



City of Brownsville Retail Redevelopment Strategy

I. Introduction

In 2019 the City of Brownsville commissioned “Cultivating a Stronger Brownsville” to provide a status on the City’s fiscal sustainability, demonstrate its importance for the well being of the community, and provide guidelines and recommendations to focus efforts and resources for a more concerted impact. This strategy considers information provided in the report that is pertinent to fiscal sustainability in Retail and Redevelopment efforts.

II. Goals and Objectives

1. Business Retention, Expansion & Recruitment to Strengthen and diversify the local economy

- Identify and conduct outreach to firms within Brownsville’s targeted sectors (greenfields – commercial/industrial, greyfields – residential/commercial/industrial, neighborhood mixed use) to promote infill development
- Actively participate and strategically pursue projects with regional partners to leverage new business
- Assist planning division to identify infrastructure issues that inhibit business growth and advocate on behalf of commercial and industrial zones
- Attend recruiting conferences and deal-making events yearly (ICSC ReCON, ICSC Red River States) to promote retail growth opportunities in the City

2. Development of Authentic and Emerging Industries Through Small Businesses and Entrepreneurship

- Expand the City’s business retention, expansion, and recruitment efforts to include maker, micro, small and mid-sized businesses with the support of Buxton

- Facilitate providing additional assistance to businesses in areas of the city experiencing or projected to undergo gentrification and displacement of legacy businesses
- Provide information on City, BCIC and GBIC incentives, available grants and or lending processes to enhance the balancing of economic development of a project's financial risk and access to small business financing

3. Development of Workforce and Human Capital to Assist in the creation of a trained, future-ready workforce

- As necessary, support/assist partners to coordinate training and education to fill the current and future needs of local industries with UTRGV, TSC, technical schools, and the Brownsville Independent School District

4. Build increasingly vibrant neighborhoods through the creation of Neighborhood Business Districts

- Regularly monitor properties for sale or rent to assist in the engagement and direct recruitment of small businesses that are a good fit in specific neighborhood identities and retail/service gaps
- Inventory vacant or underutilized property and connect businesses looking for space and lease options with appropriate parties
- Conduct outreach to absentee property owners to identify specific barriers to activating their vacant or underutilized property

5. Promote Downtown Brownsville as a center for mixed use: living, commerce and entertainment

- Support the Historic Preservation and Downtown Divisions, develop relationships with stakeholders and identify prospects for redevelopment, and infill development
- Continue to identify and recruit key tenants for catalytic Downtown sites with the greatest potential for leveraging additional private sector development and job growth
- Assist as necessary on restoration and renovation of historic structures for redevelopment of upper floors that support residential uses

6. Commercial & Industrial Property Activation by Supporting employment-generating activities and office/industrial product

- Create and maintain a database of key properties in Brownsville with high economic potential that are underutilized and promote Airport Industrial Area as a primary location

7. Implement premier customer service within the Business & Development Climate

- Conduct meetings with the City's economic development partners to discuss policy, programs, and issues
- Work with City departments to identify opportunities and mechanisms to assist with infrastructure, environmental and related development costs
- Provide special projects assistance navigating through the permitting process as necessary
- Conduct property owner outreach regarding key properties to facilitate development and attract Opportunity and Enterprise Zone investment to effect positive impacts and mitigate for unintended outcomes
- Inform professional and special interest groups about Brownsville current affairs, upcoming projects, and opportunities - developer meet and greet events, scheduled meetings with developers, etc.

8. Placemaking & City Image: Choose Brownsville to live, work, play, & explore

- Support the development of a narrative describing why Brownsville is an advantageous place to live and work with the power to resonate at a regional and state levels
- Assist in the production of economic development attraction marketing materials
- Participate in any City development broad-based strategic approaches
- Assist in the alignment of City communications efforts, local and regional economic development partners' efforts, and discussions for the creation of a potential multi-channel marketing campaign

9. Tourism as a Community Revenue Generator

- Support the promotion of Community highlights and events for the attraction of new citizens and tourists to generate hotel occupancy taxes and additional sales taxes.

III. Special Considerations

1. Employees Support Businesses

- Employees provide a strong base of support for businesses. Attracting (incentivizing) large employers to targeted areas can lead to growth and more opportunities for local retailers of all types.

2. Retail Diversity

- The success of any area is related to its unique identity within a competitive marketplace. That identity should take shape by considering the attributes of the trade area it serves, and the mix and number of its business community. The City of Brownsville serves a variety of users: local and surrounding community residents, businesses, employers, and visitors (international, seasonal, attraction tourists – zoo, historic, events)
- Downtown Brownsville’s identity is historical and very distinct. Experience-based special identity businesses like food service, entertainment, recreation, and miscellaneous retail have a high potential for growth in Downtown.

3. Displacement Concerns

- Established businesses in redeveloping areas may be concerned that new businesses will capture some of the existing sales or contribute to higher rents that could eventually lead to their displacement. New businesses can attract new traffic, spending and potential sales. Growth should support both expansion of existing businesses as well as attraction of new businesses. Supporting mixed-use development can increase supply of spaces for residents, existing and new businesses, and provide resistance to increased rents.
- Any actions by the City to encourage redevelopment of vacant or underdeveloped properties, including transformation of upper floors, office, or warehouse structures, may maximize the net increase of commercial space and minimize business displacement.

4. Financial Resources and Partnership Opportunities

- Partnerships are critical to the success of the business community. The City works closely with various organizations including Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation, Greater Brownsville Incentives Corporation, Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, and the Port of Brownsville among others
- The City along with its partners have several programs and financial resources available to help create and maintain the economic vibrancy of Brownsville businesses, as well as

spur new opportunities for both local and outside investment interests. Financial resources are tailored to the specific need of a project and will be determined after careful review and special consideration

IV. Retail Priorities and Strategies

The retail business, community and economic development priorities listed below were obtained from ideas expressed at partner meetings, events, and activities, including the Quarterly Developers Meet and Greet and Commercial Brokers Tours. They are all centered and based on a common vision for Brownsville as a vibrant, dynamic business environment that attracts people, activity, and investment.

1. Strengthen Existing and Local Businesses

- While the City has little direct influence on the market, the City, and partners, can help promote an environment where businesses can thrive. Key needs must be identified by the business community so that financial and technical assistance can be identified to support a variety of businesses in different stages of the business life cycle. Strong coordination and continued partnerships with business organizations will be crucial to this effort

2. Improve Streetscapes

- Brownsville has beautiful natural and historic settings that set it apart from other areas in the RGV. A well-connected sidewalk network is a strong asset for pedestrians, but the physical and aesthetic quality of certain areas including downtown is inconsistent. Aiming to better connect places and spaces through redevelopment and public and private investment is necessary to improve the pedestrian experience and increase foot traffic to businesses
- Efforts to attract investment to infill, redevelop and revitalize downtown Brownsville should be reinforced. The attraction of specialty businesses to its commercial core will further the vision to create a truly original experience unique to downtown

3. Promote Infill

Infill development, for the purposes of this Retail and Redevelopment Strategy, is defined as the process of developing vacant or under-used spaces within existing urban areas that are already largely developed. The City of Brownsville has over 60% of vacant land within city limits, which for various reasons, has been passed over in the normal course of urbanization.

- Cultivating a Stronger Brownsville increasingly recognizes that the spread-out patterns of growth, which have shaped many American communities in the past, cannot be sustained. Problems with lengthy commutes, overextended public facilities, increased infrastructure costs, in addition to, loss of farmlands, open space, and other valued community resources, and even reduced physical activity and community health are typically associated with such patterns. An increased emphasis on developing passed-

over parcels within developed areas, and on maximizing use of existing public facilities should be reinforced

- Successful infill development is characterized by overall residential densities high enough to support improved transportation choices as well as a wider variety of convenience services and amenities. It can return to cultural, social, recreational and entertainment opportunities, gathering places, and vitality to older centers and neighborhoods
 - Attention to design of infill development is essential to ensure that the new development fits into the existing context, and gains neighborhood acceptance
 - A cooperative partnership between government, the development community, financial institutions, non-profit organizations, neighborhood organizations and other resources (380 agreements, zonal impact fees, etc.) is essential to achieve infill success. The public and private costs of continuing to favor sprawl development patterns will far exceed the resources needed now to facilitate infill development.
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4. Encourage More Residents Downtown

Downtown Brownsville is on its way to becoming a vibrant urban district. Over the past decade, more than \$62 Million in public and private investments were made in downtown, effectively beginning to transform its landscape, and attracting interest for continued investment.

- The City of Brownsville and various partners have actively taken a role to create supportive tools that will encourage mixed use, keep project costs down (new development codes, zoning codes, Downtown TIRZ, Opportunity Zone, National Historic District designation, BCIC BIG Grants, etc.), streamline processes that hinder projects, and incentivize more development downtown.
- Downtown residents are critical to business creation and growth in our urban core which is strengthened by the interest for urban lifestyles where people can work, shop, and find entertainment close to home or transit. More people living downtown means new business opportunities, as foot traffic and residents looking for day-to-day services and goods increase. Having more activity on the street should also begin to contribute to an increased perception of safety, making downtown more inviting to the broader population.

5. Improve Downtown Reputation

- Although Downtown is beloved by many, it still retains somewhat of a negative reputation among some citizens. The most often cited concerns about Downtown

include cleanliness, inconvenient parking, homelessness, ill repute uses, and an overall perception that Downtown is unsafe.

- The negative reputation poses a threat to Downtown's success, as the desired level of activity and potential for increased market capture depend on people spending more time and money in Downtown. Downtown initiatives like the installation of security cameras, market square police station and bike patrols should continue to be expanded upon.
- Creating a Downtown Welcome Center would be another asset to our Downtown area. Having a designated space where people can go to obtain printed materials (maps, brochures, downtown activities (tours), lodging, local businesses, public venues, local events, transportation, etc.) in addition to ask questions about Downtown and surrounding areas.

6. Actively Promote Tourism

- Our historic Downtown boasts of a unique proximity to international ports of entry, higher learning institutions (UTRGV, TSC), and an eclectic mix of shopping/entertainment provide a strong basis for tourist activity. Major attractions and events like Gladys Porter Zoo, Children's Museum of Brownsville, Charro Days, Sombrero Fest, and Farmer's Market draw in hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Unfortunately, visitors do not often venture beyond their destinations, as it is not often clear what else Downtown has to offer. Efforts to make Downtown more visually connected and attractive should be encouraged to invite visitors to venture further.
- Other events like the 4th of July Salute to Freedom that drives people to the Sports Park area should be expanded upon by integrating opportunities for small businesses within other areas of the Sports Park. Coordinating events in other parts of town before or after the event will provide additional opportunities for businesses.
- The Sports Park has plenty of potential for new events including concerts that should be showcased with other things to do in Brownsville to entice more visitors to visit multiple places
- The Brownsville Active Plan provides areas in which to explore small business development. Plan should be carefully studied with Planning and Zoning Divisions to showcase specific areas that support business growth based on opportunity and or recognized need

7. Connect to Other Community and Economic Development Efforts

Many components contribute to a strong local economy (jobs, education, sector diversity, physical infrastructure, municipal tax revenue, etc.). Through partnerships we can strengthen and connect the various components to support the long-term health of our region.

- The City's new economic development approach and close collaboration with key stakeholders (BCIC, GBIC, Port of Brownsville, Chamber of Commerce, Investors, Developers, Financial Institutions, Commercial Real Estate Professionals, etc.) should be strengthened to help the City to set the stage for long term economic development viability.
- Projects and programs (E-Bridge, Sports Park Master Plan, 511 Master Plan, Small Business Financial tools, etc.) undertaken and administered by partners are opportunities to further collaboration. Promoting, supporting, and participating to the extent possible is critical.

V. Recommendations

1. Provide a Clean and Safe City Environment

- General clean up and redevelopment of blighted or vacant properties City wide will foster a more productive use of existing transportation, water, and utility infrastructure. The effort will not only increase the tax base and employment opportunities but help spur investment in surrounding properties.
- The presence of police officers contributes to the sense of safety and additional eyes on the street can help deter crime and negativity in areas like downtown where nightlife is beginning to take off.
- The development of a nightlife plan for entertainment areas that provides tips on nighttime safety, includes transportation information for customers, addresses standards for poorly lit areas will help alleviate ongoing concerns in certain areas like downtown.
- Downtown public restrooms will help to reduce the impacts to businesses and human waste in public spaces, which has been an ongoing concern. Potential placement sites should be studied further with planners.
- In collaboration with the local businesses and non-profits daily unified programming and events should be considered to bring positive, welcoming atmospheres for all and should be spaced evenly throughout the City to provide small businesses in the vicinity to integrate, and diversify revenue streams. (First Friday is a good example of such an event, a heavier business involvement and participation is encouraged.)

- Study the feasibility of a trash compactor pilot that reduces the number of garbage cans and the frequency of garbage truck trips by providing a compactor for multiple businesses to share. (Downtown could be an excellent pilot)

2. Strengthen Business Community

- Maintain a business support webpage that provides all necessary information or links to City and partner business services under one page. Including a space where businesses can submit special event promotions.
 - While City and Partners currently make available several tools to assist businesses, businesses are not always aware of these. A designated space that unifies, explains, and provides points of contact for all these tools within the webpage is necessary.
 - Develop a space within the page to provide updated information on what is happening in your neighborhood (new subdivisions, buildings, businesses, etc)
- Currently the department does not measure when a business goes dark. The City should consider making a notification of closure (submittal of issued CO) and the completion of a survey a requirement. This will allow for valuable data to be captured and considered for the creation of specific programs that support business success.
- Develop information and materials (brochures) to help small business owners with opening a storefront. This primarily would relate with opening a store front in an existing building, which could require upgrades as per building code, change of use, navigating through the historic preservation requirements if located in downtown, sign permits, etc.
- Develop a Business Guest Speaker series with ED partners where successful business owners in Texas in various sectors offer advise on best practices for local business owners.

3. Provide Adequate Space for a Spectrum of Businesses

- Assist businesses (new and existing) to connect to available, appropriate, and affordable business spaces through real estate listings, local real estate professionals, and or property owners.
- Provide businesses looking for real estate options (shared spaces) with assistance to connect with other businesses

4. Promote Events and Tourism for small business participation

- Provide outreach to small business community to engage in events and tourism initiatives more fully and consider offering event attendees with before or after programming, discounts, and or coupons to promote the venturing out from event sites.