



El Paso Downtown Management District (DMD)

## **Area-Wide Planning**

# **Central Downtown El Paso Target Area**

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY**





## Executive Summary

In 2020, the El Paso Downtown Management District (DMD) received an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Assessment (BA) grant to conduct Area-Wide Planning (AWP) activities to help communities organize short-and-long term actions needed to achieve the cleanup and reuse goals for the project area. As part of this process, a thorough public engagement strategy was implemented to provide opportunities for participation and education for interested citizens and stakeholders. **The main purpose of this strategy was to increase awareness about the BA grant and gather information about the planning Target Area through public meetings, stakeholder interviews, and a community event.**

These engagement efforts were conducted between March and August 2021, beginning with the establishment of a Brownfield Revitalization Advisory Committee to provide guidance and feedback throughout the process. Ten focus groups were created to solicit guidance for our planning efforts and to establish a better understanding of the project area from the perspective of long-term residents, employees, and patrons. Focus groups were tailored to gather input from specific interest groups including property owners, developers, elected officials, and environmental advocacy organizations.

A combination of in-person and virtual meetings were held to provide flexibility for attendance and ensure comfortable engagement opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project team shared information with the public regarding existing infrastructure and land use, known issues and negative perceptions, and opportunities for redevelopment and improvements. The public was encouraged to contribute additional opinions, develop preliminary goals, and envision aspirations for the planning area. **Through these public meetings, stakeholders agreed that equitable access to multimodal transportation, affordable housing, dignified employment opportunities, and high-quality parks and recreational opportunities are imperative for the community and that funding should be prioritized to support these needs.**

Informal stakeholder interviews were intended to understand the area's history, neighborhood character, opportunities for improvement, and barriers to enacting change. **After conducting over 20**



interviews with various stakeholders, the project team learned that the main perceptions regarding the Target Area include:

- Existing assets are not being used to their full potential
- Additional green spaces are needed to increase quality of life for residents and support local restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues
- Additional entertainment options within the Target Area would diversify recreational and nightlife offerings
- Significant concerns with asbestos and lead contamination that may be contributing to a reluctance in private investment within the Target Area
- Trash collection, particularly the prevalence and placement of dumpsters, contributes to a negative perception of cleanliness
- Fostering a sense of community that maintains cultural pride and recreates the historical neighborhood character will encourage a sense of ownership and encourage development
- Enhancing employment opportunities will improve quality of life and build upon the existing and emerging employment clusters within and around the Target Area

The project team engaged with attendees at the Downtown Fiesta de las Luces event, held within the along South El Paso Street, in August 2021 (located just south of the Target Area boundaries). Community members voiced a strong desire for more family-friendly events Downtown, increased retail options, and additional public art.



## Timeline

The eight-month engagement timeline included a variety of outreach opportunities, including virtual town halls, targeted stakeholder interviews, open houses, and a community event.



## Focus Groups

The following table lists the groups that participated in our community outreach efforts. The goal of these focus groups was to identify thoughts, observations, and perceptions that can help our team understand the Target Area through the perspective of specific stakeholders and user groups. Attachment A at the end of the document list the stakeholders that were involved in the engagement process.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
City/County/Local Government Staff and Leadership	Elected Officials & Boards	Economic Development Partners	Property Owners	Developers
Group 6	Group 7	Group 8	Group 9	Group 10
Real Estate Professionals / Banking Groups / Brokers	Community Groups, local Foundations, and Residents	Educational Institutions	Environmental Groups	State Government, Federal Entities, and Regional Government Organizations





## Public Meetings

Community participation and stakeholder involvement play a critical role in a successful brownfield development, as a shared vision is more likely to identify needs and gather long-term support of resulting projects.

The town hall-style meetings included a presentation and interactive virtual public engagement stations for participants to provide feedback, comments, and recommendations for the Target Areas. The Open House consisted of a series of in-person presentations of the preliminary recommendations of the AWP Target Area and a set of “vision” posterboards with different alternatives for the attendees to provide feedback and preferences. Input from attendees is summarized in the following key findings:

- **Equitable access to multimodal transportation, affordable housing, dignified employment, and high-quality parks and recreational activities are imperative to the community.** Downtown El Paso must be a vibrant and equitable place where everyone feels welcome. Several community members expressed their concern of having downtown development or events that are not equitable and suggested breaking down structural and cultural barriers that deprive people with disabilities or vulnerable economic situations from meaningful opportunities to fully participate in life Downtown. Framing this feedback as an opportunity will allow Downtown El Paso to create more welcoming environments through the implementation of a Downtown El Paso Accessibility Report.
- **Funding should be prioritized in this area to leverage existing infrastructure and reverse historic trends of underinvestment in this community.** Directing federal, state, or local funding into programs to revitalize Downtown El Paso was a common request from community members and key stakeholders from the public sector. Multiple government employees suggested a strategic approach to grant applications, public-private-partnerships, and capital projects that ensure a coordinated and systemic commitment to continuous investments in the Target Area.
- **Pedestrians should be given priority.** Many participants voiced concerns related to pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure in the area, particularly as it relates to equity, accessibility, and quality of life. The area is generally perceived as being hostile to pedestrians in its current form due to disconnected sidewalks, substandard or nonexistent curb ramps, lack of shade and wayfinding information, and concerns of street crime. Community members noted that the remaining alleyways within the Target Area are perfect candidates for increasing pedestrian and cyclist connectivity due to reduced vehicle conflict points and frequent opportunities for placemaking through murals, ambient lighting, and seating.



## Stakeholder Interviews

Targeted stakeholder interviews were intended to gather specific information from various user groups within the Target Area. These stakeholders were more likely to have knowledge, experience, and insight into the specific needs of the Target Area from various perspectives to help the project team better understand the needs of the community. Quantum facilitated multiple stakeholder discussions with community and industry representatives, including government entities, elected officials, property owners, developers, real estate professionals, and advocacy groups.

These meetings provided insights into targeting potential participants of the program that may be interested in nominating their properties for brownfield development. These stakeholder interviews provided the additional benefit of elevating the profile and enhancing the credibility of the Downtown Management District (DMD) among residents, business owners, and elected officials by demonstrating a commitment to supporting the needs of the community. Input from key stakeholders is summarized in the following key findings:

- **Existing infrastructure and assets are not being used to their full potential.** Numerous vacant buildings with empty storefronts contribute to a perception of perpetual decline, discouraging private investment. The large number of surface parking lots provide limited utility when considering multiple parking garages and relatively plentiful on-street parking within and immediately surrounding the Target Area. Existing green space lacks the modern amenities of parks and playgrounds in other areas of El Paso.
- **More entertainment options and large green spaces are envisioned opportunities for this area.** Aztec Calendar Park is the only park within the Target Area and was noted by numerous participants as a prime target for investment. Aztec Calendar Park could be revitalized to support adjacent bars, restaurants, and hotels by introducing outdoor dining and gathering tables and activating the space through ambient lighting, public art, and branding and programming. The community consistently mentioned that additional parks, green spaces, and a diversity of facility types are needed to improve quality of life for residents, employees, and visitors. Examples of potential new parks, amenities, and recreation facilities include skate parks, dog parks, sidewalk dining, public art installations, exercising facilities, and trails.



- **Trash collection system and asbestos/lead building contamination are the main environmental concerns.** Many participants noted environmental and sanitary concerns regarding excessive littering and trash within alleys, in front of storefronts, and along the streets and sidewalks. This contributes to a perception of decline and danger that is impacting private investment in the Target Area. Additionally, developers are deeply concerned of potential asbestos and lead contamination within the older buildings in the Target Area. These contamination issues were directly cited as disincentivizing investment as they can be more costly to address than the remodeling of the building.
- **Creating a sense of community through quality-of-life improvements and targeted commercial development will have a long-term impact.** All stakeholders agree that there is a need for quality-of-life projects that provide increased access to vital services including transit, education, and parks. Additionally, targeted attraction of specific private investments in missing services and industries such as childcare and grocery stores will allow residents to complete more daily tasks within the Target Area.





## Community Event

Starting in July 2021, the DMD hosted *the Downtown Fiesta de Las Luces* event one weekend (Saturday/Sunday) a month until September 2021. This event consisted of closing down from traffic one of the most iconic streets in the City of El Paso, South El Paso Street, from Paisano Drive to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Saturday evenings were filled with music, art vendors, food trucks and fun under the lights of the Paseo de Las Luces. Sunday afternoons celebrated the local culture with food trucks serving traditional Mexican fare, mariachis, folklorico, classic and performance car Show 'n' Shine, vendors, and family friendly activities.

Our team attended the event on August 28 & 29 by setting up an outreach and information station near the main stage. This prominent position was chosen strategically to provide maximum visibility to event attendees, with many people stopping by to ask for information about the event or for directions. The team used this as an opportunity to build trust and begin the conversation regarding the AWP process. Input from community members who attended the event is summarized in the following key findings:

- **There is a demand for more family-friendly events Downtown.** Most community members expressed an interest to visit Downtown more often for family-friendly events. Many also noted that additional outreach or promotion of Downtown events should be considered, as they often learned about events too late or by accident from being in the area for something else. The strong desire for family-friendly events could also be supported through enhanced traffic calming measures that make the area safer for all ages, including children and senior citizens.
- **Community members want more shopping opportunities Downtown.** The Target Area, and Downtown El Paso more broadly, have a historic precedent as being the go-to destination for retail and shopping activities. Participants also mentioned a desire to see businesses shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic reopen, especially since most were locally owned. Fostering new businesses, particularly locally owned startups, will help to create a dynamic retail environment with businesses across multiple industries and various price points. Dynamic, affordable office and retail space will be critical to fostering these local businesses.
- **Public art is desired throughout the Target Area.** Consistent with urban trends across the country, there is a strong desire for placemaking and facility programming through increased public art in the Target Area. Downtown El Paso already has many iconic sculptures, structures, and murals that have become destinations and attractions to draw visitors into the Target Area. A strategic plan to incorporate “art corridors” within the Target Area could be used to draw people into targeted retail and nightlife clusters.



# Attachment A

## El Paso Downtown Management District Area-Wide Planning Stakeholder Participants List

The following list of individuals, agencies, and organizations participated in the Focus Group interviews during the planning process for the Target Area.

- Gary Nadler – Nadler Investment Company
- Hal Ettinger – Hamlet Mortgage
- Lane Gaddy – W Silver Recycling
- Southside Neighborhood Association
- Martin Morgades – Rio Bravo Group
- Ray Adauto – El Paso Association of Builders
- Rio Grande Council of Governments
- Kent Waggoner – Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ)
- Liza Ramirez-Tobias – El Paso Independent School District (EPISD)
- Irene Ramirez – El Paso Independent School District (EPISD)
- Marvin Ryals – Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas (CLEAT)
- Leila Melendez – Workforce Solutions Borderplex
- Gary Williams – El Paso Community Foundation
- Fr. Rafael Garcia, SJ – Sacred Heart Parish
- Karl Rimkus – City of El Paso
- Ellen Smyth – Sun Metro
- Veronica Carbajal – Familias Unidas del Chamizal
- Jean-Carlo Tirado – Sunrise El Paso
- Hilda Villegas – Familias Unidas del Chamizal
- Sito Negron – Sunset Heights Neighborhood Association
- David Stout – El Paso County Commissioner
- David Cantu – City of San Elizario
- Margaret Barnes – Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid
- Rafael Arellano – City of El Paso
- Candie Prinz – Green Hope
- Cindy Bilbe – Certified Commercial Investment Member (CCIM)
- David Etzold – Etzold & Company
- Stan Okies – Consultants of Real Estate, LLC
- William Kell – Franklin Mountain Investments