. When residents are able to stay in their neighborhood, those neighborhoods become more stable with higher civic involvement and lower crime rates. Mixed use developments, where residential, office and commercial uses coexist in the same building should be promoted and allowed in many areas of the city, especially in the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Moreover, a variety of quality housing needs to be provided at a range of price points to ensure housing for all levels of

employment, particularly if Harlingen hopes to pursue economic growth. A strong and successful economic development program will not only provide jobs for Harlingen’s existing workforce, but will also bring new population growth to the city, including a wide range of people with varying backgrounds and lifestyle preferences.

Goal Statement - Housing and Neighborhoods

“Neighborhoods everywhere in Harlingen, both in the Core Areas of the city, and in fast growing areas, will provide a wide range of housing types. No matter their age, income or family size, anyone will be able to find housing in great neighborhoods that retain and grow in value over time. Harlingen will be known for its excellent housing choices.”

Housing and Neighborhoods - Recommendations and Key Actions

The following actions include key recommendations for Harlingen’s housing and neighborhoods.

Objective 1 Protect and enhance existing neighborhoods throughout Harlingen.

Action 1.1 Select key neighborhoods within the Core Areas of Harlingen for preservation and protection.

- Develop criteria for selection (i.e. distinctive architectural interest or historic character, falling values, loss of residential stock, etc.).
- Promote the development of voluntary neighborhood associations to help areas organize and implement common solutions.

- Work with neighborhood leaders to identify strategies to preserve and enhance the value of currently stable neighborhoods. Example neighborhoods include the neighborhoods north of Lake Harlingen, the East Austin Street neighborhood between 1st and 5th, neighborhoods along East Polk and East Taylor Avenues, and estate residences along Garrett Road in West Harlingen.
- Work to help stabilize and enhance the value of the Treasure Hills neighborhood area as a key Harlingen asset.
- Help facilitate the development and maintenance of entry monuments, landscaping and other features by neighborhood associations.

Action 1.2 Continue to aggressively pursue code enforcement and removal of dilapidated housing.

- Continue to strengthen code enforcement regulations as required.
- Target some code enforcement staff specifically towards addressing dilapidated housing.

Objective 2 Promote the development of unique housing types and housing locations that stand out in the region.

Action 2.1 Pursue and/or facilitate the development of housing in unique areas, such as overlooking the Arroyo Colorado, around bodies of water.

- Pursue the development of high quality, higher density housing overlooking the Arroyo Colorado near the Medical District and near the Dixieland Road crossing of the Arroyo. Emphasize access and views to the Arroyo. The concept on this page illustrates potential higher density condominium developments overlooking the Arroyo.
- Encourage developments that create bodies of water or amenity areas as features for surrounding homes. Water’s Edge in Harlingen is an excellent example.

Action 2.2 Encourage mixed-use redevelopment Downtown to increase the residential population there.

- Develop financial incentives to help make upper-story residential development in older commercial buildings more economically feasible.
- Review and revise sections of the Zoning Ordinance to better facilitate mixed-uses in older commercial buildings Downtown.



Undeveloped lands along East New Hampshire Street could be used to create unique higher density developments overlooking the Arroyo. Source: Halff Associates



Infill housing can use a high visibility site to demonstrate desired housing design principles, such as porches, fences and classic facades that add value to a neighborhood Source: Halff Associates



Objective 3 Focus on revitalizing neighborhoods within the Core Areas of Harlingen.

Action 3.1 Create simple neighborhood plans for key Core Areas neighborhoods. Preservation of a neighborhood’s architectural character and integrity should be a key element in all redevelopment plans. Planning department staff can lead City staff teams that work with residents of key areas to create short and long term neighborhood plans. These should emphasize renovation and increasing home values.

Action 3.2 Incentivize reinvestment in the Core Areas of the city.

- Identify a funding source for a small matching grant program, to be used for home renovations in key target areas.
- Identify and work with leaders from the residents within each target area. Enlist the assistance of key community service groups such as Rotary or Lions Clubs.
- Target small areas, generally defined by less than 10 blocks.
- Promote land-banking by redevelopment entities to target multi-lot redevelopment efforts.
- Identify key catalyst properties within each area that can be used as examples for the area.

- Identify small public works projects within the key areas (such as replacement of small sidewalk sections, light pole improvements or minor tree trimming) that can be accomplished to improve the appearance of an area.
- Enlist the assistance of other key organizations such as Habitat for Humanity or faith-based groups.
- Encourage home ownership in target areas and in the Core Areas of Harlingen through the use of tools to incentivize investment.

Action 3.3 Review and adjust standards and requirements as necessary to make it much easier and attractive to renovate older buildings and convert them to housing.

- Review codes that the city is using to ensure that they allow some degree of flexibility. Adopt standards used by other cities (i.e. the City of Dallas) to encourage flexibility and options to make redevelopment cost effective for local investors.

THE FUTURE: CIVIC FACILITIES & BUILDINGS

The City of Harlingen operates 50 city owned buildings totalling over 500,000 square feet. These range from higher profile buildings such as the City Hall and the Harlingen Library, to community gathering places such as the Casa del Sol, and the Community Center, Casa De Amistad, and the Public Safety Building and fire stations.

Civic buildings are one of the most visible statements about a city. They represent the kinds of services a city elects to provide to fellow citizens who will use those buildings. They are funded by collective taxes, and so should be efficient and appropriate to their designated purpose, but they should also be attractive. Civic buildings should express goals for the future, such as energy efficiency or how landscaping should be used. They make a statement about how a city views itself, and that statement is intended to last for a very long time.

Going Green Initiative

In 2004 the city initiated an energy management program that computerized HVAC controls and upgraded building lights, street lights, and traffic signals to LED fixtures. Solar panels installed on the roof of the Lon C. Hill Building account for 33% of the building's energy demand. In total, over the past decade the city reduced its energy demand by over 5.6 million kilowatt hours, resulting in a savings of almost \$1.5 million. These initiatives will continue as buildings and facilities are upgraded or replaced.



Key Civic Facilities Strengths and Challenges

The new Public Safety Building creates an efficient and effective center for police and municipal court operations in the city. Other city facilities, such as the Public Library and the current City Hall, are well located. In the case of the Library, its architectural qualities also convey a strong statement about Harlingen and the importance of library services. However, multiple challenges exist. These include:

- The existing City Hall at Tyler and Commerce is undersized and dated. As a result, city departments are spread out in multiple buildings throughout Harlingen, making it difficult for development services and for departments and the public to interact.
- There is no “center” for parks and recreation activities in the city. Most other cities of a similar size have a permanent parks and recreation center that is the focal point of recreation.
- As the city grows to the west, distances from the nearest fire station increase. Development of a new fire station in far West Harlingen has begun to provide service in a potentially fast growing area of the city. This may result in the need to decommission the existing Dixieland Road Fire Station (#7).

Our civic buildings say something about all of us that live in Harlingen - they represent our pride and our collective commitment to ourselves and to future generations that will live in Harlingen.

A major consideration should be the adaptive reuse or expansion of existing non-city owned buildings. While new development may actually be cheaper, the redevelopment of older buildings may have significant spin-off benefits that should be carefully evaluated.

Civic Facilities and Buildings - Goals

Growth of the city will require upgrading of Civic facilities on both a short term basis, as well as planning for longer term needs.

Objective 1 Assess current and future space needs. Identify current and future space needs for all major city facilities.

Consider both short term needs within the next five to ten years, as well as longer term needs as the city grows.

Action 1.1 Conduct a Facilities Assessment Plan. Building on planning already in place, and using in house or hired architectural programming support, analyze city department staffing needs both in the short term and long term. Identify departments to be consolidated into a common location. Identify potential locations and the benefits and drawbacks of each.

Objective 2 Create a new “one-stop” City Hall for Harlingen. Using the facilities assessment plan recommendations, develop a new city hall to replace the current under-sized facility.

Action 2.1 Select the location for the replacement/consolidated City Hall. A prominent location in the heart of the downtown

area is paramount as previous studies have recommended. New construction versus acquiring an existing building should be considered. Alternatives could include:

- Expansion at the existing City Hall location, closing 2nd Street and building vertically on the existing City Hall parking lot
- Acquiring and developing a new facility on an existing parking lot or under-developed lots along or adjacent to Tyler or Harrison in the downtown area.
- Acquiring or leasing and redeveloping an existing building in the downtown area near or adjacent to Tyler and Harrison.

Action 2.2 Fund and develop the new City Hall. Consider a variety of mechanisms, including leasing or lease purchase arrangements. Ensure that the new location, whether an existing building or new, is architecturally distinctive and contributes to the sense of place of Downtown Harlingen. Consider parking solutions that may provide a benefit to the greater downtown area around the site (such as partnering on a shared parking structure).

Action 2.3 Identify uses for the existing City Hall building. Identify and plan for alternative uses for the existing City Hall building if a new City Hall is developed. Consider both alternate civic uses as well as leasing or selling the building for commercial uses.

Goal Statement - Community Facilities and Buildings

“Harlingen’s civic facilities and buildings provide high levels of customer service, allow for excellent staff performance and meet the needs of the community. Civic buildings will inspire community pride, but will also be models for our community in terms of cost effectiveness and energy efficiency.”



Consider adopting a consistent architectural theme for new or redeveloped civic buildings, such as the Spanish colonial style of the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum.
Source: Rio Internet Marketing LLC

Objective 3 Address current and future recreation and community center needs. The city has four rental facilities, but has no citywide indoor recreation center.

Action 3.1 As part of the citywide facilities assessment, consider indoor recreation center needs. Identify size options for indoor recreation, as well operational and staffing issues and funding needs. Identify timeframe for development and proposed funding sources.

Action 3.2 Evaluate operational costs of current civic/community center buildings, whether those are adequately used for the cost and rental rates, and whether some should be leased or sold.

Objective 4 Address fire protection facility needs in West Harlingen. The western part of the city will continue to grow, and fire protection needs in that area should be addressed in the near term.

Action 4.1 Identify a location and develop a new fire station for West Harlingen. Select a location along major roadways that can serve current western areas of the city, as well as areas that may be annexed in the future. Fund and develop within two years (by 2016).

Objective 5 Continue to consider major civic/convention center needs. Identify the short and long term need for a major regional convention facility in Harlingen. Such a facility would compete with facilities in Brownsville, McAllen and South Padre Island, as well as mid-Valley locations, but could take advantage of local airport accessibility and university/medical/hotel entities located in the city. Ensure that the market for such a facility exists, or partner with a private entity.

Action 5.1 Identify strategies for addressing facility needs. Develop short term and long term recommendations and potential partnerships.



Source: City of Harlingen

THE FUTURE: EDUCATION

Education plays a major role in establishing a competitive economic position and capturing economic opportunities. Over time, educational attainment among Harlingen’s population has improved, with the percentage of the area’s population having less than a high school diploma dropping from 34% in 2000 to 27% in 2012.

Many area students, both in the past and as part of the Comprehensive Planning process, expressed a desire to pursue college or advanced technical degrees while remaining closer to home in the Rio Grande Valley. A skilled workforce can help to attract new and more diverse employers to Harlingen, and can help provide higher wage jobs to the area. This is especially critical when competing with other area communities.

In 2008, the Harlingen 100 Plan identified the need for the city to be a catalyst for improved education at all levels. The plan identified the following steps:

- Create an Education Task Force Committee (instrumental in bringing the University Center at TSTC to reality).
- Develop a long range plan for a four year college or strategic partnership (since created at the University Center at TSTC).
- Develop a formal policy of support for TSTC.
- Create a center for additional continuing education opportunities (since created at the University Center at TSTC).
- Support workforce training programs and identifying vocational training needs.

There are four key educational assets in Harlingen:

Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District - Harlingen CISD provides primary and secondary public education for the greater Harlingen area. At more than 18,600 students, Harlingen CISD’s district boundaries are one of the largest in the Rio Grande Valley.

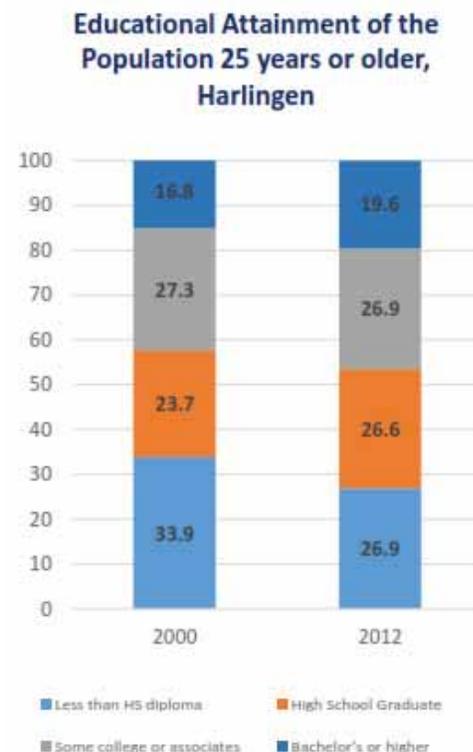
Harlingen CISD recently completed its five year strategic plan, entitled “Transforming Learning for Global Achievement.” Key goals of the plan include: developing learning environments conducive for collaboration; creating curriculum to fit the individual needs of

students; opening of specialized and unique schools for students at all levels of education; and aligning high school programs with post-secondary endorsements and certification programs for career readiness.

In recent years, Harlingen CISD has introduced innovative programs to prepare students for health careers, and recently opened a new school for health professionals.

Texas State Technical College (TSTC) - Located on Loop 499 adjacent to Valley International Airport, TSTC is one of Harlingen’s greatest assets. The Harlingen campus is one of four campuses across Texas. Enrollment is near 6,000 students, and more than 50 degrees and certificates are provided by the school.

Regional Academic Health Center (RAHC) - Previously part of the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio system and now the School of Medicine at UTRGV, the RAHC opened in 2002, and provides state of the art training facilities for medical students. Over 90% of its graduates practice in Texas with the majority practicing in the Rio Grande Valley. A key advantage is that students participate in area clinical experiences, including at Valley Baptist Medical Center, Su Clinica Familiar and other area hospitals, clinics, and physicians offices.



University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UT-RGV) - Created through a consolidation of UT Pan American and UT Brownsville, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley will be a region-wide, 4-year university. It incorporates a Medical school, of which Harlingen's Regional Academic Health Center is a key component. Because of its central location in the region, Harlingen should continue to pursue major new components of the University, including additional administration, research, and medical school components.

Educational Goals

While the City of Harlingen is not a direct provider of educational programs in the city, it should play a key role in supporting the growth of educational opportunities. The following actions include key actions for education on the part of the City of Harlingen. These actions are also summarized in the implementation section.

Goal Statement - Education

“Harlingen will work with area educational entities at all levels to provide first-class learning opportunities for all residents. Ranging from early childhood learning to vocational and college degrees and even lifelong learning and continuing education, Harlingen will be known for the quality of education in the city.”

Objective 1 Support all area educational entities such as, HCISD, TSTC, UTRGV and the Medical Schools as they pursue opportunities to improve facilities and programs. As feasible, assist with development, land acquisition, infrastructure, and funding opportunities.

Action 1-1 Re-establish a Harlingen Education Task Force Committee. The City of Harlingen should re-organize and bring together a mix of education and business leaders quarterly to share goals, strategies, areas of concern, ongoing and potential employment needs, and develop ongoing action plans and ways in which to jointly collaborate. Refer to aforementioned Key Educational Assets.

Action 1-2 Support grant and financial pursuits by area educational entities where feasible. In recognition of the importance of education to Harlingen's economic future, the City of Harlingen and its economic development entities will provide support to area educational agencies as feasible, through in-kind support, development assistance, policies or statements of support.

Action 1-3 Enlist community entities, agencies, key employers, and associations to support local education initiatives and pursuits. Encourage businesses (such as key industries or retailers), associations (such as area realtors), and other

groups to provide support to area educational entities via employment opportunities, internships, financial support for grant pursuits.

Action 1-4 Support the growth of health care programs and initiatives at all levels. Already home to a key component of the UT Rio Grande Valley Medical School, Harlingen should continue to support the growth of health care education programs at the

primary, secondary and higher education levels.

Action 1-5 Provide opportunities for joint training and employment with Harlingen CISD and TSTC. Where feasible, aggressively open up training opportunities for area students within city departments.

Action 1-6 Continue to expand opportunities for higher education in Harlingen. As appropriate, assist TSTC and partner schools with expanding programs at the University Center.

Action 1-7 Continue to aggressively pursue bringing innovative employers to the Harlingen area to provide quality employment opportunities for area students.