

# Smart Growth America Technical Assistance Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities

Community: Port Isabel, Texas  
Tool: Smart Growth Implementation 101  
Date: May 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013

TO: Robert Salinas, Economic Development Administrator  
Edward Mesa, City Manager

FROM: Elizabeth Schilling, Smart Growth America

DATE: July 25, 2013

RE: Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

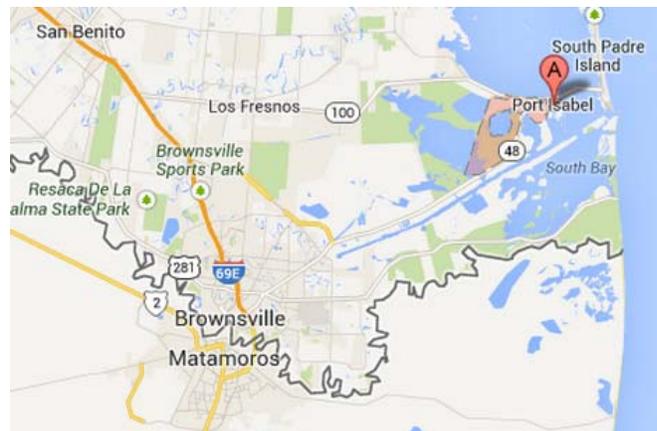
The City of Port Isabel, Texas, applied for technical assistance in order to begin planning for redevelopment in two neighborhoods in the south of the city, the Old Garcia Street District and the South Shore Drive District. During initial conversations with City staff and during the workshop itself, the need for a more general discussion of smart growth emerged. In order to present the Smart Growth Implementation 101 curriculum in a way that provided the community with the most benefit, it was important to establish a better understanding of how Smart Growth might apply across the City before focusing on the two neighborhoods cited in the application.

## Workshop Summary

### 1. Overarching issues addressed during the workshop

During a tour of the City preceding the workshops and during the workshops themselves, several overarching issues came to light. These issues are relevant to all other questions about investment, growth, and public priorities, and how the City chooses to deal with them will shape future growth.

Relationships with adjacent communities – Port Isabel's economy and demographics are strongly influenced by South Padre Island, to which Port Isabel is the gateway, and Brownsville. Both of these communities are relatively powerful, both economically and politically, and Port Isabel will be stronger if it defines its role in the region to complement – rather than compete with – its neighbors.



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Redevelopment opportunities – We visited an unusually large number of sites with redevelopment potential, including vacant or abandoned properties, possible brownfields, large tracts, small lots, lots in public ownership and lots in private hands. The wealth of potential sites can be an asset if the City identifies priorities and provides essential support, such as land assembly and infrastructure, for desired end uses.

Community engagement – Port Isabel has a core group of thoughtful, caring citizens, many of whom attended the workshops. These citizens were mainly non-Hispanic white in a community that is reportedly 76.5% Hispanic. Because community participation in smart growth planning and priority-setting is so essential to ultimate success, it will be important to expand the core group and conduct more extensive outreach to ensure broader representation from affected residents and businesses.

## **2. Specific opportunities and challenges discussed during the workshop**

Workshop attendees and city officials identified several specific projects or potential projects during the visit.

- New community center currently under construction;
- Need for pedestrian access across Queen Isabella Boulevard (SR 100), which divides the historic business district from the community center, a museum, and several neighborhoods;
- Need for pedestrian connections between neighborhoods and schools;
- Preserving and enhancing community character;
- Reinvesting in neighborhood commercial corridors.

## **3. Actions to implement smart growth**

Based on our observations and subsequent discussion during the workshops, the following actions will build a strong foundation for future growth and development in Port Isabel:

### **Create a plan to reach out to and engage a more representative group of residents and business owners.**

It is very common for a small group of dedicated residents to form the core of any smart growth effort, but it is important that other community members also participate in setting community priorities for growth and development. This participation helps to create a sense of buy-in that is very helpful in the long run: As elected officials come and go, community residents who support a smart growth plan can help ensure continued commitments. Participation also improves plans by providing better information and allowing for discussion and exchange

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of information among people who may experience the City very differently.

In light of the workshop discussion, we recommend the following initial steps to create an outreach plan, whether for a specific site, a neighborhood, or the city as a whole.

1. Identify important audiences according to the likelihood that their needs and interests will be distinct. Important groups discussed during the workshop include: families with young children, business owners, low income residents, non-resident landowners, etc.
2. Establish goals for community engagement in order to measure progress. For instance, one goal might be diversity of participants in terms of cultural background, economic status, age, location of residence. Another might be number of people attending public meetings or information booths. Progress toward attaining these goals should be tracked and reported on a regular basis.
3. Meet with key representatives of different audiences to better understand how to reach them and which issues would motivate them to participate.
4. Identify opportunities to reach important audiences and talk to them about their goals and needs. Consider a wide variety of methods, such as surveys, information booths at public events, and brown-bag presentations at workplaces.

### Establish Community Priorities

Smart growth is designed to harness growth and development to achieve specific goals – what those goals are depends on what a community wants and needs. Without priorities, and even with too many competing ones, a small community can easily exhaust limited resources – human and financial – without making progress in any one area.

A community outreach effort as described above could be designed to identify community priorities through a transparent public process. Some of the priorities mentioned during our visit include:

#### Economic

- Increase the number and quality of jobs available in Port Isabel.
- Attract tourists to the City and increase the time and money they spend there.
- Increase tax base by ensuring that vacant residential lots are developable.
- Revitalize commercial areas in the Garcia Street and South Shore

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## Districts.

- Increase connections across Queen Isabella Boulevard (SR 100) to facilitate access for tourists, workers and residents.

## Environmental

- Remediate dust.
- Protect environmental assets that define the community and attract visitors.
- Identify and clean-up brownfield sites and poorly-maintained or hazardous properties.

## Social

- Increase public access to the waterfront.
- Increase availability of high-quality housing that is affordable to new residents.
- Increase use of museum as a cultural resource.

## Prioritize development and redevelopment opportunities

Vacant and underutilized properties can function as economic development



assets, but without a redevelopment and management plan, the large number of available sites in Port Isabel can become a liability, whether they remain vacant or underutilized or alternately if they are developed in ways that undermine the City's interests and create a net drain on the city's resources.

It is helpful to be aware of all potential redevelopment opportunities, but the City of Port Isabel will be able to accomplish more if they focus on supporting redevelopment and reinvestment in specific places that may help achieve community goals. The following steps can be used to identify priority sites and achieve redevelopment goals:

1. Map vacant, abandoned and underutilized sites. Identify sites that are publically owned, abandoned by the private owner, for sale, etc.

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2. Rank each site according to its ability to achieve identified community priorities.
3. Consider the impact of development on the neighborhood surrounding each site or group of sites.
4. Determine whether the City can play a role in marketing or encouraging development.
5. Consider all of these factors to develop an overall ranking of sites for redevelopment.
6. Market or consider investing in the highest priority sites.
7. Use code enforcement and other legal strategies as necessary to ensure that vacant and abandoned properties do not create health hazards and affect the marketability of other property.

#### **Create a Pedestrian Connectivity Plan**

Walkability is a comparative advantage for Port Isabel, differentiating it from South Padre Island and providing the “bones” of a vibrant, mixed-use center that could give visitors more to see, more to do, and more reasons to stay than they find across the Causeway. The tiny Lighthouse District is an excellent illustration of how this works, where visitors park their cars and walk between shops and restaurants. The block structure of Port Isabel’s core can be a valuable asset, but the City will need to provide leadership and guidance to developers, shop owners, and state and regional agencies in order to take advantage of it.

A Pedestrian Connectivity Plan is one tool the City can use to identify the improvements that will allow residents and tourists to take advantage of Port Isabel’s inherent walkability. A connectivity plan would focus on pathways between important uses, such as neighborhoods and schools, the historic district and the museum, or bus stops and workplaces. The plan can be used to identify barriers for pedestrians, locate gaps in the sidewalk network, rate the quality of existing infrastructure, and identify additional pedestrian amenities such as lighting and signage.

A connectivity plan can be used to prioritize public investments, inform requests for funding from state and federal agencies, and support requests for developer-provided infrastructure.

#### **4. Time frame for accomplishing actions**

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**30 days after receipt of report:**

- Determine whether the City has the resources to proceed with Garcia Street District and/or South Shore District reinvestment planning.
- Select a process to identify community priorities, whether through a public outreach strategy or an internal City discussion.
- Depending on the outcome of these two decisions, begin to identify important groups to engage and representatives of those groups to interview.
- Map pedestrian paths associated with the new Community Center.
- Work with tax assessor and others to map vacant, abandoned, or underutilized properties in the City.

**6 months after workshop:**

- Begin to identify community needs and/or priorities through meetings and other outreach opportunities.
- Have community outreach goals established.
- Have a complete list of community outreach opportunities and community decision points mapped out for the life of the process.
- Have a working list of community priorities.
- Identify specific pedestrian connectivity needs and priorities for the new Community Center.
- Have a draft ranking of redevelopment priorities available for review.
- Identify additional areas for pedestrian connectivity analysis.

**1 year after workshop:**

- Have adopted community priorities to inform future work.
- Have broadened the core group of engaged citizens to be more representative of the City as a whole.
- Have an approved list of redevelopment priorities.
- Have completed at least three neighborhood-based pedestrian connectivity plans.