



DOWNTOWN MESQUITE ASSESSMENT REPORT
MARCH, 2017

Produced by the Texas Downtown Association for the City of Mesquite



The Texas Downtown Association was invited by the City of Mesquite to complete a downtown assessment on February 10, 2017.

Team members were: Anita Brown, City of Waxahachie; Tony Rutigliano, Downtown Arlington; Scott Welmaker, City of Mansfield; and Catherine Sak, Executive Director, Texas Downtown Association.

Per the guidelines of our revised Downtown Assistance Program, a representative from the city was asked to complete a short pre-visit survey about Downtown Mesquite. These results were shared with the team members, along with data about the community.

The assessment visit took place on Thursday, February 10. The day started with a meeting of downtown supporters at the McWhorter Greenhaw Music building. The team was introduced and they asked attendees about their downtown and what types of businesses, activities, or events they would like to see. Meeting attendees also introduced themselves and shared how they were connected to downtown, top concerns, and favorite ideas.

Discussion points included: showcasing the history of Downtown Mesquite; moving utility lines underground; what people enjoyed doing in other Texas downtowns; parking; restaurant options; things to do at night; and creating attractions.

After the morning meeting, City of Mesquite staff member Kim Buttram took the team on a windshield tour of the downtown area designated by the stakeholder group at a meeting in January.

Initial impressions:

- The core downtown area should be the primary focus of the initial revitalization program so that resources aren't diluted.
- There aren't a lot of vacancies.
- There is a large inventory of parking in the core downtown area.
- Traffic moves very quickly through downtown.
- The downtown square area is not utilized to its highest and best use.
- Many professional services are available downtown.
- Downtown is diverse.

Team members then did a walking tour of downtown on their own and visited with business owners who were available to talk and share opinions.



Issues raised by business and property owners:

- Speed of traffic on downtown streets – Multiple people mentioned the speed of traffic through downtown. From IH 635 to Galloway Avenue there are no stoplights, protected pedestrian crossings, or traffic calming devices to slow traffic.
- Lighting/safety – People supported the idea of upgrading light fixtures and improving lighting in downtown. One business owner said their policy is that no one can work in the office alone due to safety concerns.
- Lack of events – We asked people what events were held downtown and most mentioned the Rodeo Parade and the Christmas Tree lighting. Some complained that events were relocated out of downtown.
- Front Street parking - Business owners questioned if parking would be possible on the city-owned easement on Front Street.
- Consistency on downtown building lights – Business owners said the strand lighting that outlines downtown buildings is not consistently lit and hoped that the city would take action.
- Lack of promotion for events that are going on – People mentioned they weren't always aware of what events were happening and wanted more information so they could participate and/or share information with customers.
- Lack of food options – Everyone mentioned the lack of dining options and suggested additional restaurants, coffee shops.

The team met with city staff in the afternoon to discuss initial findings and recommendations. Below is the full list of recommendations broken down as short term, mid-range, and long term goals.



RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM GOALS

Downtown Boundaries

We believe that the focus should be on the downtown core (shown in blue on the downtown map). Concentrating efforts and resources in a smaller, walkable area is key to success and to preventing dilution of resources and volunteers.

Public Input & Stakeholders

All downtown property and business owners should be invited to participate in meetings about downtown since they are the stakeholders most directly affected by proposed changes and projects.

Mesquite youth can be an excellent resource for downtown. Consider development of a youth advisory council and talk to Mesquite ISD about partnering with student art programs, young entrepreneur groups, and other entities that might be interested in participating. Carthage started a Main Street Youth Advisory Council last year with 14 local teenagers who fundraised for a downtown project and hosted a downtown event.

Mesquite's diversity should be embraced as a strength, and downtown should be a place for all residents. Be sure to include representatives from different ethnic communities in downtown discussions.

Online surveys can be an excellent way to collect data and allow people to provide feedback even if they're unable to attend a meeting in person. You can survey different groups or open up the survey to all Mesquite residents.

You could also host an in person event and ask people to share ideas about the types of businesses they'd like to see and what they want to do downtown. There are some fun and creative ways to gather public input that will inspire engagement. "I Wish This Was" is a public art project that encourages people to share their ideas and dreams about a vacant building but the concept could be adapted for a downtown or an open space.

Transportation/Traffic

Explore the possibility of the city's "take back" of Texas Highway 352 through downtown from the state. This would require the city to find an alternate route connecting two state highways for truck traffic and the city would be responsible for road maintenance. We believe that control over Highway 352 is key to successful downtown revitalization and to improve walkability and safety and ultimately increase the number of downtown visitors.



The City of Mansfield found that the TxDOT turn back program was a fairly straightforward process. The primary advantage is that the city would then control access and design. The contact for this program is the local TxDOT engineer.

Historic Preservation, Design Guidelines, Ordinance Reviews & Updates

Historic District Designation

Designating downtown as a historic district could help protect the historic fabric that remains of the original Old Town Mesquite. Such a designation could also assist property owners that were interested in taking advantage of state and federal historic tax credit programs.

Design Guidelines

Adoption of design guidelines for the downtown district would allow the city to manage proposed updates and alterations to downtown buildings.

Ordinance Updates

The city should review adopted ordinances related to zoning, signage, building code, and related issues that would affect downtown revitalization. Review and revision of zoning and use charts will need to be done to discourage new businesses in the central area that will not enhance the revitalization efforts and to allow for new uses as existing businesses close.

Clean Up Day

Host a downtown clean-up day. Events like this can help bring a variety of partners together (Boy Scouts, sports teams, nonprofits, churches, etc.) and start the team building process. This could also be a good opportunity to ask for downtown feedback from community members.

Beautification

A mural would be a great addition to the lot that is proposed as a pocket park/breezeway. The City of Navasota sponsored a mural in a similar type of location in their downtown that features blues musicians. The space has become very popular with local artists as an outdoor studio and downtown visitors enjoy it too. An Anice Read Fund grant from the Texas Downtown Association could help with funding a project of this nature.

City owned property

Moving the CVB to the city-owned property on South Broad is a great idea. Since the property is so large then there are a lot of options to consider for the remainder of the building.



Marketing

Social media is the best option for the new program. Downtown Mesquite has an unofficial FB page that should be converted into a managed page. Use Facebook Events to promote things happening downtown (clean up, mural painting, etc.)

Goals for the next twelve months

Keep it simple. Focus on small goals that are realistic and manageable for a 12 month period. Select projects that will be visible and create excitement without costing a lot of money.

MID-RANGE GOALS

Parking inventory

A parking inventory will allow you to have an accurate count of public and private parking spaces in the downtown district. Take pictures of parking areas during different times of the day to show how parking is being utilized. The city may want to consider contracting with downtown churches and/or businesses for use of parking during the week and after hours. A recent study completed in Toronto indicated that parking wasn't as important as business owners and city leaders assumed. Here's a link to an article about the study:

<https://www.fastcoexist.com/3067515/why-local-businesses-shouldnt-worry-about-eliminating-on-street-parking>

Building Inventory

Complete a building inventory of the downtown core to collect the following information: Building type, square footage, zoning, current use, and owners contact info. There are tools out there to build a database with this information but you can also use a spreadsheet to get started.

Light Walks

Light walks should be scheduled for dark evenings (no full moons) to assess downtown lighting conditions and sense of safety, identify tripping hazards, and to get an idea of what downtown is like in the evening hours.

Incentives

There are a variety of incentives that can be offered to encourage downtown development. Sherman and Taylor offer rental reimbursement grants for new businesses that have been identified as desirable by city staff (retail, restaurants, specialty shops, etc.). Many communities offer façade improvement grants that offer matching funds for façade improvements that must be reviewed and approved by the city or organization managing the funds. Signage grants are also common and allow businesses to receive matching grants for improved signage.



Bonham offers a matching grant for property owners or potential businesses to bring in a certified professional (architect, engineer) to assess a building and determine what steps and costs are necessary to bring a building up to code.

The best course of action is to determine what the need is in your community and tailor incentives to meet that need.

LONG TERM GOALS

Public Restrooms

As we learned during our walking tour, there are no public restrooms available downtown. Public restrooms are a great resource during events and for day to day downtown visitors. If you are going to invite people to spend time in your downtown, you must have the necessary facilities available.

Streetscape Improvements

Downtowns are definitely judged by their appearance. Wide sidewalks, attractive lighting, benches, and trash cans, landscaping and hardscaping are all good investments that will provide a return.

Wayfinding signage

Wayfinding signage can be useful in directing downtown traffic and can include maps to help people find their way.

Transformation of parking lot into lawn/plaza

We feel strongly that the property between Broad and Lancaster currently used as a parking lot would better serve the community as a public lawn or plaza, especially if the city takes back Highway 352 from the state. With current traffic it wouldn't be safe to create a public area that is focused on pedestrian use.

The lot's use as a parking area serves as a barrier to each side of downtown and obstructs the line of sight to every other side of the square. Conversion of the area from parking to park will not be popular, but it is imperative if you want downtown to be the social hub of the community again.

Downtown Staff

Ideally the city or another entity will hire a staff member dedicated to downtown that can assist with small business development, recruitment and retention, incentives, and visitors.



Neighborhood Empowerment Zones

One way to encourage redevelopment is through use of Neighborhood Empowerment Zone designation. Celina recently established an NEZ for downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods, allowing owners of residential and commercial property to apply for incentives including discounted permit and impact fees.

Linkages to other attractions/resources

Hike & bike trails that link downtown to other areas/attractions would be useful and would encourage non-car travel. Waxahachie has developed an extensive trail system that connects parks on each side of the original town to the downtown. City Lake Park is a great resource close to downtown that could be connected to benefit both areas.

Possible Funding Sources

Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone/Tax Increment Financing (TIRZ/TIF)

If a TIRZ is developed it should include a larger area than just the downtown core to capture areas ripe for development. Some cities have borrowed against projected TIRZ revenue to start the revitalization process immediately. Typically, every \$80,000 in revenue provides \$1 million in bonding capacity.

One of the advantages of a TIRZ is the assurance to investors within the district that their tax dollars will be used for improvements only within the district. Some cities have included an allowance for grants in their TIRZ list of authorized uses.

Public Improvement Districts (PID)

Development of a PID would provide the opportunity for downtown property owners to participate, and take ownership, in the revitalization of downtown. Funds from PIDs can be used for a variety of things including marketing, beautification, economic development and security efforts. PID assessments vary from community to community, but range \$0.10 per \$100 to \$0.20 per \$100 of property valuation.

Economic Development Funding

It is our understanding that the city's economic development funding is dedicated to parks, public safety, or commercial transportation. Is it possible that some of those funds could be used for downtown if projects are appropriately related?

Fundraising

There are Texas communities that host fundraisers to support façade and signage grant programs to augment funding provided by General Revenue accounts. The Georgetown Main Street Program annual Wine Swirl event raises thousands each year just for this purpose.



RESOURCES

Texas Downtown Association

Anice Read Fund

The Anice Read Fund accepts applications from TDA members each year for funding to support downtown projects and programs. The application process was developed with busy downtowners in mind and won't require hours of staff time or a grant consultant.

<http://www.texasdowntown.org/anice-read-grants.html>

Texas Historical Commission

Certified Local Government Program

This program requires a community to establish and support a local preservation program. Once CLG status has been attained a community can apply for grants and access other THC programs like the Town Square Initiative (see below).

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/certified-local-government>

Texas Business Treasures Award

This program recognizes businesses that have provided employment opportunities and support to the state's economy for at least 50 years.

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/texas-treasure-business-award>

Texas Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program

This tax credit went into effect on January 1, 2015. The link below to the THC website includes information about the state and federal programs.

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/preservation-tax-incentives/texas-historic-preservation-tax-credit>

Town Square Initiative

TSI was developed in 2014 under the direction of the Commission utilizing staff positions appropriated by the 83rd Legislature. The program was envisioned to leverage the significant investments the state and local communities have already made through the work of agency programs such the TMSP, Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP), and the Certified Local Government Program (CLG).

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/town-square-initiative/about-town-square-initiative>

Texas Commission on the Arts

Cultural District Program

This program recognizes thriving creative sectors.

<http://www.arts.texas.gov/initiatives/cultural-districts/>



Texas Touring Roster

The Texas Touring Arts Program is designed to ensure that all Texans have the ability to enjoy performances by outstanding Texas-based companies and artists in their own communities. The Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) provides grants to help with the costs of bringing in companies and artists from this roster for performances.

<http://www.arts.texas.gov/artroster/roster/>

Texas Department of Agriculture

Go Texan Program

The Go Texan program promotes Texas made products and certifies farmers markets.

<http://www.gotexan.org/Home.aspx>

Communities Foundation of Texas

The foundation awards grants to 501(c)(3) nonprofits for a variety of issues and activities. CFT also manages the day to day operation of the Anice Read Fund.

<https://www.cftexas.org/>

Keep Texas Beautiful

KTB sponsors the GCAA program which awards funding for beautification programs. The process is very competitive since there are cash prizes.

<http://ktb.org/programs/awards/governors-community-achievement-awards.aspx>

Project for Public Spaces

The Lighter Quicker Cheaper movement focuses on LQC projects that make an impact on placemaking. The site below includes links with a lot of information and ideas.

<https://www.pps.org/reference/lighter-quicker-cheaper/>

Union Pacific Foundation

Provides grants to communities with UP lines.

<https://www.up.com/aboutup/community/foundation/>