





NEIGHBORHOODS, HOUSING & CHARACTER

Introduction

In Rockdale, the goal is to create neighborhoods where people, places and unity come together for the City's quality of life. The focus is on practical, safe and vibrant areas where families thrive alongside the workplace. As Rockdale grows, there is an effort to adapt to the changing needs for housing.

Neighborhoods play a big role in how the city feels, leaving a lasting impact on residents and visitors. The aim is to give Rockdale its own unique identity, fostering community pride through various design ideas and guidelines that make a positive and lasting impression.

This chapter will address challenges and set goals for policies that can enhance the vitality of Rockdale's neighborhoods. The primary focus is on leveraging existing resources and assets to elevate safety, quality of life and opportunities for all residents. An emphasis will also be on creating mixed-use, infill and new neighborhood areas to sustain and enrich Rockdale's unique character.

The subsequent sections offer comprehensive guidelines for establishing, preserving, and enhancing the character of the community:

- Neighborhood Assessment
- Housing Framework Guidelines
- Historic Preservation
- Community Branding & Urban Design



WHAT WE'VE HEARD: Neighborhoods, Housing & Character

"More cultural activities, preservation and upkeep of historic buildings, a vibrant downtown with more retail. Beautiful entrances to the city."
- Community Member

"More public spaces for walking and biking."
- Community Member

"Cleaner, safer, growth."
- Community Member

"Housing better suited for young professionals and families and more parks with inclusive play sets."
- Community Member

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Encourage a variety of housing options and enhance the availability of more affordable housing.
- The top 3 types of housing the residents of Rockdale want are single-family neighborhoods, rural residential and multifamily units in mixed-use developments.
- Increase support for the maintenance and care of housing.
- Balance revitalization with stabilization.

Neighborhood Stability

Rockdale's current population is mostly comprised of Older Labor Force, as illustrated in the Community Snapshot chapter. Given the generally older population, there are likely going to be changing housing needs and preferences in the near future. When survey participants were asked about the most needed housing option in Rockdale, 42% expressed positive inclination toward diverse residential choices. Given the potential for new growth due to surrounding development and job creation, a variety of alternative single-family products should be considered in addition to traditional single-family neighborhoods.

Rockdale has below average housing prices for the state of Texas and Milam County. As the City anticipates growth and the demand for more housing rises, there is an opportunity to strategically guide new housing developments to support the ongoing attainability of housing in Rockdale. This approach aims to align with the long-term goals of the community and foster neighborhood stability. The Economic Resiliency chapter discusses housing data in greater detail.



Examples of existing housing stock in Rockdale.

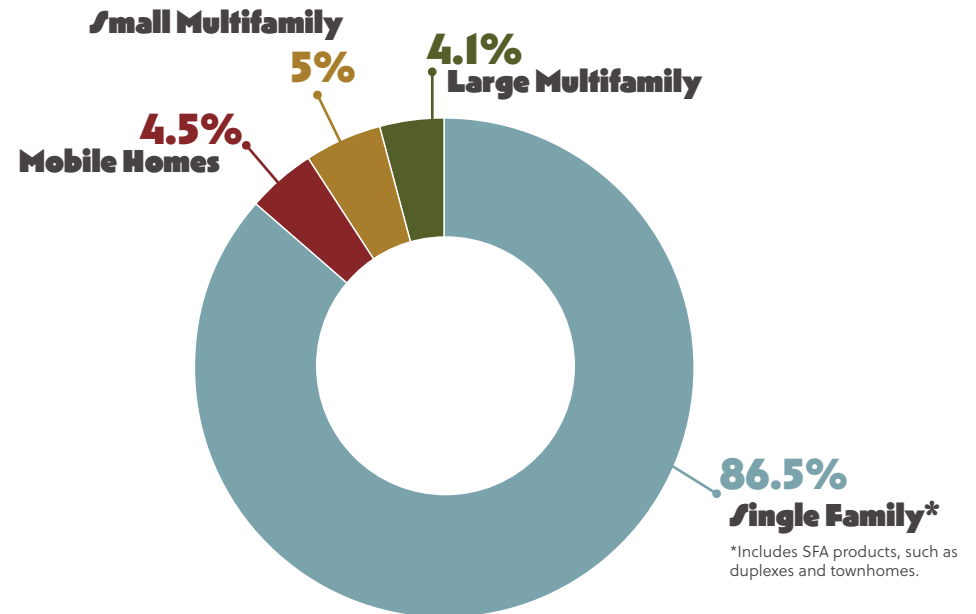


Figure 36. Existing Unit Mix by Housing Structure Type

Source: U.S. Census 2021: ACS 5-Year Estimates

\$798
Median gross rent
\$107,100
Median home value

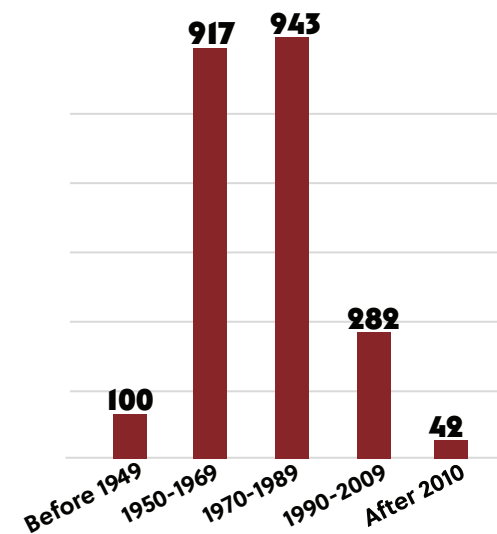


Figure 37. Housing Units Built by Year

Source: U.S. Census 2021: ACS 5-Year Estimates

Vicious vs. Virtuous Cycles

As neighborhoods undergo constant change, it is easy for housing to become fixed in a vicious or virtuous cycle. The vicious cycle involves declining neighborhoods; resulting in a diminished quality of life, residents and businesses deserting, a shrinking tax base, disinvestment, and a stagnant community that further exacerbates the decline in quality of life - a downward spiral that may commence at any point and persist unless interrupted. Conversely, thriving neighborhoods are associated with a virtuous cycle which has more favorable results of improved quality of life, investment and reinvestment from residents and businesses, increased tax base, and increased public investment, which then enhances quality of life even more, and the cycle spirals upward.

It is important to note that unchecked growth is not the ultimate objective, as it introduces its own set of challenges such as sprawl, displacement, congestion and increased strain on city resources. These are complex issues that take coordination from multiple city departments to address and plan for as they begin to promote and see the benefits of the urban growth cycle. The optimal outcome is a balanced, sustainable growth cycle that benefits both existing and new residents and businesses.

In addition to the Neighborhood Assessment presented previously, the City should identify neighborhoods that are at risk of becoming stuck in a vicious cycle and direct resources to prevent that cycle from taking hold, and doing so in partnership with the residents.

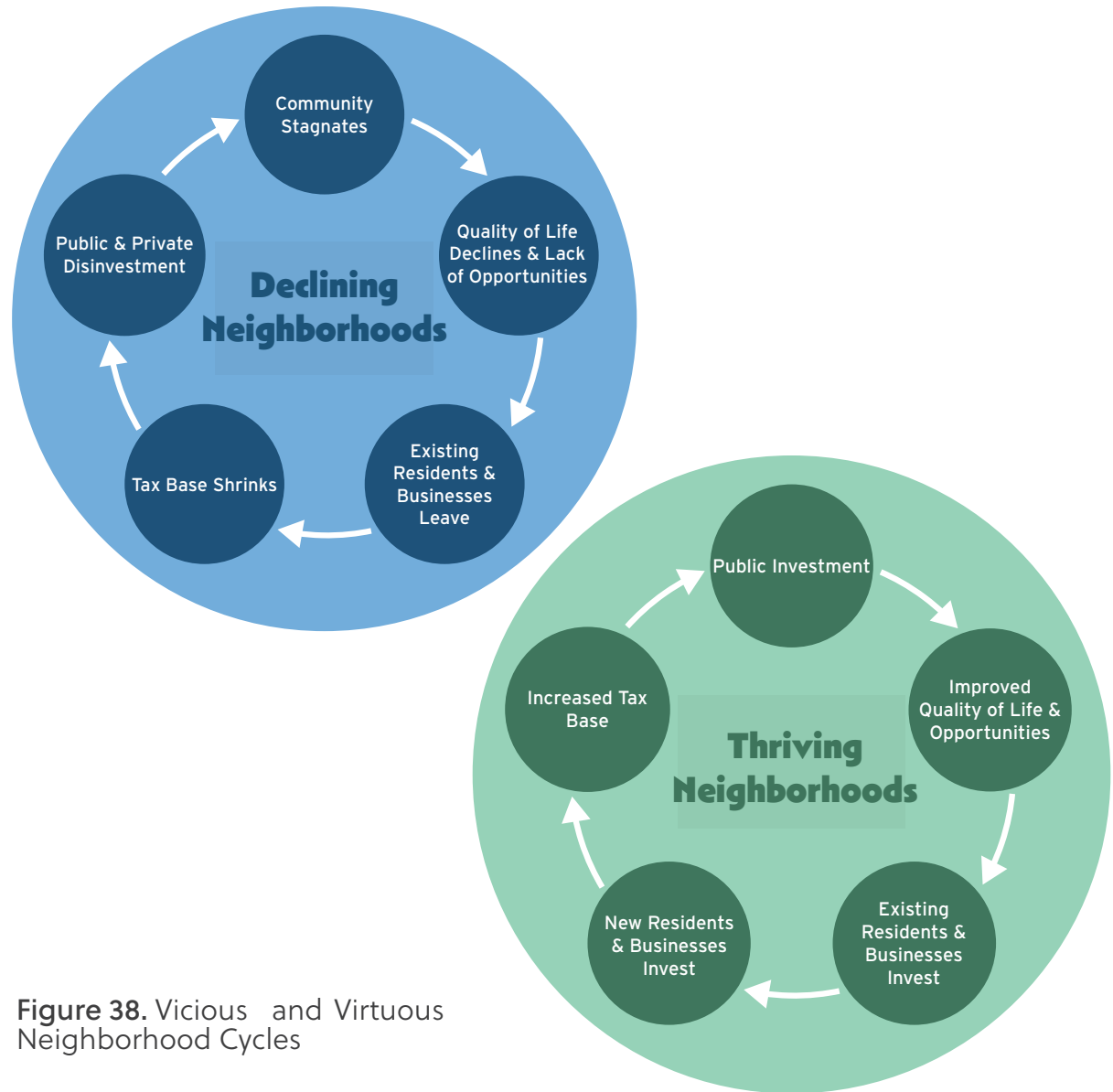


Figure 38. Vicious and Virtuous Neighborhood Cycles

Housing + Transportation Affordability Index (H+T Index)

The H+T Index is a tool that demonstrates affordability as a combination of both housing and transportation costs. This creates a more holistic picture of affordability within a community.

Nationally, 55% of neighborhoods meet the traditional definition of “affordability” that housing costs should be no more than 30% of a household’s income. However, using the H+T index and factoring in transportation costs as well, the number of affordable neighborhoods nationally drops to only 26%.

This is because attainable housing options are often in locations that require higher automobile ownership and farther driving distances to access jobs, goods and services, which incurs many costs including auto payments, maintenance, insurance and fuel purchases. Transportation costs are usually the second largest expenditure for a household (after housing) and are impacted heavily by the household’s physical location and neighborhood characteristics, when controlling for household characteristics.

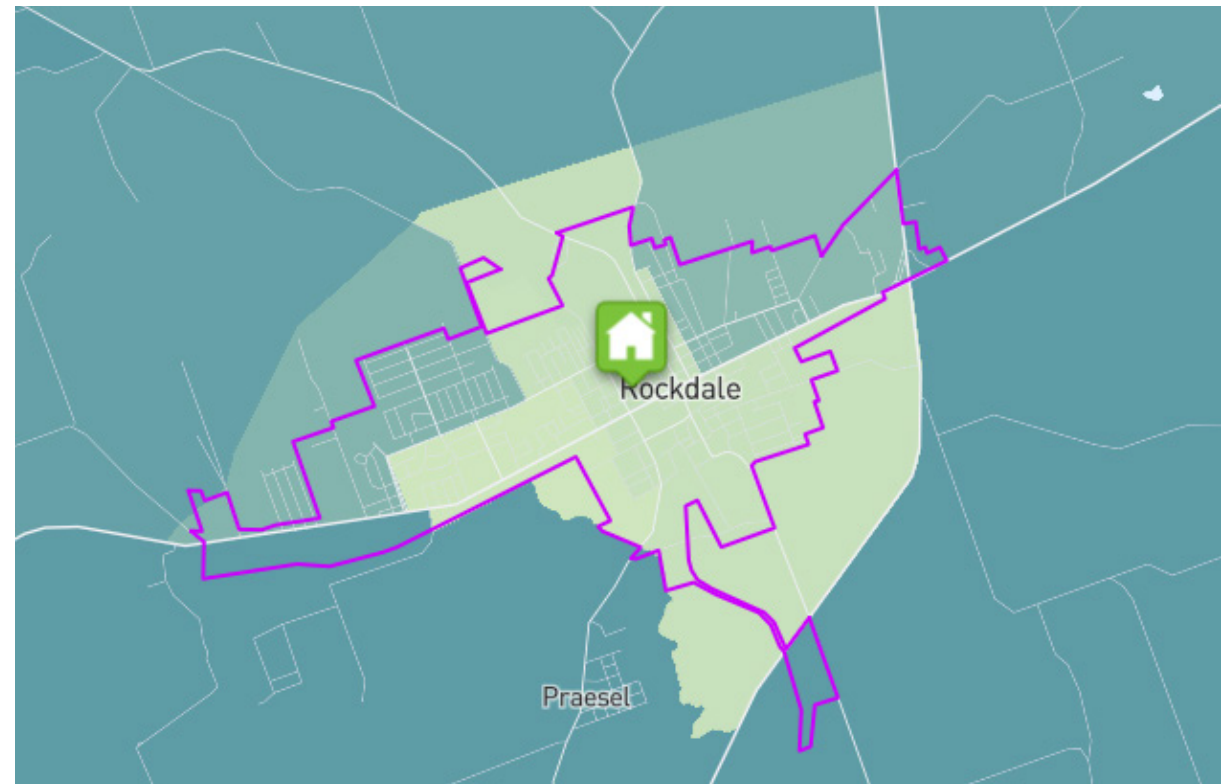
The H+T Index recommends that housing and transportation costs together should make up no more than 45% of a household’s income.

Currently, Rockdale’s overall H+T Index comes out to 44% (15% housing and 29% transportation), just below the 45% recommended benchmark. So while housing costs are well below the 30%

benchmark, the costs of transportation required to live life in Rockdale are quite high, putting it right on the verge of affordability.

In order to maintain affordability in Rockdale, the City needs to maintain its housing affordability and implement strategies to help bring down residents’ transportation costs. Some strategies to achieve this are to provide development

patterns that allow residents to choose alternative modes of transportation, bringing more goods and services closer to residents so they don’t have to travel as far, and providing more jobs in the community so residents can have shorter commutes.



Housing + Transportation Costs % Income

< 24% 24-36% 36-45% 45-54% 54-66% 66-78% 78-87% 87%+

Map 13. H+T Index Map

Source: Center for Neighborhood Technology, <https://htaindex.cnt.org/>

Community Resilience

Resilience is the ability to withstand or recover from an impact and bounce back stronger than before. Impacts may be acute shocks, (quick, unexpected and extreme events such as natural disasters or cyber attacks) or chronic stressors (long-term, lingering issues that slowly grow until they finally push a community over the edge, such as poverty or environmental degradation). Resilience is complex and highly contextual, so it means something different to every community, organization and individual. Holistic resilience planning includes the traditional tasks of infrastructure hardening and emergency response preparations, plus the addition of strengthening community resilience. Community resilience focuses on addressing the underlying social and economic issues such as health, housing, education, affordability, equity, trust, etc. so that residents may be as strong as possible in the face of a shock or stress. Expected outcomes of working toward greater community resilience are:

- Communities with the means and ability to properly prepare themselves for emergency events.
- Self-sufficient communities where neighbors can care for each other while waiting for help to arrive and can assist in formal emergency response efforts.
- Residents who are engaged in the community and connected to each other, know their neighbors and who might need additional assistance during an emergency event.
- Impacts of shocks and stressors don't compound on top of other health, social or economic hardships.

It is well documented that shocks and stressors impact low income and marginalized communities "first and worst." This should be a primary consideration when formulating and implementing plans and programs focused on increasing community resilience. Community resilience is not a one-time plan or event, it is a daily, year-round effort.

Some of the concerns related to community resilience identified for Rockdale include:

- Increasing homelessness and rising housing costs
- Diminishing social connections
- Limited opportunities for economic mobility

- Lack of healthcare access
- Infrastructure condition
- Housing in disrepair

Addressing these items will help set Rockdale residents up to more easily withstand and recover from impacts they might face.

Leveraging Local Organizations

The closing of the ALCOA plant in the late 2000s was not only a loss of jobs for the community, but also a loss of funding for many community activities and services that help support community resilience. There is a solid group of local organizations and individuals in the community who are doing their best to fill those gaps left by ALCOA, but they lack formal organization and funding. Additionally, those residents that step up on behalf of their community are tired and often run into barriers in their efforts. To realize greater impact, the City should support the work of these community efforts and could assist them with coordination, funding, succession planning and overcoming obstacles.

Schools are a major aspect of Rockdale's community pride, both historically and today. Although the school district operates separately from the City, both benefit from positive community perception and a strong working relationship. Rockdale should support their local school district by:

- Promoting Rockdale-area schools through newsletters, local media channels and social media. Pursue collaborative marketing between City, school district and other entities such as the economic development community and local real estate agencies.
- Supporting teachers by offering workforce housing options for teachers and paraprofessionals, including missing middle housing like townhomes, condominiums, duplexes, live-work units and patio homes. The City can collaborate with and encourage local landlords and property owners to offer discounted rates or promotions to school faculty and staff members so that a greater variety of housing options are attractive and accessible. In turn, teachers and other paraprofessionals can afford to live in the City they work in.
- Working with local schools and regional partners to facilitate additional offerings to both students and other residents related to trades jobs, technical training, upskilling, etc.

Neighborhood Assessment

A neighborhood assessment looks at the physical characteristics of an area, including infrastructure, access and housing to identify parts of the City that could benefit from additional investment.

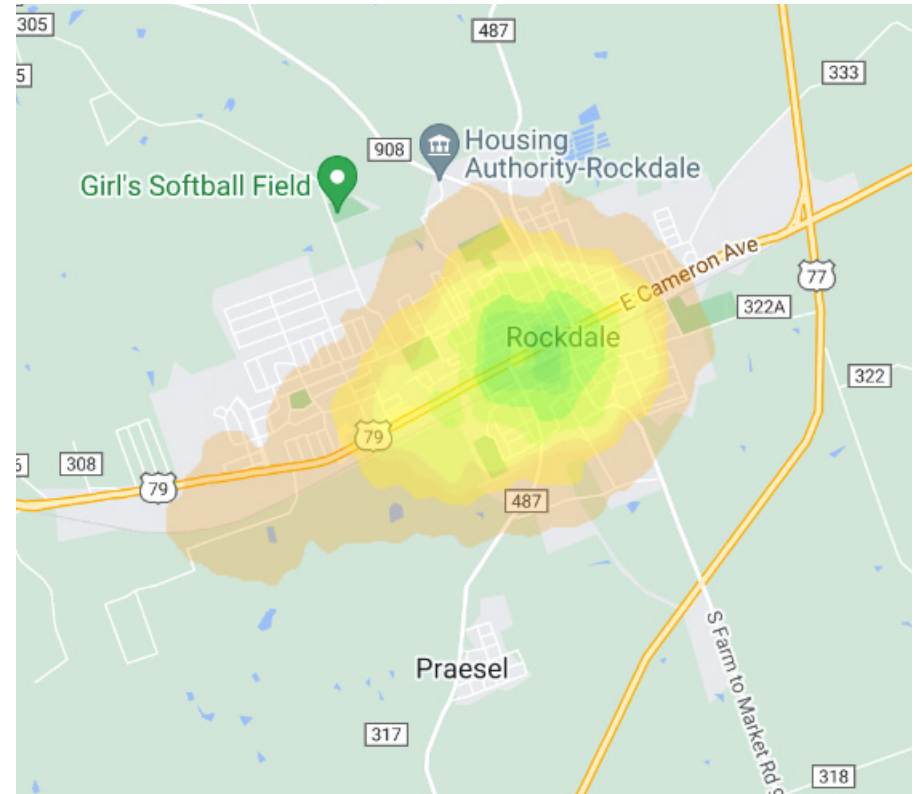
Infrastructure Condition

Notably, the City's road infrastructure emerges as a focus area with attention required to ensure well-maintained and efficient roadways. Parts of the City south of U.S. 79 have many roadways with issues such as eroding pavement and localized flooding. Addressing these infrastructure needs contributes to improved mobility, connectivity and overall safety for the community.

The City is in the process of doing major city-wide upgrades to utility infrastructure. Additional utility information can be found in the Utilities and Public Facilities chapter.



Roadway conditions in eastern Rockdale.



Map 14. Walk Score Heat Map
Walk Score®, <https://www.walkscore.com/>

Access to Goods and Services

Accessibility to goods and services is an important aspect of any neighborhood, impacting the residents' ability to go about their daily lives with the most convenience. Access to jobs, healthcare and food specifically are basic needs that make the difference in the quality of life for residents. Not surprisingly, the neighborhoods with the most current accessibility to goods and services are those near the Downtown and along U.S.79. Attracting more businesses as well as distributing them more equitably around town will help increase access for a greater number of Rockdale residents.

Housing Quality

As homes age they often require more care to ensure they stay well maintained and safe. By analyzing housing conditions, the City can better understand the current state of housing in the City and where to direct investment efforts. Map 15 - Housing Conditions Map identifies the general conditions of housing observed in Rockdale. This assessment does not apply to every home, but rather the overall state of properties within the neighborhood. This assessment considers housing condition, yard maintenance and overall upkeep.

One factor contributing to the age of Rockdale's housing stock is its historic relationship with the ALCOA plant. Much of the housing in the City was built when the ALCOA plant was rapidly expanding and new construction slowed once it reached full employment in the mid-1980s, and nearly stopped when the plant closed in the late 2000s. New growth on the horizon provides opportunities for new construction and housing stock, but updating existing housing, and enhancing quality of life for existing residents in that process, should not be forgotten.

The visual assessment revealed widespread opportunities for improvement in Rockdale's existing housing stock, indicating a comprehensive approach is needed. For instance, this approach might involve not only housing repair but also addressing city infrastructure challenges, implementing green spaces and promoting active community participation. Initial processes could serve as a model for broader revitalization strategies, steering Rockdale toward a more resilient and aesthetically pleasing future.

Sound

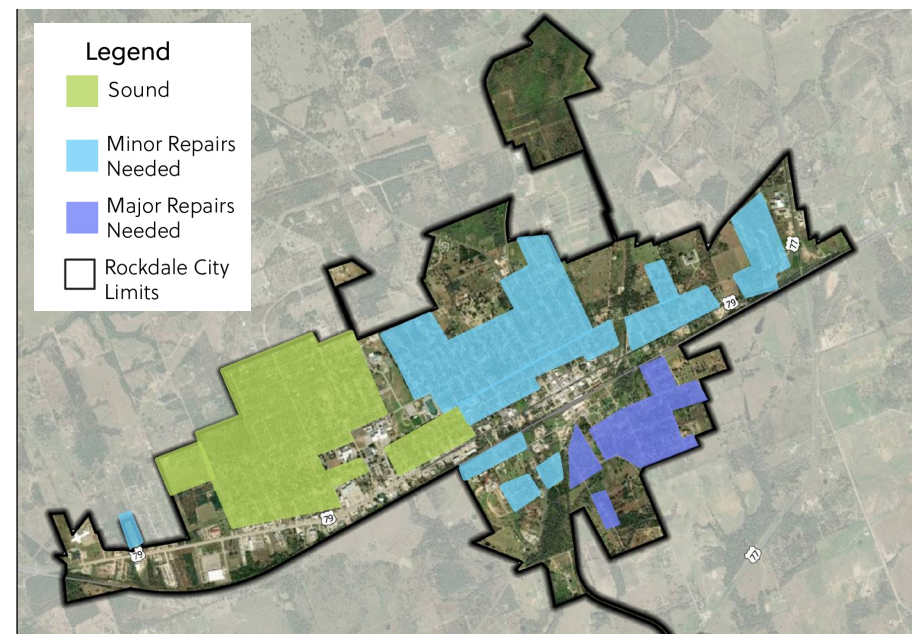
Neighborhoods within this category include predominately sound, quality housing. It also includes older areas in stable condition. However, there may be some factors or properties that need updating or repairs within these areas. Overall, this housing only needs to be sustained at its current condition to prevent or slow the aging process. However, the City should proactively work to maintain stability instead of assuming that these neighborhoods will sustain themselves.

Minor Repairs Needed

This category includes neighborhoods that are just beginning to show signs of wear. Most housing is in sound condition, with some properties simply in need of maintenance or minor repairs. Overall, this housing could need some correcting of code violations and assistance for homeowners to make repairs to prevent further decline.

Major Repairs Needed

This category includes neighborhoods that are showing signs of decline with many properties in need of major repair. These areas are prime for the first and most investment to enhance quality of life for these residents.



Map 15. Housing Condition Map

Repair and Weatherization Programs

Repair and weatherization programs assist residents with the maintenance and upkeep of their properties and homes. Weatherization is especially important in that it can impact inhabitants' health and lower utility bills, helping with overall affordability.

Repair efforts are important for Rockdale as they not only enhance the quality of life for existing residents but also contribute to the overall improvement and rejuvenation of the City. Revitalization initiatives, focused on housing repair and weatherization programs with priority on the neighborhoods most in need of investment, bring about positive transformations that create a more appealing, healthful, and aesthetically pleasing living environment. By investing in the restoration of homes and infrastructure, Rockdale can foster a sense of community pride and well-being.

Community Stewardship

City investments in infrastructure, parks and home repair programs can spur community pride and stewardship among residents. One element of community pride is in how residents and local businesses maintain their properties. This does not have to mean expensive updates, but can be small, simple acts that demonstrate care and stability.

The City could create and distribute "Idea Books" to showcase ideas about how to improve curb appeal on a budget. Additionally, city-wide cleanup days, whether sponsored by the City or a private entity, that focus on improving properties (fix fences, paint walls, fix roofs, update landscaping, etc.) are an easy and relatively inexpensive way to beautify the community. Since volunteers donate their time as in-kind, nonprofits and other organizations can maximize their efforts through partnerships that leverage each other's resources.

Cleanup programs might already exist as grassroots initiatives and the City should seek to create or enhance such programs by coordinating with volunteers, school districts, local businesses and faith-based organizations. If not, the City or MDD may look to start a "Keep Rockdale Beautiful" or similar initiative for this purpose.



Unfinished housing construction in Rockdale.



Older homes in Rockdale would likely benefit from assistance with weatherization updates.

Planning Framework for Housing Diversity

Areas within the City provide an opportunity to focus on strategic efforts to create a meaningful impact or transformation based on the identified vision and goals within this Plan. Some areas are currently vacant and are a blank slate for new development. Other areas could benefit from focused planning to revitalize existing neighborhoods. Key strategies identified for addressing City issues and aspirations include mixed-use developments, infill projects and the creation of new neighborhoods.

Mixed-Use

Mixed-use developments offer more than just aesthetic improvements; they also mitigate market risk by not relying solely on the demand for a single use. In well-designed mixed-use developments, the loss of one component does not jeopardize the entire project. These centers generate long-term value, appreciating over time as different activities reinforce each other, leading to increased pedestrian traffic and improved amenities. With a focus on mixed-use corridors in the future land use map, careful consideration is paramount.

A mixed-use development enhances a small town by integrating urban design elements, combining residential and commercial spaces to create a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environment. This approach fosters economic diversity, supports local businesses and reduces dependence on vehicles to get around. Walkability and efficient land use contribute to a sense of community.

Additionally, mixed-use developments align with City design aspirations, reducing the need for long commutes and promoting sustainable development. By efficiently utilizing available land, it minimizes urban sprawl, preserving the City's character. This well-integrated approach not only addresses economic and social aspects but also creates a resilient, walkable and culturally rich small town, benefiting both residents and local businesses.

Infill

Infill development involves constructing on vacant or underutilized land between existing developments, resulting in smaller, incremental projects that gradually increase area density. Infill development presents opportunities for small businesses and unique housing options. Leveraging vacant land and underused parking lots in central locations provides a chance to create desirable spaces while preserving the character of existing districts.

Throughout the core of Rockdale, numerous vacant lots stand as opportunities for prime development. These opportunities could either bring in residential spaces within convenient walking distances to the City's main retail areas or introduce local business establishments, addressing essential needs that currently lie beyond the reach of pedestrians in the area.

Topic of Note: Range of Housing Choices

Diversity within housing is defined as variety in the housing type (e.g., single-family home, townhome, duplex), size and price point. While related to affordability, diversity also considers the specific preferences or needs of the household, which often varies by life stage. Housing unit type is an important characteristic to consider for cities to adequately understand housing challenges and issues facing their residents and workforce. A range in housing options is important to ensure the full life cycle of housing is available. Enabling residents to stay within the community throughout their lives, even as housing desires change, is an invaluable component of a city. Smaller starter homes, apartments, townhomes and retirement housing are important to ensure adequate housing for young adults, families with children, empty-nesters and retirees. Additionally, a range of housing options combats inequality and provides housing for all income levels.

New Neighborhoods

New neighborhoods primarily center on single-family residential development, also incorporating additional housing options in appropriate circumstances. Planning the development of new subdivisions, such as the new Cornerstone subdivision, with 660 residential lots, ensures the inclusion of desired elements like green spaces, parks and improved infrastructure. Despite limited new neighborhoods in the past, the City anticipates growth and should plan to connect new growth with City needs.

Rockdale's aging neighborhoods have an impact on community growth and the overall quality of life, influencing individuals and families as they search for an ideal place to establish roots. The shortage of diverse housing options and neighborhoods that are easily accessible contributes to urban sprawl. While efforts to revitalize aging neighborhoods through initiatives like "fixer-upper" projects and City improvements, such as enhancing walkability, are attractive and incentivize residents to move into existing areas, there's a parallel need to accommodate the City's growth.

As Rockdale expands, creating new neighborhoods becomes essential to provide housing solutions that align with the evolving needs of residents. Balancing efforts to rejuvenate existing neighborhoods with the development of new ones ensures a comprehensive approach to community planning, accommodating both those who seek the charm of established areas and those eager to be part of the City's growth.



Duplex units currently existing in Rockdale.



Examples of ADU and Townhome units, housing choices that likely make sense for Rockdale.

Topic of Note: Aging in Place

Aging in place refers to staying in one's familiar home and community as one ages, with changing needs. Here we are focused less on the individual house or unit but more on the community wide efforts that support aging in place. Incorporating housing like accessory dwelling units into neighborhoods allows for downsizing while maintaining proximity to family and familiar surroundings. These housing options, referred to as 'granny flats', offer independent living. Condoized single-family homes and setups like bungalow courts also provide independence with less upkeep, fostering social connections among residents. Yet, holistic quality of life for seniors necessitates mixed-use neighborhoods with daily amenities and services easily accessible without relying on cars. Keeping seniors in communities benefits everyone, as they contribute through volunteering, support the local economy and help with childcare. Prioritizing features like ADA accessibility, high-speed internet and public transit access is essential in senior-friendly housing.

Historic Preservation

A community's enduring character leaves a lasting imprint on both residents and visitors, shaping its distinct and appealing image through thoughtful development and maintenance. The identity of Rockdale is a collaborative creation, molded by the values and needs of its residents and workers, who, in turn, influence the physical and built environment. The public realm serves as a tangible reflection of community values, instilling pride among residents and leaving a positive impression on visitors - ultimately fostering a sense of community stewardship.

The impact of historic assets within the City is paramount in shaping Rockdale's character. By employing various methods to preserve and enhance this character, Rockdale can distinguish itself from other communities. While the term "character" is broad, particularly in the context of the built environment, it encompasses a range of design recommendations and guidelines aimed at creating a favorable impression on both residents and visitors.

These recommendations include, but are not limited to:

- Urban design guidelines and streetscape enhancement programs
- Gateway installations
- Landscape enhancements
- Development standards
- Corridor aesthetic standards

Rockdale's Existing Assets

Rockdale has a rich history, detailed in the Community Snapshot chapter, leaving behind historic buildings and areas deserving recognition and preservation. Despite the absence of strong preservation efforts, various studies, such as the Old Rockdale City Hall Historic Structures Report and Feasibility Study, provide insights into the City's historical assets. Ongoing efforts to understand and preserve these assets are crucial for maintaining the City's historic identity.

The 1895 Project (redevelopment of the historic City Hall building now owned by the Vision Historic Preservation Foundation), has returned the bell tower to the building and it now serves as both a physical and programmatic anchor for Downtown.

Tools of Preservation

To facilitate preservation, the City may consider employing various tools, such as:

- Zoning Overlays
- Conservation Districts
- Historic Rehabilitation Incentives
- Direct Subsidies or Grants
- Preservation Easements

By leveraging these tools and fostering a collective commitment to preservation, Rockdale can uphold its unique character and historic legacy, ensuring a vibrant and distinctive identity for generations to come.



Funding Sources & Incentives

Incentives play a pivotal role in shaping the urban design of a city, acting as catalysts for positive change and sustainable development. By offering incentives, municipalities can encourage private developers, businesses and communities to actively participate in the enhancement of urban spaces. These incentives may range from tax breaks and financial subsidies to streamlined permitting processes and zoning flexibility.

The prospect of economic and regulatory benefits motivates stakeholders to invest in projects that align with the city's vision for a well-designed and functional urban environment. In turn, this fosters innovation, promotes the construction of environmentally friendly structures, and attracts businesses that contribute to the overall economic vibrancy of the city.

Moreover, incentives can be tailored to address specific urban challenges, such as affordable housing shortages or the revitalization of neglected neighborhoods, providing a targeted approach to address pressing issues. Ultimately, the strategic use of incentives in urban design empowers cities to steer growth in a desirable direction, creating vibrant, sustainable and inclusive urban landscapes.

Commercial Grants & Incentive Programs

A large number of funding sources and economic development mechanisms are available for commercial property owners.

- **USDA Rural Business Development Grants** - This program is designed to provide technical assistance and training for small rural businesses. Small means that the business has fewer than 50 new workers and less than \$1 million in gross revenue.
- **Texas Enterprise Zone Program (EZP)** - The EZP is a state sales and use tax refund program designed to encourage private investment and job creation in economically distressed areas of the state.
- **Public Improvement District (PID)** - A district in which owners pay an additional assessment on their taxes which is then used exclusively on public improvements within the district.
- **Brownfield Site Assessment and Technical Assistance** - Helps provide initial planning and environmental assessment for underutilized sites that may be contaminated or just perceived as such.
- **Texas PACE Authority -Property Assessed Clean Energy (TX-PACE)** - A proven financial tool that incentivizes Texas' property owners to upgrade facility infrastructure with little or no capital outlay. Approved by State legislation and established by local governments, TX-PACE programs enable owners to lower their operating costs and use the savings to pay for eligible water conservation,

energy efficiency, resiliency and distributed generation projects. Owners gain access to private, affordable, long-term (typically 10-20 years) financing that is not available through traditional funding avenues.

Residential Incentive Programs

A variety of City-led programs can help facilitate the revitalization of aging residential neighborhoods, programs that have had regional success include:

- **Rural Housing Inspection Program** - Helps ensure that the rental housing stock meets minimum standards to ensure that high quality housing is available for renters.
- **Rehabilitation and Replacement Program** - Provides funds to rehabilitate single-family occupied structures, enhancing housing quality and neighborhood perception.
- **Demo-Rebuild** - Is an incentive program that offers tax abatements, streamlined permits, or financial incentives to encourage property owners and developers to revitalize specific areas with higher value structures.
- **Exterior** - The City may provide a rebate or other incentive to residential property owners that make improvements to the exterior of their homes, similar to Rockdale's existing facade program for structures in Downtown Rockdale.

Community Character

A strong community image expressed through elements in the public realm lets people know when they have entered the city and reflects the values of the community. Branding and identity can create enjoyable experiences for people, leaving a positive impression on visitors and promoting community pride and stewardship through the city's investment in its public places. Branding should be unique and identifiable to the City of Rockdale and can include elements such as consistent use of materials or colors, a cohesive signage program and a series of special distinctive places throughout the City.

Signage & Wayfinding

Signage is an important element of the public realm, both functionally and aesthetically. Sign families should be created that use an organized and consistent set of design elements and materials, creating a cohesive and memorable experience. Sign families consist of coordinated sets of signage, including:

- Gateways
- Wayfinding
- Branding Elements
- Building Signage
- Regulatory Signage

Gateways

Gateways are features, landmarks or other streetscape elements that help to initiate an identity, orient visitors to an area and signify entrance to the city. Two distinct classes of gateway entries include regional gateways and local entry gateways.

Regional gateways are large in scale and typically situated near regional highway systems. Most likely to be experienced from a vehicle, regional gateways are designed to be effective for drivers and passengers. Regional gateways could be considered along U.S. 79, at the regional nodes identified on the FLUM.

Local gateways are located at secondary points into the city, they are intended to create identity at the street level and are experienced by both vehicles and pedestrians. These could be established along the smaller F.M. roadways coming into Rockdale, especially as part of the identity created by the local mixed-use nodes.

Both regional and local gateway features should be designed with a unified theme to enhance continuity and link elements together, creating a recognizable community identity. Additionally, gateways are an opportunity to incorporate beautification elements, such as enhanced landscaping and public art.

Wayfinding

Wayfinding signage helps motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians better navigate the city. There should be various versions of wayfinding signage that adjust in scale and content as applicable to the different users, whether they be in a car, on a bicycle or on foot. For example, drivers may need simple signage to quickly point them to special areas of town or parking locations, while pedestrians may want more detailed signage pointing them toward local attractions and specific destinations.

Gateways and wayfinding signage should be a part of a cohesive package of signage that is coordinated with the city's logo and other branding and identity elements.



Topic of Note: Commercial Redevelopment

Like many cities across the U.S., Rockdale features numerous strip shopping centers that serve most commercial needs for itself and its surrounding area. These are primarily located west of Downtown on Cameron Ave. Currently, most of these centers host a variety of productive economic activities, serving as sources of jobs, tax revenue and amenities for Rockdale's citizens.

However, retail consolidation and the shift toward online commerce pose potential challenges to these centers. There's a risk that some could become vacant, fall into disuse or appear neglected - turning assets into eyesores and maintenance challenges, and resulting in a loss of tax revenue.

We recommend that the City proactively monitor these centers to identify potential issues. The City should adopt a creative, flexible approach, which may include encouraging housing and mixed uses; permitting light industrial activities; partnering with developers for business incubation; holding special events; or reimagining sections of parking lots as active gathering spaces. Concurrently, the City should review its building, parking and use regulations to ensure they are compatible with innovative approaches. The guiding principle should be to support the flexibility needed to ensure that these properties continue to be assets for the community.



Urban Design

Urban design is intricately connected to the health and vitality of a community, a quality-built environment plays a vital role in improving physical health and well-being. For example, a city with quality sidewalks connecting major destinations can encourage residents to be more physically active, both as a part of their daily lives and recreationally.

The following are basic urban design elements that can be incorporated into the City's development code to govern the physical shape and development pattern that is desired. This is especially applicable to the mixed-use nodes and corridors as denoted in the FLUM.

Additional concepts for urban design on specific roadways throughout Rockdale can be found in the Transportation chapter.

Street Design

For decades, the design of city streets has centered around the automobile. Streets are an integral part of the public realm and often make up a large portion of public lands. As such, they should be designed to accommodate a range of users, including pedestrians, cyclists and cars.

Sidewalks

Sidewalks play a vital role in communities. They facilitate pedestrian safety, movement and access, promoting overall community connectivity and welfare. Safe, accessible and well-maintained sidewalks are a fundamental and necessary investment for cities, which have been found to enhance public health and maximize social capital. In residential settings sidewalks should

ideally be 5-7 feet wide, and 8-12 feet wide in commercial settings. New developments should be required to install sidewalks along their frontages and a plan to fill in sidewalk gaps throughout the city should be developed.

The context of the area and the adjoining street type should determine the appropriate sidewalk width. It is critical that sidewalks provide enough width to accommodate the expected amount of pedestrian traffic, or else people might be pushed off the sidewalk into potentially dangerous situations.

Additionally, shared-use paths may be a great option for smaller communities that do not need separate infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. These should be 8-16 feet wide to promote safety when mixing modes.

Lane Width

The width allocated to lanes for motorists, bikes and parked cars is a crucial aspect of street design. Lane widths should be considered within the overall assemblage of the street. Narrower streets are typically recommended in a downtown or mixed-use area to reduce vehicle speed and create a more comfortable experience for pedestrians and cyclists.

Curb Extensions

Curb extensions are a traffic calming measure primarily used to narrow roadways at crosswalks and extend the sidewalk for pedestrians crossing the street. Shortening the crossing distance improves pedestrian safety and visibility. Curb extensions may also be implemented to help allocate more space for street furniture, landscaping or street trees in areas with narrow rights-of-way.

Streetscapes

Streetscapes are the combination of paving materials, trees, landscaping, lighting and street furniture placed within the sidewalk or pedestrian zone, the area between the back of curb to the property line. Streetscapes help define a community's aesthetic quality and identity as well as provide amenities that can make the experience of walking through an area more enjoyable. The more enjoyable a place is for pedestrians, the longer they tend to stay, the more connections they make and more businesses they frequent.

Streetscape amenities should be determined by the context of the area and the adjoining street type. For example, on a high-traffic vehicular corridor, streetscapes may be mostly aesthetic and maintenance would be a primary concern, whereas in Downtown or a mixed-use node, pedestrian experience, comfort and safety may be the primary goals of the streetscape.

High quality streetscapes do not need to be expensive; cost and scale can be adjusted to available resources and context without sacrificing impact.

Street Trees

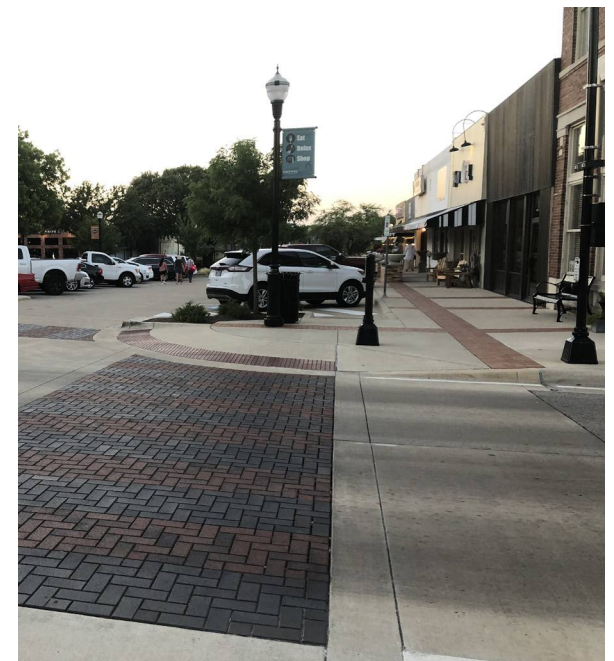
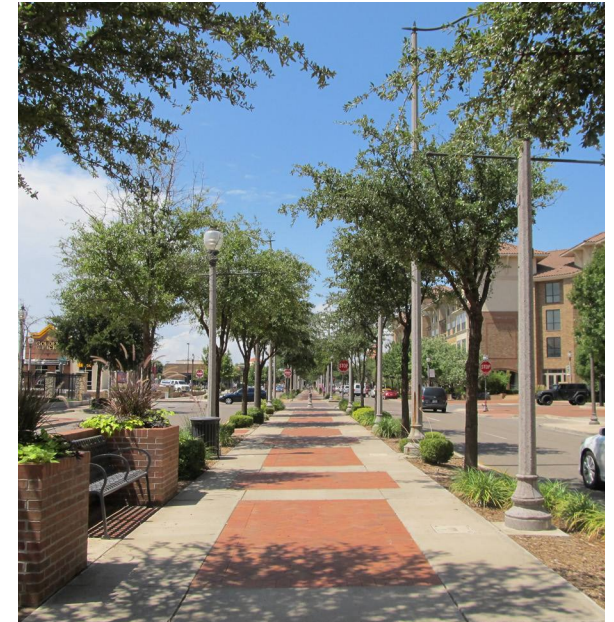
In Texas, providing shade is one of the most important streetscape elements. A non-shaded sidewalk can be rendered nearly unusable certain times of the year. Even along primarily vehicular corridors, shade can help reduce the ambient heat caused by paved surfaces. Ideally, shade is provided by street trees of shade-tree species that are adapted to the climate and context or setting.

Providing adequate soil volume is an important factor in determining the fate of street trees and ensuring they grow large enough to provide shade. Today's best practices suggest 1,000 cubic feet of soil volume is necessary to support a thriving street tree in an urban environment. Soil volume can be provided for in planting areas, tree well/pits or underneath walking surfaces with the use of suspended pavers.

Root barriers should be utilized as needed to ensure tree roots are contained and do not damage adjacent infrastructure. Street trees are a common point of contention among city departments, but they bring so many benefits to a community that it is worth the time for staff to come together to find solutions to the implementation of street trees for their city. It may be worthwhile to convene a Right-of-Way Task Force, even temporarily, to work through issues like this.

Lighting

Lighting can serve a variety of purposes. Roadway lighting is intended to serve drivers and standards or requirements are generally mandated by applicable transportation jurisdictions. In some instances, roadway lighting casts enough light onto adjacent sidewalks to also serve as pedestrian lighting, or a "dual arm" fixture can be used that has a smaller fixture on the side of a pole facing a sidewalk. Pedestrian- scaled lighting, such as lampposts or bollards, provides safety for pedestrians and should be installed along sidewalks, trails or at crossings as necessary for safety and comfort. Decorative lighting, such as landscape, building or festoon lighting, can add character and interest to an area without much cost. For both aesthetic and environmental purposes, overlighting an area should be



prevented through thoughtfully, appropriately and safely applied lighting. Rockdale may consider a lighting ordinance that is Dark Sky compliant and utilizes the Model Lighting Ordinance (MLO) provided by the International Dark-sky Association.

Furnishings

Appropriate furnishings along a streetscape, such as seating and waste receptacles, are highly dependent on the context. The types of amenities provided for a pathway that may be primarily used for recreation will vary from those provided near a transit stop. Like lighting, the application of furnishings to a public space should be done thoughtfully. Considerations include the types of users, what they will be doing in the space and their needs, comfort and safety. The types and location of furnishings should be dependent on these considerations. For example, along a recreational path a water bottle refill station might make sense, whereas near a transit stop shaded seating might be most appropriate.

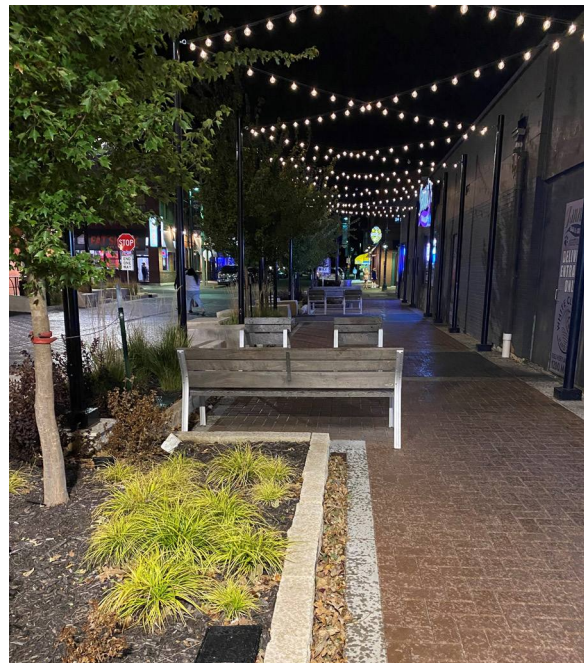
Screening

There are certain elements of the public realm that are necessary for the place to function but do not necessarily make for a pleasant experience. This includes utility boxes, dumpsters, outdoor storage, etc. To the extent possible these elements should not be placed along a primary street frontage and should be screened using a decorative fence or landscape.

Activation

Even the most well designed spaces will not be successful if they are not utilized and well loved by people. Planning for physical elements,

contexts and programming that encourage people to come to and stay in a public space is known as activation. Along activated streets, an emphasis should be placed on people-focused or pedestrian-scale design. Allowing businesses to spill out into the right-of-way via sidewalk sales or outdoor dining areas, public art, tactical urbanism installations and treatment of the building facades are all elements of activation. This is most applicable in Downtown and Mixed-use Nodes. The next section on building form discusses this in more detail.



Topic of Note: East Cameron Avenue Vision

In late 2021, the Rockdale Municipal Development District, in cooperation with the City of Rockdale commissioned designers to prepare a long-term vision for the area of Rockdale along East Cameron Avenue (U.S. 79), between U.S. 77 and Main Street. The "Vision 22" plan provides many additional considerations and strategies to enhance urban design and promote quality development. The recommendations provided in this Comprehensive Plan are in alignment with and supportive of the proposals in the East Cameron Avenue vision, and looks at how those general ideas can be applied city-wide. The Vision 22 document also provides detailed implementation recommendations that may also apply to the broader community beyond just the East Cameron Avenue corridor.

Building Form & Site Design

The creation of good public spaces does not end at the boundary of the public right-of-way. The form of the surrounding buildings and the context they create for the public realm have an immense impact on the character of the space and its success in a community. Building form should also respond to the type of street environment and configuration that exists or is to be created over time. Street design and building form go hand-in-hand and must be aligned to create a harmonious and vibrant public realm.

Height, Massing, & Scale

The height, massing and scale of a building should be reasonably proportional to surrounding buildings and the streetscape so that they do not overpower the public realm. Buildings must be designed and sculpted to create a comfortable experience, especially in highly pedestrianized environments. The height, massing and scale of buildings need to be balanced with the size of surrounding or adjacent right-of-ways and open spaces. Buildings and the elements that contribute to their facades should have a proportion and scale that are welcoming for pedestrians. Considerations in massing include, but are not limited to, creating a sense of enclosure or openness, sunlight and shadows, reinforcing views and wind patterns.

Building Placement

For mixed-use, retail, and commercial buildings in pedestrianized areas, the building should be located at or near the primary frontage property

line, in order to reinforce the streetscape and create a quality pedestrian experience.

For residential uses, the building placement will depend on the type of residential building being proposed and the desired character of the neighborhood. Townhomes and multifamily buildings should be located at or near the property line to ensure the proper proportions are created for the public realm. Single-family dwellings should be set back 8-15 feet from the property line, close enough to engage the sidewalk but providing some buffer for the home. In existing neighborhoods, the current form may be preserved. The setback ensures there is growing space for trees and front entrance features, such as a porch. Encouraging structures to be located closer to the street reinforces the streetscape, creates a quality pedestrian environment, and opportunities for socialization. Additionally, front setbacks are generally the least utilized portion of a home's yard, so it is a more efficient use of the lot to put that additional space in the back yard.

Building Facade

In conjunction with building massing, scale and placement, the building facade can be adorned with features that are inviting and contribute to the experience and scale of the buildings. Long monotonous walls without windows or entrance features should be avoided. To ensure a quality public realm, entrances to the ground floor units, whether commercial or residential, should front the street. Building facades should feature architectural elements along the street such as main entrance features, balconies, porches, patios, awnings and light fixtures. Multifamily, townhomes and single-family dwellings should connect entry features to public sidewalks.

Parking

Parking is an inherent functional piece of most places. With downtowns and mixed-use nodes in particular, there is often a perception that there is never enough parking. A more accurate statement might be "there is never enough parking right in front of where I want to go". Often there is plenty of parking within a reasonable walking distance but this is more of an issue of people feeling like the walk isn't safe, comfortable or interesting. Likewise, restricted use of private parking reduces overall parking efficiency and reduces the financial performance of downtowns and mixed-use areas. In a downtown or mixed-use setting, good urban form tends to locate parking on-street or toward the fringe of the core in communal lots or structures, allowing focus to remain on pedestrian space and activity.

Throughout the City, parking should generally be encouraged to be placed in the rear of buildings. It is common in Central Texas to see areas dominated by oversized parking lots in front of buildings, this is an excellent opportunity for redevelopment using engaging liner buildings that can create the more desired character of buildings fronting the streets.

Many cities have eliminated minimum parking ratios in downtown and mixed-use areas. An increasing number of cities have eliminated minimum parking city-wide, in these cases the market tends to provide adequate parking due to pro forma and financing requirements but it is not mandated by the municipality.

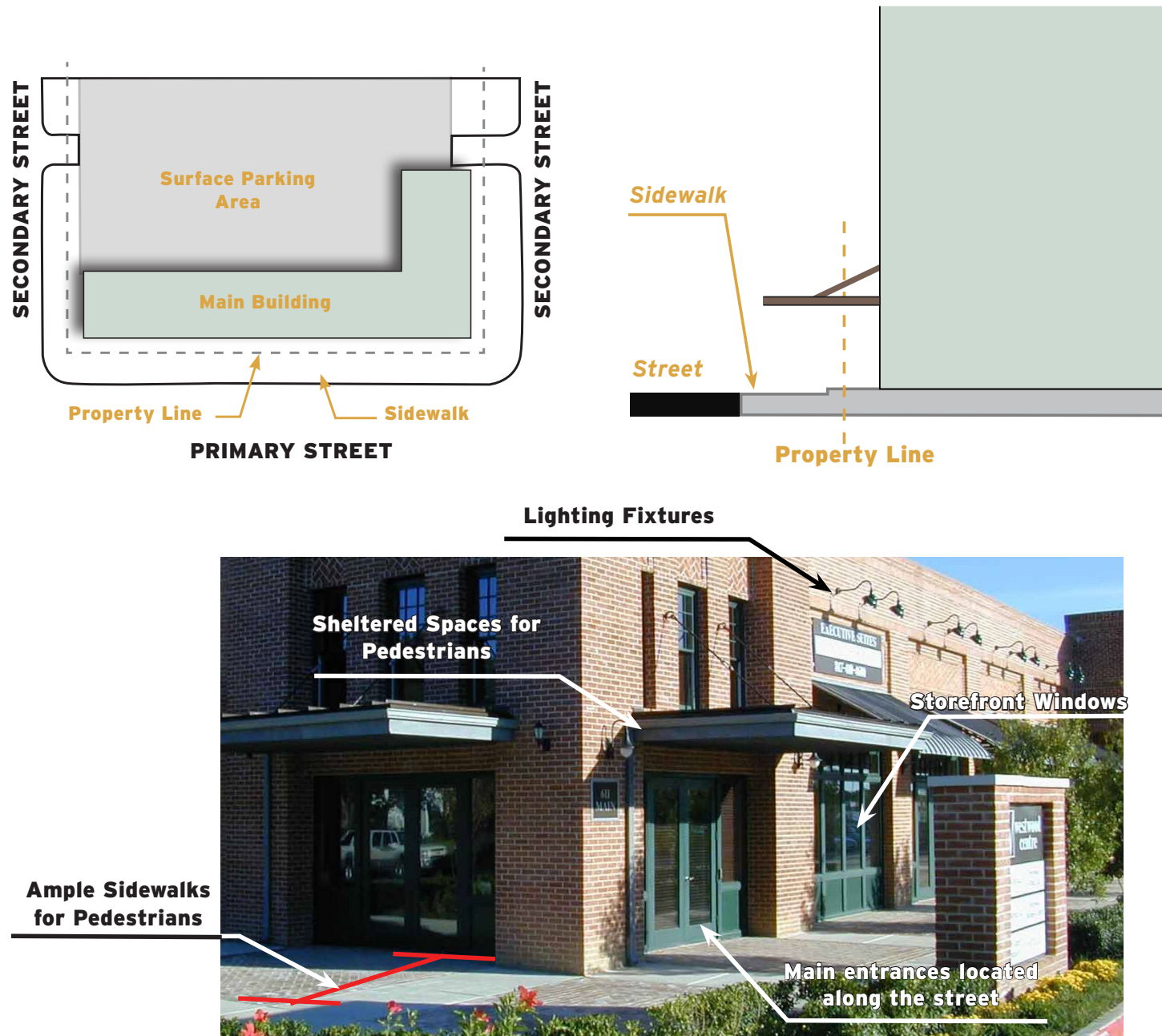


Figure 39. Strategies to address urban design using building form.