About El Paso

Spanish explorer Don Juan de Oñate was born in 1550 in Zacatecas, Mexico and was the first New Spain (Mexico) explorer known to have observed the Rio Grande near El Paso in 1598, celebrating Thanksgiving Mass there on April 30, 1598 (several decades before the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving.)

El Paso is the county seat of El Paso County, Texas, United States, and lies in far West Texas. As of the 2010 census, the city’s population was 649,121. El Paso stands on the Rio Grande (Río Bravo del Norte), across the border from Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The two cities form a combined international metropolitan area, sometimes called the Paso del Norte or El Paso–Juárez, with Juárez’s being the significantly larger of the two in population. They have a combined population of 3 million, two-thirds of whom reside in Juárez. In 2010, El Paso was awarded an All-America City Award, the oldest community-recognition program in the United States.

Ethnically, the city is 86.62% Hispanic or Latino and 13.38% Non-Hispanic or Latino.

About Downtown El Paso

Downtown El Paso, like most other downtowns around the US, suffered from disinvestment as many residents and jobs left for suburban areas during the last half of the 20th Century. Today vitality is returning to downtown El Paso, as the city’s leaders and residents recognize its importance and assets. Those assets include an impressive collection of historic buildings and a network of streets and sidewalks that is human-scaled and walkable. Downtown is also the location for important border crossings to Ciudad Juárez, crossings that bring business people, shoppers, students, and tourists to the downtown. Finally, El Paso now has many individuals, businesses, and voters ready to invest in the revitalization of downtown.
Project Scope

The City’s award-winning *Plan El Paso* adopted by the City in 2010 established an overall goal to: Encourage infill development within the existing City over peripheral expansion to conserve environmental resources, spur economic investment, repair social fabric, reduce the cost of providing infrastructure and services, and reclaim abandoned areas. As part of that plan the City places the highest priority on the reinvigoration of Downtown, whose strategic location, walkable blocks, and historic buildings will once again make Downtown a vibrant destination and center of culture, shopping, government, and the arts.

Challenges to Overcome

- A downtown building fabric that has been lost over time, which has resulted in many streets lacking proper shaping by the fronts of buildings and shade to protect pedestrians from the hot sun
- Lack of downtown housing limits the cycle of activity Downtown, particularly in the central business district
- Considerable vacancy in Downtown’s central business district, deterring shoppers and investors
- Public spaces need to be refreshed

Project Goals

- Sustainably redeveloped buildings
- Residential neighborhoods
- Multimodal streets
- Programming and marketing the 18 Hour Downtown, extending downtown use past 5 PM
Project Elements: Downtown El Paso

Redevelopment

A central element of the revitalization of downtown El Paso is the reuse of existing historic buildings, which Plan El Paso notes are not merely a nostalgic reminder of previous decades or centuries; they represent a significant amount of embodied materials, energy, time, and labor that were put into their creation. It would be more economical to preserve historic treasures than to replace them with buildings of a similar quality. Historic buildings can help inform today’s developers and architects in creating street-friendly, climate-responsive structures of enduring quality. The Accelerator will provide expertise to help private developers, public officials, and voters understand the potential public and private benefits of reuse of existing buildings as a framework for downtown redevelopment. The investments in transportation choices, described below, are another part of the city’s strategy for downtown revitalization.

Green Design & Infrastructure

Green infrastructure and design are not central features of the city’s effort. Some pedestrian improvements downtown, however, may also serve as green stormwater facilities, for slowing and cleaning street runoff during heavy rainfall events. The City may also examine whether there are opportunities for integrated energy and water conservation across public and private developments.

Transportation Choices

Plan El Paso states: a primary vision shaping Plan El Paso is El Paso’s aspiration to become the most walkable and least car-dependent city in the Southwest. To do so, the transportation system must be reimagined from a conventional auto-only perspective towards providing people with many travel choices. El Paso is in the process of investing in developing the Brio bus rapid transit (BRT) system and has decided to invest in a streetcar loop connecting downtown, the border crossings, and the University of Texas El Paso. The implementation team will have the opportunity to examine the performance of the Portland streetcar system and may choose to learn more about Eugene’s BRT system. As part of the implementation of this concept, El Paso will be working on the implementation of a bike-sharing program and considering what investments to make downtown in bicycle facilities and pedestrian improvements. The Accelerator can also create opportunities for education and support between non-governmental bicycle transportation organizations in Portland and El Paso.

Equity

Public investments to increase transportation choices or stimulate downtown redevelopment inevitably raise questions of how the costs and benefits of these improvements are distributed among people and communities of different incomes and ethnicities. During the year, the City implementation team will have help in considering how to address these issues. Successful downtown redevelopment can be accompanied by gentrification and displacement in nearby neighborhoods, like Sunset Heights of Segundo Barrio. The project team will have the opportunity to explore how to anticipate and avoid gentrification and displacement.
Downtown El Paso Team

Marty Howell, Director of Economic Development and Sustainability, City of El Paso
Contact: Howellem1@elpasotexas.gov
Marty has worked for the City of El Paso for five years, leading the creation and implementation of the City’s nationally recognized sustainability program.

Lauren Baldwin, Sustainability Program Specialist, City of El Paso
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One of Lauren’s main tasks is to manage the social media, newsletter, outreach, and education portion of the City’s sustainability projects.

Peter Wallish, Redevelopment Manager, City of El Paso
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Peter Wallish is the newly appointed Redevelopment Manager for the City of El Paso, overseeing the City’s real estate, historic preservation, and citywide redevelopment efforts.

Eloisa Portillo-Morales, Sustainability Program Engineer, City of El Paso
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Eloisa Portillo-Morales is the Sustainability Program Engineer and is responsible for the implementation of the City of El Paso’s Sustainability Plan.

Fred Lopez, Transportation Planning Manager, City of El Paso
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Among other things, Fred is working on creating a comprehensive bike plan for El Paso. By supporting bike infrastructure and pushing for more walkable areas, Fred is hoping to connect areas of town for bicyclists and make it safer for everyone.

Alejandro Palma, Senior Economic Development Specialist, City of El Paso
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Laura Kissack, AIA, Architect, El Paso City Development
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Before joining the City in 2012, Laura had a private architectural practice where her favorite projects were remodels of otherwise-despaired-of buildings with shoestring construction budgets.

Ben Fyffe, Cultural Program Supervisor, City of El Paso
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Ben manages a portfolio of programs and staff serving 2 million people annually that includes grantmaking to local artists and arts organizations, promotion and reporting for the newly designated Downtown Arts District, implementation of the Downtown Art & Farmers Market, and the community’s biggest arts festivals.

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