

THE DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT Report

PRESENTED BY

The City of Corpus Christi, Texas
Downtown
REDEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE



photo: Jike Waller
courtesy CVB



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Our Committee wishes to acknowledge the support provided by the staff of the City of Corpus Christi, particularly the support of the Economic Development Department.

DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last several years, the City of Corpus Christi has made significant financial investment in downtown. This investment can be strengthened by the development of a thriving downtown community. We are pleased to present this Executive Summary of a full report compiled by the Downtown Redevelopment Committee. This report, aligned with the South Central Area Development Plan, is submitted in response to the City Council's goal to redevelop our Downtown.

THE PROCESS

The Downtown Redevelopment Committee (DRC) started meeting on March 29, 2006. A total of 22 committee meetings were held, not including sub-committee and other meetings. The group was composed of various individuals representing community and private sector organizations. Staff support was provided by Economic Development Department of the City of Corpus Christi.

The group sought background information from a variety of sources. City staff provided extensive information on projects, programs, and ordinances. Other organizations, such as the Downtown Management District, provided information on their projects and programs. Members of the group researched studies and efforts of other communities, and group members visited downtown Harlingen to view the results of their Mainstreet Program.

Members of the committee wish to express their appreciation to all who assisted with this research, particularly city staff who provided invaluable support and information.

After considerable background research and brainstorming, the DRC developed a Vision statement for the downtown of Corpus Christi.

THE VISION

“Downtown Corpus Christi is a safe, clean, pedestrian friendly community comprised of a central business district, arts and culture, sports and entertainment areas. This unique, vibrant waterfront community will provide local residents, tourists, and families opportunities to enjoy its fine restaurants, shops and residential facilities.”

The DRC group also conducted an analysis of the downtown area to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). Out of a long list of individual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, the group selected the top six in each category which are listed in the chart below.

SWOT ANALYSIS TOP 6 CATEGORIES

STRENGTHS

- Proximity to water & Water Events
- Entertainment/Arts, Culture, Events, Restaurants
- Proximity to tourists/Events
- Can be pedestrian oriented
- Center for employment
- Investing in infrastructure-water, sewage and drainage

WEAKNESSES

- Lack of real plan
- Vacant buildings
- Lack of housing
- Improve our parks/More usable parks
- No grocery store/Lack of retail
- Visually unappealing/Lack of maintenance/Graffiti

OPPORTUNITIES

- Council priority
- Coastal location
- Vacant buildings
- Urban shifts
- Marina improvement
- Restore the Ritz

THREATS

- Lack of marketing/Community perception/Lack of identity
- Divisiveness/Need to work together/Lack of leadership
- Homeless population
- Lack of knowledge/Cooperation/Absentee owners
- Ineffective codes
- Brain drain

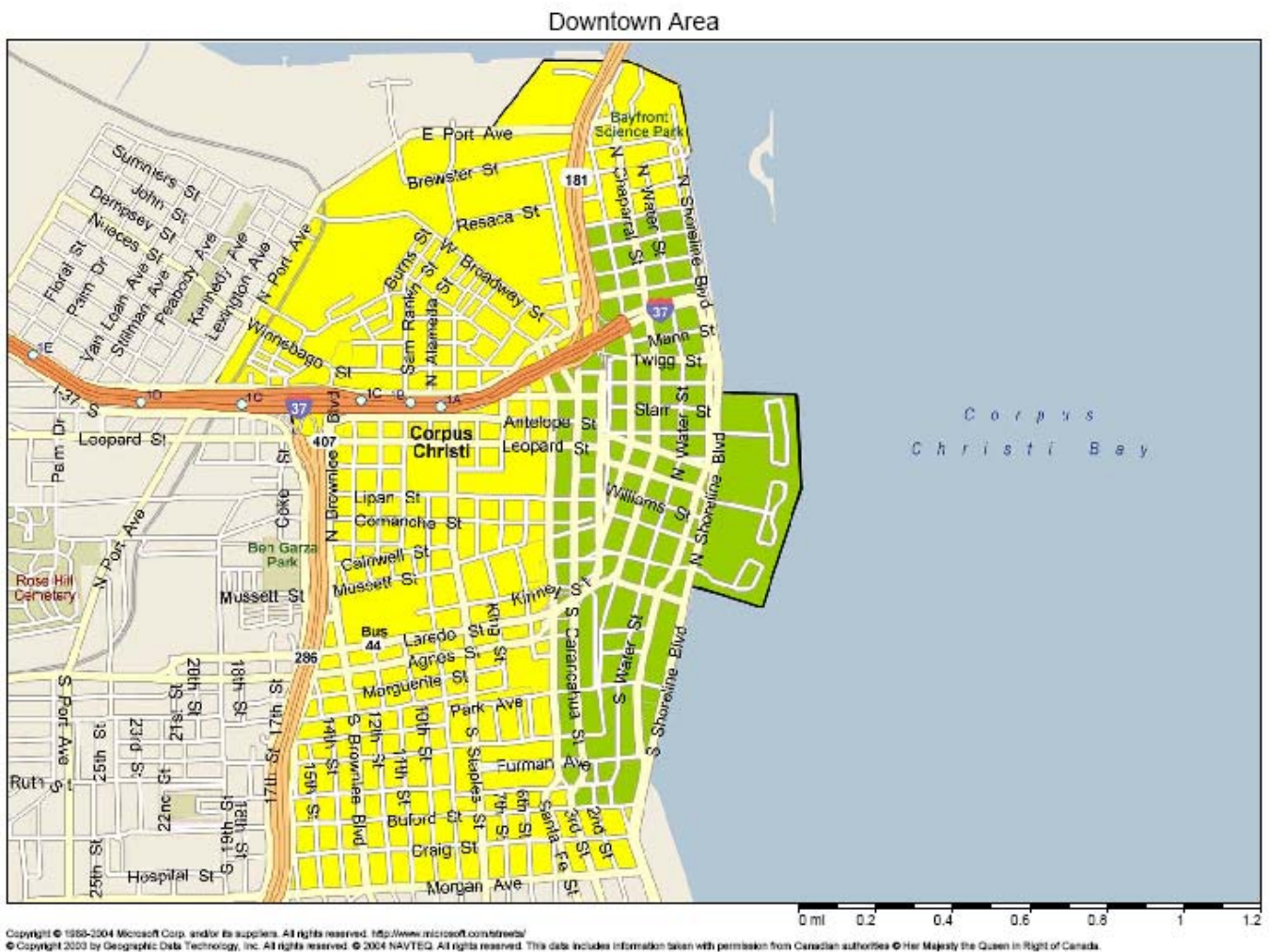
SUCCESSFUL DOWNTOWNS

As discussed, research was conducted to benchmark what successful communities have done to create thriving downtown areas. As the DRC began to develop goals and strategies, one study provided a recent and valuable overview. Research conducted by the Civic Fellows Programs of Cornell University provides a comprehensive description of successful downtown actions based on study of eleven downtowns across the country (*Characteristics of Successful Downtowns: Shared Attributes of Outstanding Small & Mid-sized Downtowns, Gary Ferguson, draft report, September 2005.*) The shared attributes of these successful downtowns as reported by this research are quoted in the chart.

- **No Single Organizational Model Exists.** Contrary to expectations, there are a variety of organizational models among the “great downtown” communities suggesting that the type of downtown organization is less important than the overall ability of the community to deliver needed services.
- **Successful downtowns tend to have multiple traffic generators that supplemented the presence of a larger institution (s), all within short walking distance.** Many, but not all of these traffic generators were purposely strategically located. Serendipity had as much to do with some location decisions as careful planning.
- **Successful downtowns are beloved by citizenry.** The area has regional significance, and there is strong affection for the downtown. There is also controversy and debate.
- **Successful downtowns have been and are continuing to overcome challenges and obstacles.** Just because a city has a great reputation for its downtown, does not mean that it is exempt from challenges. These cities share an innate ability to respond to and overcome challenges.
- **Successful downtowns are walkable.** There is no single design model but, they possess street level pedestrian scale and are well used.
- **Successful downtowns, by and large, had a commitment to mixed use development.** Uses are generally not geographically separated in these downtowns. New projects have mixed use orientations. The various uses tend to be integrated into the downtown fabric. Even when they are separated, they generally remain within walking distance of each other.
- **There is broad public/private investment in the future of downtown.** All of “great downtowns” surveyed in the study are actively planning for the future. They are implementing new projects that broaden the appeal and scope of downtown, and many of these projects have the involvement of a pro-active public sector.
- **The nature of downtown retail appears to be in flux.** As clothing or other traditional retailers close or choose to relocate, these cities report that the resulting vacant storefronts are being filled with restaurants, bars or other food and beverage oriented businesses able to pay higher rents. Local, independent retailers continue to dominate these areas.
- **Entertainment is a driving market segment.** Anchor projects help. All have been able to extend the life of downtown beyond 5 p.m., and all have strong and growing restaurant sectors.
- **There was a prevalence of strong, adjacent residential neighborhoods that are within walking distance of downtown.** These neighborhoods, many of which are upscale, provide a key base of patrons for downtown.
- **Downtown (CBD) housing was either prevalent or underway. The market for housing in the downtown was strong and growing.** Affordability was a major issue faced by many, but residents were invaluable to the retail economy.
- **Universities help but are not the sole answer.** The presence of a higher institution of higher education does not by itself appear to be the deciding factor in determining downtown experience.

THE DOWNTOWN FOCUS AREA

The DRC spent considerable time discussing the focus area of downtown. The DRC recognizes that “downtown Corpus Christi” would traditionally be defined as the area shown in green on the map below, or even a smaller area south of I 37 and perhaps east of the bluff or Upper Broadway. The DRC recommends, however, that a broader area be considered and included in redevelopment considerations. The broad area selected by the DRC, particularly from the perspective of housing and employment potential, is shown in yellow on the map below. While many of the DRC recommendations address the green area as an initial focus, the DRC feels that the yellow area must also be addressed in order for downtown to develop.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Six (6) major topic areas were the basis of six subcommittees that developed strategies and recommendations. The efforts and results of the work of each subcommittee were then reviewed, synthesized and revised by the DRC as a whole. These six major strategic or topic areas were:

- Designs and Plans
- Infrastructure
- Policies
- Business Development
- Marketing
- Organizational Structure

STRATEGY ONE - DESIGNS AND PLANS

The primary goal of the planning recommendations is to improve and enhance connectivity of the neighborhoods identified above by addressing the following means of connectivity:

Pedestrian Experience
Vehicular Access
Event Public Transit
Parks and Green Space

Targeted improvement of the four elements of neighborhood connectivity demonstrates public commitment to Downtown Revitalization. Improved connectivity, in conjunction with other Strategies for incentives and abatements targeted at residential development, are the impetus to spark private investment.

A downtown residential community is the engine for continued downtown revitalization. It is the engine to energize retail, restaurant, and office growth and the key to sustainable growth in tourism, convention, entertainment and hotel markets. Creating Downtown Neighborhoods that are active 24/7 is the key to expanding these other markets.

While the recommended actions, detailed in the attachment, focus on the types of residential environments likely to develop in the detailed focus area the broader focus area, identified in yellow on the previous map, provides significant potential for revitalization of surrounding blighted and declining residential neighborhoods. Revitalization of these areas will be important in providing desirable housing for middle and lower income residents working in a revitalized downtown.

STRATEGY TWO - INFRASTRUCTURE

1. Create a phased plan to make sidewalk improvements at minimum one block at a time:
 - a. Consistent and walkable sidewalks with pedestrian scale lighting, emphasizing down lighting, safety, and ADA accessibility.
 - b. Electrical, Fiber Optic, and Irrigation upgrades installed during sidewalk improvement process.
 - c. Informational WiFi Kiosks at bus stops including interactive GPS bus locations, including wayfinding, and opportunities for business advertising.
 - d. WiFi prepaid parking meters.
2. Improve streets, intersections, connectivity and wayfinding signage entering, between, and exiting all downtown.
 - a. Improve street rideability and brick paver installation.
 - b. Traffic Engineering should provide recommendations to improve the traffic flow between all downtown areas and particularly after peak events to offer citizens the ability to spend their entire day/evening in downtown.
 - c. Improve traffic connectivity between S.E.A. town and DTown with emphasis on looking at Chaparral St. Continuing southward toward I37 as a two-way arterial with parallel parking.
 - d. Where feasible, East/West streets in Dtown then become one-lane, one-way with angled parking to reclaim and add more street level parking in the DTown area.
3. Continue to support Marina improvements understanding our unique downtown asset on water.
 - a. Maximize visibility & usage, improve landscaping, and tourist retail/commercial interactivity on the T-Heads.
 - b. Support & Encourage a regional high speed water taxi to transport local commuters and tourists from Downtown to Packery Channel, Port Aransas, Ingleside, and Rockport.

STRATEGY THREE - POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

1. Increase residential development by:
 - a. Incentives for residential conversions and new residential construction
 - b. Providing incentives for retail and entertainment amenities – such as grocers, drug stores, specialized retail, private cable or satellite television systems, and cinemas – to serve existing and future residents
 - c. Working with other public entities and the business community to enhance the availability and convenience of public transportation so that living downtown becomes a more attractive option.

2. Create a special planning and maintenance district (or adjust existing Bayfront zoning districts) to meet the following goals :
 - a. Providing increased standards for the physical appearance and maintenance of buildings. For example, the boarding of ground floor windows of vacant buildings should be prohibited, and minimum window frontage requirements for new construction would create a more attractive and pedestrian-friendly appearance.
 - b. Implementing “adaptive reuse” principles in rehabilitating vacant and underutilized buildings for new uses. Such principles include the relaxing of parking, density, and other zoning regulations, flexibility in complying with building code requirements, and streamlining of the project approval process.
3. Create standards for designating downtown buildings as blighted and enforce those standards.
 - a. The stigma of having a deteriorated building in Corpus Christi designated as blighted would encourage the property owner to redevelop or sell the property.
 - b. The City, at its option, could inspect and perform needed maintenance on blighted buildings and charge the owner for this work. If unpaid, the City could take a lien on the property to secure payment.
 - c. A designation of a property as blighted under these standards could also be used as an initial step in condemnation proceedings and as evidence in support of state and federal redevelopment grant applications.
4. Code enforcement must be swift and certain. Because of the importance of downtown to our city’s economic development efforts, code enforcement cases in the downtown area should be fast-tracked at all stages of the process, including calling for monthly Building Standards Board meetings to allow more constant review.

STRATEGY FOUR-BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

1. Recruit more retail and commercial businesses to Downtown.
 - a. Encourage the creation of a Downtown Merchants Association to work in partnership to work in partnership with the city’s Downtown Task Force (DTF) which is described in strategy 6 and other groups. This group can function as advocates for the downtown merchants.
 - b. Continue to target city incentives such as tax credits, tax abatement and reduction of permitting fees to the downtown area helping to recruit business to the area.
 - c. Support new businesses during the first 12 months of operation through the creation of rent buy down programs.
 - d. Approve the use of a marketing program to draw more pedestrian traffic to downtown businesses.

- e. Market downtown to existing local businesses to encourage them to open locations in downtown.
2. Support existing downtown businesses.
 - a. Encourage Downtown Management District to finalize plans for a downtown market, encouraging participation from downtown merchants.
 - b. Full scale development of a WiFi community portal to assist downtown merchants in marketing of their businesses.
 - c. Encourage the participation of local financial institutions to provide for loan pools and rent buy downs for downtown businesses.

The DRC recommends that priority be given to local merchants to reflect the local flavor of Corpus Christi. Local art groups, Del Mar College and Texas A & M University should be encouraged to support the development of downtown retail shops, restaurants and residential development showcasing local talent.

STRATEGY FIVE- MARKETING

1. Brand downtown as a “Destination” by creating a visual identity and design standards for publicly funded items such as logos, signage, wayfinding, downtown entry way and pedestrian information kiosks.
2. Develop a strategic marketing plan focusing on culture, residential, new and existing businesses, tourism, entrepreneurs, and the community using traditional and new media.
3. Enhance and develop the downtown “experience” by establishing consistent public events and art experiences which could include: Wednesday night Sailboat Sunset Festival, murals, decorated benches and bus stops, permanent art installations, outdoor markets and park events.

STRATEGY SIX - ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

1. Establish a new and visible symbol of the City’s commitment to renewal and to a new future for downtown Corpus Christi by creating a Downtown Task Force, headed by Economic Development and composed on city staff from various departments to expedite and foster development in the downtown area as defined by the DRC. The DRC further recommends that at least one additional staff member be added to the Economic Development Department to help coordinate this task force and assist with implementation of this plan, including monitoring of progress.
2. The Task Force will also research and bring forth recommendations to the City Council and City Manager on a financing plan for the implementation of this plan, with possible funding sources including use of annual budget resources, capital

improvement bond program financing, utility revenue bonds, tax free housing finance bonds, federal and state grant funds, other public and private funding sources including local sources such as the RTA, and a tax increment financing zone (TIF).

3. DRC members will establish an advocacy group (or enhance an existing group such as the Heart) which will help move the downtown agenda forward, work proactively with other organizations and invite the membership and participation all interested groups and individuals, including the City Council.

CONCLUSION

The DRC effort is only the beginning of a process that must involve a wide range of interests and stakeholders continuously in the future. This report must be viewed as a living document, subject to re-thinking based on future opportunities and challenges. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers or simple solutions to redevelopment. The DRC, however, hopes that these recommendations will be the foundation for a more vigorous renewal of downtown Corpus Christi and result in:

- More economic activity, particularly housing and commercial;
- Less under utilized land;
- Fewer vacant buildings; and
- An aesthetically pleasing, cherished heart for the community.