



THE KAY THEATER

IN 1947, E. L. BRYAN AND THE FOY ABBINGTON FAMILY BOUGHT A SURPLUS QUONSET HUT, ONE OF THOUSANDS OF THE ALL-PURPOSE METAL BUILDINGS MADE DURING WORLD WAR II. THE HUT WAS MOVED TO ROCKDALE TO BECOME THE CORE OF THE SECOND MOVIE THEATER IN TOWN. LOCAL CARPENTERS JACK KYLE, SR. DIRECTED SEVERAL ROCKDALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO BUILD THE SLOPING CONCRETE FLOOR AND FACADE FOR THE STREAMLINE MODERN-STYLE KAY THEATER, NAMED FOR THE ABBINGTONS' DAUGHTER, KATHERINE. A HALF-CYLINDER OF CORRUGATED STEEL SHEETS FORMED THE WALLS AND ROOF. THE ENTRY INCLUDES A STEPPED PLASTER WALL OUTLINED IN NEON, AN ENTRY DRUM OF PLASTER AND GLASS BLOCKS, PAIRED DOUBLE DOORS, A CENTRAL SIGN AND LARGE LETTERS SPELLING K-A-Y ON EACH SIDE OF THE ROTUNDA.

THE OWNERS, MR. AND MRS. FOY ABBINGTON, SAID THE QUONSET HUT ARCHITECTURE "LEND[ED] ITSELF NATURALLY TO EXCELLENT ACOUSTICS AND A PLEASING INTERIOR APPEARANCE." A THANKSGIVING 1947 OPENING, AT A DEDICATION CEREMONY THE NEXT NIGHT, POSTMASTER CLYDE FRANKLIN WAS MASTER OF CEREMONIES AND MAYOR J. B. NEWTON INTRODUCED "ROLING HOME," STARRING RUSSEL HAYDEN, JEAN PARKER AND RAYMOND HATTOK. LARGE BOX FANS MADE THE THEATER ONE OF FEW AIR-CONDITIONED LOCATIONS IN TOWN. MR. ABBINGTON MANNED THE TICKET BOOTH AND WAS THE PROJECTIONIST, AND HIS WIFE MANAGED THE CONCESSIONS, AS WITH SIMILAR FACILITIES AT THE TIME. AFRICAN AMERICAN PATRONS WALKED UPSTAIRS TO SEPARATE BALCONY SEATING. THE KAY THEATER CLOSED IN 1962 AND WAS VACANT FOR MANY YEARS BEFORE RESTORATION BEGAN IN 2004. REMAINING THEATER IN MILAM COUNTY RECALLS A TIME WHEN GOING TO THE MOVIES WAS A CULTURAL EVENT AND CENTRAL TO THE SOCIAL LIFE OF MANY YOUNG PEOPLE.

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DOWNTOWN

Introduction

Downtown Rockdale is widely recognized as the historic heart of the community. Long-term residents recall a time when Downtown was bustling with a wide variety of activities and serving people of all ages.

The condition of Downtown has a major impact on how a city is perceived by others, and even by its own residents. Rockdale's residents strongly backed the vision statement of this Plan, which is centered on being a resilient city which holds pride in its history and culture. To accomplish this, it will be crucial to bring new life to Downtown. New development is expected to be happening in the City and region in the coming years, and for Rockdale to thrive it must celebrate what makes it unique. Revitalization of the historic Downtown is central to this, as the character and history of Rockdale's Downtown cannot be replicated by even the most thoughtful new developments.

Over the last several decades, Downtown Rockdale has seen patterns of disinvestment typical of towns and cities throughout Texas (and the nation as a whole), as businesses have either closed due to competition from large national chains or relocated to newer parts of the City, such as the Cameron Avenue Corridor. This has been exacerbated by the local economic struggles resulting from the closure of ALCOA's operations in Rockdale. The ultimate result has been that many properties in Downtown Rockdale remain vacant, underutilized or undeveloped.

Rockdale's 2012 Downtown Master Plan offers a wide array of recommendations for the district, many of which remain relevant. This chapter of the Comprehensive Plan is not meant to replace the 2012 Plan, as that would require a separate downtown plan to fully explore strategies and recommendations. Rather, this chapter identifies the role Downtown plays in supporting the City's larger vision and goals, as outlined in this Comprehensive Plan paired with a more specific implementation strategy to build momentum and progress. It identifies opportunities and challenges specific to Downtown, Downtown character areas and a number of issues which will require strategic focus, including:

- Vacancy Strategies
- Public Space Activation and Events
- Micro-investments
- Parking

Each of these recommended priorities are discussed in more detail in this chapter. None can be understood in isolation, as all connect to each other to result in a successful and cohesive Downtown.



WHAT WE'VE HEARD: Downtown

"I suggest that the City leaders focus on a major Downtown renovation."

- Community Member

"East Bell Tap House has brought life back to the Downtown area!"

- Community Member

"Most all of the Downtown surrounding area has fallen to urban blight."

- Community Member

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The community seeks to find a harmonious approach that maintains Downtown's historic character while allowing for necessary modernization and revitalization.
- Downtown is identified as the best place to celebrate the history and culture of the City.
- Vacant buildings, or general maintenance issues in Downtown, create a negative impression of the City as a whole.
- Top priorities in Downtown: addressing parking and providing a wider variety of public spaces and particularly family-friendly entertainment options.

The top 4 development types residents want to see more of in Rockdale are Local Businesses, Food and Beverage Service, Entertainment, and Retail - all are ideal uses for Downtown.

59% of survey respondents said they visit Downtown at least once a week.



Downtown Opportunities & Challenges

Based on public input and stakeholder conversations, below are the top opportunities to leverage and challenges to address as identified by the Rockdale community.

Key Assets

- Kay Theatre
- East Bell Taphouse
- Patterson Library
- The 1895 Project (historic City Hall redevelopment)
- Wolf Park
- Historic Train Depot

Businesses/Retail Frontages

Key Challenges

- Lack of “critical mass” of establishments
- Vacant storefronts and vacant parcels
- Perceived lack of parking
- Limited variety of offerings
- Public realm maintenance and appearance
- Traffic on U.S. 79

Key Opportunities

- More Local Businesses
- Library Expansion
- Family-friendly Activities
- Community Events



Map 21. Downtown Assets



Downtown Character Corridors

Downtown Rockdale is in a compact area, which allows the City to focus on a relatively small geographical area. For this reason, the identification of character areas in Downtown looks at the aesthetics and experience of different corridors throughout the area. Three types of corridors have been identified for Downtown Rockdale:

- ● ● Mixed Pedestrian/Vehicular Corridor (E Cameron Ave/US79)
- ● ● Primary Pedestrian Corridor (Main St)
- ● ● Supporting Corridors (E Bell Ave and Ackerman St)
- ▶ ▶ ▶ Festival Street (Milam Ave)

Map 22. Downtown Character Corridors

Downtown Character Corridors

Mixed Pedestrian/Vehicular Corridor (E Cameron Ave/U.S. 79)

The primary vehicular corridor follows E. Cameron Avenue/U.S. 79, a roadway controlled by TxDOT, meaning that the City has limited control over design within its right-of-way. It had some recent improvements to improve pedestrian conditions including enhanced intersection details, new parking and sidewalks. This is a busy regional roadway with a large quantity of traffic, including large trucks. A variety of businesses front onto this corridor, including the Lucy Hill Patterson Library. The future condition of this roadway should balance the current vehicular needs with downtown-appropriate pedestrian amenities, with a focus on beautification, aesthetics and pedestrian safety. To note, the East Cameron Corridor plan overlaps with a portion of the blocks identified here. While this plan is generally consistent with the proposed conditions, we recommend looking into a redesign which would reallocate the trees in the median to line the sidewalks.

Primary Pedestrian Corridor (Main St)

Bookended by the Kay Theatre and East Bell Taphouse on one end and Wolf Park and the historic Rockdale Train Depot on the other, the three blocks of Main Street through Downtown pose the opportunity to create a great pedestrian street for Rockdale. This corridor is still a major roadway through town, but caters more to local trips and has less traffic overall than E Cameron Ave; however, Main St is controlled by TxDOT and the City has less control over design within its right-of-way. The future condition of this corridor should focus on pedestrian comfort and amenities (wide sidewalks, streetscaping, lighting and furnishings) and encouraging the businesses to activate the public realm through sidewalk cafes, etc.



Conceptual rendering of Main Street as a Pedestrian Corridor.



Supporting Corridors (E Bell Ave and Ackerman St)

A single block of these two roads round out Downtown and create a “core block” bounded by Cameron Avenue, Main St., Bell Avenue and Ackerman St. There should still be adequate pedestrian infrastructure and minimum levels of maintenance and aesthetics adhered to along these blocks, as well as support for storefront activation where feasible, but they do not require the same level of investment as Cameron Avenue or Main St. Ackerman St., on the north side of Cameron Avenue, is under the jurisdiction of TxDOT, adding to the list of roads constrained on design within the right-of-way.

Festival Street (Milam Ave)

Bonham Street and Milam Avenue serve as an important connector between multiple Downtown assets including Bridge Park, Wolf Park and the Historic Train Depot. This poses an opportunity to create a festival street that could be closed during events and used to expand Downtown’s civic space. Bonham St/Milam Ave between Bridge Park and Scarbrough St. could be enhanced to create a festival street via the following:

- Enhance Bridge Park, Wolf Park, and the open spaces around the Historic Train Depot per recommendations in the Parks, Recreation, Open Space, and Trails chapter, creating a series of Downtown destinations along the corridor.
- Street enhancements from Bridge Park to Plum/San Gabriel St, including a shared-use path, lighting, benches, and landscaping.
- Street enhancements from Plum/San Gabriel St to Ackerman St and Burleson St to Scarbrough St focused on generally enhanced pedestrian walkability including sidewalks, lighting, landscape, benches, etc.
- Street enhancements for the two blocks of Milam Ave between Ackerman St and Burleson St creating a festival street, including curbless transitions between the roadway and sidewalks, enhanced pavers, festoon lighting, landscaping and street furnishings.
- Acquire the commercial buildings between Milam Ave and the railroad tracks to turn into permanent vendor market stalls or similar, that can be open regularly or just during activations and events.



Conceptual rendering of Milam Ave Festival Street and Wolf Park.



Rockdale Arts & Entertainment District

Downtown Rockdale has many arts, culture and entertainment assets that make it primed for the creation of a formal Arts & Entertainment District. Considerations for an appropriate boundary include a compact area with a concentration of assets that are within a 5-minute walk of each other. Map 23 displays a recommended district boundary that is likely to meet the criteria of the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA). The district is bookended by the proposed Milam Ave Festival Street on the south and the Kay Theatre on the north. These are connected by the proposed pedestrian corridor enhancements along Main Street, which is also intersected by Cameron Ave, providing connections to The 1895 Project and the Public Library. These routes also connect to local businesses such as East Bell Taphouse and Main Street Bookshop, which are popular third places for the community and also host their own public events. A series of activated alleyways provide an additional layer of connectivity and interest throughout the District.

The recognition of this District by the City via a formal Arts & Entertainment District Overlay would be a precursor to eventual TCA Cultural District designation, which opens up additional resources and funding. The City could also consider applying a historic preservation program within the District boundaries and eventual designation as a Certified Local Government by the Texas Historical Commission, again creating access to grant streams.

Additional recommendations related to the implementation of an Arts & Entertainment District include:

- Updating the City's noise ordinance to accommodate regular functions of the District, such as reasonable accommodation for evening outdoor music.
- All of the arts/cultural interest groups and stakeholders in the area should formalize their coordination and support for one another, and consider asset-sharing to support their similar missions.
- Creation of a public art program, focused on leveraging local artists.

- Creation of an art league or artist's cooperative; The 1895 Project has plans for a community gallery or the MDD could acquire a space for such a use.
- Encourage and support youth engagement programs related to arts and culture in the district.
- A percentage of infrastructure/capital projects in the District should be slated to go towards public art integration in the area.
- Develop programming plans for public spaces within the District, in partnership with the many organizations and businesses already active in the area.
- Prioritize the proposed streetscape and alley enhancement projects to link existing arts, cultural, and business assets in a comfortable and interesting public environment.
- Make allowances for artisan-scale manufacturing uses in Rockdale's Downtown, these uses are especially appropriate for adaptive reuse of former industrial buildings.

TCA Review Criteria for Cultural District Designation

Artistic Quality: Artistic significance, quality of works of art, quality of artists, impact on artists, quality of services.

Capability: Administrative capability, personnel, demonstrated history, budget, planning/implementation/evaluation.

Impact: Public service, audience or participants, education, outreach, economic impact.



Map 23. Arts & Entertainment District Map

Vacancy Strategies

Downtown Rockdale benefits from multiple blocks of quality commercial buildings, both along Cameron Avenue and on Main Street. Collectively, these buildings offer the potential to create a thriving and attractive Downtown. However, vacant and inactive buildings, particularly at the ground level, pose a serious challenge to creating vibrancy. Vacant storefronts create “visual dullness,” signaling a lack of investment and making the destinations that do exist in Downtown feel few and far between, especially for a pedestrian.

Data provided by the City of Rockdale identified 49 buildings within the Downtown area, as of December 2023:

- 11 are listed as “vacant” and “deteriorated”
- 6 are listed as “vacant,” but not “deteriorated”
- 3 are listed as “occupied” and “deteriorated”
- 2 are listed as “half occupied”
- The remaining 27 are occupied and appear to be in decent shape

That means approximately half of the buildings are not currently contributing to the aesthetics or activity of Downtown, and may even be hindering it. In addition to the 49 buildings, there are 18 other lots in the Downtown database. One is listed as a park (Wolf Park), six are listed as parking, and 11 are listed as “undeveloped.”

Further classification could be helpful in identifying “active” uses (such as retail, restaurants, salons/barber shops, the library, etc.) and “passive” uses such as private offices. Ideally, most of the uses on the two primary streets (Cameron and Main) are “active” uses. However, this aspiration may not be feasible in the short term, given the surrounding population and the size of the Downtown. At this point, getting the storefronts well maintained and filled with any economically productive use would be a significant step in the right direction.

The City and MDD should work proactively to keep the Downtown database up-to-date. As part of this planning process, revisions have been made to the database and a checklist was created that the City and MDD can use to update the data building-to-building (See Appendix B).

This includes such information as:

- Would it be possible to get a Certificate of Occupancy (CO) based on the current condition?
- What specific investments are needed to address deterioration?
- Does the ground floor have a public-oriented use (such as a restaurant, store, or salon)?
- Are there any Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance issues?
- Are the windows tinted or shaded?

As the City and MDD continue to update this information, they can gain a better understanding of what is needed to bring the buildings in Downtown up to code.



Enforcement Efforts

City Ordinance 2023-03-13(6A) sets increasing fees for vacant commercial buildings:

- Ownership for 1 year: \$100
- Ownership for 2 years: \$500
- Ownership for 3 years: \$1,000
- Ownership for 4+ years: \$2,000

This provides a foundation for accountability and ensures that the City and MDD can take some action against absentee landlords. However, this could be significantly strengthened by requiring property owners work with the City and MDD to list out any outstanding building code violations and create a plan to achieve compliance. Alternatively, the City could require an annual inspection from the Fire Marshal, Building Inspector, and Code Enforcement to verify the building has no code violations.

Rockdale's code enforcement officer has several important duties within the City and therefore is not able to put their full focus on code enforcement. The current official is actively working with building owners and maintaining an active database in Downtown and elsewhere throughout the City.

Through the process, it may be established that some buildings have fundamental structural issues which would be financially infeasible to correct. This is a particularly difficult issue in Rockdale since there is a significant number of buildings in Downtown but not a large population center that provides the customer base to justify major structural projects. The City should take steps to avoid demolition of buildings, but in some extreme situations it may be necessary. The urgency of addressing these issues is underscored by the collapse of a downtown building during heavy rains in May of 2024.

Storefront and Small Business Support

To bring deteriorated buildings into productive use, a "carrot/stick" strategy is needed. The City and MDD must not only penalize property owners who leave their buildings in disrepair, but also support and incentivize new active uses and fit the future vision for Downtown.

Strategies to achieve this are:

- Support a "business cluster" to help promote filling vacant storefronts. The 2012 Plan suggests an antiques and arts cluster, however these should not pose limitations on other active uses that may help to fill the vacant spaces. It should be noted that the "antiques mall" model has often proved successful in attracting people and filling large spaces in small town downtowns, even in the absence of

a strong overall market for tourism. This can also be a way to incubate and test innovative retail concepts at low cost and risk.

- Lead a "popup" or temporary retail initiative in vacant and underutilized storefronts (as recommended in the 2012 Plan). Participation in such a program could be optional or required as part of a developers agreement in cases where the City makes a contribution/investment in a property or project. Such popups can range from very short term (such as a day-long popup in conjunction with a special event), to medium term (holiday season, Sesquicentennial Celebration, etc.), to several months. Success will require active outreach to potential local entrepreneurs. Such a program can help significantly lower the barriers to entry for new business concepts.
- Small business support - various entities, including the MDD and Chamber of

A Note on Second Story Vacancies

Second story vacancies can be a particularly difficult issue, even in downtowns which are very economically productive. Meeting the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other modern code requirements can often make development of upper stories in historic buildings infeasible. For that reason, the City may consider lessening enforcement actions for second stories or come up with creative ways to help support building owners with multi-story buildings. For example, creating a zoning overlay for historic structures in Downtown that waives certain code requirements without sacrificing health, safety and welfare. Alternatively, the City and MDD could create a program to fund design services for accessibility alternatives under the existing building code for a building owner.

It should be noted that the City of Rockdale has adopted the 2018 International Existing Building Code (IEBC), which allows greater flexibility for historic buildings. It will be important to ensure that both local developers and City's Code Enforcement staff are aware of the applications of these standards to such structures.

Commerce, should work together to both support existing Downtown businesses and help incubate new ones. Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) excel at providing tailored support to small businesses. These generally require partners “on the ground” in a community to help guide businesses to their services. It is recommended to reach out to local SBDCs (Brazos Valley Small Business Development Center in Bryan, Blinn College SBDC in Brenham, Texas State University SBDC in Round Rock) to explore potential partnerships. In addition, there has been a proposed partnership between the City and Temple College, which also has a partnership with Taylor.

- The City and MDD should continue to work with property owners on a variety of programs including facade grants, low interest loans, property tax abatements, etc. to help bring their properties up to code. Crucially, this funding must come with agreements that require active participation in the Downtown as a whole. This may include being part of monthly events, having an active window display, keeping the property clean and well-maintained, being open certain hours, or inclusion in a popup retail program. This can be tied to programs that recruit and mentor small developers, as discussed below in the Vacant Lots section.

Window Display Programs

Window displays are the “seams” between the public realm (what people experience as they walk through Downtown) and the private realm (what people experience when they walk into businesses). For that reason, they play an outsized, and usually underappreciated, role in both the ability of businesses to attract customers and the Downtown experience as a whole. We strongly recommend that the City or MDD maintain a constant budget for matching funds to support window display programs, including those with lighting at night. Entities such as the Chamber of Commerce and Rockdale Downtown Association could hold themed competitions during special occasions. Storefront Mastery is an organization that can offer low-cost advice on dynamic window displays.



Window Displays in Downtown Rockdale.

Zoning

Downtown Rockdale is subject to Central Area (CA) zoning. This district permits a mix of uses, including retail, office, light commercial, and residential uses. No minimum lot area or setbacks (see Glossary) are required. A minimum lot width of 25 feet is required. The top permissible height is 35 feet, while 100% lot coverage is permitted. Additionally, there are no required minimum number of parking spaces. These standards are appropriate for a traditional small-town downtown context and are consistent with Downtown Rockdale's historic development patterns and future vision.

However, there is a lack of downtown-appropriate urban design standards, which may include elements such as entrances on main streets, maximum setbacks, and window/permeability requirements. Since Downtown is a unique part of Rockdale, it is strongly recommended that the City consider creating specific urban design standards for the CA district.

It should also be noted that there is a specific limitation that all business be "conducted wholly within an enclosed building, except for delivery, gasoline sales, nurseries and garden centers." Since outdoor dining (and other similar activities) are beneficial, appropriate, and even encouraged for a downtown area, it is recommended that the City reconsider this regulation.

Vacant Lots

A number of vacant lots in Downtown offer strong opportunities for infill development or redevelopment. Given the large number of vacant commercial storefronts in the area, it is unlikely that these empty lots will be appropriate for retail, restaurant, or similar active commercial uses. These lots are best suited for modest-scaled residential developments, particularly if the current height limits of 35 feet are maintained. Downtown is a prime location for "missing middle" housing products such as duplexes, townhomes and small multifamily buildings.

The City and MDD should proactively work to identify local developers with capacity to build residential development on this scale. Based on conversations with these developers, the City and MDD should assess what the market needs are, whether zoning will need to be adjusted, and how they can best mentor or support these developers. National organizations such as Neighborhood Evolution or the Incremental Development Alliance may be sought to advise on these projects, depending on local capacity. There may also be a need for the City to work with financial institutions to create low-interest loan packages, particularly given the current high interest rates.



Public Space Activation & Events

One of the most important strategies to creating a vibrant downtown lies in the activation of public spaces and semi-public spaces (see Glossary in Appendix B).

Wolf Park

At this time, Wolf Park, which is owned by the Chamber of Commerce, is by far the most significant gathering space in Downtown Rockdale. This is a partially programmed space with a 1,200 square foot pavilion and some other amenities. The park can be rented for a fee of \$50 (waived for Chamber members), plus a \$25 utility fee if concessions, sales, or amplified music are used.

For two years, the Chamber hosted an increasingly popular Farmers Market in Wolf Park. However, the market was briefly moved out of Downtown, particularly due to shade issues, before being discontinued in March of 2024. There may be opportunities for the City to bring it back. The Chamber also uses the pavilion to host occasional evening craft markets and other events.

Consistent programming of “anchor” public spaces, even if only for small events, is key to bringing a constant flow of people into downtowns. Equally important is redesigning the space for daily use, where people are encouraged

to eat, linger, play lawn games, or be involved in other activities. The 2012 Downtown Master Plan includes some design recommendations for Wolf Park, but the City should consider a fresh redesign process to maximize the use of this asset.

Events

A key to successful, consistent events is providing shade in strategic locations and throughout Downtown. Downtown currently has a general lack of mature street trees or other sources of shade. Consideration should be given to implementing a program to restore awnings on buildings Downtown, potentially accompanied by lighting to enhance visibility at night. Furthermore, the addition of street trees and well-placed shade structures, particularly at parks, gathering places and intersections, will help to mitigate the Texas heat while strengthening the visual cues that establish the Downtown.

There are currently events held along Bell Street, including the Thursday on Tap events that debuted the summer of 2023. Milam Avenue between Main and Ackerman adjacent to Wolf Park offers another potential opportunity for holding events. The City and MDD could pilot shutting down this block to hold special events and work toward pedestrianizing the street.

The Vision Historic Preservation Foundation is planning to include a pocket park with their 1895 Project along W. Cameron Ave. and plan to produce events in their space.

Bridge Park is only a short distance from Downtown core, 5 blocks east via Milam Ave/ Bonham Street. The street becomes a shaded rural road for about 875 feet before terminating

into Bridge Park. With signage and visual cues, a better connection between Downtown, Bridge Park, and a wider network of parks and trails could be made.

Staffing

It should be appreciated that various entities- including the Chamber of Commerce, the Kay Theater, the Rockdale Downtown Association, the Rockdale Historical Society, and the Lucy Hill Patterson Memorial Library - are doing an excellent job creating events in the Downtown. This ranges from Thursday Sip and Shops, to Saturday Farmers Markets, to numerous shows at the theater. However, there are limitations to what can be coordinated by volunteers or organizations that have other primary missions. Both the curation of events and the expansion of the number of events will likely require paid staff.

One cost effective way to do this is to bring on an events coordinator who gets paid from vendor fees, sponsorships, etc. as well as a modest payment from the City or MDD. In the long run, the City may consider hiring a Downtown Coordinator, perhaps as a part-time position,



A bench in Wolf Park.

who can coordinate events as well as support the “bigger picture” of Downtown. Likewise, the City could consider participating in the Main Street Program, administered by the Texas Historical Commission.

Micro-Investments

Cities often focus on large, transformative investments, whether private or public, to improve their downtowns. Such expenditures are sometimes needed, for example, major enhancements to public streets that require large capital investments and extensive coordination with other jurisdictions. Similarly, the proposed 1895 Project, led by non-profit Vision Historic Preservation Foundation, offers the opportunity for a catalytic project in the form of high-quality historic restoration with a strong cultural element.

However, such large investments are only a piece of the larger puzzle. They come rarely and often involve factors which are beyond the immediate control of City and MDD staff and other stakeholders. Furthermore, they are unlikely to be successful in isolation as they must be part of a larger strategy. Making many small, intelligent investments of both money and time is crucial to a successful downtown. Given that, micro-investments should be the foundation of Downtown’s revitalization strategy.

Tax Increment Funding

Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ) capture the increased tax revenue from properties within a growing district and invest that money back into the area (see the Implementation chapter for additional information on how a TIRZ works). Tax Increment Funding (TIF) is the funding that comes from the TIRZ district.

The City of Rockdale has recently created TIRZ #2 (the Downtown/East Cameron Area TIRZ), which begins in the western section of Downtown Rockdale and terminates at U.S. 77 (near Rockdale’s eastern boundary). The TIRZ has a 20-year term and will expire in 2043.

This Plan recommends that the TIF funding collected within the district should be prioritized as follows:

1. **Addressing basic safety concerns** - some Downtown structures pose possible safety hazards; to the extent that buildings are

confirmed as potentially dangerous, taking steps to mitigate those risks via building updates, demolition or other strategies must be the highest priority.

2. **Keeping streets, sidewalks and common areas well maintained and attractive** - basic maintenance such as weed control and repainting parking lines. Beyond basic maintenance, additional elements such as enhanced paving, landscaping, decorative lighting and crosswalks.
3. **Supporting active spaces for people** - upgrades to Wolf Park are the most obvious opportunity for this strategy. Since the Wolf Park parcel is owned by the Chamber of Commerce, it will require a partnership and cooperation between the City, MDD, and Chamber. As a precondition for success, it will be necessary to have a maintenance and cleaning plan in place for the park, either independently or in collaboration with the Chamber.



A portion of Downtown Rockdale that could benefit from TIRZ funds for sidewalk maintenance.

4. **Creating “visual cues” to support a distinctive Downtown** - branding elements such as signage, consistent streetscaping, enhanced paving, public art, holiday lighting, etc.
5. **Updating the appearance of storefronts and window displays** - as outlined in the prior sections of this chapter.

To note, the existing five-year plan for TIRZ #2 is consistent with this recommended prioritization. The rough budget over five years, which will likely be adjusted as more information is available, includes a number of Downtown improvements, such as murals, banners, planters, decorative street signs and lights on Downtown buildings. It also includes demolition of dilapidated structures along the Cameron Ave Corridor. Ongoing maintenance of landscaping, trash removal, holiday lights, banners and Downtown lights are also included.

Other items to consider may include repainting parking lines, creating shade structure in Wolf Park, creation of parklets, painted/artistic crosswalks, movable furniture, strategically-placed bollards (to create buffers for pedestrians), and a window display program. These may be funded by the TIRZ, or the City may identify other grants and sources of general funding to support this.

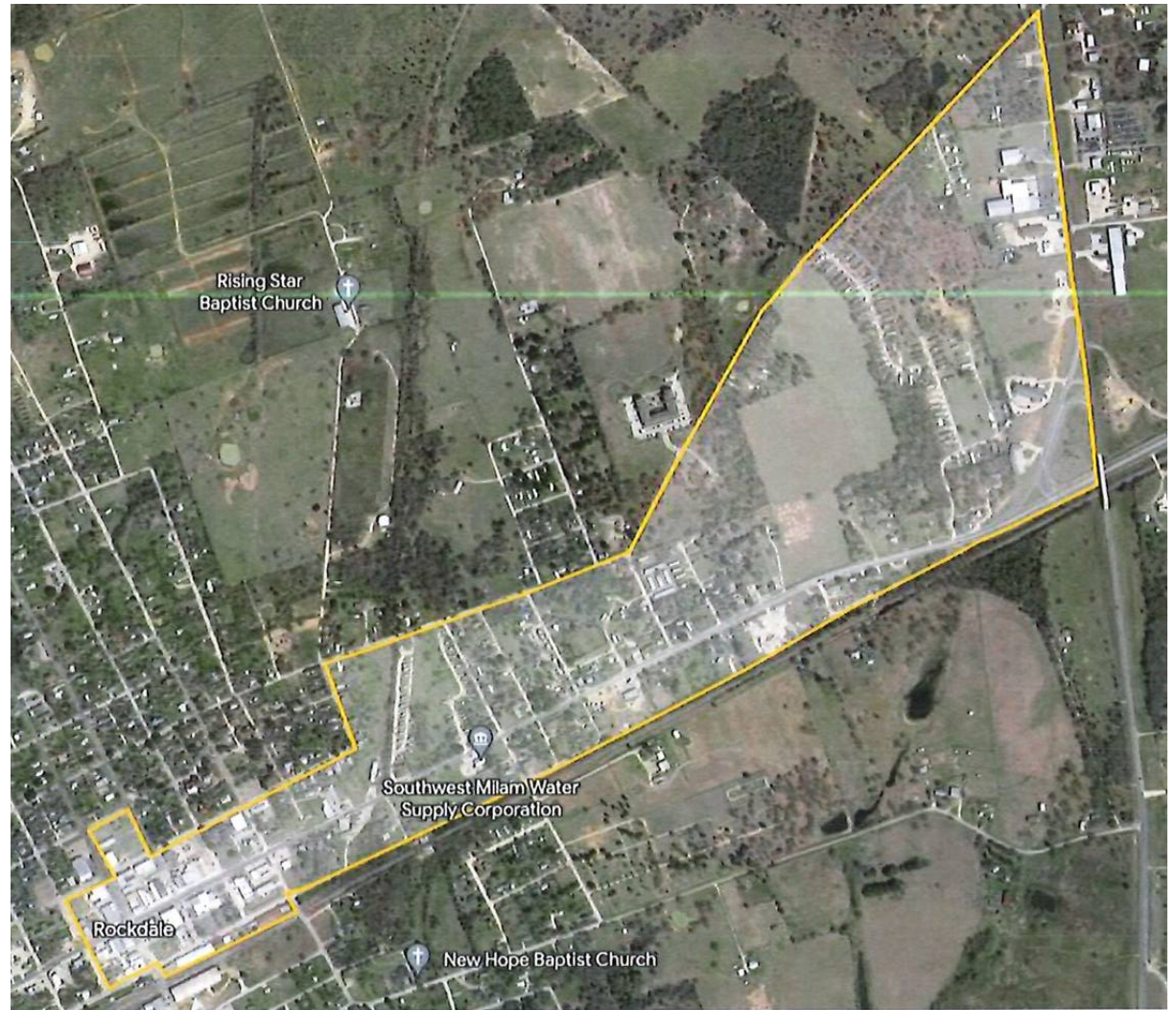


Figure 66. Boundaries of Rockdale TIRZ #2

Source: City of Rockdale Document Center, <https://www.rockdaletx.gov/41/Codes-Ordinances>

Parking

The more successful a downtown becomes, the more parking becomes a challenge. So, while parking issues are frustrating, they also signal that Downtown is a popular and thriving district.

Visitors are often accustomed to having convenient, clearly marked parking right in front of their destinations, particularly if they live and shop in small towns and rural areas. Many examples can be seen along Cameron Avenue west of Downtown, where businesses have ample parking. This traditional retail parking is clearly assigned to one store or a group of stores in a shopping center. In such places, businesses can create large, convenient parking lots with few tradeoffs. However, a significant portion of these lots are often empty, and an empty parking lot is not the highest or best use for any piece of land.

A downtown, on the other hand, thrives when a variety of uses are within walking distance of each other, with minimal gaps or dead zones between buildings and businesses. More broadly, there are tradeoffs between parking and other priorities. Usually the tradeoff is between convenience and economic productivity. A recent example in Downtown Rockdale is the TxDOT project that helped to improve pedestrian experience but required the elimination of some parking spaces. In the future, the City may consider replacing some spaces with parklets (see Glossary in Appendix B), as a way to bring outdoor dining and active public spaces into Downtown, but would be at the expense of one or more parking spaces.

Currently, there is not a broad perception of a parking shortage in Downtown Rockdale. As storefronts fill and Downtown attracts more activity, this will likely change and there will likely be a perceived parking problem. To note, “parking problems” often have little to do with the actual number of parking spots available, but often more so with the fact that the walk between plentiful parking and destinations is not enjoyable.

A parking garage is unlikely to be a good solution for Downtown Rockdale, as parking garages are expensive and can be perceived as unsafe and unpleasant. Rather, the City and MDD should first strategize to use what spaces are available and, if necessary, identify empty lots which can be converted to parking. Secondly, the City and MDD should ensure walking routes between parking areas and Downtown businesses and destinations are safe, interesting, and comfortable.



A “parklet” that utilizes an on-street parking lot to provide outdoor cafe seating for a business.

MDD staff conducted parking counts across Downtown Rockdale on 10 weekdays (five in the morning, four in the afternoon and one in the evening), excluding the five days leading up to Christmas. In addition, there were three counts taken on Saturdays, at 8:00 AM, noon and 4:00 PM. These counts revealed a significant underutilization of available parking.

Existing Parking Use Study

Downtown has 10 surface parking lots, totaling 218 spaces. Although currently owned by specific entities, these lots offer considerable potential to accommodate increased parking demand as Downtown continues to develop. The highest usage observed was 26.1%, with an average of 17.9%. The MDD lot, with 11 spaces, displayed the highest weekday occupancy rate, with a maximum of eight to nine spaces in use.



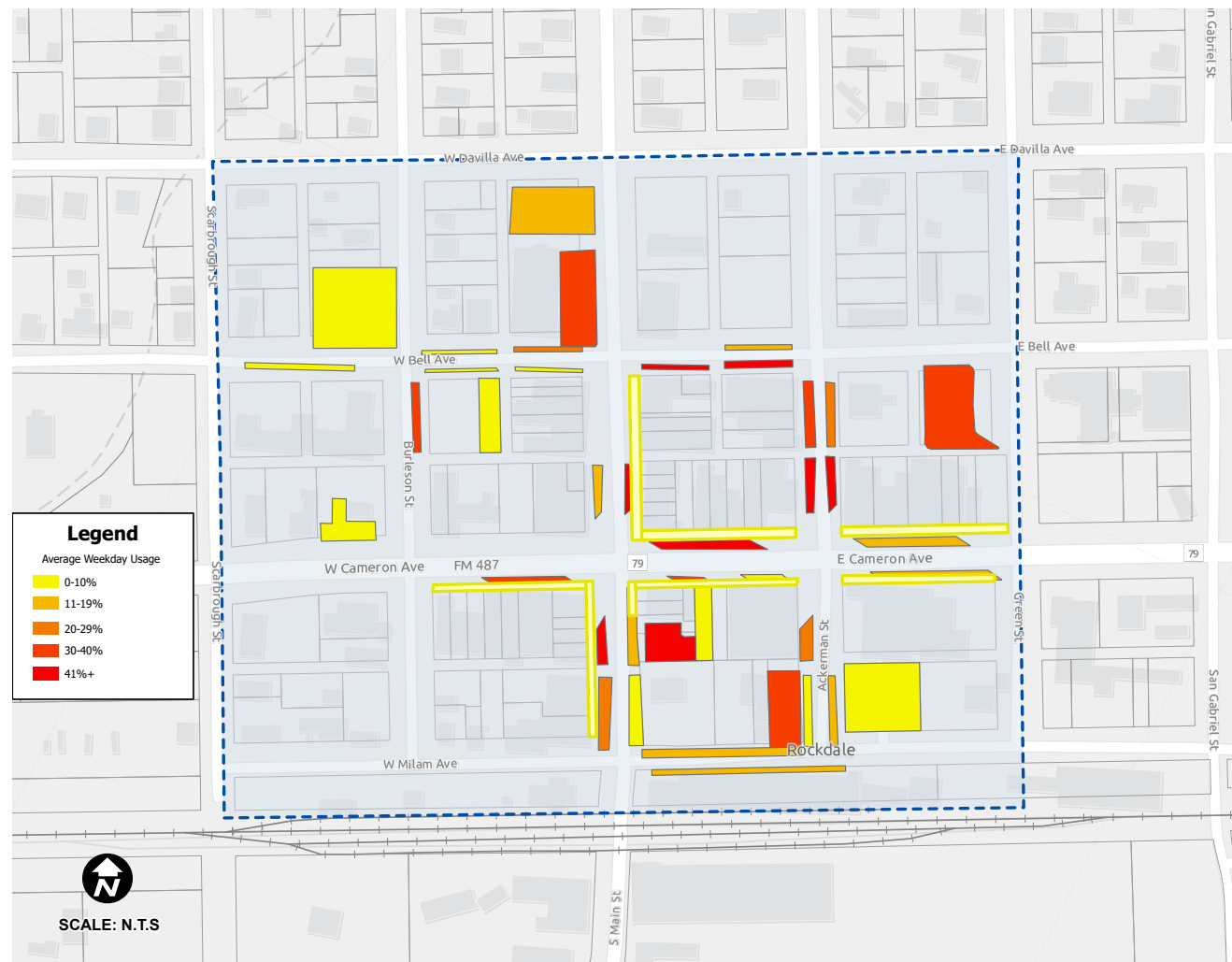
On-street Parking (weekday)

Downtown has 182 on-street parking spaces, which are available to everyone. As with the parking lots, only a small percent are used during the weekdays. These have a total use of approximately 22.8%. Even in high demand areas, there were significant vacancies. For example, the block of Main Street between Bell and Cameron (24 spaces) had a peak observed weekday occupancy rate of 66.7% and an average of 30.7%. For the two blocks of Cameron between Bell and Ackerman (21 spaces), the peak was 62% and the average was 45%.

It should be noted that many of these spaces are currently unmarked, leading to potential user confusion.

For the Saturday counts, it was observed that the vast majority of spaces were empty. Of the 218 parking lot spaces, three to 17 cars were parked on Saturday. For the off-street spaces, usage ranged from 17 to 25 cars parked. This indicates significant opportunity for Saturday daytime activities with minimal impacts on parking.

These findings highlight a considerable surplus of parking availability throughout Downtown Rockdale, suggesting opportunities for better utilization and management to support the area's growth and development.



Parking Strategy

Downtowns are, by their nature, mixed-use districts. As such, they naturally lend themselves to shared parking arrangements. For example, church parking lots tend to be filled on Sunday mornings, and to a lesser extent during other times (such as Wednesday evenings). Bank parking tends to be filled on weekdays during the day and restaurant parking is filled during the evenings and weekends. These uses can all share parking with generally little overlap.

Public lots which are open to all uses are often most appropriate for a downtown, in contrast to the “each user parks themselves” model which can work in other parts of a city. This is because in downtown it should be encouraged that visitors frequent more than one business while in the area.

A parking strategy for Downtown Rockdale will include:

- Clearly mark on-street parking spaces to encourage use, including signage to direct visitors to side street parking.
- Work with parking lot owners to make parking available publicly, during appropriate hours. As a model, the MDD may consider making its lots available for public parking during evening/ weekend hours as deemed appropriate (for example, after 6:00 PM on weekday evenings and all day on the weekends). Other examples may include:
 - First Christian Church Parking Lot, Bell Ave/Burleson Ave
 - Citizens National Bank Parking Lot, NW corner of Milam/Ackerman

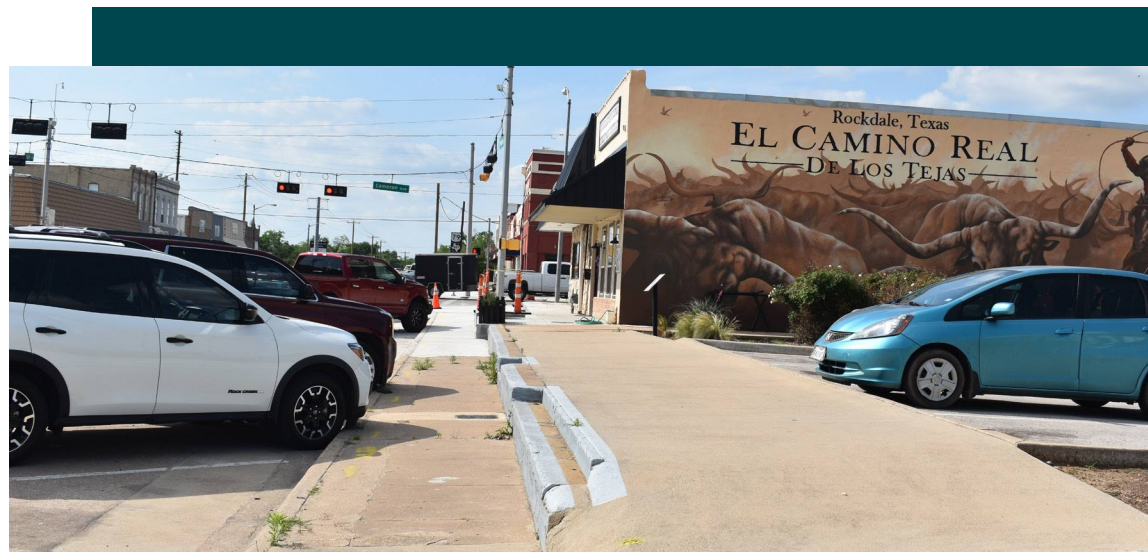
- Citizens National Bank Parking Lot, NE corner of Milam/Ackerman
- First Baptist Church of Rockdale lot, Bell Ave/Green Ave.

- Increase visibility of parking lots with uniform signage and other indicators, listing rules and hours as appropriate.
- Create maps to indicate available parking. As a first step, these can be printed for distribution by businesses and circulated in conjunction with special events.
- Work with property owners and Downtown employees to use more remote parking spaces, where appropriate. This could be led by Rockdale Downtown Association.

There may be enough opportunities to work with existing parking lot owners to address future parking concerns. If not, an additional strategy is to consider the conversion of undeveloped Downtown lots into parking, either permanently or temporarily. While parking lots on Cameron

Avenue or Main Street would have greater visibility, they would also disrupt the continuity of the primary Downtown corridors. Therefore, where possible, parking lots should be located on side streets and have highly visible signage and indicators to direct visitors to these lots with convenient and comfortable walking routes to get pedestrians to their destinations from these lots.

In the bigger picture, Downtown parking cannot be approached in an isolated silo. For people to park Downtown and walk to a different location, the walkability itself must be safe, comfortable, and visually appealing. Efforts to calm vehicular traffic in the Downtown area and to improve crossing conditions for pedestrians will be crucial to maximizing use of existing and future side street parking spaces. While the City maintains jurisdiction regarding side streets, any changes to parking along both Cameron Avenue or Main Street will require coordination with TxDOT.



Activation and Connection Strategy

The presence of two major Downtown corridors, and some minor ones, creates an opportunity to offer visitors a variety of experiences and uses in Downtown. However, it also makes the district somewhat difficult to explore and navigate for people with limited familiarity with the area.

There should be an active effort to create visual cues and uses which entice visitors from one part of the Downtown to another. The use of string lights, distinctive public art, pavement treatments and similar methods can be part of this strategy.

People are drawn to human activity. A series of well-lit, activated alleyways can play a key role in creating additional pedestrian connections between retail corridors. A future plan will be needed to assess how to balance the functional needs of alleys for such things as waste management and access with the benefits of creating an enhanced human experience. It should be noted that redesign of such spaces may prove to be logistically infeasible; in such a case, it can make sense to make modest changes (such as murals) where possible, while focusing the bulk of resources on the primary streets.

Some alleyways that may be candidates for activation and pedestrian walkways are identified in Map 26 by the red arrows.



Map 26. Downtown Alley Activation

Alley Activation

Alley activation could be a great strategy to enhance aesthetics and connectivity in Downtown Rockdale. The concept allows these alleys to remain functional while being able to support comfortable pedestrian movement and larger activations during peak times. Permanent installations could include enhanced paving, lighting, shade elements, and wall art or plantings. All furniture, planters, stage elements, etc. are intended to be movable and could be put out only during special events or put out during the day by businesses and taken back up at night to allow functional access. These enhanced alleys also provide additional branding opportunities and could be named after prominent historical figures in Rockdale.



Typical Downtown Rockdale alleyway.



Conceptual rendering of an activated alleyway.



Miscellaneous

Downtown Maintenance

Currently, there is a lack of basic maintenance in Downtown. There is no clear responsibility for keeping up cleanliness in the district as a whole. There are a number of visible issues related to this lack of maintenance, including faded banners, weeds, trash, etc.

While many people may not consciously notice this lack of maintenance, it serves as a negative advertisement for the Downtown area and appears not cared for. This is even more true for public spaces, such as Wolf Park, which cannot be consistently programmed or activated until there is staffing in place to keep it clean. This will require some allocation of funding and resources, either directly or indirectly, in the form of assigning staff time to perform general Downtown upkeep. The landscaping budget identified with the TIRZ #2 funding may be sufficient to address this.



An area of Downtown that requires maintenance.

Leveraging the Historic Depot

The Historic Train Depot, run by Rockdale Historic Society, is currently a museum and weekend visitors center. The model trains, blacksmith shop, and other offerings of the museum pose a strong potential attractor for casual visitors. In addition, recent events such as the living historian on Veterans Day of 2023 showcase the opportunity to further leverage the site.

The dining car is available for rent and seats 32. This space hosts occasional special events, such as a dessert event and a Roaring 20s themed dinner in 2023. Moving forward, it should be encouraged to feature consistent similar events. There could also be an excellent opportunity for

a small diner, bar, or coffeehouse to operate out of this space not unlike similar services found in museums throughout the country. This is one of the low-hanging fruits to create a unique attractor that can bring visitors to the Downtown area.

Rockdale Downtown Association

While strong City and MDD leadership is necessary for a successful downtown, it is not sufficient by itself. Downtown cannot be consistently successful without the cooperation of business owners and other individuals who invest their money, time, and energy into the area. For that reason, having strong participation in the Rockdale Downtown Association (RDA) is



The dining car adjacent to the Historic Train Depot.

crucial for long-term prosperity.

The RDA has an active social media presence and participates in several projects; recent examples include the City of Angels public art project, the Christmas Tree lighting, and the Downtown Sip and Shop events.

For the RDA to continue its success, it is recommended that they set a clear understanding of their goals, mission, and next steps, as well as an action plan. This will also involve specifying what their specific role is and how it differs from other organizations which are active in Downtown, such as the Chamber of Commerce, MDD, Rockdale Historical Society, and The Vision Historic Preservation Foundation. This is especially important because the Chamber is strongly involved with running events and promoting businesses. The RDA may decide to host separate events or offer to take a role in leading or supporting Chamber events.

The RDA may choose several areas of focus, which may include event planning, public art, fundraising for Downtown improvements, promotion/marketing, Downtown business support, etc. However, it will be impossible for them to address all elements of Downtown and the RDA time will be more effective if targeted toward specific mission-aligned efforts.

Public Art

Public art can be key to creating visual cues that establish one has arrived in the Downtown area, as well as useful for bringing beautification, culture and interest. Downtown Rockdale has a base of quality private and public art, including the 1939 “Industry in Rockdale” mural at the Post Office, the “History of Milam County” mural at

Citizens Bank, various art and antique displays at the Patterson Library (both permanent and rotating), and three outdoor murals throughout Downtown. Continuing this trend, the City should place a focus on bringing well-curated, high-quality public art to the area. Creating more murals is one easy opportunity and there are a number of potential locations for these. As with many elements of Downtown, there needs to be a clear “champion” of this effort who can set guidelines, obtain funding, and ensure quality.

Broadly speaking, art serves as an attractor in its own right, as well as a gateway and branding opportunity for the district as a whole. State law permits up to 15% of all Hotel Occupancy Taxes (HOT Funds) to be used on public art, this could be an opportunity to leverage Downtown Rockdale.

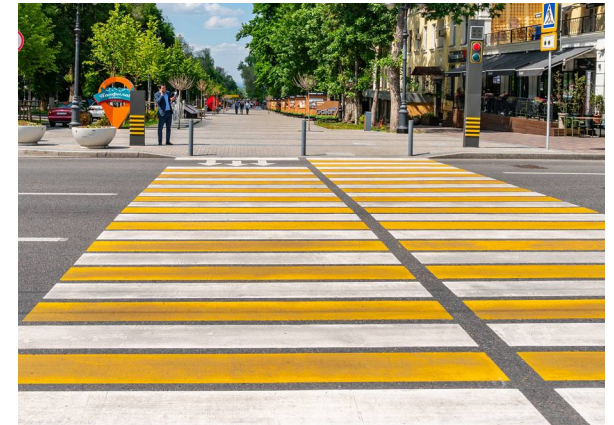
Crosswalk Safety

As of June 2024, there have been two recent pedestrian fatalities in Rockdale, neither of which were in Downtown. These deaths underscore what has been confirmed in many discussions with stakeholders, that pedestrian conditions, particularly on Cameron Avenue, are unsafe and uncomfortable.

While this is a problem along the entire corridor, it is particularly concerning in the Downtown area, where pedestrians should be prioritized. One way to help address this is to ensure that there are highly-visible crosswalks, with specialty or colorful materials to attract attention coupled with upgraded traffic control devices such as fully-signalized intersections and pedestrian-actuated signals. Examples in Texas are some crosswalks which use thermal plastic for durability and visibility. In some cases, public art funds have

been leveraged to support “artistic” crosswalks.

Crossings can also be reinforced by pavement treatments, signage, and other cues to alert drivers that they are entering a special zone and to pay more attention. The current pedestrian “beg buttons” on the intersection of Main Street and Cameron Avenue are not operational, further deprioritizing pedestrians. Ideally, such buttons should not be needed in a Downtown context, as pedestrians should have ample crossing time without having to push a special button.



Examples of crosswalks with an artistic flare.

Downtown Action Plan

This action plan summarizes the recommendations from this chapter into clearly outlined action items that should be undertaken to implement the vision. Implementation timeframes shown here are target, but actions can be done sooner or later than noted here based on viability of funding, political support, or other opportunities.

Short-term = 1-5 years, Mid-term = 5-10 years, and Long-term = 10+ years.

Rec.	Supported Goal	Action Items	Implementation Timeframe			Action Type	Key Entity and Partnerships
			Short-term	Mid-term	Long-term or Ongoing		
DT-1	Pedestrian and Vehicular Corridor Enhancement	Enhance pedestrian conditions, including sidewalks and intersection details, along E Cameron Ave/US79, per the existing corridor plan.		◆		Program	Engineering TxDOT
DT-2	Pedestrian and Vehicular Corridor Enhancement (Related to action TR-3)	Balance vehicular needs with downtown-appropriate pedestrian amenities, focusing on beautification, aesthetics, and safety.	◆			Policy	Engineering
DT-3	Pedestrian and Vehicular Corridor Enhancement	Explore redesign options to relocate trees in the median to line sidewalks.		◆		Project	Engineering
DT-4	Main Street Pedestrian Corridor	Improve pedestrian comfort and amenities on Main St, focusing on wide sidewalks, streetscaping, lighting, and encouraging businesses to activate the public realm.		◆		Program	Planning Engineering
DT-5	Supporting Corridors Enhancement	Ensure adequate pedestrian infrastructure and aesthetic maintenance along E Bell Ave and Ackerman St.		◆		Project	Planning Engineering
DT-6	Small Business Support (Related to action ED-10)	Collaborate with Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) to support existing businesses and incubate new ones.	◆			Program	MDD
DT-7	Small Business Support	Continue programs such as facade grants, low-interest loans, and property tax abatements to improve property conditions and encourage participation in Downtown activities.	◆			Policy	MDD
DT-8	Small Business Support	Support a cluster of art- and antique-related businesses in Downtown, leveraging the business incubation potential of these types of entities. This should not preclude encouraging other types of businesses.		◆		Program	MDD
DT-9	Vacant Storefront Activation	Lead a popup or temporary retail activation initiative in vacant and underutilized storefronts.	◆			Program	Planning MDD
DT-10	Window Display Programs	Maintain a budget for matching funds to support window display programs, including themed competitions and lighting enhancements.	◆			Program	MDD
DT-11	Zoning and Urban Design Standards	Consider creating specific urban design standards for the Downtown district to preserve Downtown's historic character and encourage appropriate development.		◆		Study	Planning
DT-12	Vacant Lots Redevelopment (Related to action LU-4)	Identify opportunities for infill development or redevelopment of vacant lots, focusing on missing middle housing products and working with local developers and financial institutions.			◆	Study	Planning MDD

Rec.	Supported Goal	Action Items	Implementation Timeframe			Action Type	Key Entity and Partnerships
			Short-term	Mid-term	Long-term or Ongoing		
DT-13	Public Space Activation & Events (Related to action PR-30)	Redesign Wolf Park to maximize its use for public events and daily activities.		◆		Study	Planning Chamber of Commerce
DT-14	Public Space Activation & Events (Related to action TR-11)	Provide shade in strategic locations and enhance streetscapes to support consistent events in downtown.	◆			Project	Engineering
DT-15	Public Space Activation & Events	Consider piloting street closures for special events and pedestrianizing certain areas.	◆			Study	MDD Engineering
DT-16	Public Space Activation & Events	Implement a festival street along Milam Ave per the recommendations in this chapter.			◆	Program	Planning Milam County
DT-17	Staffing and Coordination	Consider hiring an events coordinator or a part-time Downtown Coordinator to support event planning and overall downtown management.		◆		Policy	MDD
DT-18	Staffing and Coordination	Explore participation in the Main Street Program for additional support and resources.		◆		Policy	MDD
DT-19	Micro Investments	Focus on small investments in Downtown infrastructure, amenities, and programming to complement larger transformative projects.		◆		Study	Engineering MDD
DT-20	Parking Strategy	Strategize to use available parking spaces efficiently, considering shared parking agreements and remote parking options.	◆			Study	Planning
DT-21	Parking Strategy	Enhance visibility and signage for parking lots, create parking maps, and encourage walking routes between parking areas and downtown destinations.	◆			Project	Planning MDD
DT-22	Parking Strategy	Coordinate with TxDOT for any changes to parking along primary downtown corridors.		◆		Project	Planning Engineering TxDOT
DT-23	Parking Strategy	Ensure that all on-street parking spaces are clearly striped.		◆		Program	Engineering
DT-24	Activation and Connection Strategy	Create visual cues and activate alleyways to enhance pedestrian connections between retail corridors.			◆	Program	Planning Engineering
DT-25	Activation and Connection Strategy	Address basic maintenance issues in Downtown to improve overall cleanliness and attractiveness.	◆			Policy	Engineering
DT-26	Leveraging Historic Depot (Related to action PR-31)	Encourage consistent events at the historic depot and explore opportunities for additional services like a small diner or coffeehouse.		◆		Program	MDD Rockdale Historical Society
DT-27	Rockdale Downtown Association (RDA)	Define clear goals, mission, and action plan for the RDA to ensure effective Downtown revitalization efforts.	◆			Study	MDD
DT-28	Rockdale Downtown Association (RDA)	Specify the role of the RDA and differentiate it from other organizations which are active in downtown.	◆			Policy	MDD
DT-29	Public Art and Crosswalk Safety	Focus on bringing well-curated public art to Downtown and improve crosswalk safety with highly-visible markings and upgraded traffic control devices.		◆		Program	MDD Engineering