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EDITOR'S PICK

New report imagines next phase of Downtown redevelopment

By Sara Sanchez/El Paso Inc. staff writer

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Joe Gudenrath, executive director of the DMD, stands in Aztec Calendar Park. The report suggests expanding the park and adding trees and gathering areas.

Photo by Cosima Rangel

If you're an El Pasoan of a certain age, you might remember what was known as the "golden horseshoe" in Downtown El Paso.

It was the corridor along El Paso and Stanton Streets that shoppers from Juárez would travel through before heading back to Mexico.

Now, the Downtown Management District is trying to build on that and spur new economic development on those routes and in the surrounding areas.



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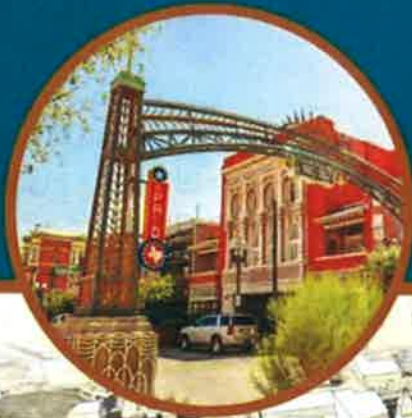
This month, the DMD, an entity governed by Downtown business and property owners that provides services and promotes economic development in the city’s core, released its “Central Downtown El Paso Area-Wide Planning and Revitalization Strategies” report.

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Central Downtown EL PASO

Area-Wide Planning & Revitalization Strategies

EL PASO, TEXAS



Prepared for

El Paso Downtown Management District

Prepared by

Stantec Consulting Services, Inc.

Bellevue, Washington / Dallas, Texas

In Partnership with

Quantum Engineering Consultants

El Paso, Texas



Version: March 01, 2022

Central Downtown El Paso Area-Wide Planning and Revitalization Strategies report

A year-long effort by the DMD, the report was funded by a \$600,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. The Brownfields Assessment Grant program helps communities identify and clean up contaminated or underutilized properties.

“There are a lot of things we still have to do that are still left over from the 2006 plan and are ripple effects from what we have,” said Joe Gudenrath, executive director of the El Paso Downtown Management District.

This is the first Downtown plan since 2006, he said.

That plan, titled Downtown 2015, was created by a powerful group of borderland investors headed by businessman William Sanders. A secretive effort to remake El Paso’s historic core, the plan involved the use of eminent domain and ran into significant opposition.

That plan was never fully realized, but over the past decade, the area around San Jacinto Plaza – from the new ballpark and streetcar system to the restored Plaza Hotel and Martin Building – has been transformed by public and private investment.

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Even so, many areas of Downtown remain quiet and historic buildings remain dilapidated. The target area identified by the DMD’s report is what it refers to as central Downtown – an area south of San Jacinto Plaza that is bounded by Mills to the north, Kansas to the east, Paisano to the south and El Paso Street to the west.

The area has older buildings, some empty storefronts and plenty of parking lots.

“You can talk about renewal and resurgence, emerging urban neighborhoods, without automatically talking about demolitions of buildings,” Gudenrath said. “That area is primed for (renewal), and you don’t have to poison a discussion with things like demolition, displacement, gentrification, things like that.”

This plan emphasizes rehabbing current properties without displacement and emphasizes people first, he said.



As part of the grant program, the DMD and the city can help properties get brownfield assessments to see what type of work might need to be done.

The EPA describes a brownfield property as “a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant.” They range from large polluted industrial sites to small structures with lead paint and asbestos.

There’s not a list of specific properties labeled as brownfields, but the EPA estimates there are more than 450,000 across the country.

Gudenrath said that the report helps guide a vision for Downtown as community leaders continue the effort that began a couple of decades ago to attract and retain new businesses and residents.

“If we’re not talking about the next 5, 10, 15 years now, then we’re just going to put ourselves further and further behind as we go,” Gudenrath said.

The report, which was adopted by the DMD board at its March 24th meeting, was created by international engineering services company Stantec Consulting Services, with El Paso-based Quantum Engineering Consultants.

There are plenty of challenges, he said. The area targeted by the report and those surrounding it include some of the poorest neighborhoods in El Paso.

The 100-plus page report has suggestions for improving the target area, including expanding residential options, transforming key alleyways into “art passageways,” building “pocket” parks, adding bicycle lanes, holding community events and installing wayfinding signage.

One proposal included in the plan is to expand Aztec Calendar Park, where the city would vacate Myrtle between the park and Stanton Tower.

“If you’re going to have residential, you have to have green space,” Gudenrath said.

There are also proposals for long-term and short-term uses in the target area, including pop-up shop events at empty storefronts and food truck gatherings on parking lots.

The plan also calls for creating three unique “corridors” in the area, including a possible entertainment corridor along El Paso street, a creative urban neighborhood corridor along Stanton and a mixed-use corridor on San Antonio.

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- Environmental Protection Agency
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- San Jacinto Plaza
- Central
- Dmd
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