

SECTION 11. DOWNTOWN PLAN

Introduction

The Downtown Revitalization Plan addresses an approximately 28 block area shown as the Central Business District on the *Future Land Use Plan* (see Plate 4.1). Its borders are roughly 4th Street to the north, 10th Street to the south, Avenue J to the west and Avenue D to the east.

The Plan addresses aspects and opportunities associated with the strengthening of the central city area as the economic and social center of the community. To make a valuable assessment of the downtown, it is first important to draw the distinction between what defines a successful downtown and one in decline. The next step is to determine where Levelland's downtown falls in this spectrum and determine any negative aspects that falter from an ideal downtown.



Map of Central Business District

The CBD (shown in light red) covers a roughly 28 block area, the downtown proper is focused around the courthouse.

Many of the economic development strategies described in Section 10.3 *Economic Development Strategy: Non-Basic Jobs and Associated Industry* will be appropriate to business development and retention within the downtown.

11.1 Defining a Quality Small City Downtown

All valuable smaller downtowns have a number of commonalities that make them so: they are pleasant to be in, provide visual interest, are safe and clean, and create a physical atmosphere conducive to social congregating, retail businesses and restaurants, sidewalk shopping and are a haven for pedestrian activity: an alternative to what the rest of the city typically has to offer. The City can create a framework to ensure that new public and private redevelopment happens in an appropriate manner through development standards and design guidelines and other actions.



Quality Downtown

A quality downtown offers an alternative to typical commercial development by offering a walkable environment.

Often, store fronts are occupied throughout a downtown by retail users with offices occupied above. Downtown office and governmental buildings serve as anchors for a downtown, providing the density and economic activity required to support the smaller scale functions of the downtown area. The City can encourage such economic activity via various economic development programs or actions.

The Downtown Plan is two fold: creating and enforcing development standards and design guidelines *and* creating and initiating economic development programming.

11.2 Existing Conditions

Essentially, Levelland’s downtown consists of older one to two story buildings surrounding the Hockley County Courthouse. The grid street layout in place is a solid basis from which to begin and similar to many Texas cities and towns.

The Hockley County Courthouse is an attractive older building anchoring the downtown and occupying a full city block. The structure is surrounded by attractive grounds with large trees that provide public open space in the downtown area.

The majority of minor buildings surrounding the courthouse are retail-oriented and appear to be mostly occupied and in fairly good condition. Generally, sidewalks are wide enough to support a pedestrian friendly downtown. Generally, other buildings surrounding downtown are in poorer condition and uses range from residential, office and retail to automotive-oriented and various other commercial uses. Many vacant lots and deteriorated structures also exist in this peripheral area of downtown.



Aerial of Downtown Levelland

The downtown is planned on a grid street system and is a solid foundation for a quality downtown.



Hockley County Courthouse

The courthouse is a great asset and anchor for the downtown.

11.3 Summary of Main Street Program Efforts

Levelland, as a Main Street Program city, has taken measures to improve the overall quality of the downtown area. The following measures are either in discussion or are in various stages of implementation:

- Development, maintenance of a website
- Capitalization on the Super Wal-Mart as a stimulus and opportunity for downtown economic activity (to include “tear sheet” map of downtown and way-finding signage to interconnect the Super Wal-Mart shopping area and the downtown)
- Media/Marketing effort to include TV spots, radio spots, newspaper ads, a preservation awareness week, Main Street brochures, and marketing efforts through partnerships with downtown merchants
- Creation of an advisory board and Main Street workshops
- Volunteerism: as needed, volunteers would be recruited for various activities aimed at improving the downtown and Main Street Program
- Recruitment of a chain store to help anchor downtown economic activity
- Downtown business networking lunches
- Research Arts and Entertainment Districts
- Replacement of deteriorated sidewalks and improvements of accessibility



Downtown Retail

Retail shops surround most of the courthouse.

Festival Concepts:

- Farmer’s Market
- Country Christmas on the Square
- Monthly Retail Event

The Main Street Program is a major resource for the implementation of existing programs and addressing the recommendations of the Downtown Plan.

Design Guidelines:

- Temporary gateway entries
- Permanent gateway entries
- Year-round lighting on buildings
- Streetscaping (benches, planters, trashcans, etc.)
- Landscaped parking
- Public art

Future Main Street Considerations:

- Hotel recruitment (for downtown proper)

- Historic tourism
- Museum

The City has worked with TXDOT to redesign the downtown parking areas, circulation and pedestrian crossing areas. This action has added parking in close proximity to businesses and included street lighting and benches. Sidewalk and accessibility improvement for retail businesses has been initiated with the assistance of state grant funds.

As illustrated above, the City has been working on ways to maintain its downtown.

11.4 Issues for Downtown

As with many downtowns across Texas, retail businesses have gradually vacated downtown buildings in search of locations that are efficiently served by the automobile. Levelland is no exception but has seemed to resist this trend better than many downtowns. Nevertheless, with a new Super Wal-Mart under construction on Highway 114, the downtown area will face new challenges in business retention. Additionally, new “pad” sites are often generated next to “big box” retailers, further capturing retail dollars.

11.5 Recommended Strategies

The following strategies propose initiatives that the City can take to successfully further downtown objectives. These objectives are:

1. To create a downtown that creates a pleasant and aesthetically pleasing environment through the employment of design guidelines, capital improvements and exterior building improvements.
2. To create a downtown that is a destination for persons of all ages and walks of life.
3. To create a downtown that is almost equally active in the evening and during the weekends as it is during the regular business day.
4. To create a downtown that is a source of community pride and identity *and* secures its place as the economic, social and cultural focal point of the community.
5. To create a downtown whose retail and office buildings are at occupancy and the basis for economic success is in place.

The downtown strategy should be one that differentiates the CBD by fostering a pedestrian friendly and attractive environment and in turn bringing economic success and civic pride

Many of the recommendations will require cooperation between the public and private sectors. Many will also require the involvement of civic-related groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Program and the City.

Create a Downtown Sector Plan

The further development of a Downtown Sector Plan provides an opportunity for the City and all involved parties to examine the unique challenges of various sectors and/or corridors within the downtown area, or Central Business District (CBD). It also helps to formulate priorities and better define areas of opportunity. The following brief descriptions are assigned to the various downtown sectors:

1. **Avenue H Sector:** A corridor running north/south from Houston Street to Highway 114. This corridor serves as a “gateway” avenue to the downtown to attract visitors and general activity to the CBD. Its primary uses are currently commercial-oriented (i.e. not office or retail).
2. **Downtown Core Sector:** The city blocks immediately surrounding the courthouse (and the courthouse block itself) constitute this sector. These blocks are primarily retail and office and represent the majority of downtown economic activity.
3. **Downtown Perimeter Sector:** All blocks within the CBD and surrounding the Downtown Core Sector. This area is primarily residential with a mix of commercial and public service uses.
4. **Houston Street Corridor:** This area is primarily residential with a mix of commercial and is a primary route to the downtown from the heavily trafficked College Avenue.

For a graphic depiction of these various sector locations and borders, refer to Plate 11.1 *Downtown Sector Plan* on the following page. The development standards and design guidelines described in the following subsection may be customized to the unique concerns of individual sectors. In such a scheme, design guidelines could be specified for a sector and take precedence over any conflicting general standard.

The Downtown Sector Plan encourages further analysis of specific sector issues and a customized approach to revitalization in the CBD.

Finally, it is recommended that a City program, like the Main Street Program, be assigned the task of analyzing and developing a Downtown Sector Plan document which identifies the unique

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concerns of each sector, the overall downtown priorities as it relates to individual sectors, and a realistic strategy for addressing each sector.

Conduct a Survey of Downtown Business Owners

A survey of downtown business owners should be conducted. The purpose of the survey would be to help the City determine the most effective role the public sector can take on in revitalization efforts from the perspective of people operating businesses in the area. A questionnaire delivered to each business in person by a City official is a positive way to show merchants that the City is committed to the downtown and business owners will recognize the importance of their response. A mail-out survey is not likely to garner the same response rate.

Possible questions are:

- What specific improvements do you feel would have the most positive impact on downtown as a whole? Choices could include: sidewalks and streetscape improvements, roadways, traffic and parking, building facades, gateways, directional signage, festivals and other physical improvements.
- What improvements would you like to make to the exterior of your business that you are not currently able to afford? Choices could include: new doors, new windows, new fenestration (detailing), new paint, brick refurbishment, and other façade improvements.
- How could the City most effectively help with downtown revitalization? Choices could include: marketing efforts, directional signage, altering City regulations, business development, City-sponsored events or festivals and other actions.
- What are your biggest challenges and concerns?
- Would you be willing to participate in a task force to help with oversight of these programs?
- Responses to the survey would help the City more effectively decide how and where capital funds would be best spent in order for both the private and public sector to get the most benefit from available funding.

Establish a Storefront Window Program

One of the most important features of a storefront are its windows and what is in view in the store. Windows that display interesting products or inviting activity inside are much more likely to draw shoppers (and dollars) into those stores versus storefronts whose windows are non-existent or have nothing on display to draw interest. The City should establish a program to help downtown shop owners realize this importance and then follow through with steps for redesigning storefront windows. This would create visual interest along the sidewalk rather than a voided space that interrupts an otherwise attractive shopping street.

The Storefront Window Program recommended herein:

- Should encourage all ground floor retail facades to feature 60-80% in window coverage.
- Should establish ways in which business owners could be approached in order to suggest/encourage improvement.

In short, the concept behind establishing a Storefront Window Program is to increase the attractiveness of storefronts in order to make people want to stop, look, and buy goods downtown. The City could offer to retain a retail market expert in this field to work with downtown businesses.



Large Storefront Windows

Large windows allow passers-by a view inside stores, creating visual interest in the downtown.

Initialize Activity Downtown

- *Festivals and events:* Organized festivals and events within the downtown area is perhaps the most significant way in which the City can encourage people to come to the downtown. Doing so exposes citizens to the downtown who don't ordinarily visit it and is an opportunity to showcase the downtown to citizens and plant the seed that the downtown is an excellent place to visit and shop on regular weeks as well. The public space around the county courthouse is a natural setting for hosting such events and provides a pleasant place for public gatherings and festivities. When festivals are held in the evening or on the weekend, downtown merchants should be encouraged to extend their operating hours to be open during these events. A bike route through downtown (as recommended in the Thoroughfare Plan) could also be promoted through local events.



Downtown Festival

A downtown festival reinvigorates the downtown with activity and re-introduces citizens to the downtown.

- *Downtown in the evening:* Encouraging a tenant mix that features businesses whose primary economic activity is entertainment-oriented and occurs in the evening is an excellent way to approach a downtown open beyond 5 pm. These businesses may be restaurants, coffee shops, movie theatres and the like. Promoting a safe environment with adequate lighting will foster evening activity in the downtown. The more "after 5 pm" activity that can be generated, the safer the perception and reality of the downtown becomes. One way to begin to establish nighttime activity downtown is to encourage all restaurants to agree to stay open on the same Friday and Saturday night at least one weekend each month.

- Downtown residences:* Residential uses should be encouraged as part of the adaptive reuse of existing buildings on upper floors. Lower floors should generally be reserved for retail or office uses for all blocks opening up the courthouse. For blocks beyond the immediate downtown area, residential should be allowed on the ground floor. Old downtown buildings would provide a unique affordable housing within Levelland and provide an alternative to apartment/duplex buildings near the college as well as an option for empty-nesters and seniors desiring to leave the upkeep associated with home ownership and reside in a more walkable and active area. This type of adaptive reuse of downtown areas has been a national trend for a number of years in big and small cities as communities begin to recognize the value of their under appreciated downtowns. *Not only would this provide a unique housing component in Levelland, but increasing the residential density allows for more and better retail opportunities.*



Residences over Ground Floor

Allowing residences on upper levels generates activity in the downtown, making it a more vibrant place to be.

Marketing Efforts

Without marketing the downtown and the programs associated with its revitalization, the effectiveness of other efforts will be limited. A successful marketing strategy will be paramount to maximizing revitalization efforts:

“Without marketing the downtown and the programs associated with its revitalization, the effectiveness of other efforts will be limited.”

- Advertise Incentives for Downtown Revitalization:* The City’s Main Street Program has established several programs for downtown revitalization (see previous section). The City should work together with civic-related economic groups to ensure that business owners and potential investors are aware of these programs and incentives. Informational sheets or brochures describing downtown incentives is a quick and easy way to bring the business community up to speed with the benefits associated with locating in downtown. Advertising in the Levelland-Hockley County News-Press and area business publications is another way to disperse information.
- Work With Business Groups:* It is recommended that the City and the Main Street Program work closely with the Chamber of Commerce to market downtown. The internet and the City’s website is an excellent vehicle to make interested parties informed of all pertinent information and should be done to compliment and coincide with other more traditional marketing efforts.

- *Establish Gateways & Directional Signage:* One effective way to draw attention to downtown from surrounding areas is to establish gateway features at key points of entry into downtown. Some entryways already proposed by the Main Street Program include Avenue H at Highway 114 and College Avenue at Houston Street. Since many of these gateways are on state highways, Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) guidelines will have to be followed and TxDOT cooperation will be required.



Gateway Sign

- *Banner Signs:* Banner signs are signs that can be affixed to a tall light pole or utility pole. These signs are recommended for use within downtown Levelland in two primary ways. First, they should be used to announce special events and/or festivals. Placing banner signs that advertise these events throughout the downtown area would help market them. Second, banner signs could be used throughout downtown on a daily basis to further demarcate it as a special area of the City.

Gateway signs are an effective way to draw attention and traffic to the downtown.



Banner Sign

Banner signs are an effective way to promote and define the downtown.

Economic Development Initiatives

Economic development initiatives presented and discussed in Section 10.2 *Strategy Specifics* should be employed and adapted as needed for use in the downtown area. For example, a list of desired businesses for downtown should be developed and targeted for marketing efforts. Additionally, the following programs are recommended for consideration

- *Tax Abatement:* tax abatements are an effective way of encouraging the physical improvement/appearance and increased value of downtown properties. Through such a program, new and existing businesses can add to the physical value of their property (through renovation, building repair, etc.) and any associated increased value will not be taxable for a specified period of time.
- *Matching Grants:* Matching grants are designed to help provide funding for visible exterior improvements to buildings. This can be done in the form of a Façade Improvement Program where the city contributes some percentage of total renovation costs.

- *Low Interest Loans:* Low interest loans can be established through institutions (see Section 9. *Housing Strategies* for a listing of possible institutions) for business owners to use for exterior improvements visible to the public like window and door repairs, glass replacement, façade repair, brick and mortar repair, awnings, trim repair or replacement, and paint.

Establish a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District

Tax increment financing districts, or TIF Districts, can be described as special districts where public improvements are funded with increased tax revenues resulting from improved property valuations. The property tax rate paid by property owners is the same as would be paid in other areas of a city, but the additional tax paid on the increased value of the property would be used for debt service associated with the TIF District. Once all associated debt has been paid, the district status ends and taxing entities begin receiving the full tax of the current assessed value.

The City should investigate the feasibility of establishing a TIF District for downtown. The amount of additional tax revenue from improved property valuations for the City could be significant enough over the long-term to contribute to the visible improvement of downtown. Establishing a TIF district should be done with careful consideration given to the financial feasibility of such an investment; a TIF district can only be effective if the expected increase in taxable value is anticipated to be sufficient enough to fund the improvements.

11.6 Development Standards and Design Guidelines

The City should consider incorporating development standards and guidelines appropriate for Levelland into the Central Business District zoning regulations and other appropriate ordinances. An example of such downtown standards follows.

General Recommendations for Downtown Development Standards and Design Guidelines

Parking

- On-street parking should be maximized (to reduce off-street parking requirements) by continuing to use parallel or diagonal parking on one or both sides, however appropriate.
- Parking lots should be broken up into areas no larger than 10,000 square feet (ex. 100'x100') and no more than 60 spaces to minimize negative visual effect.

- Curb cuts (driveways) into any downtown block should be prohibited.
- Off-street parking should be located to the side or rear of buildings.
- Off-street parking should be screened by landscaping or small-scale masonry wall for improved aesthetics.



Screened Parking

Screening parking lots minimizes negative visual impact of parked cars.

Required maximum parking ratios are as follows:

- Office: 1 space per 450 square feet
- Retail: 1 space per 300 square feet
- Restaurant: 1 space per 150 square feet
- Cinema: 1 space per 4.5 seats

Sidewalks

Sidewalks should be a minimum 8'; wider widths are encouraged at corners/intersections to allow for public seating areas (ex. Outdoor sidewalk café) and decrease the distance walked when crossing the street.

Implementing development standards and design guidelines ensures that with revitalization of the CBD, the improvement of the public environment occurs in a consistent manner

Streetscapes

- Overhangs and canopies are appropriate to the pedestrian walkway for visual interest and to add shade/weather protection; awnings should not extend beyond the sidewalk or lower than 8' for walkway clearance.
- A unified visual image of the downtown should be enhanced through public sitting areas, street trees, lighting and landscaping being featured at regular and frequent intervals.
- The pedestrian-oriented environment should be safe, accessible, visually pleasing and comfortable.
- Bollards should be used to separate and protect public space from autos where appropriate.



Attractive Downtown Corner

Features include: ADA ramp at crosswalk; brick patterned sidewalk; widened sidewalk at corner; overhang provides weather protection.

- Sidewalk elements should not impede persons from reaching cars parked at the curbs, trash receptacles, etc.
- Street trees in appropriately sized tree grates should be located with regular spacing along all sidewalks.
- Street trees should have a ground clearance of 8’ over the sidewalk and 14’ over the street
- Trees should not obstruct building entrances or corner visibility for auto traffic.
- Pedestrian crosswalks are encouraged to be constructed of an alternative to regular paving such as brick, interlocking concrete pavers or colored concrete for added visual interest.
- Pedestrian crosswalks should be a minimum 8’ in width and connected to the sidewalk by ADA ramps.
- Outdoor seating and sidewalk restaurants are desirable to allow for outdoor leisure use, people-watching and an overall more active downtown.
- Streetscape features like trash cans, newspaper racks, benches, bollards, decorative lighting poles, etc. should have a unified theme throughout the downtown.

Landscaping

- Street trees requiring minimal care are encouraged
- Tree grate areas should be a minimum of 4’ in width or 20 square feet
- Landscaping, shrubs and ground cover are encouraged to accent areas (where space permits), shield any unsightly areas and soften building foundations
- Plant containers and potted plants are encouraged throughout the downtown

Building Setbacks and Envelope

- Any new buildings should feature a continuous street wall for further support of the pedestrian environment; firewalls are encouraged versus actual building separations.
- Any new buildings should have the same setbacks as other buildings to avoid a “gap tooth” effect and encourage a continuous streetwall.
- Building footprints (separated by firewall or actual building) should be limited to discourage “big box” formats from retailers.



An Ideal Structure

Retail below, office above; wide sidewalks; Large windows; continuous streetwall, consistent setbacks; small footprint discourages “big box” format

- Building height is limited to three stories; allowances will be made for architectural detailing that extends beyond the height limit.

Individual Retail/Office Signage

- Signage should be exterior lit to avoid excessive lighting
- Signage should be to a human-scale (i.e. not intended to be seen by fast moving auto traffic); it should be limited to 2' in height, 10' in width, compliment the overall architectural style of the building and not extend beyond the building's height, preferably inset above the main entrance
- Projecting signs along the first floor level are appropriate
- Awning signs are appropriate



Attractive Streetwall

Parapets shield rooftop HVAC equipment; on-street parking (additional parking at rear); sidewalk unbroken by driveways; large windows; awnings and street trees.

Lighting and Signage

- Lighting to be limited to a height of 14'
- Street signage should use same decorative poles

Landscaping

Aesthetic Purposes

- Screen undesirable views, soften and enhance architecture, provide spatial enclosure, increase community identity
- Provide visual interest
- Provide a back drop to the built environment
- Provide simple ornamentation

Planting Materials

Planting materials should accomplish the above *aesthetic purposes* while being appropriate to the arid conditions of Levelland: requiring minimal levels of water and drought-resistance.

Appropriate Xeriscape principles/practices should be used wherever possible to conserve water. Xeriscape ordinances are protected by the Texas Local Government Code.

11.6 Specific Steps/Recommendations

To achieve revitalization of the CBD, a cohesive strategy must be employed that addresses all recommendations and concerns discussed

The following is a concise summary of the information presented and recommended steps.

Recommendations are highly similar to the recommended steps presented in Section 10.6 and are tailored to the specific concerns of the downtown:

1. Differentiate from products available elsewhere like those available at the Super Wal-Mart (currently under construction).
2. Meet with all economic development related organizations to present and discuss the overall economic development strategy for the downtown.
3. Ensure ongoing economic development activity is being addressed appropriately.
4. Develop target downtown businesses and individuals to be consulted throughout all economic development activity.
5. Conduct a survey (if needed) to determine major concerns of downtown business owners.
6. Assess and further develop proposed economic development incentives and programs for the downtown.
7. Further develop a list of prospective businesses based on past research and a realistic approach to what the downtown might anticipate based on demographic data.
8. Further develop a marketing strategy and contact list for selling downtown to the targeted prospective business list.
9. Continue all retention activities along with implementation of retention program.
10. Adopt design guidelines to ensure future quality development.
11. Consider inclusion of downtown aesthetic improvements in the capital improvement programming.