

# Downtown & Inner City Revitalization & Historic Preservation

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**centralita** *nf* : switchboard

**centralizar** {21} *vt* : to centralize — **centralización** *nf*

**centrar** *vt* 1 : to center 2 : to focus — **centrarse** *vr* ~ **en** : to focus on, to concentrate on

**céntrico, -ca** *adj* : central

**centrífugo, -ga** *adj* : centrifugal

**centrípeto, -ta** *adj* : centripetal

**centro**<sup>1</sup> *nmf* : center (in sports)

**centro**<sup>2</sup> *nm* 1 MEDIO : center <centro de atención : center of attention> <centro de gravedad : center of gravity> 2 : **downtown** 3 **centro de mesa** : centerpiece

**centroamericano, -na** *adj & n* : Central American

**ceñido, -da** *adj* AJUSTADO : tight, tight-fitting

**ceñir** {67} *vt* 1 : to encircle, to surround 2 : to hug, to cling to <me ciñe demasiado : it's too tight on me> —

**ceñirse** *vr* ~ **a** : to restrict oneself to, to stick to







# EXISTING CONDITIONS

Downtown Laredo is the part of the city that all Laredoans have in common. It is the cultural center of the metropolitan area, a regional destination for the state, and an international destination for Mexican nationals. The downtowns of Laredo and of its sister city of Nuevo Laredo have long shared a common history and a mutually beneficial relationship spanning across the international border.

The downtown still has most of its historic fabric from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Streets like Convent



Gateway to the Americas International Bridge



The Laredo Federal Building and the Hamilton Hotel on Matamoros Street



Avenue, Iturbide Street (It Street), Flores Avenue, and Hidalgo Street retain a charming historic character not easily found elsewhere.

Pedestrian safety remains a concern despite the high levels of pedestrianism. Sidewalks are often very narrow, with wide one-way travel lanes that result in unnecessary speeding. Many downtown streets also lack shade trees, relying instead on awnings and canopies to provide shade for pedestrians.

In recent decades, investment has moved away from downtown as the city expanded. Downtown along Convent Avenue has remained a shopping destination for Mexican visitors on foot. This has resulted in relatively low ground floor vacancy rates, but very high upper floor vacancies. A combination of outdated regulations, unstable land values, and a perception of low parking supply, has resulted in very little reinvestment compared to other downtowns across the country.

The recent instabilities related to border violence in Mexico, and the devaluation of the Peso have created a fresh set of challenges for a downtown that caters almost exclusively to Mexican shoppers.



Relatively new public and private investment along Iturbide Street (It Street)

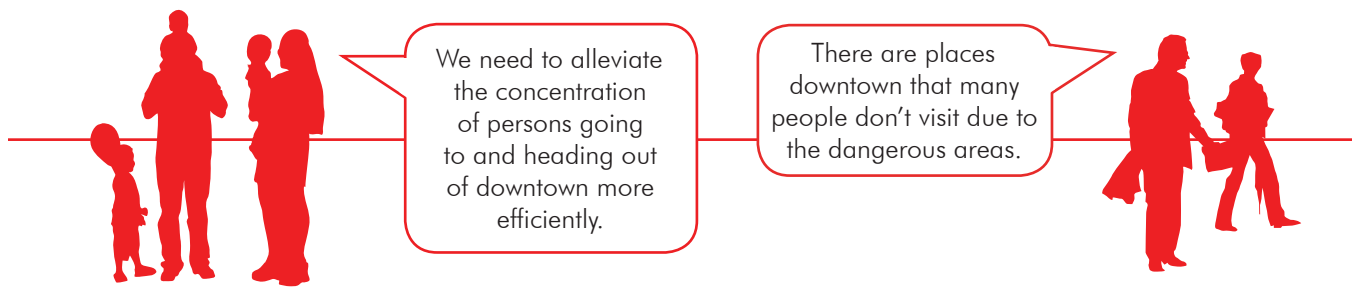


A vital shopping area for both Laredoans and Mexican nationals



Landmark historic structures with low upper-story vacancies





Downtown Laredo is composed of a dense grid of blocks and streets, punctuated by a series of public plazas. Laredo's founders, inspired by the Law of the Indies, which were guidelines required of Spanish colonial towns, had the foresight to plan for great public spaces from the outset of Laredo's development. Over the years, a few of Laredo's original plazas have been lost to a combination of public and private development projects. The ones that remain, though, form some of the best public spaces in the region.

San Agustin Plaza is centered around the oldest part of the city and is anchored by the Cathedral of San Agustin, the Old City Market Building, and La Posada Hotel. In many ways, it is the cultural heart of the city and is generally active throughout the day.

Jarvis Plaza is also a natural gathering space due to its adjacency to the downtown Transit Center. The historic Hamilton Hotel and Laredo Federal Building (the post office) also help to anchor the plaza and provide an instantly recognizable landmark.

The port of entry at Bridge 1 was recently revamped with new outbound processing facilities and retail plaza and esplanade. Adjacent to this, a new downtown outlet mall was recently completed. The outlet mall represents a major investment that is expected to attract significant traffic from



The Cathedral of San Agustin is the seat of the Catholic Diocese of Laredo, Texas



Downtown San Agustin Historical District



Jarvis Plaza



Monterrey. By locating downtown in an urban format, the mall can have a positive effect on the rest of downtown by attracting new visitors to the downtown area. Careful attention needs to be paid to the connections between the mall and the rest of downtown to ensure visitors are encouraged to explore beyond the outlet mall.

Historic Preservation is a crucial part of the future of downtown Laredo. The 1995 Historic Preservation Plan established some important frameworks and guidelines; yet many preservation efforts still happen in piecemeal fashion, and some historic buildings are still being lost to demolition and neglect. Preservation and restoration should be a major priority in the revitalization of the downtown area.

Thanks in part to its dense grid of intimate streets, lined by a continuous fabric of historic buildings, downtown remains one of the most walkable and bikable areas of the city. Yet investments continue to favor vehicular circulation at the expense of walking and biking. Careful attention should be paid to encouraging more people to bike and walk as a choice, rather than as a last resort.

This Downtown Revitalization and Historic Preservation Chapter looks at some of the potential big ideas for downtown that were explored during the comprehensive planning process to help revitalize downtown Laredo.



The new plazas of El Portal



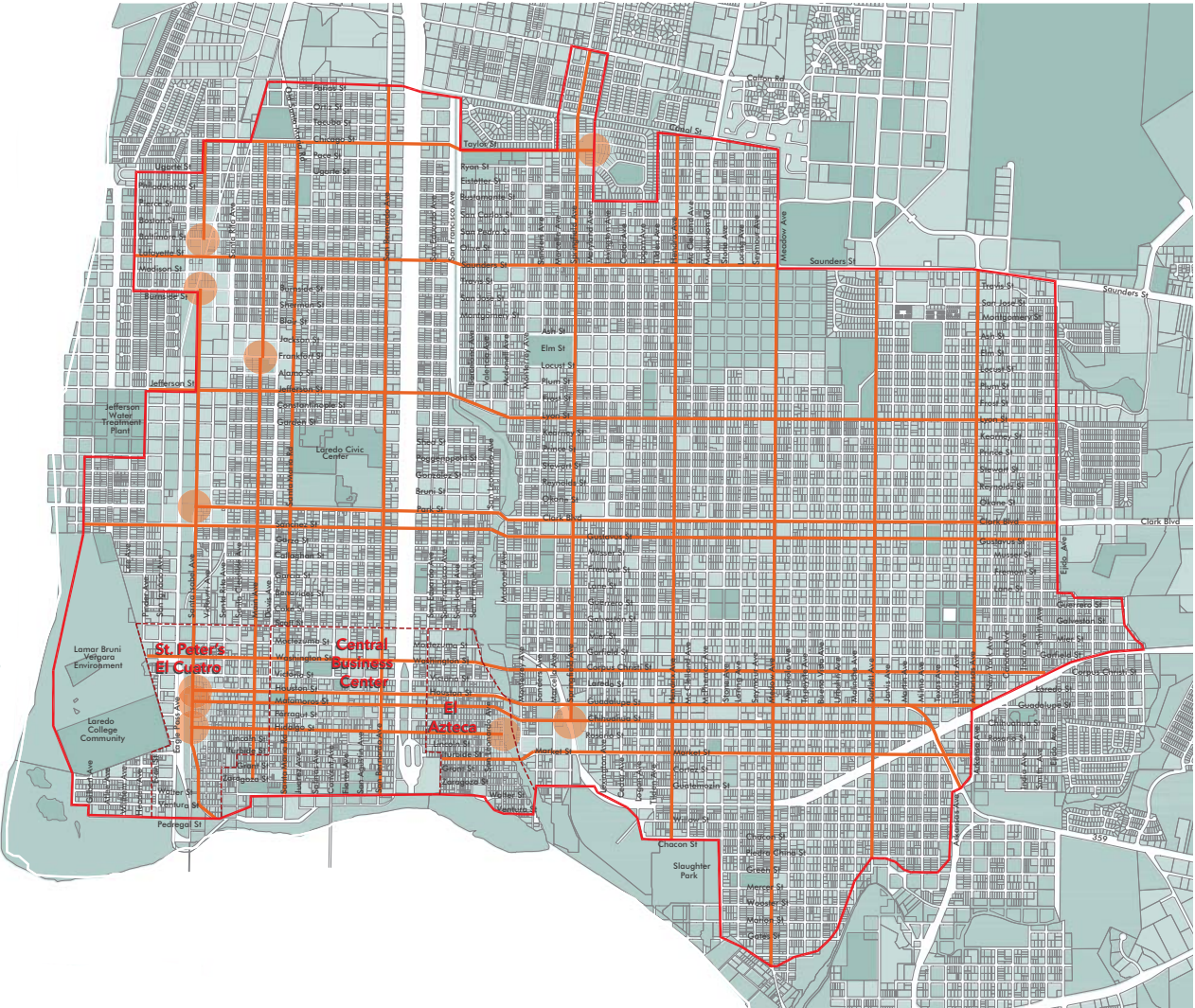
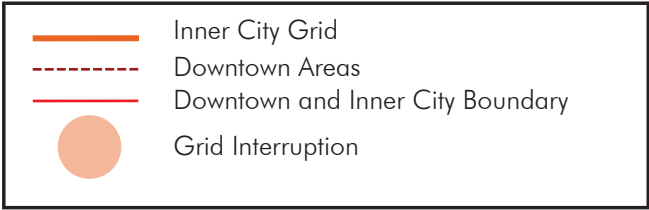
Restored historic structure on Iturbide Street



Bicycles remain a primary mode of transit for downtown users of all kinds



# Downtown and Inner City: Existing Conditions Map





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## **Downtown Areas**

Downtown consists of the central business district and adjacent neighborhoods, St. Peter's El Cuatro to the west and El Azteca to the east. There are three currently designated historic districts: St. Peter's Historic District, Old Mercado Historic District, and the San Agustin Historic District.

The downtown grid extends and connects the inner city mid-century grid. It connects traditional neighborhoods and their commercial centers seamlessly. Inner City Neighborhoods need to be interconnected by the continuous street grid. Laredo's inner city grid is mostly intact within neighborhoods, but neighborhoods generally are not interconnected from one side of the grid to the other, and some neighborhoods are almost completely cut off. Much of the most historic fabric of the city is very poorly connected.

## **Inner City Street Grid**

The Existing Conditions Map, shows major and minor streets within the boundaries of the inner city street grid. Highlighted streets represent the most transited and uninterrupted paths that connect across the inner city, north-south, east and west. The value of a street grid is degraded when streets are blocked by developments that cut street access, blocked by train tracks, limited bridging at creeks, and when limited and segregated by land uses usually meant for suburban subdivisions post 1960.

When one area becomes limited to accessibility, it can eventually wither into blight, and its return will not be possible until accessibility is restored. There are

already areas that are experiencing this problem; in fact one neighborhood is called "Sal Si Puedes" which translates to "exit if you can."

Degrading street accessibility does not only make it difficult to exit, but as the translation also implies, it degrades chances for economic survival. Providing better economic opportunities to neighborhoods that are cut off, is almost impossible.



# Historic Districts in Laredo

## Historic District / Landmark Board

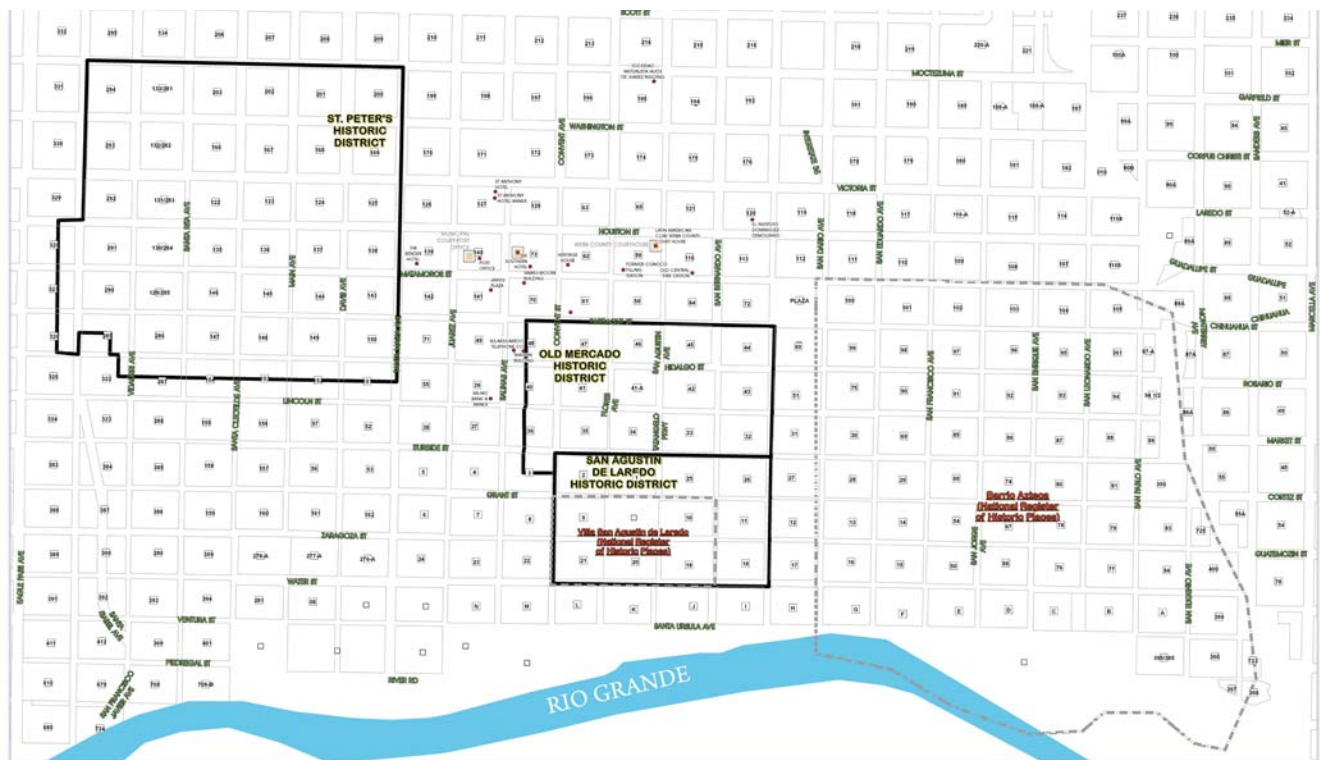
The Historic District / Landmark Board is part of the City of Laredo Planning and Zoning Department. The board consists of nine appointed representatives, one by each of the eight districts council persons and the mayor.

The Historic District/Landmark Board was established to provide for review of projects undertaken in the local historic districts. Design Standards have been established for the historic districts.

In 1995, the city provided for ad valorem tax abatement for historic rehabilitation to promote the restoration and preservation of historically designated

structures and buildings. If a property owner restores their building to the standards set forth in the Historic Preservation Ordinance, the city exempts the owner from paying a portion of their property taxes.

The Historic Preservation Plan adopted on March 25, 1996 contains a wealth of historic knowledge and a clear path for expanding and adding to the existing historic districts. This document is hereby incorporated into this Comprehensive Plan as it sets a clear path for future designations; however, the time lines and desire for adding new historic and conservation districts should be reassessed and a new set of priorities created.



### Local Historic Districts

- Local Historic Landmarks (dots)
- Local Historic Districts (Outline)
- OLD MERCADO
- SAN AGUSTIN DE LAREDO
- ST. PETERS

## LAREDO HISTORIC DISTRICTS

### National Register of Historic Places

- National Register Landmarks (dots)
- National Register Districts (Outline)
- Barrio Azteca Historic District
- Villa San Agustín de Laredo

Downtown Districts and National Register Landmarks



# COMMUNITY CONCERNS

## **Revitalize Downtown**

The downtown served an important role in the city's history and became the home to numerous cultural resources. A remarkably high percentage of downtown's historic structures have survived the test of time. While many of these buildings are still in very good condition, others have been left to neglect and are in danger of being lost.

Despite downtown's assets, it has not yet experienced the kind of urban revival that many other downtowns have experienced in recent years. Within the core of the downtown, there is no significant housing stock, few office buildings, and ground floor retail buildings have high vacancy rates. Accordingly, downtown streets often feel deserted, giving the impression that downtown is unsafe.

A downtown renaissance is long overdue, and Laredoans hope to see the vacant buildings filled with occupants, the streets busy with people throughout the day and week, and businesses and cultural facilities thriving.

## **Downtown as the Primary Center of Civic Life**

Downtown Laredo is home to a number of civic institutions, including Laredo's City Hall, Webb County offices, and several great museums and cultural centers. These civic institutions currently provide invaluable anchors for the city; however, other civic functions have located outside of the downtown such as the Laredo Civic Center and the main public library.

## **Connect Inner City Grid**

The boundary of the Laredo inner city street grid consists of all the inner city neighborhoods. A successful inner city connects neighborhoods and business districts seamlessly. Connecting the inner city street grid is important to Cultural Heritage, economic development, and for sustainable use of existing infrastructure.

## **Restore and Reuse Historic Buildings**

The restoration of Laredo's downtown will increase property values and help to improve Laredo's regional identity. The first priority for the revitalization of downtown must be to implement the refurbishment and reuse of historic structures.

Priority should be placed on increasing the residential population in downtown, thereby increasing vitality throughout the entire day. In addition, reusing historic buildings and encouraging more people to move back into the city's original in-town neighborhoods is an excellent way for the city to evolve as a modern, environmentally sustainable place to live. A first step in this concept has begun with lifting parking requirements for residential uses within the downtown.

Historic buildings like the Plaza Theatre and the Royal Theatre are architectural gems that the community wants to see reopened. The Royal Theatre is currently being used as a retail store while the Plaza Theatre remains vacant and in need of costly cleanup and repairs. Reopening one of these theatres would help to create entertainment destination in the downtown.

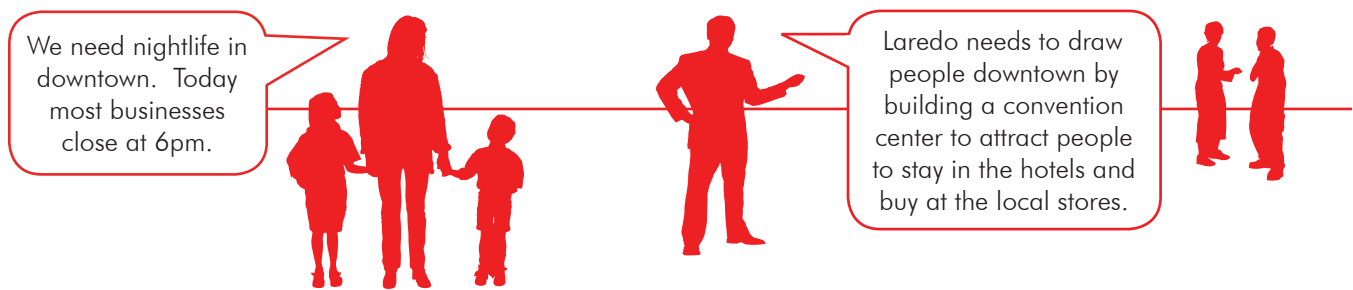
## **Diversify and Add Missing Uses**

Downtown Laredo currently serves primarily as a shopping district for people crossing the border, supplemented with civic uses and an emerging entertainment area. In the future, as downtown evolves into a 24-hour environment, it will be necessary to diversify uses and add elements that are currently missing. As residential units are added, a variety of supporting uses will be needed, including grocery stores, dry cleaners, daycare, hairdressers, and coffee shops. Increasing employment opportunities will also activate the downtown during the day.

## **Rethink Civic Spaces**

Laredo's founders had the foresight to plan great public civic spaces within the downtown. These spaces include San Agustin Plaza, Jarvis Plaza, and St. Peter's Square, as well as the streets themselves. Many of these spaces have lost elements of their original design.





Park spaces and squares should serve as living rooms for the community. While San Agustin Plaza is very active, other squares have become underutilized. The needs of the surrounding neighborhoods should be assessed and these plazas can take on new forms while still meeting the civic function as a neighborhood gathering place. Once the city's historic public spaces have been cared for, opportunities may be found to introduce new public spaces within the downtown.

Streets should be reclaimed as places for people. Iturbide Street (It Street) underwent a transformation several years ago in the effort to make it an entertainment district. These efforts have begun to make a difference, though progress has been slow.

### **Bring Back the Trolleys**

Laredo's small street car line operated for approximately 30 years, ceasing operation in 1918. There is community support to restore trolley service in the historic core of Laredo to serve regional residents, workers, and shoppers. Streetcars throughout the country complement heritage tourism.

### **Downtown Parking**

The general perception from public input from the community is that the availability of parking within the downtown area is inconvenient, improperly managed, and detracts shoppers from travelling to retail stores. Traffic congestion in the area only further exacerbates the issues of convenience. These two issues are related. A surprising amount of traffic can be generated by people who are circulating around blocks trying to find a place to park. These cruising cars create a mobile queue of vehicles waiting for curb vacancies since on-street parking can be far cheaper than off-street parking lots and garages.

### **Invest in Historic Neighborhoods First**

Most Laredoans agree that the city's core historic neighborhoods should be preserved, repaired, and completed. The neighborhoods themselves are still desirable as they are developed on the original street grid with walkable streets, sidewalks, central parks

with neighborhood amenities, and a range of housing types. However, many goods and services are no longer available in the immediate area and school quality is in some cases, low.

### **Highlight Laredo's Arts and Cultural Assets**

Laredo's long and proud history can be discovered at several institutions within the downtown such as the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum, the Border Heritage Museum, Museums of the Villa Antigua, Webb County Heritage Foundation, and the George Washington Birthday Museum. However, there is opportunity to create tourism programs and initiatives that would highlight the city's history and attract visitors interested in learning more about the city itself. Laredo is not yet a major destination for American tourism.

As the city's historical assets are revitalized, their role in history should be highlighted and made more a part of the day-to-day life of the city. Laredoans want to see the unique character of the city's historic core promoted as a distinctive place for people to visit from around the country.



# STRATEGIES

## Leveraging Streets

### **Enhancing the Street Environment**

Investment in downtown in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century created a vibrant urban fabric with a mix of uses, street-oriented buildings, proud architecture of distinctive character, and numerous public and civic gathering spaces.

A historic street grid, distinct and historic architecture, buildings located immediately adjacent to the sidewalk that create a sense of enclosure, and a unique geographic location, are each examples of the potential for downtown to become *the* place where people want to be.

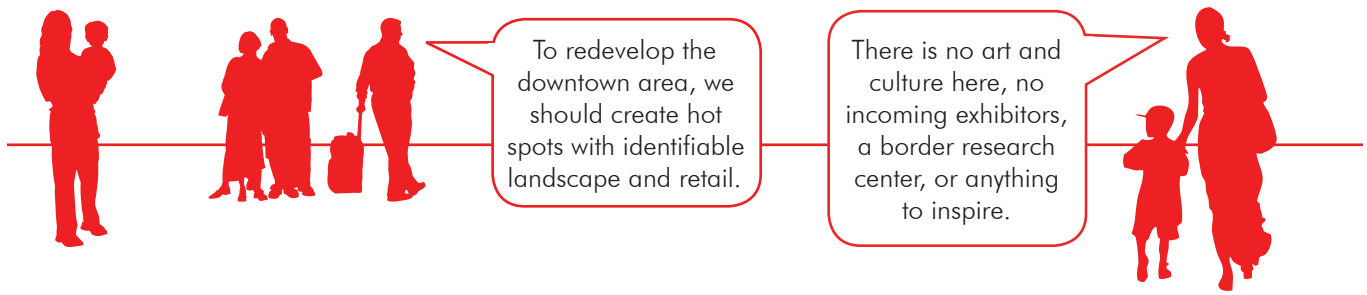
However, the downtown suffered from disinvestment as auto-oriented development on the edges of town became the preferred location to live and work for wealthier Laredoans. Further complicating the downtown story is the impact of international trade agreements and the relationship between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. Downtown Laredo was traditionally a popular shopping location for visitors from Nuevo Laredo, and much of the business conducted there depended on stable and constant trade with Mexico.

Redevelopment opportunities abound downtown; given appropriate incentives, developers can realize projects both large and small within the patchwork of individual properties, with each property contributing to a unified whole. These reinvestment efforts, which include adaptive reuse of historic properties, general façade improvements, and infill, should focus on providing housing options, office and retail opportunities. In particular, focus should be placed on renovating and leasing the upper floors of mixed-use buildings, many of which lay vacant. Redevelopment and infill efforts should be coordinated with streetscape improvements, including street trees, awnings, and street furniture. City investments in streetscape projects will inspire confidence on the part of developers and property owners, as well as attract visitors.

The recipe for a successful public realm involves a series of ingredients which, together, create a sense of place that is representative of local culture and tradition. Laredo already has many of the important parts that will help to create a thriving downtown.

Change does not happen overnight and requires a coordinated effort between city leaders, business owners, and residents. As with any long-term strategy, redevelopment of Laredo's in-town neighborhoods is a project including action steps to undertake immediately, and steps to address over a longer timeframe.

For example, while the sidewalks are widest and most continuous downtown, several are in need of repair, and on streets that will prioritize the pedestrian, more space is needed to accommodate the walkability required in this context. Also, building facades that line the street should be mostly transparent, specifically at the ground level, creating public spaces that are inviting and interesting. In addition, where possible, street trees or building elements like awnings and canopies can be added, providing shade and adding to the sense of enclosure. Last, restoring two-way traffic on downtown streets will increase circulation – a much needed improvement.



The following sequence illustrates the potential transformation of Convent Avenue between Iturbide and Lincoln Streets, following public and private investment. Key steps to implement over time, as opportunities arise, are illustrated. Each phase introduces elements that enhance the public realm.

### Convent Avenue Existing Conditions

Convent Avenue is a one-way street with a bike lane, all leading away from International Bridge 1 where people have just crossed the border. Shopfronts are filled with low-end stores and the streetscape feels harsh and in need of cleaning.

#### Step 1: Public Infrastructure

Initial improvements could restore two-way travel and add a streetcar to the right-of-way. If a feasibility study deems this project sustainable, the streetcar could share space with cars while providing an amenity to travelers and helping to bridge the gap between the border and the transit center. In the version depicted, a striped bike lane and the existing wide sidewalks complete the street.

#### Step 2: Fill Second Floors

Following the addition of a streetcar and improved transit, facade improvements can help to revitalize many of the existing buildings. Where absent, transparent storefronts should be added on the first story, while the stories above ground can be retrofitted into offices or residences, creating a diverse neighborhood for people of different lifestyles and incomes. This variety will transform downtown into an 18-hour destination serving the entire community. This transformation from a business district that functions only during traditional work hours will also generate far greater economic returns for the city.



Existing Conditions



Step 1: Public Infrastructure



Step 2: Fill Second Floors



### Step 3: Revitalization Continues

Long-term improvements include additional façade improvements and greater recruitment of retail, dining and entertainment options that appeal to residents, workers, and visitors. Improving signage will be essential. Signs in a downtown need to be sized for the pedestrian scale rather than the automobile.

### Streetcar Benefits

Streetcars have more advantages than just transportation. They signal to the public, to the property owners, to investors and developers, that something new is going to happen. They provide visitors a unique experience. Streetcar rails themselves calm traffic by signaling to drivers to move more cautiously. Streetcars also fit well into a multi-modal transit system, focusing on short trips and conveniently connecting with other rail and bus modes. Streetcars work in complement with other transit modes to improve regional mobility.

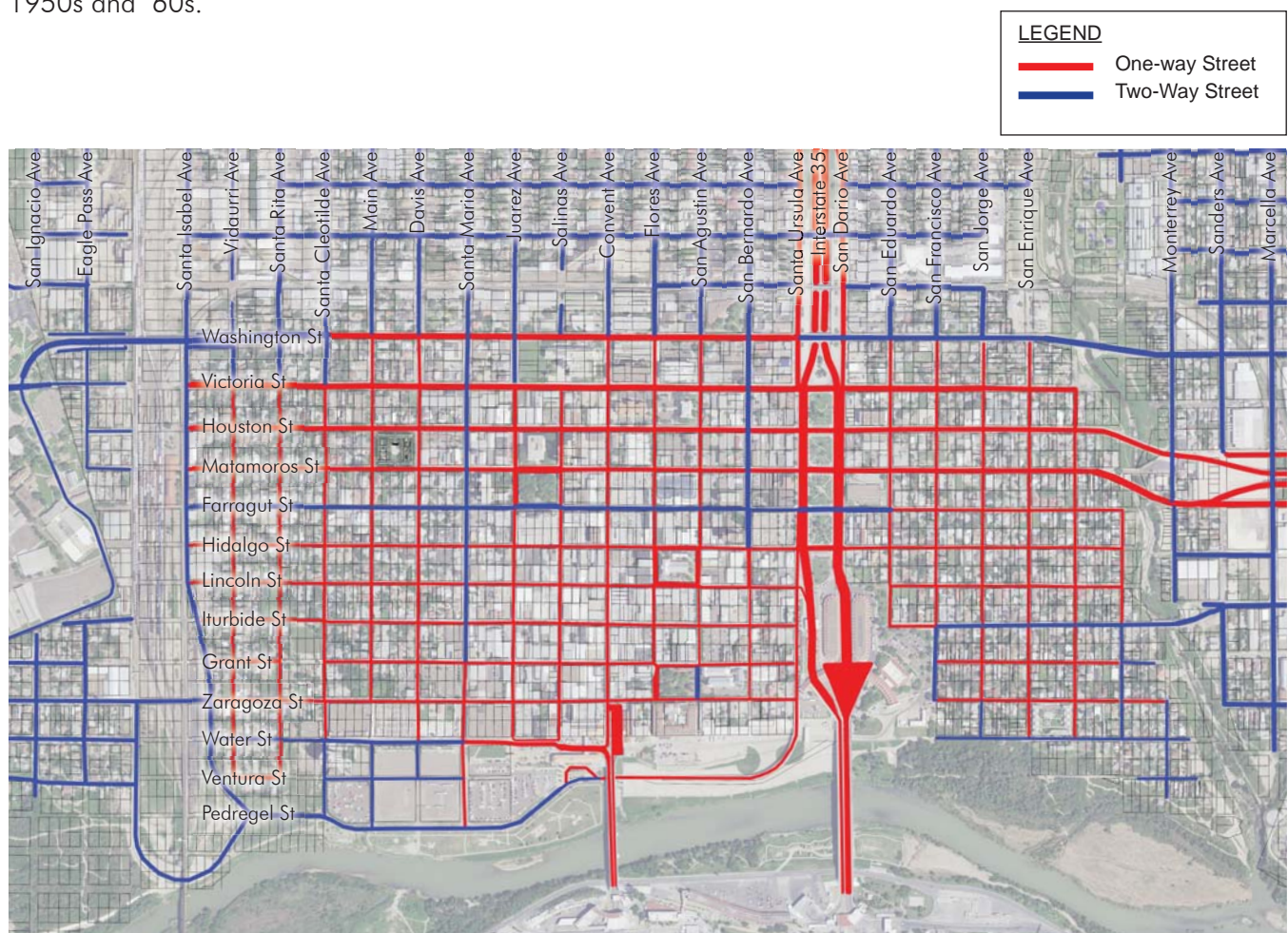


Step 3: Revitalization Continues

### Return One-way Streets to Two-way Operation

In the 1960s, the city's greatest concentration of traffic occurred at the Central Business District (CBD) and the International Bridge, which connects the Laredo CBD with the Nuevo Laredo CBD. At this time, Laredo's CBD was largely two-way streets. Congestion was attributed to the narrow streets, high demand, the small city blocks, left turning movements, poorly timed traffic signaling, on-street parking, delivery vehicles loading and unloading during peak hours, and the numerous corner bus stops [City of Laredo, 1964]. Increases in capacity were needed to accommodate the dramatic increases in travel by automobile in the 1950s and '60s.

Laredo, similar in recommendation and in action with many other cities across the nation, altered the circulation patterns in the downtown area by converting many of the streets from two-way to one-ways, imposed on-street parking restrictions, and restricted delivery truck loading/unloading times. The resulting reduction in "congestion" by making traffic move faster resulting in a reduction in retail growth. Additionally, the expansion of the interstate highway system put a virtual stop to traffic growth in most CBDs and many downtowns realized actual declines in traffic volume.



Existing downtown Circulation Pattern

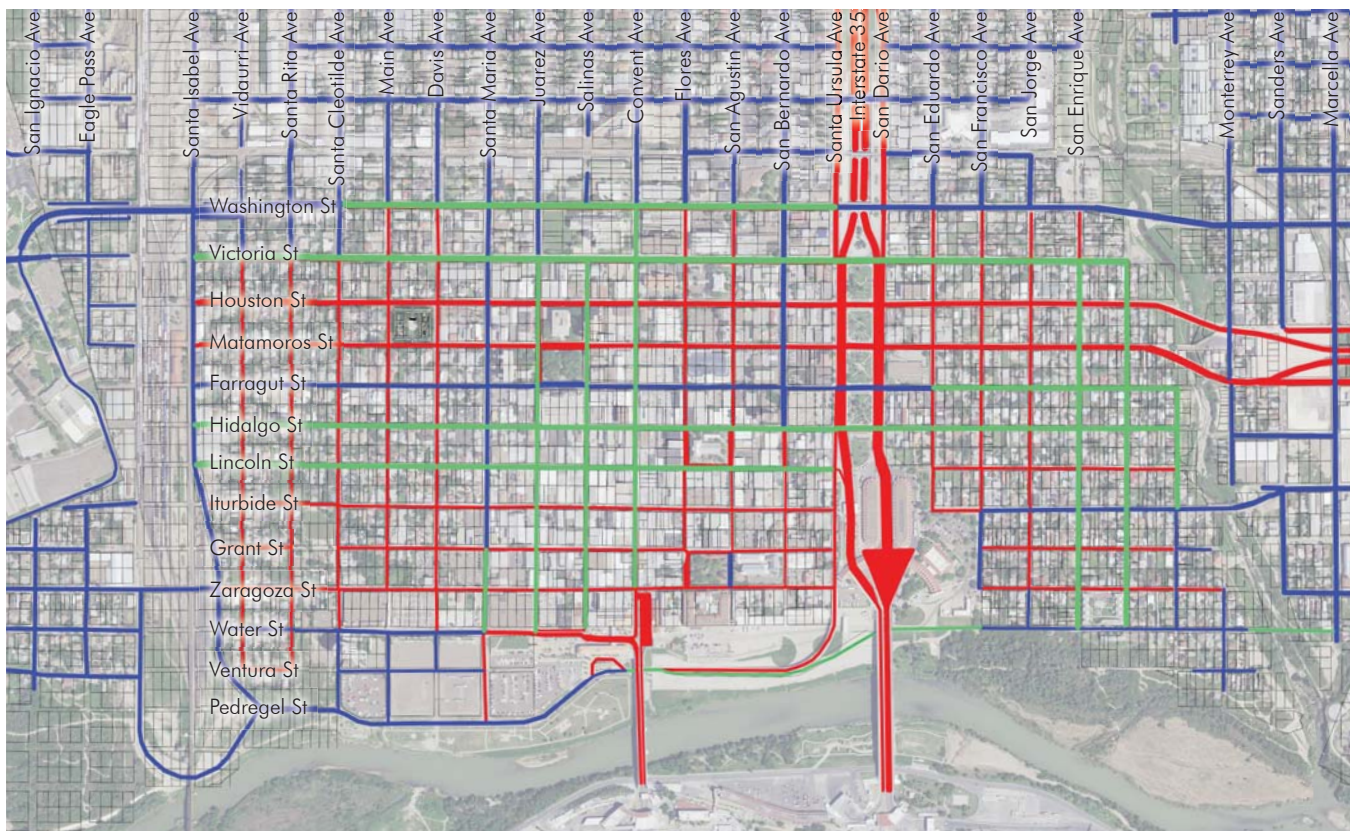


One-way streets are largely considered warranted when the Average Daily Traffic Count reaches between 10,000 and 20,000 vehicles per day. However, the vast majority of Laredo's downtown streets range in traffic counts from 500 to 3,000 Average Daily Vehicles. The highest trafficked street is Convent Street which diverges from the norm with a count of 4,500 [TxDOT, 2015]. All of these streets are well below the 10,000 vehicles per day threshold.

As part of a revitalization effort of the downtown commercial district, it is recommended that efforts be made to investigate and convert one-way streets back to two-way streets where warranted. The change in traffic circulation has shown correlations with improvements to the economic well-being for many commercial businesses by supporting increased retail sales and employment, increased pedestrian activity, and reduced vacant floor space. As of recently, many cities have begun to restore their street networks to two-way operation. Cities that have largely been successful in this effort include Denver, Dallas, Lubbock, Tampa, Des Moines, Kansas City, Sacramento, among others.

#### LEGEND

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <span style="color: red;">—</span> One-way Street  | <span style="color: green;">—</span> One-way Streets Converted to Two-Way Streets |
| <span style="color: blue;">—</span> Two-Way Street |   |

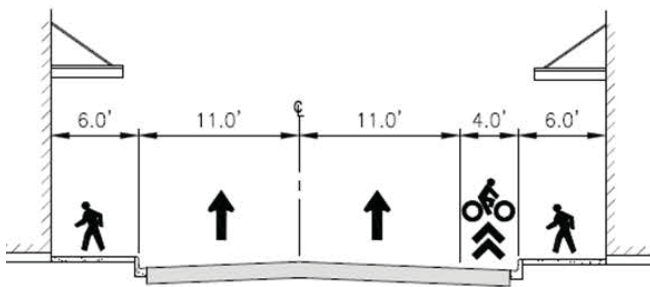


Proposed downtown Circulation Pattern

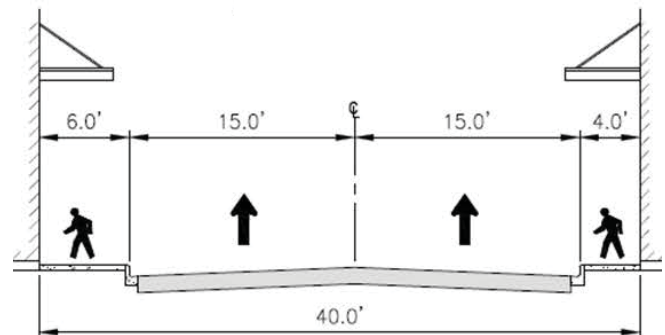
Two examples for how the existing right-of-way can be reconfigured from one way to two-way traffic are illustrated with Convent Avenue and Matamoros Street.

Convent Avenue, which is one of the most heavily trafficked streets downtown and is a gateway between the United States and Mexico, provides an opportunity to showcase Laredo's downtown and history. The typical street width is approximately 26 feet wide and is presently a one-way street northbound with a bicycle lane. The simple conversion of this street to a two-way road and the addition of an electric streetcar is illustrated.

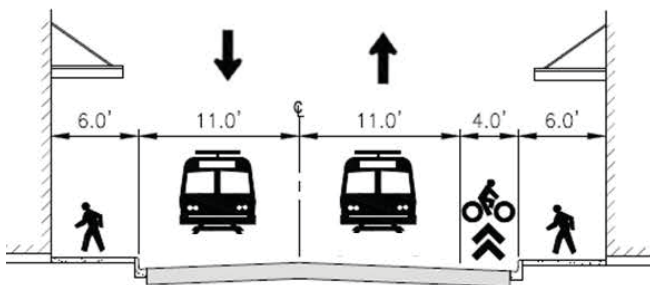
Matamoros Street, which is presently a one-way from west to east, is approximately 30 feet wide and provides ample room to convert to a two-way street with 10-foot lanes, on-street parking, and extending the southern sidewalk from 4 feet wide to a more comfortable 6 feet wide.



Convent Avenue - Existing Conditions

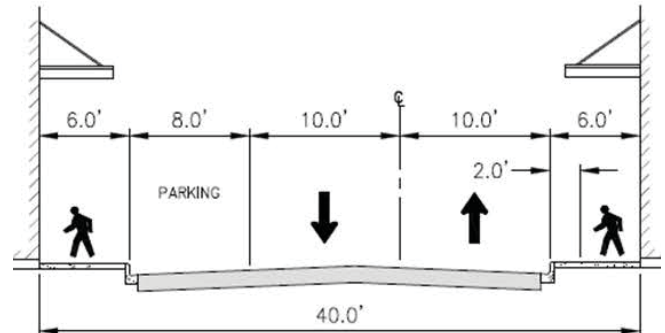


Matamoros Street - Existing Conditions



1-way to 2-way conversion with streetcar

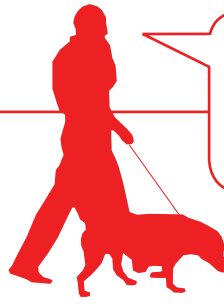
Convent Avenue, One-way to Two-way Street Conversion



Matamoros Street, One-way to Two-way Street Conversion



Revitalizing downtown should also focus on safety considerations.



Although we are in the US, please understand that we are a majority Hispanic city so this plan must reflect that.



Most of the streets downtown have a relatively narrow right-of-way, creating an intimate sense of place, similar to many of the best historic cities throughout the world. The narrow right-of-way can be an asset for placemaking, walkability, and bikability.

Given the narrow right-of-way, the notion of shared streets, or shared space, is particularly relevant. Shared space utilizes a similar hardscape material, from one building face to another, often at the same elevation; in many cases, sidewalks lack curbs, but they don't have to. The concept of shared space, seeks to integrate the street space for all modes of travel -- rather than separate modes by type. The concept has been successfully in place in major cities and small towns around the United States and the world; shared space is just one ingredient out of many that can help to revitalize the space between the buildings.



Shared space in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

### Tatangelo Parkway

Tangelo Parkway is a one block street segment that spurs off of a corner from San Agustin Plaza. This street has at times been pedestrian only and at other times a slow one way street. It is one of the few streets in the downtown to have shade trees, however there is no activity on either side of the street. The space is not being taken advantage of by the buildings that frame the space so it is often vacant and forgotten about.

The street can become a truly shared space. The street is nicely paved, but the sidewalks can feel narrow and broken. By making the street all one level with bollards to separate the pedestrian from vehicular space the entire street will feel more unified. The street can also easily be temporarily closed for events.



Details of shared space in St. Augustine, Florida.

In addition, the buildings that frame this space should open windows and doors onto this space to activate it and make it a lively attraction to the downtown.

Having a beautiful pedestrian space can help to enliven a downtown and become a beloved spot for the community. Similar pedestrian areas with revived buildings have become favorite wedding photo spots in other cities, a true mark of a unique and revitalizing downtown.



Tatangelo Parkway - Existing Conditions



Tatangelo Parkway - Proposed Conditions



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### **Additional Street Improvements**

Currently, downtown streets prioritize traffic lanes, creating an unsafe space for people to bike and walk. Many streets include wide travel lanes, which could be improved with additional parking and bike lanes.

Grant Street, west of the Plaza San Agustin, is a twenty-eight feet brick paved street, but only accommodates a driving lane and one row of on-street parking. Another row of parallel parking or two bike lanes (one counterflow) could be added. Lincoln Street, Flores Avenue, and Hidalgo Street are also overly wide around the Laredo Center for the Arts (Old City Hall). The parallel parking should be re-stripped as angled parking for efficient use of street space and to increase the parking supply.

Santa Maria Avenue, south of Houston Street, is another example of a street that encourages cars to travel at high speeds with wide lanes. Without moving the existing curb, Santa Maria Avenue could be re-stripped with a lane in each direction, and parallel parking on both sides. As Santa Maria Avenue passes south of Matamoros Street, the pavement width narrows and allows for two traffic lanes with one aisle of parallel parking.

San Bernardo Avenue widens north of Lincoln Street, creating wider lanes that induces higher speeds. These lanes could narrow and provide space for one bike lane. South of Hidalgo Street, San Bernardo Avenue widens to one twenty-seven foot wide driving lane. To accommodate additional parking and bike facilities, the addition of parallel parking and bike lanes should be incorporated on both sides of the street.

### **Downtown Access**

Access to the downtown has become limited not only due to one way streets, but also because of larger infrastructure that physically disconnects it from the rest of Laredo.

- The physical barrier of the Rio Grande and the international border prevent any access to the south except for across the international bridges.
- The railroad tracks to the west often have trains sitting on the track blocking access to the west with the exception of Washington Street, which bridges over the tracks on the northern edge of downtown and a small, intimidating surface street, San Francisco Javier Avenue, which goes under the tracks by the edge of the Rio Grande. The only surface road connection is Zaragoza Street which connects the Saint Peter's neighborhood to the Fort McIntosh LCC campus.
- Railroad tracks also impede travel to the north. Although the grid still connects to the north, it is often blocked with train cars multiple times throughout the day and night.
- And finally to the east, International Bridge 2 and Interstate 35 disconnect the El Azteca neighborhood from the Central Business District.

All of these barriers isolate the downtown and make it feel unapproachable to the community, even if there are things for them to do in the downtown.

Opportunities to increase access to the downtown should be sought. Multiple options have been considered, but none will be an easy fix. Some of the possibilities to consider follow.

### **Connect to Fort McIntosh**

Create a new street connection from Fort McIntosh to the downtown at Iturbide Street. Whether this connection would be a surface street, or bridge over the tracks should be studied as a bridge can disrupt the neighborhood for a few blocks on each side while a surface connection may not be very useful if it is often blocked by trains.

The downtown area should be more clean and lively. In addition, the buildings should be restored to their original glory.



Develop Azteca, El Cuatro, and downtown with affordable housing and small business.



### New Connection North

Numerous discussions have occurred about how to establish a north-south connection between downtown and the San Bernardo neighborhoods. Solutions have taken the form of either building a bridge over, or going under the railroad tracks. Streets that have been considered include Convent Avenue and Santa Maria Avenue. If this connection is to be pursued, the effect on the homes and businesses for two blocks on either side of the railroad tracks needs to be considered. A look at the effect the Washington Street bridge over the tracks can be used as an example. Access to these lots will be restricted or eliminated. This effect should be weighed against the benefit of additional access to the downtown that is not impeded by the heavy flow of trains along the railroad.

### On-ramp South

The closest ramp to get onto I-35 headed south is at Madison Street, nearly a mile and a half from the downtown and the railroad bridge crossing. If an additional on ramp could be provided closer to the downtown, it could increase access to the downtown by allowing people to go under the train track instead of having to sit and wait for it to pass. The on-ramp would ideally be accessed near Benavides Street. It takes approximately two blocks to ramp from Santa Ursula Street level to the level of I-35.

### Access East

A plan to make a multiway boulevard from the end of I-35 to the border has been developed. Making this area a premier, pedestrian-friendly, civic space can help to mentally bridge the gap between the El Azteca neighborhood and the downtown. This proposal, known as the “Boulevard of the Americas” is discussed further as a Signature Civic Space later in this chapter.

### Coordinated Train Stoppage

The city should work with the rail operators to better coordinate where, when, for how long, and how often trains are stopped blocking surface roads to minimize the impact and inconvenience downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods.

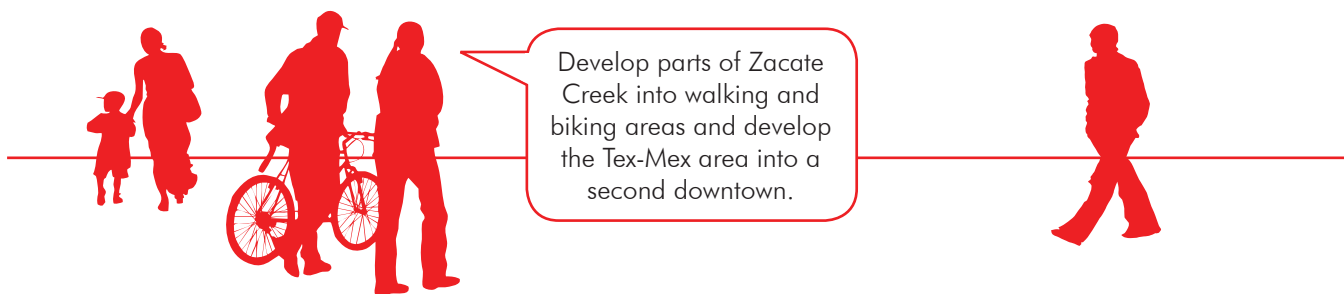
### Street Cleaning Campaign

The streets of Laredo’s downtown feel old, worn, and dirty. A campaign to clean the streets should be undertaken. Pressure Cleaning a street can help to breathe new life into an area and make it feel less intimidating. Streets near the new mall and Iturbide Street should be first priorities for cleaning. Street cleaning of downtown streets could be coordinated through the Central Laredo Municipal Management District.



Clean streets make a first impression that the downtown is open for business.





### It Street as an Entertainment District

Iturbide Street (It Street) underwent a major streetscape overhaul several years ago to add trees, bus shelters, benches, and wider sidewalks. In addition, the city offers many incentives from facade improvement grants, elimination of fees during construction, waived permit fees, among others to entice people to open bars and restaurants along It Street from San Bernardo Avenue to Flores Street. These efforts should be highly publicized and continued.

Although the streetscape was revamped, it also needs to be kept up. The street should be regularly cleaned and occasionally pressure washed, and areas around trees should be maintained to prevent it from appearing dingy. This could be coordinated through the Central Laredo Municipal Management District.

### Traffic Signs and Signaling

As streets are narrowed and made two-ways, the flow of traffic should still be considered. Four way stop signs and small roundabouts should be considered to allow the safe, slow flow of traffic along with safety for pedestrians. If traffic signals are warranted at an intersection, they should be coordinated with other intersections. The concept of coordinated signal timing is discussed in more detail in the Mobility Chapter of this comprehensive plan.

Street name signs are oriented toward motorists on one-ways streets, not facing all sides. This situation creates a difficult wayfinding environment for pedestrians. It is recommended that street signs should always face all directions.



Iturbide Street

# Historic Preservation

## Take Stock of Laredo's Historic Resources

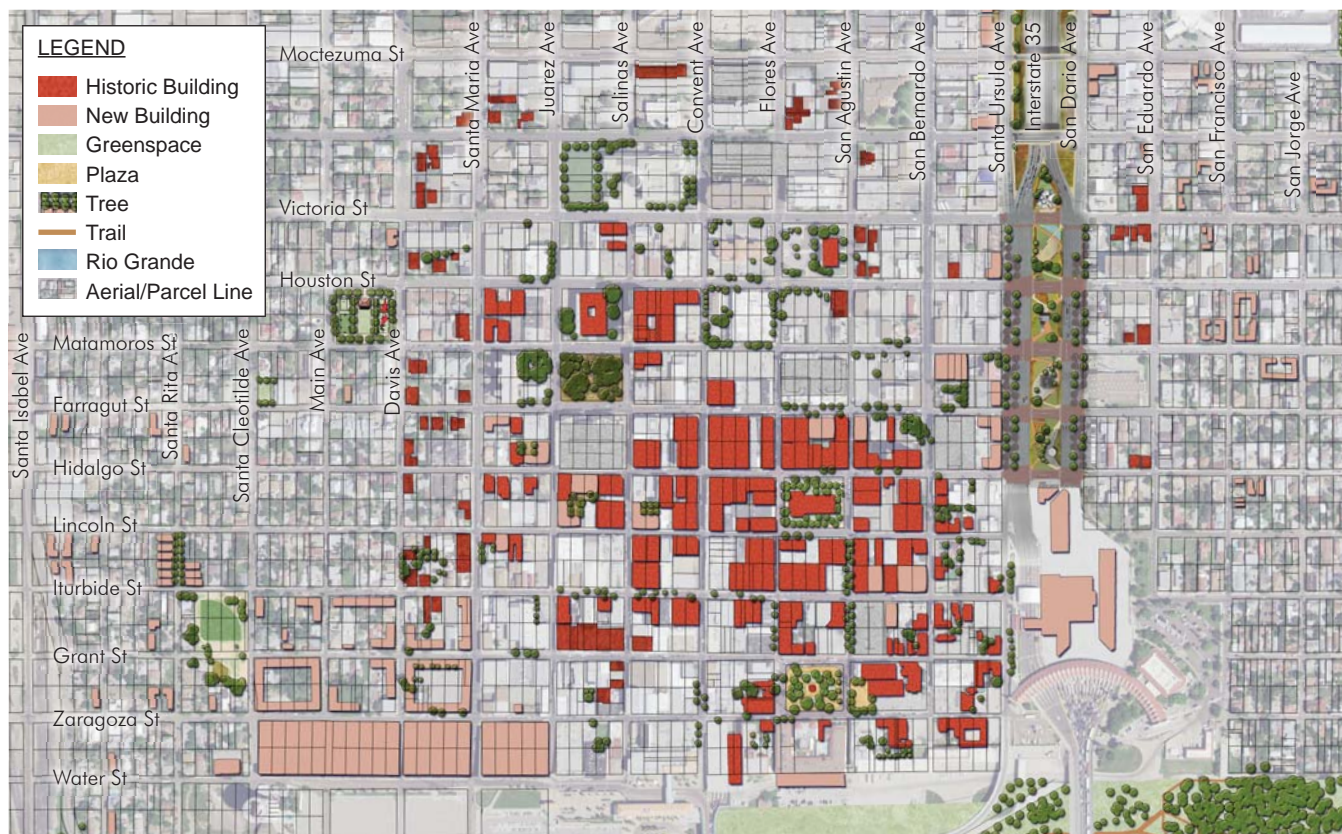
As a first step towards strengthening Laredo's sense of place and community identity and spurring economic development and revitalization, the city must have a baseline survey of all historic resources that exist. Some preliminary surveys have been conducted. These initial surveys should be confirmed, updated, and expanded to include buildings in the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

### Step 1: Conduct Blitz Surveys

The best way to undertake a comprehensive historic resources survey is to undertake "blitz," or sketch surveys, that are comprised of photographs, quick notes, and addresses for candidate historic properties.

These blitzes can be organized by the historic museum, city staff, or LCC, but the field work itself is conducted by community historic preservation partners and concerned citizens who are simply doing a first round of identification. The organizing entity can compile the materials collected by volunteer groups and use them as a basis to revisit properties and conduct further research to identify candidates for historic designation.

From this survey, city staff can create an endangered building list, comprised of the city's most at-risk properties. It would then be possible to prioritize actions such as local designation of key properties, public awareness campaigns, outreach to property owners, and financial incentive packages.



Significant historic structures in the central business district



## Step 2: Gather Supporting Documentation

Once an initial blitz survey has been conducted, it would be possible to prioritize specific neighborhoods, streets, and buildings that are either particularly endangered or merit special attention based on historic significance or architectural distinction. Documentation supporting historic designation of these places should be gathered, including original architectural drawings of the buildings, and/or drawings of subsequent renovations, additions, and remodelings.

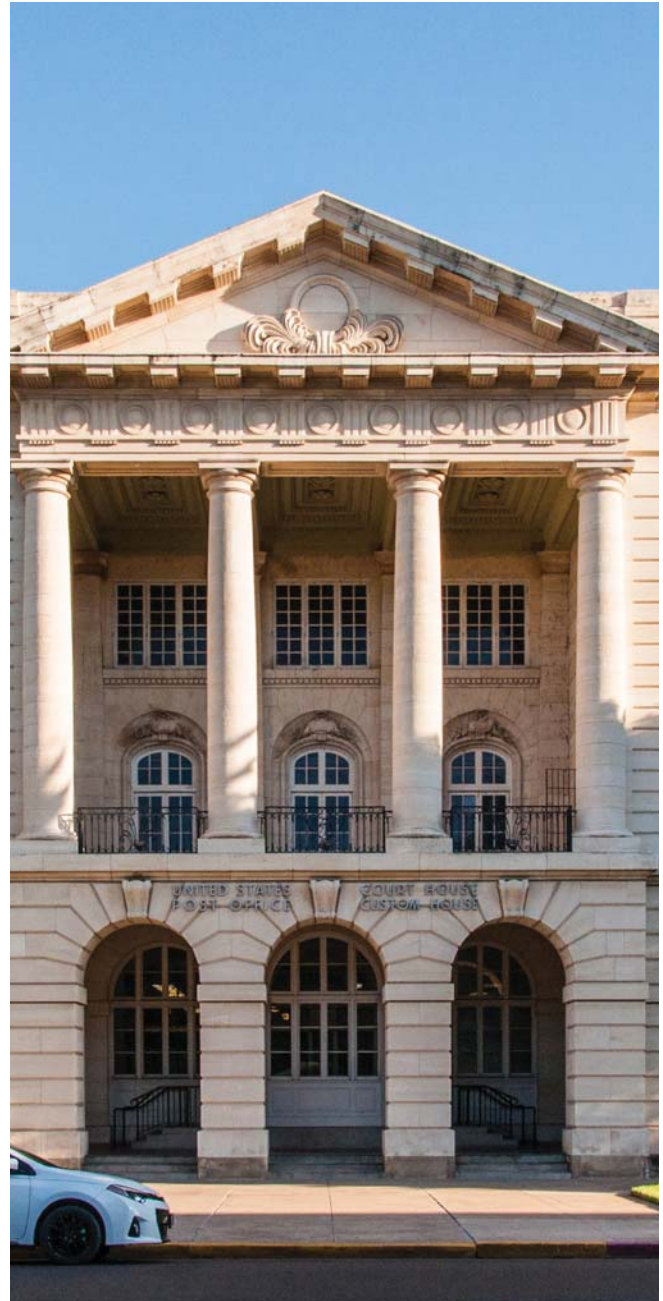
Oral history should be gathered from Laredoans that remember the early days of these buildings, if possible. Sanborn maps and any original plat maps should be gathered to help understand the original urban form of neighborhoods, as well as the placement of historic buildings and some of their distinguishing features. Historic city phone directories can aid in determining residency as well as the types of businesses that were located in specific buildings.

Finally, historic photographs and paintings should be gathered to determine the original appearance of the building as well as features such as landscaping, streetscape and road design.

## Use Historic Landmarks to Leverage Economic Development

The City of Laredo is home to a significant amount of intact historic urban fabric, particularly a strong showing of American mercantile buildings within the Central Business District downtown. These resources can be used to anchor new development and leverage economic development initiatives.

There are numerous other historic resources in Laredo that could be restored and put to work in a similar fashion, such as St. Peter's Plaza and other historic parks. Historic areas such as El Azteca, Old Mercado, St. Peter's, and El Cuatro could be used to leverage smaller-scale infill and adaptive reuse projects such as mixed-use buildings, small apartment



Post Office is a Neoclassical Building from 1907.

buildings, rowhouses, and new single-family homes. Architectural guidelines or a pattern book should be created to guide appropriate new infill development.

### **Emphasize Qualitative Standards When Designating Post-WWII Landmarks**

Historic preservation has had great success in preserving compact, walkable, mixed-use districts from the pre-WWII era, particularly downtowns and 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century neighborhoods. Preservation has proven to have positive environmental and social benefits for towns and cities across the country.

However, as the decades progress, the 50-year threshold for qualification as a historic structure or district is opening up more and more post-WWII construction for preservation, including public housing, the interstate highway system, and monotonous automobile-oriented suburban sprawl. The environmental and social consequences of preserving these auto-dependent places could be very serious. Historic designation of auto-oriented sprawl will hinder future possibilities for walkable retrofit, and could lock these areas into auto dependence for the long term.

Preserving post-WWII neighborhoods simply to avoid retrofit towards greater walkability or density should not be supported, since these neighborhoods require high levels of energy consumption and will not prove adaptable. In these cases, it is important that historic and architectural merit are weighed with environmental and social considerations.

### **Use Discernment When Evaluating the “Compatible but Distinct” Clause**

Historic preservationists, according to current thinking, value contemporary design that is “of its time” and is “compatible but distinct” from historic places. Sleek glass boxes may not be appropriate as an addition to Georgian mansions. Consider urban infill projects that have similar but distinct design.



Rio Grande Plaza hotel built in 1975.



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This ideological preference for contrast in historic environments should be kept in check. Oftentimes historic buildings were designed to be environmentally adapted, with operable windows spaced for cross-ventilation, sloped roofs provided to shed rain and snow, and arcades built to shade the ground floor and passing pedestrians. Moreover, most historic buildings were designed to be street-oriented and serve a pedestrian population. These important lessons should not be thrown away in contemporary additions, reconstruction, and infill, and they definitely should not be thrown away for the sake of fulfilling a standard to be “compatible but distinct.”

When weighing the benefits of “distinction” in design, the end goal should not be aesthetic distinction for its own glory, but instead should consider economic, environmental, or social benefits of distinction. If the contemporary design fails to improve upon the economic, environmental, and social contributions of the original historic design, then it should not be considered. Designers should integrate the economic, environmental, and social contributions of the neighborhood.

### **Create, Enforce and Monitor a Vacant Building Ordinance**

The city should create a specific plan for economic revitalization that provides incentives for addressing vacant and underutilized properties is the creation of a Vacant Building Ordinance, which would be applied to the city’s most impacted neighborhoods. A Vacant Building Ordinance would require property owners to register their vacant buildings with the city and have them inspected by officials, create a long-term plan for the building’s use, bring the buildings up to fire and safety codes, maintain the façade and exterior walls, and finally, provide insurance coverage for the buildings.

The ordinance should be designed to make it harder and more expensive to maintain a vacant building,

therefore pressuring property owners to occupy their buildings, sell them, or in some cases, (only if the building is determined to have no historic value,) demolish them. The target of the Vacant Building Ordinance should be buildings in central Laredo; it has the potential to rejuvenate historic neighborhoods and improve the image of the city.

It is important that the Vacant Building Ordinance is actively enforced as a powerful tool for revitalization. Equally important, the effects of the ordinance should be monitored closely to ensure that it does not have unintended consequences, such as insensitive alterations to historic façades, including alteration of doors and windows, or destruction of historic features for the installation of safety upgrades. This is a particular risk for buildings that have no historic designation. First and foremost, it is critical to monitor the requests for demolition of vacant properties to make sure that a Vacant Building Ordinance does not result in the demolition of significant historic buildings.

### **Reform Tax Appraisal System for Income Properties**

A great majority of downtown’s historic multi-story commercial buildings are vacant or underutilized. The primary influence on this phenomenon is the State of Texas’ tax appraisal system. This system allows income properties to be appraised according to the income produced annually by the property, rather than according to the value of the property. For commercial and mixed-use buildings, this system rewards property owners who make little or no income on their property by charging them very low taxes, sometimes lower than the taxes paid on a modest single-family home. This system provides owners with incentives to keep their buildings vacant, or to only rent the ground floor for retail and to leave the upper floors vacant. Reform of this tax appraisal phenomenon will require examination of local appraisal practices and may require reform of State law.

Cultivate the youth.  
We need an identity-  
we can be San  
Antonio, Portland,  
or New Orleans.



Continue to educate and  
explain both the micro  
and macro implications  
and expectations to the  
community. Look into  
“design for social impact.”

### **Continue and Expand Facade Improvement Program**

Laredo has a facade improvement program to assist building owners, particularly within the downtown, with the cost of repairing and upgrading their facades to improve the public realm. While some businesses have taken advantage of this program to great affect, a campaign to get other building owners to participate should be encouraged.



La Posada hotel

### **Update the City's Historic Preservation Design Guidelines**

In order to better assist property owners, the city should take stock of its existing Historic Preservation Design Guidelines and assess how well they are functioning. These Guidelines should be strengthened or updated as needed, or in the case of historic districts that do not currently have their own design guidelines, they should be created. In addition, the Historic District and Landmark Board, which is appointed by the Mayor and City Council, should be required to meet minimum qualifications so that it is known that they can assess and advise on the difficult task of preserving and enabling the enhancement of the city's historic assets. Consideration should be given to following a model as prescribed by in cities such as El Paso, Texas, with qualifications as follows:

All members shall have demonstrated special interest, knowledge, and experience in the architectural, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, ethnic and/or political history of the City of Laredo, and shall include two architects. No one business or professional interest shall constitute a majority membership of the Landmark Board. To the extent available in the community, professionals from the disciplines of architecture, engineering, construction, history (such as urban planning, American studies, American civilization, cultural geography, or cultural anthropology), architectural history, urban planning, archaeology, or other disciplines related to historic preservation shall be given preference for appointment for any membership positions.

### **Utilize Form-Based Codes for New Construction in Historic Neighborhoods**

Often one school of thought in historic preservation does not want new construction to mirror historic buildings. However, the placement of buildings and the way that they respond to climactic conditions are lessons we can learn from.



Utilizing a Form-Based Code for new construction in historic neighborhoods can allow buildings to be distinct but fit in with the character of the surrounding community. The regulatory process can also be simplified as new construction would not need to go through historic preservation board review.

### **Revise the Approval Process to Make it Easier to Rehabilitate Historic Structures**

Downtown property owners describe a difficult approval process which discourages rehabilitation. Rehabilitation requires city support and a positive, flexible attitude. City processes and their administration should be reviewed and discussed with elected officials and city staff.

### **Develop a Rehabilitation Code**

The city or State should develop a rehabilitation code to facilitate the reuse of both historic and non-historic buildings. The code should be in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. North Carolina and Maryland have developed rehabilitation codes that could be used as models.

### **Educate Property Owners**

Another serious roadblock to historic preservation is ignorance. Many property owners in Laredo do not know that Historic Preservation programs and facade improvement programs exist, or if they do, they view them as a burden on their property rather than a benefit. It is important to educate property owners on the multiple benefits of historic preservation – economic, social, cultural, environmental, and aesthetic. In addition, property owners should be educated on the tools and resources available to help them finance the preservation and restoration of historic buildings and to make responsible decisions on how to properly restore or alter these structures.

In order to entice more property owners to seek historic designation for their property and to ensure that more properties are successfully restored and re-used, it is important that the toolbox of historic preservation incentives is well-understood by the public. Incentives, such as federal, state, and local tax exemptions and grants, should be packaged in an understandable and user-friendly manner so

that property owners can be sure what their options are for funding rehabilitation work. Financial, logistical, and technical resources available to property owners should be advertised. This promotion can be done through the city's historic preservation website, through informational brochures, Central Laredo Municipal Management District workshops, and through direct communication with owners of currently-designated or should-be-designated historic properties.



Improved building facade with funding from the facade improvement program on Iturbide Street.

# Parking and Downtown Prosperity

Making it easier for customers, workers and residents to travel to and from downtown Laredo is important for future prosperity. Today, transit options for those traveling to and from downtown Laredo are quite limited. Therefore most people will continue, at least for the immediate future, to arrive by car. The current parking options in and around downtown's historic center can make finding a parking space a challenge.

There is ample parking supply in the downtown and within a five minute walk of most businesses. However, there are several reasons people feel that parking downtown is inadequate which can be common to many downtowns:

- Visitors do not know where to park.
- Parking may be located a block or two away from their desired destination.
- The downtown districts need better signage and wayfinding to alert visitors of public parking lots.

- Better lighting and sidewalk improvements to create safe walking environment throughout the day and night.
- Activate the private parking supply to be better utilized.
- Problematic parking during events and festivals.
- Time restrictions on parking that are either too long to support customer turnover during shopping hours or too short to support dining and entertainment uses.
- Strict parking times and strong enforcement can make people feel unwelcome downtown if they are even a few minutes late returning to their car.

Getting people to come downtown is essential to the prosperity of the city center. Growing the downtown population will only help to a certain extent. Downtown needs to become a destination for residents from all over the city. The following are some ways to address parking concerns in the downtown.



Downtown Parking Supply



## Parking Management

To relieve traffic congestion and efficiently maximize the use of available parking, downtown districts may consider, and are not limited to, the following strategies:

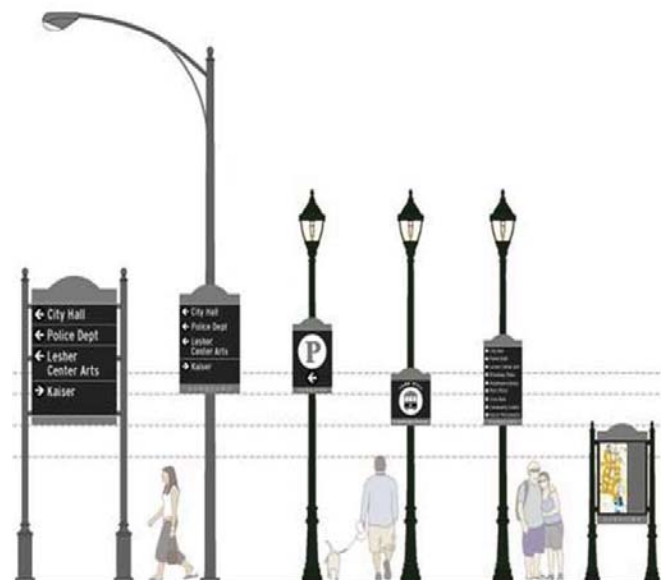
- Conduct a parking survey to understand the reasons for people going downtown and tabulate the distribution of uses with respect to shopping, dining, work, residents, errands/appointments, tourists, and other uses. As the downtown becomes more vibrant, this survey can be updated to ensure strategies to adequately address parking are being pursued.
- Perform a parking survey to understand the parking patterns for customers and employees regarding the use of parking lots and on-street parking with respect to distance from their destination. This data may illustrate that employees often park within one block of their destinations, while customers may park two or more blocks away, circumventing business and parking turnover.
- In business areas, consider giving priority use of the on-street supply to customers, visitors, and loading needs. In residential areas, the on-street supply should be managed for residential needs.
- Manage the pricing of meters to maintain 15 percent vacancy at all times—which may translate to high meter fees during peak demand and reduced rates at evening hours. The effect for a retail district is that it can improve convenience, increase shopper turnover and improve economic vitality.
- Look into utilizing a mobile parking app for all municipal spaces including on-street, in lots, and in garages. Allow private lot owners to add their lots to the app as well to encourage a wider use of the app and make parking and rates downtown predictable. Examples of mobile apps include Pay-by-Phone and ParkMobile which allow people alternate ways to pay, receive reminders of when

their parking time is about to expire, and add additional time remotely if necessary.

- Reinvest parking revenues with improvements in such things as sidewalks, shade trees, lighting, street furniture and street cleaning to improve the vibrancy of the district.
- Encourage pedestrian activity by organizing the downtown area into parking sheds, which are walkable sectors that collectively address the parking demand needs by sharing municipal parking lots and on-street parking among the multiple users.

## Signage and Wayfinding

Initiate a wayfinding signage program for the downtown. Wayfinding and signage should help people get to and navigate the downtown and direct people to pools of parking such as municipal garages and lots. The community should create a unified vision through signage to promote downtown. Wayfinding signage will assist residents and visitors with the location of shopping, parking, historic properties, and other areas of interest as well as convenient parking.



### Examples of signage and wayfinding

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### **Adding New Downtown Parking Supply**

Downtown Laredo is an attractive destination in large part because of its highly-walkable, compactly-woven network of blocks and streets. While many historic downtowns in the United States have lost substantial portions of their building fabric to make way for parking, downtown Laredo has retained its building stock. Streets are continuously shaped by well-activated facades with plentiful doors and windows.

Exploration of additional parking options to supplement the current supply would be useful as Laredo looks to increase the prosperity of downtown by attracting greater numbers of customers, workers and residents. At the same time, Laredo should protect the continuity of its downtown building fabric as a top priority in any initiative to add new parking supply.

### **Parking at the Periphery**

As downtown is a highly walkable environment, it is not necessary to locate new parking immediately adjacent to the uses it serves. Parking can be located several blocks away and still be perfectly functional. Parking located some distance from the uses it serves in fact has the distinct benefit in a downtown environment of increasing foot traffic, which is helpful for increasing the prosperity of shopfront uses.

### **Parking Structures vs. Surface Parking**

As parking supply requires a geometrically larger amount of land area, surface parking lots in a downtown environment are especially destructive to the continuity of urban fabric. While more expensive per space to construct, parking structures are a better option to compress the footprint of new parking supply and result in lower land cost. The reduced footprint of parking structures can make new parking supply far easier to insert into the fine-grained block structure of Laredo and reduce the displacement of active urban fabric.

### **Design of Downtown Parking Structures**

Once parking structures have been located on the periphery of the downtown and have been compressed into as small a footprint as possible, several other techniques can be used to integrate them into the urban fabric as seamlessly as possible.

Parking garages do not have the same enlivening effect in an urban environment as other buildings housing uses such as residential, office, and commercial. Parking structures do not provide “eyes on the street” and if they are located adjacent to a sidewalk can have a deadening effect on the vitality of a public space of the street.

Where possible, parking structures should be placed in a mid-block location where they are not adjacent to the sidewalk. Enough room should be reserved between parking structures and the street for a “liner” of buildings containing uses. These uses can then face the street with regular doors and windows and the continuity of the urban fabric remains unbroken.

If the space available does not permit the siting of a parking structure away from the sidewalk, then special care must be taken in the design of the garage itself. A parking garage located adjacent to a sidewalk should have active normal uses integrated into it on the ground floor. These ground floor uses should be designed with shopfronts, signage, awnings, and other details to preserve as continuous a streetscape as possible from the point of view of pedestrians. They could be designed with infrastructure to allow the permanent placement of food trucks lining the edge of the street.

Upper floors of the parking structure, while perhaps not housing active uses, can be designed with façade details to reduce disruption of façade continuity as much as possible.





## Increased Downtown Potential

### **Downtown Malls Can Help an Entire Area**

A mall or shopping destination located downtown has the potential to stimulate interest and economic vitality within the urban core. In Laredo, the new mall, an \$80 million investment, located along the Rio Grande, in the historic center of the city, provides 77 new stores and ample services. The draw of the new center of commerce has many advantages, including local, regional and international appeal.

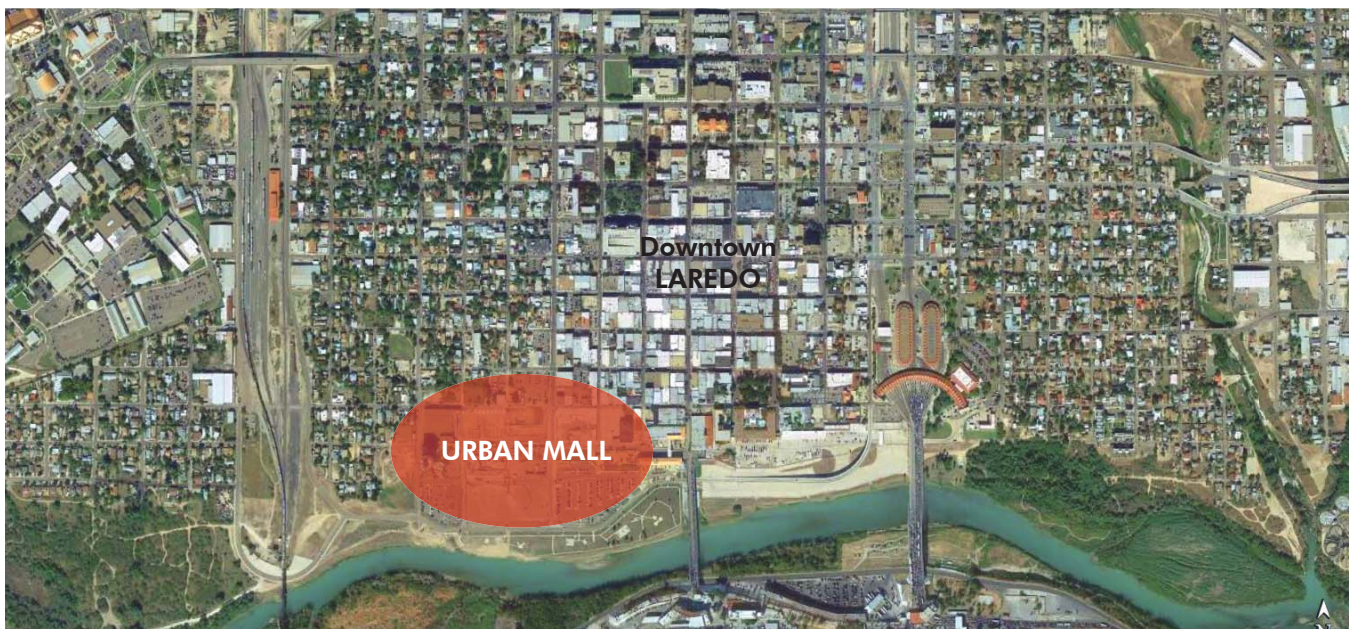
### **Economic Development and Revitalization**

In the past, some cities have opted to locate new malls near the edge of town, far away from the city center; the result has often proven to be economically disastrous for historic centers. Urban malls, located within or adjacent to a downtown, provide an alternate model. Examples like City Place in West Palm Beach, Florida, and Providence Place in Providence, Rhode Island, have stimulated economic activity and contributed to a renewed interest in their downtowns.

An urban mall is a natural draw for many in Laredo, and there will also be international interest, given the highly accessible location. In order to have a thriving downtown, a variety of destinations are needed. In addition to many of the unique cultural organizations that exist in downtown Laredo, the mall now offers another reason for folks to travel to the city center.



Laredo's new urban mall



Aerial image displaying the new mall site, located immediately adjacent to downtown

### The “Spillover Effect”

Prior to the construction of City Place, the urban mall in West Palm Beach, the adjacent historic center was in need of revitalization. Many historic buildings had an authentic character, but needed improvements. The economic success of the mall “spilled over” to adjacent streets, catalyzing reinvestment and providing a natural extension to downtown. Clematis Street, the historic central spine of the city, benefited from many unique, new businesses as well as upgrades to building facades and the public realm. Today, a symbiotic relationship exists between the urban mall and the historic city center in West Palm Beach; the fact that the city has also invested in public space and streetscape improvements also illustrates the impact that a revitalization effort can have in a neighborhood or downtown, when both public and private entities work together.

### Walkability & The Urban Mall

Walkable places are also economically vibrant places. In an environment where pedestrians feel comfortable, they are likely to enjoy more of the local businesses than they would if they were driving through the neighborhood. Pedestrian access to the things that make Laredo interesting must remain; ensuring that the new mall remains connected to the districts cultural programs and institutions in the downtown will help to create a dynamic city center that works--because a real variety of uses and services populate the area.



City Place, West Palm Beach, Florida, a thriving downtown mall providing services and citywide economic benefit. It is linked to the primary downtown street with two trolley routes.



The success of City Place has “spilled over” to nearby historic streets in West Palm Beach, Florida.





### **A Park-Once Environment**

Another benefit that results from an urban mall and a nearby downtown involves the creation of a “park-once” environment.

The notion of a park-once location includes ample designated parking areas for those that are traveling to their destination by car. Once parked at their destination (at the mall or in the downtown area), people become pedestrians, so long as the streets and the public realm are safe, interesting and connected to other places. Providence Place Mall in Rhode Island has helped the historic center to return to a lively destination; its location has also encouraged a park-once environment.

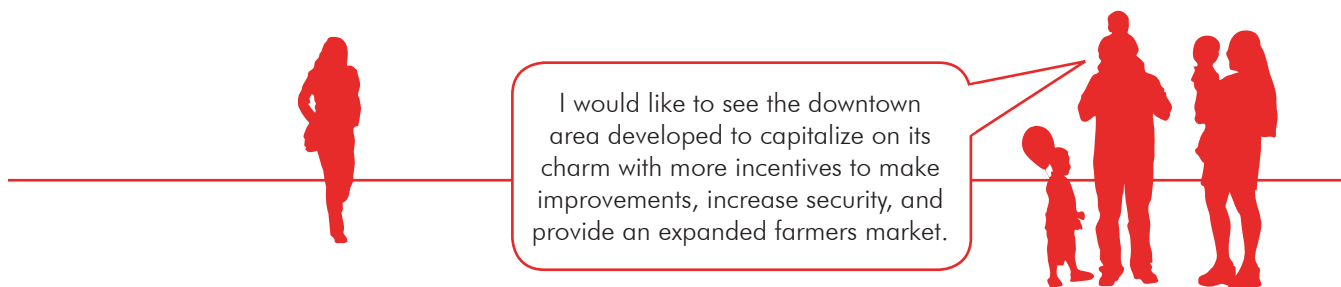
The new mall in Laredo is likely to have a similar impact with parking provided on site adjacent to the downtown streets. Street improvements and the addition of new public spaces can supplement the new facilities, creating an environment where visitors park once and then walk around to access desired services.



Weybosset Street near Providence Place Mall



The mall in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, has stimulated revitalization in the historic city center.



### **Convention and Conference Center**

Laredo has a desire to create a convention and conference center in the downtown. The needs and subsequent siting of the convention and conference center should be carefully considered. Convention and conference centers often function internally and require a lot of space for open convention center floor space as well as smaller meeting rooms. Convention and conference centers are often sprawling internal structures. If not designed and treated carefully, it could have a deadening effect, instead of an enlivening effect on the downtown.

What ever location is eventually selected, the following should be considered:

- Carefully consider space needs
- Consider alternate methods of accommodating space. Perhaps the convention and conference center could utilize a multistory structure to require a smaller footprint
- Investigate the possibility of the convention and conference center utilizing multiple buildings.

Some of these considerations were taken into account when creating the shopping outlet which also has some of the same problematic siting concerns. In the case of the mall, the streets still penetrate through the site which helps to maintain the integrity of the downtown block structure and provides additional opportunity to let the economic impact of the shopping outlet to “spill” into the downtown.

### **Location #1: On the City’s Edge Facing the River**

The area is at the elevation of the downtown, above the flood zone. This area could be expanded over river vega area to extend the footprint of downtown. The location could accommodate incredible views across the river and into Mexico. Parking would be below on the river level, accessible directly from the down ramp on Santa Ursula.

### **Location #2: El Rincon Diablo**

The location is adjacent to the downtown mall that was recently completed. At this location, parking supply with the mall could be shared. However, this may require the destruction of numerous neighborhood buildings, will likely result in a design that requires the vacation of streets, and is on the outer edge of the downtown, separating its success from the CBD.

### **Location #3: Central Business District**

Locating the convention and conference center within the central business district would be ideal and mutually beneficial for the convention center and the surrounding businesses. However, the small block structure and prevalence of numerous historic structures may make it difficult to adequately accommodate the convention center space needs.



# Signature Civic Spaces

## **Boulevard of the Americas**

The Boulevard for the Americas is a plan for the four blocks between the one-way pair of San Dario Avenue and Santa Ursula Avenue from International Bridge 2 to the start of Interstate 35. This four block segment is envisioned to be a signature civic space.

The plan envisions turning this segment into a multiway boulevard. Separated access lanes will allow on-street parking next to businesses that face this street with a row of street trees separating this local traffic from through-lanes heading toward the border or tuning to head farther south down Highway 83.

Each of the intersections is envisioned to have paving patterns that bring more attention from drivers to the cross streets in a effort to make the whole area more pedestrian-friendly.

Making this space less intimidating for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists can have positive affect on the downtown. It will make getting to the downtown feel less intimidating as well as better connect the historic El Azteca neighborhood back to the Central Business District. This unification of the neighborhood can make it more attractive to residents and can help to populate the downtown neighborhoods.

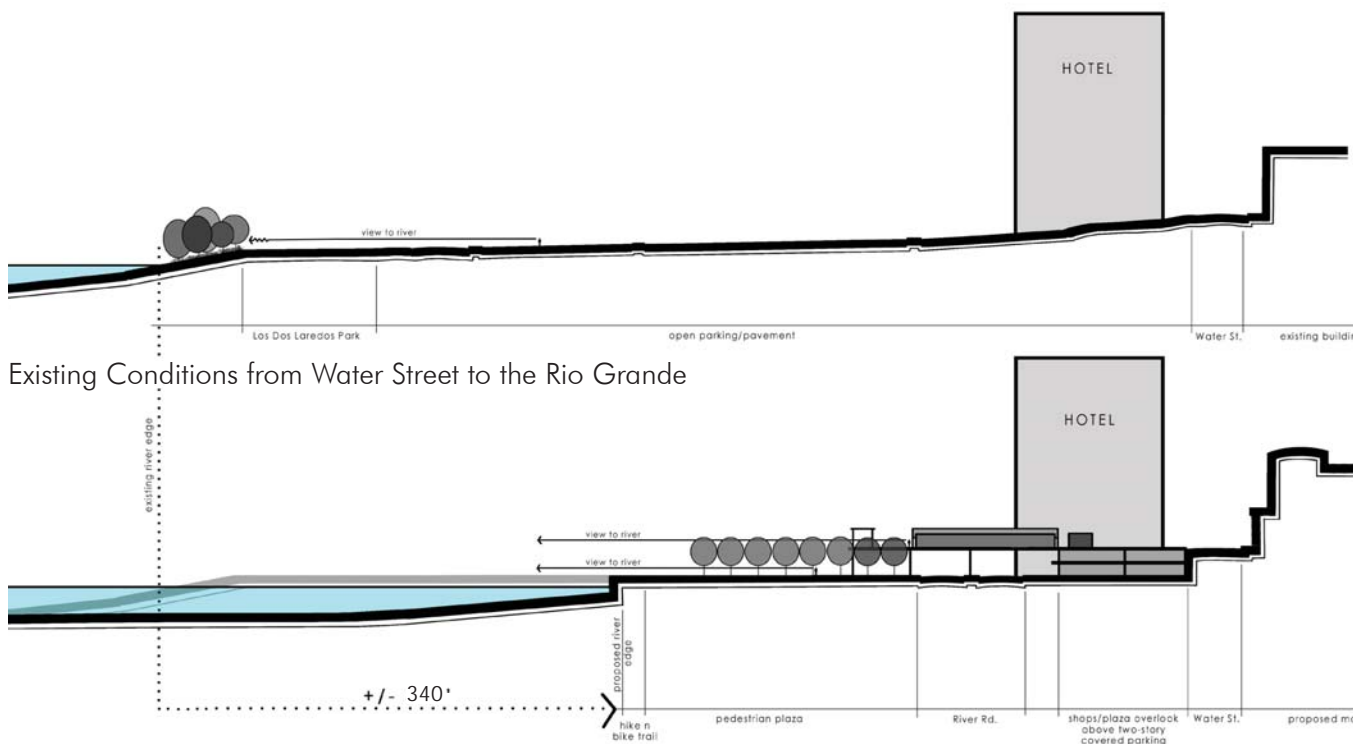


## Downtown Vega Lands

Vega land is primarily the area adjacent to the Rio Grande within the flood plain, and in the case downtown, in the jurisdiction of border control. This area cannot be developed with structures, but can provide an opportunity for recreation and to create a premier civic space for all Laredoans to enjoy.

The main proposal for the vega lands is to create a premier linear park with spaces for recreation and trails for hiking and biking that can connect Laredo's downtown to both the north and the south. This trail system along the water could infinitely extend the city's connectedness through modes other than cars. However, it can not be overlooked that this is also an international border and will also be patrolled and at least partially be under the control of border patrol.

One significant proposal within the vega land plan for the downtown area is to create a level of parking that is then covered by park and recreational space. This proposal also considers a widening of the Rio Grande in this location. The ultimate goal of this portion of the plan is to build positive space up from the river with a bulkhead for security and a positive vantage point, rather than build a wall to look through if such a barrier is determined necessary by the federal government.



Proposed Condition from Water Street to the Rio Grande. This scheme widens the Rio Grande on the American side by approximately 340' and utilizes a pedestrian plaza and a two level parking garage to access views over the river to Mexico.

*Image Credit: Rio Grande Vega Lands Master Plan, September 2008*



## Saint Peter's Plaza

Laredo is fortunate to have a number of public squares in downtown. These squares, established in the historic plan for the city, also provide a tremendous benefit for residents. They provide opportunities for recreation, venues for cultural events, and locations for both informal and for civic gatherings.

Some, like San Agustin Plaza, are well equipped with shade trees, benches to sit, fountains and other amenities. Others, like Saint Peter's Plaza, would benefit tremendously from additional investment in physical design details to improve their utility.

Saint Peter's Plaza has the fundamental arrangement to be a very high quality public space. While details are currently under-developed, Saint Peter's Plaza is very well-sized, has a generous canopy of existing shade trees, and the edges of the space are well-shaped by being faced with the fronts and sides of buildings, many of which are beautiful historic structures.



Saint Peter's Plaza - Existing Conditions

What Saint Peter's Plaza currently lacks, however, is detailed programming that would make the space useful for particular activities. The space today features sod traversed with a crossing of pathways, and a single isolated basketball hoop above a plain circle of concrete at the center of the space.

If we want students/  
people with degrees  
to “come back,”  
will the wages be  
competitive?



Attract college students by  
making the surrounding area  
of LCC (both campuses)/  
TAMU more commercial.  
Connect them to the  
community.



## Potential Future Improvements

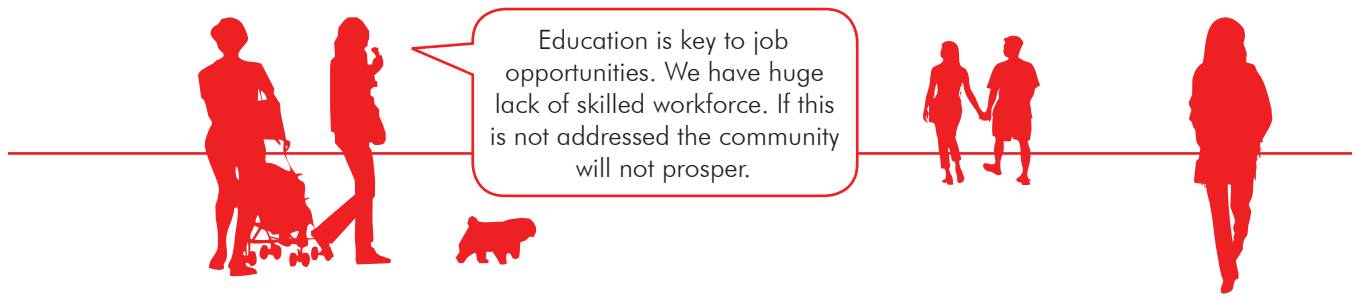
Variety of facilities would increase the usefulness of the squares to a broader variety of people and would help to ensure that the space is well-activated throughout a longer period each day.

Saint Peter’s Plaza would be greatly improved by the addition of places to sit. Benches should be located along pathways in such a configuration that they provide a pleasant vantage point from which to observe activities in the square.

Specific program recommendations need public input and improvements should be sensitive to the character of Laredo’s historical plazas as they are unique landmarks. It is highly recommended that the City of Laredo develop a Historic Plazas Master Plan to work with the community on future plaza improvements.







## Connecting Downtown and LCC

The main campus for Laredo Community College, also known as the Fort McIntosh Campus because of its location on historic Fort McIntosh, is situated at the west end of Washington Street in downtown Laredo. The campus is situated on a small hill on the bend above the Rio Grande. The campus has many of the original United States Army buildings from the old fort along with modern buildings from the 1940s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

LCC can play a role in revitalizing downtown and the historic St. Peter's neighborhood. LCC can work to repopulate the buildings downtown by moving some classes downtown and utilizing the St. Peter's neighborhood as a location for student housing.

The college could bridge the gap between the existing campus and the St. Peter's neighborhood. A program for student housing in the neighborhood can be established. This will start to repopulate the downtown neighborhoods and provide a customer base for restaurants, bars, and other businesses in the downtown.

## Create an Arts or Architecture College in Downtown

A major step in the successful preservation of downtown and its historic buildings is to re-populate it and begin to fill vacancies in these historic structures.

One strategy that has proven successful for downtown revitalization in cities such as Savannah, New York, Providence, and Charleston has been the integration of a college campus, particularly an art or architecture college, into the downtown fabric. Laredo could potentially have the added benefit of partnering with a Mexican college or university and help to strengthen the connection between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. Colleges in the downtown can help to saturate vacant historic buildings by restoring and occupying them with student housing, classroom space, and administrative offices.

## Savannah College of Art & Design

Preservation projects undertaken within the City of Savannah:

- Massie School
- Unitarian Universalists Church
- Flannery O'Connor House
- Kennedy Pharmacy Building
- Federal Courthouse
- Custom House
- Historic Courtroom
- MLK Corridor
- Scottish Rite Building
- Historic Buildings, Savannah State University
- Historic Powder Magazine
- SCAD Buildings
- Broughton Street Retail Development Project
- Berrien House



SCAD injected new life into downtown Savannah by restoring and reusing historic buildings, such as this mid-century theatre.



Historic Preservation students participate in the opening of the restored Kennedy Pharmacy Building.

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With the introduction of college life during the day and residential life at night, retail, restaurants, and services can locate to the ground floor of historic buildings downtown. These amenities will be available throughout the day and week, not just from 9 to 5 during weekdays. The overall effect can snowball, with more residents, offices, and retail moving into historic buildings downtown, attracted by the vitality already created by the college's presence.

The benefit of a downtown art or architecture college, as opposed to other programs, is that art schools have the tools and the drive to work with historic resources as a hands-on learning experience for students. This benefits the college, but even more, it benefits the city by creating a dependable stream of public/private/university partnerships, and by injecting the downtown with the creativity and zeal of student work.

It is important that an arts or architecture college teach in a way that is respectful of the downtown with its stock of traditional American mercantile buildings. Many schools do not teach the technique of traditional architecture and urban design, or even a sympathy for it. This is one of the reasons that when the majority of architects find that their livelihood demands the practice of traditional architecture in historic districts or in places in which traditional architecture is valued, they practice it inexpertly.

By contrast, in Savannah, Georgia, the creation of the Savannah College of Art & Design (SCAD) in 1978 was a watershed moment for Savannah's downtown, and the college has since played an important role in the restoration and revitalization of the historic city. Student housing and academic buildings are integrated throughout the downtown and many of the college's programs use the city as a living laboratory for their work. In particular, the college's Historic Preservation program has made significant contributions to the restoration and reuse of downtown historic buildings and places.

## **Tourism**

Laredo's role in early American history is significant in many ways. There is no reason why Laredo should not be added to the list of priority destinations to learn more about the history of the United States, as well as Mexico.

Organized tours of the historic trails should be promoted within Laredo and throughout the country, and special events should be promoted there, such as festivals, concerts, and parades. Coordination between area hotels, restaurants, and cultural destinations should be encouraged to ensure that the entire tourism experience is a positive and cohesive one.

Laredo has the opportunity to promote its role as the only place in Texas to serve under seven flags. Greater efforts should be made to highlight the location of significant events downtown and along the US-Mexico border, through the creation of additional walking tours, guided tours, and historical markers.



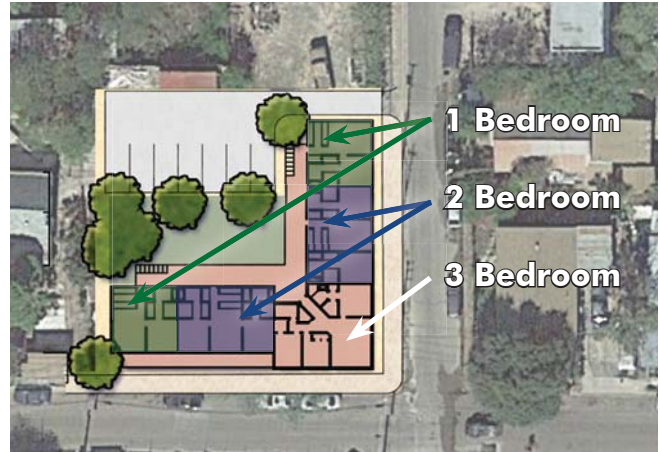
# Redevelopment and Zoning: Downtown and Inner City

The existing zoning code for the City of Laredo already contains polices that address concerns for a walkable, denser, and more lively urban fabric, reflecting strategies that encourage good urban growth. While the zoning regulations have made strides in promoting a walkable and vibrant downtown, there are other regulations that create roadblocks in the way of fully realizing this goal.

The reintroduction of residential uses in urban areas is a major factor in the revitalization of downtown areas. Therefore, it is important to consider policies that would encourage this growth and to reexamine policies that place barriers to residential development.

## Mixed Use Infill Sample Development

The following sequence illustrates how a new multi-family building can be placed on two existing lots within the downtown. The example lots are at the corner of Davis Avenue and Zaragoza Street. The example illustrates how a ten unit corner building with a mix of 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom units can occupy the space. This sample highlights some of the existing policy impediments to development that exist within the downtown neighborhoods.



A floor plan of a mixed-use apartment building with 10 apartments of varying sizes that contributes to the quality of the urban space and more neighborhood commerce.

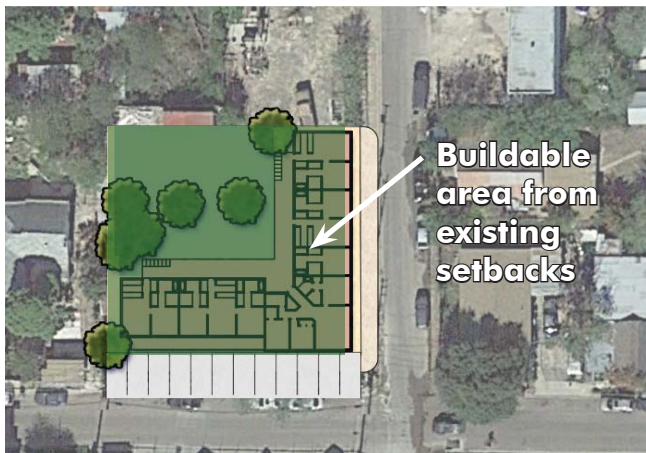


## Parking Requirements

An influential component in the development of residences downtown is the minimum parking requirements. Allowing for off-site parking to count toward residential uses is a positive action; however the additional half space requirement for every bedroom after the first bedroom results in ballooning space requirements that are not conducive to the development of a successful, traditional urban environment.

Removing this additional half space requirement, allows developers to determine what their target market and funding sources require. This could allow for more flexibility and encourage urban development. To prevent over-supply of parking, the existing regulations could be established as a parking maximum in order to preserve the intent of the zoning code.

In order to address concerns for parking, the city should identify strategic locations for the addition of public and private parking structures to increase the available supply that can be considered for residential uses.



Setback requirements usually result with parking lots out front and create conditions that are undesirable.

## Minimum Lot Size and Density

The current minimum lot size requirements for residential uses in Laredo reflect a more suburban understanding of space required for residences and pose a challenge to developing a traditional urban environment. The current zoning requires 3,000 square feet for each dwelling unit in areas designated R-3, Mixed-Residential. As a result, a maximum number of dwelling units allowed for an average block is approximately 149 one-bedroom units. In order for a developer to realize a maximum potential of an entire block, a parking garage would be necessary and could also include some commercial spaces. This is not impossible to build; however the existing policy encourages a luxury market due to the combination of a costly process for purchasing each lot, the cost for construction, and the number of allowable units. Thus far, there has been no incentive and there is no market for the development of luxury residences downtown which has contributed to the lack of development of a lively urban area. Relaxing or even removing these regulations in the Commercial Business District would open the available market for development and could help incentivize growth.



Existing lot size minimums make a denser urban fabric difficult to achieve by requiring more land for 10 units. Otherwise, only 7 units are buildable with this acreage.





### Building Placement

Encouraging building development that engages pedestrians is an important aspect of successful, traditional towns. In order to achieve this, zoning should require building frontages to be built at the front and side property lines. Including this as a policy increases pedestrian safety by removing the incentive to place parking at the front of the lot where pedestrians would need to navigate around cars. In addition, this creates a continuous street frontage which also increases safety by removing spaces that cannot be easily observed and which encourage undesirable activity.

The existing code requires a 25 foot front setback and a 10 foot side setback in the Community Business zoning. Laredo could consider rezoning these areas downtown to a Central Business District, or reduce the front and side setback requirements to be zero.

### Loading Requirements

Current loading dock requirements establish one loading dock per occupancy requiring pick-up and delivery for every building over 5,000 square feet. A lack of a lane or alley within the blocks necessitates that these loading docks areas be located on the sidewalk which has a negative impact on the safety of pedestrians. Removing this requirement while accommodating locations for truck delivery along the street would enable new construction to continue to add to the walkability of downtown. These locations could be at the curb of shop fronts and marked as zones for temporary truck parking and delivery during certain hours. Parking for visitors could then occur outside of these delivery hours. This approach is observable in existing urban areas such as historic Charleston, Savannah, New York, and San Francisco.

### Permit a Mix of Uses

Including various business options in the Saint Peter's and El Cuatro neighborhoods of downtown is positive and helps bring more diversity to the urban life of these historic neighborhoods. However, the current Residential/Office zoning does not allow certain neighborhood services such as tailors, banks, credit unions, dry cleaning, beauty and barber shops, etc. Allowing these uses within a five minute walk from residences and places of work makes it possible to minimize dependence on cars within these areas.

As an example, rezoning both sides of Farragut Street to include B-3 would allow for these neighborhood service uses while also maintaining control as to where they could be located. A form-based code for the historic downtown neighborhoods should be considered so that new development focuses more on the placement and form of buildings to be consistent with and enhance the neighborhoods while not focusing on uses as much.

Certain blocks have different zones on either side of the street. Pedestrians tend to favor streets that reflect uses and heights on both sides of the street that are similar. This urban condition is also beneficial for businesses and property value stability. In order to encourage this condition, it is good practice to locate the transition between zones down the center of the block rather than the center of the street. This approach also avoids significant disparate uses from facing each other and enhances the satisfaction of residents at their home or place of work.

## Filling in the Blocks

The following sequence expands on the development of a single building over a six block area from Santa Cleotilde Avenue to the west, Santa Maria Avenue in the east, Iturbide Street in the north, and Grant Street to the south. This location is directly to the north of the downtown mall location. There are not any significant historic structures within these blocks.

### Step 1: Multi-family Building

With the previously noted zoning code adjustments, a 10 unit building is constructed at the intersection of Davis Avenue and Zaragoza Street.

### Step 2: Additional Development

In time more lots become available to create new residential units with some commercial uses.

### Step 3: Private Structured Parking

A larger project might be proposed with its own parking deck. The parking deck is completely lined with habitable space.



- Community Business
- Mixed-Residential
- Limited Business

Existing zoning



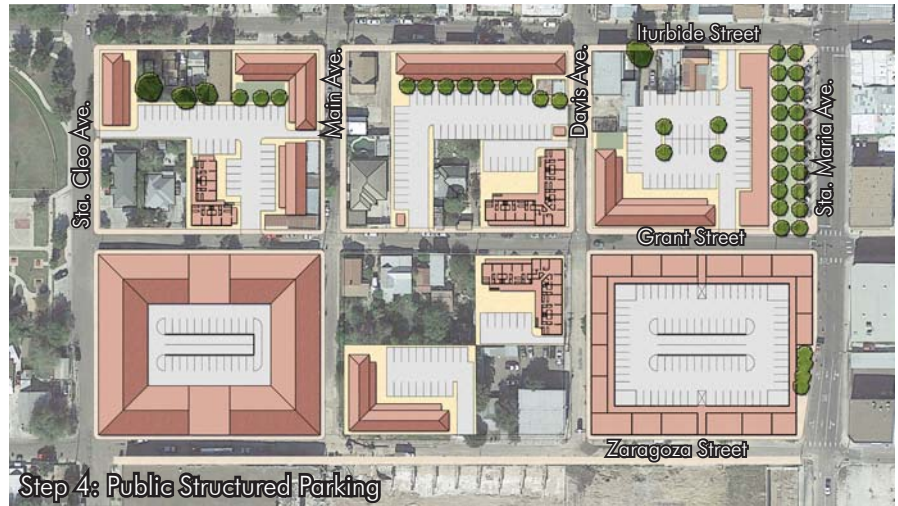


#### Step 4: Public Structured Parking

A public parking garage is added to the existing public surface lot. A liner of habitable or commercial space integrates the parking garage into the urban context.

#### Alternative Public Park

A possible final condition in downtown Laredo. With the right zoning code adjustments to incentivise desired outcomes, Laredo can transform its urban area into a vibrant, walkable and highly desirable downtown.



I agree with a comment said in the forum stating that we don't have to be like other cities. Laredo has a great unique sense and we should stay true to that.



# GOALS & POLICIES

## Overall Goal

Create a more vital downtown and inner city neighborhoods with residential options of all kinds, quality places to shop, dine and recreate while preserving, renewing, and evolving historic buildings, districts, and landscapes for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

### General

**Goal 2.1:** Create a roadmap for the coordinated effort to revitalize the downtown.

**Policy 2.1.1:** Review and update the downtown and plan.

### Downtown Public Realm

**Goal 2.2:** Enhance the public environment to encourage a lively and active downtown.

**Policy 2.2.1:** Revise regulations that are oriented to suburban land use to encourage traditional urban development. Provide for easy access to daily activities and uses and provide a pedestrian friendly streetscape.

**Policy 2.2.2:** Revise setback requirements in Community Business zones.

**Policy 2.2.3:** Remove loading dock requirements in Commercial Business District zones.

**Policy 2.2.4:** Relocate transitions between zoning districts from the center of the street to the center of the block along rear lot lines.

**Goal 2.3:** Improve downtown's streets until they become Laredo's premiere public spaces.

**Policy 2.3.1:** The city should encourage the use of the illustrative plans and renderings in this chapter as examples to encourage best practices in improving downtown streets particularly for city projects.

**Policy 2.3.2:** Maintain and improve the downtown street network by providing multiple routes and pathways for vehicular and pedestrian movement.

- a. Downtown streets, particularly within the Central Business District, are to be maintained first and foremost for pedestrians, transit vehicles, and deliveries. Private automobiles will be accommodated to the greatest extent possible consistent with this priority.
- b. Streets should not be permanently closed or dead-ended or converted to one-way traffic except in cases of overriding public necessity or to allow the creation of pedestrian-only public spaces.
- c. Seek opportunities to reopen former streets to bring more economic vitality to surrounding properties.
- d. Convert one-way streets back to two-way streets to increase the economic viability of businesses and to make downtown more intuitively navigable for residents and visitors as per the Proposed Downtown Circulation Pattern found in this chapter.

**Policy 2.3.3:** Improve downtown streets to become more multimodal and appealing to pedestrians, with ample shaded sidewalks and on-street parking.

- a. Improve safety and encourage pedestrians and transit users by managing vehicular speeds on downtown streets, using measures such as:
  - i. Narrower travel lanes;
  - ii. Changes in paving;
  - iii. Restoration of two-way vehicular travel;
  - iv. Artfully designed traffic calming measures; and
  - v. Timing of traffic signals to reward managed steady vehicular speeds.



- b. Provide on-street parking on at least 50% of all downtown streets.
- c. Redesign downtown streets using pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare section assemblies from the thoroughfare plan in the Mobility Chapter. Design arterials using guidance in the ITE recommended practice, *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach*.
- d. Turn traffic signals to four-way stops in off-peak times when long red wait times on empty streets discourage downtown visitors.

**Goal 2.4:** Recognize that public spaces and streets within the city's historic districts are themselves prime contributors to the vitality and appearance of the districts.

**Policy 2.4.1:** Create and enact a comprehensive green and public space plan to be integrated with downtown development to increase the overall amount of green space in the downtown.

**Policy 2.4.2:** Ensure that the redevelopment and enhancement of plazas, greens, playgrounds, paseos, and other public spaces within historic districts are done in a way which is sensitive to the context.

### **Lighting, Signs & Utilities**

**Goal 2.5:** Streets and spaces are safe and inviting with adequate lighting and clear signage.

**Policy 2.5.1:** Adequate and pedestrian-scaled lighting should line each street in Laredo.

**Policy 2.5.2:** Utilities should not be located on the sidewalk, allowing clear access for pedestrians between destinations.

**Policy 2.5.3:** Install clear wayfinding signage in all of Laredo, directing residents and visitors to significant locations including available parking.

### **Downtown Buildings**

**Goal 2.6:** Revitalize downtown first.

**Policy 2.6.1:** The city should provide financial incentives, regulatory guidance, and technical support for the adaptive reuse of downtown buildings for use as housing.

**Policy 2.6.2:** Promote downtown Laredo as a living classroom for historic preservation and architecture education and encourage partnerships with universities on research, documentation, and restoration projects.

**Policy 2.6.3:** The Historic Preservation Division and the Department of Planning and Economic Development should work to attract a professional arts school to downtown Laredo, for instance an art or architecture school with a historic preservation program.

**Policy 2.6.4:** Lobby State officials to reform the tax structure for vacant downtown buildings, which is currently based on a property's net income rather than its assessed value, thereby encouraging property owners to only lease the ground floor of their buildings and allow the upper floors to remain vacant. Work with city leaders and the County Tax Assessor-Collector. If necessary, also work with Laredo's State representatives and senator to address the issue at the State level.



**Policy 2.6.5:** Create a Vacant Building Ordinance to encourage the use of existing structures instead of allowing them to sit vacant, detracting from a vibrant downtown environment.

- a. Monitor the performance of the Vacant Building Ordinance to ensure that the intended goals are being achieved. If it is found that the ordinance results in degradation or insensitive changes to historic buildings, take measures to address them, such as:
  - i. Designate historic buildings that are not currently protected and could be insensitively altered as a result of the Vacant Building Ordinance.
  - ii. Work with the Building Department to adjust the terms of the Vacant Building Ordinance to require the sensitive repair and maintenance of buildings older than 50 years of age.

**Goal 2.7:** Facilitate reinvestment in the downtown.

**Policy 2.7.1:** Revise regulations that may be impeding development downtown.

**Policy 2.7.2:** Create and adopt a rehabilitation code to facilitate the reuse of both historic and non-historic buildings.

**Policy 2.7.3:** Rezone portions of downtown to be Commercial Business District zones to coordinate with the accepted comprehensive plan.

**Policy 2.7.4:** Remove lot size minimum requirements for residential uses in the Commercial Business District zones.

**Policy 2.7.5:** Remove minimum parking requirements for residential uses in the Commercial Business district zones.

**Goal 2.8:** Strive for the widest variety of activities downtown to create a healthy mix of housing, working, shopping, cultural, and civic uses. This concentration of diverse activities will reduce traffic impacts and infrastructure costs and re-use downtown's existing buildings to their maximum potential.

**Policy 2.8.1:** When evaluating rezoning requests and also when designing public buildings, consider the principles under policies 2.8.2, 2.8.3, and 2.8.4.

**Policy 2.8.2:** Expectations for downtown buildings include:

- a. Nearly all downtown buildings should be re-used or re-purposed instead of being replaced by a new building.
- b. Building façades that face sidewalks should not have more than 30% of their length or 30 feet, whichever is less, as blank walls (without doors and windows).
- c. Sidewalk-level retail, office, and service uses that face a public space should be designed to have clear glass on at least 60% of their façades between 3 and 8 feet above grade.
- d. Sidewalk-level retail, office, and service windows should be kept visible (unshuttered) at night.
- e. Sidewalk-level retail, office, service, and live-work spaces should comprise at least 60% of the street-level façade.
- f. Design new downtown buildings to have at least 70% of the total linear frontages of mixed-use and non-residential building façades within one foot of the sidewalk.
- g. All businesses and/or other community services on the ground floor should be accessible directly from sidewalks along



a public space, such as a street, square, paseo, or plaza.

- h. Design new downtown buildings which have ground floor dwelling units such that at least 50% of those units have an elevated finished floor no less than 24 inches above the sidewalk grade.
- i. Sidewalk-level dwelling units should be elevated at least 24 inches above the sidewalk.

**Policy 2.8.3:** City policies and programs will encourage the rehabilitation of upper stories of existing downtown buildings as office, retail, entertainment, and residential space. Financial incentives will be considered to encourage investment from the private sector.

**Policy 2.8.4:** Encourage a wide mix of residential housing types downtown and within downtown neighborhoods to encourage a diversity of ages and incomes and allow residents to trade up, downsize, or create multi-generational households without being forced to leave downtown. Housing should include arrangements such as: studio units, 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom units, townhouses, penthouses, and live-work spaces; and should include both rental apartments and units that can be owned by their occupants.

## **Historic Resources**

**Goal 2.9:** Preserve the City of Laredo's valuable historic resources.

**Policy 2.9.1:** Support the preservation of Laredo's historic resources through public information, advocacy, and leadership within the community and through the use of regulatory tools.

**Policy 2.9.2:** Begin a "blitz" campaign to document existing historic structures.

**Policy 2.9.3:** Create a priority list of buildings to protect and preserve that are in the most danger of being lost.

**Policy 2.9.4:** Provide widespread cultural and educational resources and information programs on historic preservation techniques and benefits.

**Policy 2.9.5:** Continue to encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

**Policy 2.9.6:** Continue to collaborate with various entities to promote historic preservation landmarks and historic events as tourist attractions.

**Policy 2.9.7:** Encourage development planning and design to sensitively incorporate preservation of historic structures and artifacts.

**Policy 2.9.8:** Encourage the development of attractive and unique characteristics which help each neighborhood in developing its individual historic value and identity.

**Policy 2.9.9:** Inform the public of tax benefits and funding sources available for restoration.

**Policy 2.9.10:** Continue to collaborate with various entities to promote historic commemorative events marking significant landmarks in Laredo's development.

**Goal 2.10:** Historic Preservation should be embraced as an effective economic development and revitalization tool for the City of Laredo.

**Policy 2.10.1:** Use Laredo's designated historic districts and structures as an integral element in citywide revitalization and economic development efforts.

**Policy 2.10.2:** Promote the value of historic preservation to spark interest in designating additional historic districts as well as individual properties.

**Policy 2.10.3:** Preserve architecturally or culturally significant structures which are not historically designated and lie outside of the historic districts.

**Goal 2.11:** Improve public perception of Historic District Designation so that more neighborhoods will seek and embrace preservation of their historic resources.

**Policy 2.11.1:** Educate property owners on the economic, social, and cultural benefits of historic preservation.

**Policy 2.11.2:** Provide workshops on how to care for a historic property in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

**Policy 2.11.3:** Ensure that city practices uphold and support historic designation as a benefit to property owners, and not a burden.

**Policy 2.11.4:** Promote historic preservation and Laredo history in local schools. Create programs to educate children through field trips, workshops, and curriculum.

**Goal 2.12:** Improve the performance of Laredo's existing Historic Districts.

**Policy 2.12.1:** Work with federal, state, and local governments, non-profits, and private groups to identify additional funding resources for the rehabilitation of historic properties.

**Policy 2.12.2:** Provide a clearinghouse of existing financial resources for owners of historic properties in order to provide incentives for appropriate renovation and rehabilitation projects. Make this information accessible through the city's Historic District/Landmark Board on website and brochures and work with neighborhood leaders to spread the word on these resources to other property owners in their districts.

**Policy 2.12.3:** Educate the owners of historic properties on how to properly maintain and rehabilitate their property.

- a. Create neighborhood associations to focus on the advancement and interests of the neighborhood.
- b. Create master plans for each neighborhood to act as a guiding document for the neighborhood association.
- c. Provide a historic preservation resource group that consists of the neighborhood association leaders for each historic district and set up a regular schedule of meetings.
  - i. Use this group to disseminate new information and resources as they are available and to hold training and education programs.
  - ii. Use this group to track the performance of each of the individual historic districts and to provide advice to city leaders as challenges arise.



**Policy 2.12.4:** Improve Code Enforcement efforts in Historic Districts so that properties are consistently maintained and owners can be assured that inclusion in a historic district guarantees a certain neighborhood character and higher level of maintenance.

- a. Ensure that Code Enforcement Officers are trained in the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitation and that refresher courses are available for new and veteran officers.

**Policy 2.12.5:** Amend the Building Code for existing structures within historic districts to make it easier for property owners to undertake renovations and improvements.

**Policy 2.12.6:** Encourage new commercial and live/work uses within historic districts to make them more economically viable and livable by revising the zoning as necessary.

**Goal 2.13:** Promote historic preservation as part of a holistic strategy to promote walkable, livable, and humane place making.

**Policy 2.13.1:** Promote training programs for architects, designers, and builders to work with traditional buildings and learn traditional building techniques. As these professionals gain experience in rehabilitating historic buildings, they will learn how to transfer these lessons into a new generation of high-quality buildings and places throughout the city.

**Policy 2.13.2:** Market historic districts to potential homeowners and property owners for the walkable, complete lifestyle that these neighborhoods offer. These homeowners spark a new generation of homeowners who will enjoy the benefits of mixed-use walkable communities and can increase the market for new walkable communities throughout Laredo.

## **Parking**

**Goal 2.14:** Incorporate adequate parking for private cars into new development while providing infrastructure for alternative modes of transportation, bike parking, transit or trolley access, and comfortable pedestrian access.

**Policy 2.14.1:** Create a downtown parking strategy plan that continues to utilize and improve upon the provision of on-street parking, public parking lots and garages, and shared private parking spaces, with clear signage to inform the public of all transportation and parking options.

**Policy 2.14.2:** The city should not require any on-site parking for buildings downtown and will encourage the sharing of private parking spaces between various uses to reduce the total number of parking spaces.

**Policy 2.14.3:** Locate parking lots and garages out of sight at the interior of blocks wherever practical.

**Policy 2.14.4:** Parking garages should be lined with habitable or storefront space to provide a safe, interesting environment for pedestrians and to screen parking from the view from public spaces such as streets, squares, and plazas.

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### **Downtown Public Facilities**

**Goal 2.15:** As civic buildings are added, updated, or replaced, they will be integrated into Laredo's original street network and other land uses rather than being isolated in large complexes of civic buildings.

**Policy 2.15.1:** Civic buildings should be acts of civic art, embedded within the urban fabric of downtown and sited memorably, when possible on high ground and at the terminal axis of streets to increase their visibility.

**Policy 2.15.2:** Important public facilities such as courthouses, post offices, museums, and administration buildings should not be moved from downtown to outlying locations.

### **Downtown and Inner City Connection**

**Goal 2.16:** Recognize the important potential inherent to the existing inner city and focus on its vitality.

**Policy 2.16.1:** Reestablish connections if street path has been interrupted at as many locations in the inner city possible, especially those that will enhance connectivity between one neighborhood and another.

**Policy 2.16.2:** Consider adding a bridge or a surface railroad crossing to establish better connections between neighborhoods.

**Policy 2.16.3:** Support the creation of neighborhood associations and engage them in decisions affecting each neighborhood.

**Policy 2.16.4:** Neighborhood associations should define the special qualities of their areas; a district should not be defined by council district boundaries but by special qualities of the neighborhoods. Many of these may already exist.

**Policy 2.16.5:** Connect district to district.

**Policy 2.16.6:** Create a forum for dialogue with railroad companies concerning stop times of trains crossing into Mexico.