

civic plan element





Introduction

This portion of the Comprehensive Plan addresses the City of Brownsville’s goal of having an engaged, civically responsible, and informed community that actively participates in civic affairs. The community should be characterized by open and effective cooperation among public and private sector entities and guided by effective appointed or elected leadership, all committed to the community’s sustainable development. While the Civic Element directly affects the “engaged” and “collaborative” vision themes, it also impacts several other vision themes both directly and indirectly (Figure 1).

Vision Themes Related to Civic Element:		
	DIRECT	INDIRECT
PROSPEROUS		•
EFFICIENT	•	
FUNCTIONING		•
SAFE		•
TALENTED		•
HEALTHY		•
LIVABLE		•
VIBRANT		•
ENGAGED	•	
COLLABORATIVE	•	
EQUITABLE		•
SUSTAINABLE		•

Figure 1. Civic Element Vision Themes

There are three major civic sub-elements that are addressed in this section: individual civic engagement, cooperation between public entities, and civic leadership. This section of the Plan presents the objectives, assesses current gaps and key issues, and outlines strategies to narrow the gaps.

Individual Civic Engagement - Objectives

Individual civic engagement can include volunteerism, organizational involvement, participation with groups and institutions to address an issue or community problem, and electoral participation. An engaged community works together to overcome obstacles and elect strong leaders capable of implementing the community’s vision. There are three specific objectives addressed by this plan element:

1. Improve and sustain the number, quality and diversity of effectively engaged individuals working together to improve the quality of life and economic development of the community.
2. Engage well-informed individuals (e.g., voters, volunteers) committed to participation and action, who are empowered with a sense of ownership, accountability, and responsibility in the community.
3. Increase the number, frequency, and awareness of opportunities for engagement, while reducing the cost, time, and effort to develop and retain engaged individuals.

Inter-Institutional Cooperation - Objectives

Inter-Institutional cooperation and coordination is critical to meet the goals and objectives outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. The challenges facing the City are beyond the scope and capacity of any one entity. Inter-Institutional cooperation prevents duplication of efforts and facilitates the efficient use of limited resources to meet a common vision. The Inter-Institutional cooperation sub-element has one main objective:

To enhance the value and benefits of public services and improve productivity and utility of public-serving entities in Brownsville by causing high order inter-entity cooperation and collaboration among all public institutions.

Leadership - Objectives

The third sub-element of the plan addressed the need for effective, quality leadership. There are three specific objectives in this sub-element:

1. Develop and retain engaged and effective leadership.
2. Have knowledgeable, ethical, open minded, cooperative, and accountable elected and volunteer leaders.
3. Engage the community to support and encourage leaders.
4. Increase diverse community participation in leadership roles.

Gaps / Key Issues

1. Currently, the level of voter registration in Brownsville is below both State and National levels, and of the population that is registered, very few actually participate in the voting process.

The current population in Brownsville is approximately 173,000, 69% of which (~79,048) are of voting age. Of those residents that are of voting age, it is estimated that approximately 67% of them are registered to vote. This compares to ~77% nationally and ~72% in the State of Texas. The breakdown of registered voters by age bracket is displayed in Figure 2. In addition to a relatively low percentage of registered voters in Brownsville, the percentage of registered voters who actually votes is significantly lower. In both the 2005 and 2007 City elections, less than 10% of the registered population actually voted. Furthermore, less than 7% of the voting age population in Brownsville was both registered to vote and actually voted in the 2005 and 2007 City elections. This lack of voter participation is especially acute in the under 30 age group.

This is an extremely important issue due to the impact that voting participation has on the City's ability to apply for and receive federal and state funding.

While there could be several factors that contribute to low voter participation throughout the City, it is important to note that funds spent on promoting voter registration and participation in Cameron County are less than half of the estimated national average (~\$3/voter as opposed to \$6). Another issue contributing to low voter turnout is the

perception of low leadership quality and trust as discussed in the next section.

2. Brownsville currently lacks a formalized mechanism to recruit and retain volunteers for non-profit organizations.

On a national level, volunteer organizations are suffering due to decreased availability of public funding and the lack of volunteers. In Brownsville specifically, there is a need for professionals and experts from high-skilled areas such as financial services and healthcare. Part of the problem is the time required to identify and become engaged in volunteer opportunities. While there are a number of dedicated individuals already donating time to various volunteer opportunities, the lack of an organized framework to recruit volunteers prevents a greater rate of participation. More individuals would volunteer if a volunteer outreach and recruitment program existed. Currently there is no such formalized volunteer recruitment or enrollment process in Brownsville.

3. Surveyed Brownsville residents have a low perceived level of satisfaction and trust of elected leaders.

The issue of low voter participation is compounded by the perception of leadership quality throughout the community. Over 60% of residents surveyed in a recent Community Survey (survey described in Planning Process Section) view the quality of Brownsville's local leadership as either low or very low. An additional 29% view the quality as being neither high nor low. When asked about the level of trust that the community has for local leaders, the results were similar with nearly 70% responding low or very low.

	Age Ranges (years)							Total 18+
	18	19-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+	
# of People in Brownsville	2774	28438	23690	21771	18472	8196	15277	118618
% of Population	1.6%	16.5%	13.7%	12.6%	10.7%	4.7%	8.8%	68.6%
# of Registered Voters in Brownsville	798	17767	16517	13066	11534	4653	14713	79048
% of People Registered to Vote in age class	28.8%	62.5%	69.7%	60.0%	62.4%	56.8%	96.3%	45.8%
People Registered to Vote by Age as a % of the Total Registered Voters	1.0%	22.5%	20.9%	16.5%	14.6%	5.9%	18.6%	100.0%

Figure 2. Brownsville Demographics by Age Source: Cameron County Elections Office



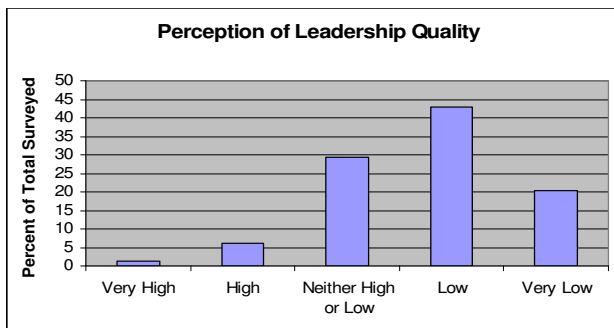


Figure 3. Leadership Quality Chart (Data Source: Community Survey)

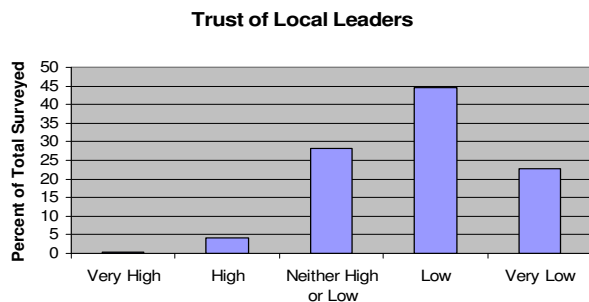


Figure 4. Trust of Local Leaders Chart (Data Source: Community Survey)

4. Surveyed Brownsville residents perceive the level of cooperation between local public entities as being low.

Cooperation between public entities is critical for a city to run effectively and efficiently. Operations of public entities often overlap and directly impact each other. Cooperative efforts to achieve individual and overlapping objectives would result in more efficient use of the City's limited resources and potential operational costs savings. An example of a project that serves the goals of two or more entities is the increased demand for public park space and the need for large-scale detention ponds. Rather than spending dollars and valuable land constructing a park in one location and a detention pond in another, a single facility could be designed that provides much needed stormwater detention during rainfall events and public parks and open spaces during dry weather.

The current perceived level of cooperation between public entities (determined in Community Survey described in Planning Process Section) may be viewed in Figure 5. Approximately 48% view

the level of cooperation as either low or very low and an additional 34% view it as neither high nor low.

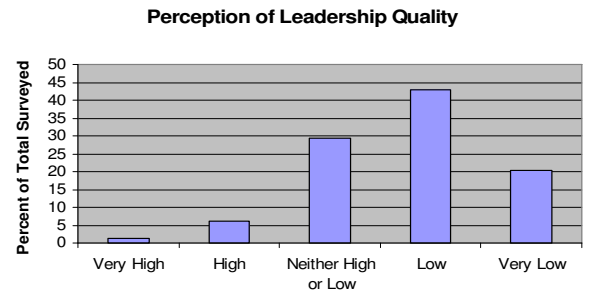


Figure 5. Perceived Cooperation Chart (Data Source: Community Survey)

Strategic Initiatives

1. Creation of an Inter-Agency Planning Group

The community's vision and objectives are beyond the scope and capacity of any one institution and will require integrated and cooperative action between various public sector institutions to achieve. An inter-agency planning group would create a structure for inter-institutional planning and cooperation to meet the needs and vision of Brownsville.

The organization would consist of an executive committee, a reorganized task force and a technical support group. A detailed description of the organization structure is presented in the implementation section of the Comprehensive Plan.

In order to measure the degree of inter-institutional cooperation, the indicators in Figure 6 are proposed to measure the degree of effectiveness of the inter-institutional strategy.

2. Expand leadership training opportunities and improve the quality of leadership

This strategy involves formally developing and investing in leadership training and development opportunities for current and future leaders.

In terms of preparing a pipeline of future leaders, the following strategies were identified:

Indicator	Current	Standard of Comparison	5-yr Target
Existence of Inter-Agency Planning Peer Group	No	N/A	Yes
% of Entities Participating in Peer Group	N/A	N/A	100%
Ratio of Capital Investments Spent on Collaboration Projects to Total Capital Investment Projects	N/A	N/A	30%
Number of Successful Incidents of Collaboration/Time	N/A	N/A	15

Figure 6. Inter-Institutional Cooperation Indicator Table

- Internship/apprenticeship programs run by public entities that would be designed to expose young potential leaders to the opportunities of public service
- Youth training programs at BISD and UTB/TSC that would promote public service
- Expansion of the “Leadership Brownsville” program
- A media campaign to promote public service and civic engagement
- Establishment of a “clearing house” to coordinate all youth leadership/public service promotion programs

to excellent leaders; and b) development and publication of objective comparisons of the credentials (e.g., educational attainment, job history) of all candidates running for local office.

The effectiveness of these strategic initiatives would be evaluated using the indicators described in Figure 7.

3. Increase voter registration and participation through youth programs, voting leagues, and education and outreach efforts

The following strategies were identified for improving the quality of existing leadership:

- Develop orientation programs for all new local public servants. The program would be developed in cooperation with entities such as the UTB Institute for Public Service.
- Develop continuing education programs for elected officials and encourage their participation. The program could be developed in cooperation with the UTB Institute for Public Service or other such entities
- Expand the scorecard accountability program run by the UTB Center for Civic Engagement to include: a) periodic reports for all local elected officials with special recognition given

There is currently a vast majority of Brownsville residents who remain isolated from the voting process and selection of elected City leaders. Aside from the civic implications, lower voter turnout has a significant negative impact on the community’s ability to capture a fair share of critical State and Federal funds.

To address this issue, the following strategies were developed to develop an awareness of the importance of voting in the under-age population, and to increase voter participation in registered voters:

- Expand the Kids Voting program
- Create a League of Women Voters
- Increase outreach efforts to promote voting

Indicator	Current	Standard of Comparison	5-yr Target
% Who Perceive Leadership Quality as High or Very High	~7%	N/A	30%
% Whose Trust for Elected Leaders is High or Very High	~5%	N/A	30%

Figure 7. Leadership Indicator Table



including better dissemination of voting dates, polling locations, and voting hours through public service announcements; encourage early voting; encourage businesses to provide time for employees to vote; and thorough local media campaigns that stress the importance of and benefits of voting.

These efforts should specifically target portions of the community that are significantly under-represented both geographically and demographically and should be coordinated with the Cameron County Elections Department.

The effectiveness of voter education and outreach efforts would be measured using the indicators described in Figure 8.

4. Development of a volunteer center and mechanism for increased volunteerism

This strategy aims to maximize the recruitment and retention of high quality, dedicated volunteers to support the various non-profit organizations in the community.

Specific functions of the volunteer center include:

- Provide a centralized location for creation and dissemination of public service announcements promoting volunteer opportunities
- Match qualified volunteers to appropriate organizations that require their services.
- Increase the overall number of new volunteers by working with private industries and BEDC to link the number of employee volunteers to incentives
- Promote and coordinate cooperation among non-profits in the community. There are a number of opportunities where non-profit

institutions can cooperate to gain greater benefits. For example, the Equity and Health plan elements include a strategy whereby the United Way and Community Health Centers form a cooperative partnership to promote enrollment in Medicare/Medicaid; assistance in filing tax forms to maximize the amount of earned tax credit received by residents; general financial education; and voter education/participation among others.

The effectiveness of this strategy would be tracked using the indicators in Figure 9. To facilitate tracking the overall number of volunteers throughout the City, all non-profits that participate with the center and use it to recruit volunteers would be required to report their volunteer statistics (number of volunteers and hours for each volunteer) to the center.

Implementation

The primary responsibility for the implementation and tracking of the civic plan element falls to the civic dimension technical group within the reorganized Task Force.

Indicator	Current	Standard of Comparison	5-yr Target
Percent of Community that Currently Participates in Community Service Programs	N/A	26% (Approximate National Average)	30%
Average Number of Hours Spent Volunteering (Volunteer hrs/month)	N/A	N/A	10

Figure 8. Individual Civic Engagement Indicator Table

