

Project SHAPE

EL CENTRO DOWNTOWN PLAN

OCTOBER 2007



**COMPASS
BLUEPRINT**
new directions for growth



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INTRODUCTION

This is a historic time as the City of El Centro takes steps to enhance its downtown and create an opportunity for new development—both preserving the historical character of the downtown and encouraging new investment. El Centro began as a small town, and its downtown reflects this. As the city and county continue to grow, downtown should be a central location for new development. This Downtown Master Plan serves as a road map and business plan that the city can use to generate new investment in the downtown area.

This Downtown Master Plan is intended to translate the vision of a vital downtown El Centro into reality. Simply planning for a better downtown will not lead to its success—it will require a concerted effort by city leaders, area businesses, residents and new investors. Fortunately, the city and its redevelopment agency have many of the tools in place to help create an environment for the downtown's future success: appropriate regulations, key strategic public investments and the ability to partner with the private sector.

El Centro is well primed to move forward in shaping a new future for its downtown—a future that will be filled with careful preservation of historical treasures and exciting opportunities for growth and development.



Project Goals

The El Centro Downtown Master Plan has the following goals:



Participants at the 2007 State of the Downtown Breakfast were excited to begin cooperatively planning for the future of the downtown.



Preserving historic buildings such as the Mayan Hotel through rehab and revitalization is key to the success of the downtown.

- **Beautify the Downtown Area**

Create an environment that is both inspiring and attractive by taking advantage of the downtown's unique features and adding new elements that enhance its physical beauty.

- **Create a People-Oriented Place**

Create a vibrant downtown that focuses on the people who live, work and shop in the area. This can be accomplished by providing safe places for people to sit and talk with friends, where children can play in public spaces and where services and goods are readily available.

- **Design a Walkable Downtown District**

Enhance the pedestrian environment and provide parking in adequate numbers and in strategic locations throughout the downtown so people can walk freely and safely all throughout the Downtown area. This district should be adapted to El Centro's desert climate.

- **Develop An Economy To Sustain and Serve Future Generations**

Ensure ongoing economic development and activity by creating sustainable businesses and providing economic opportunities through strategic partnerships and public investments.

- **Historic Preservation**

Preserve and enhance the distinct historic architectural character of the downtown.

- **Restore Prosperity and Vitality to the Downtown area**

Provide a vibrant and economically active environment that meets the economic and social needs of the people who live, work and shop in the downtown district.

- **Identify Common Interests and Develop Positive Relationships**

Where public and private interests converge, create opportunities to enhance relationships and build community. Work with area partners to enhance entrepreneurship, local business development and economic investment.

- **Define a Vision for the Downtown area**

Using public and stakeholder input to create a vision for the downtown that reflects the values, goals and hopes of the people who live, work and recreate in El Centro.

How Can Redevelopment and Revitalization Be Beneficial for Downtown El Centro?

City planning experts around the world know that a successful city is one with a strong, healthy downtown. El Centro is certainly no exception. As a result, this Downtown Master Plan focuses much of its efforts on strengthening the core of economic livability and vitality in the downtown area. Redeveloping and revitalizing the downtown core will create many significant benefits for the entire El Centro community, including:

- Encouraging business development (both new and existing) that will flourish.
- Increasing the quality of life for El Centro residents by providing housing opportunities within the downtown core.
- Increasing choices for nearby shopping, housing, work and recreational activities—all of which help reduce the number and distance of trips taken by car.
- Creating a real sense of “place” in Downtown El Centro—with local shopping, restaurants and services that create a downtown that is a destination.
- Adding new opportunities for high-quality housing that will help support downtown businesses and provide urban living and pedestrian-oriented streets.

Downtown is the cultural heart of El Centro, with a distinct commercial area that has a rich history. Many successful businesses are located in the downtown area, including restaurants, shops and services. However, in recent years there has been a new competitive threat to the success of the downtown core—the development of many new large retail facilities along Highway 86 and the edge of town. Many downtown merchants can't match the mass-scale retailing and prices of the big box chains. Like merchants in most downtowns, El Centro shop owners must find a niche that has been overlooked by the giant retailers, offering unique products, services or convenience that large chain stores cannot compete with. Also, because these outlying areas are not designed for housing, downtowns also have an advantage in that they are attractive places to live.

Despite this city's many promising, successful features, it must take steps today to create a downtown area that will continue to thrive in the future. This Downtown Master Plan aims to do just that. A mix of housing, jobs, services and attractions is necessary to shape a vibrant and pedestrian-friendly downtown—one that will grow in proportion to the rest of the region.



Currently parking is sufficient in the downtown; however, with the expected new growth additional spaces and/or parking garages will be necessary in the future.



Main Street in Downtown El Centro



Strengthening local business in the downtown is beneficial to both owners and patrons.

Physical location of community

El Centro is located in the southernmost part of California, adjacent to the northern border of Mexico. El Centro covers 10.75 square miles and is the largest city in Imperial County. El Centro is located 616 miles southwest of San Francisco, 117 miles east of San Diego and 245 miles west of Phoenix, Arizona and is accessible via Interstate 8, State Highway 86 and State Highway 111.

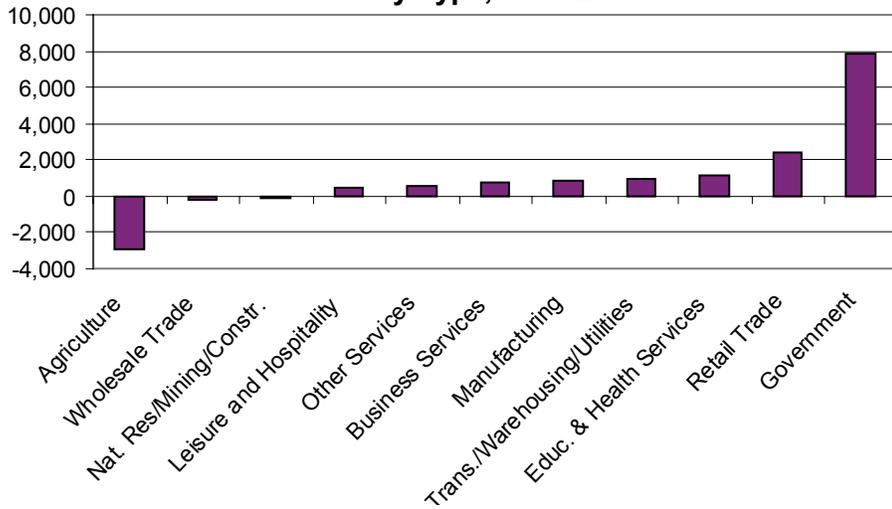
El Centro is the county seat and principal trading center of Imperial County. It is strategically located in the Imperial economic base. Several state and federal government offices are located in El Centro, such as the Bureau of Land Management, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Border Patrol Headquarters, United States Social Security Administration, Employment Development Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



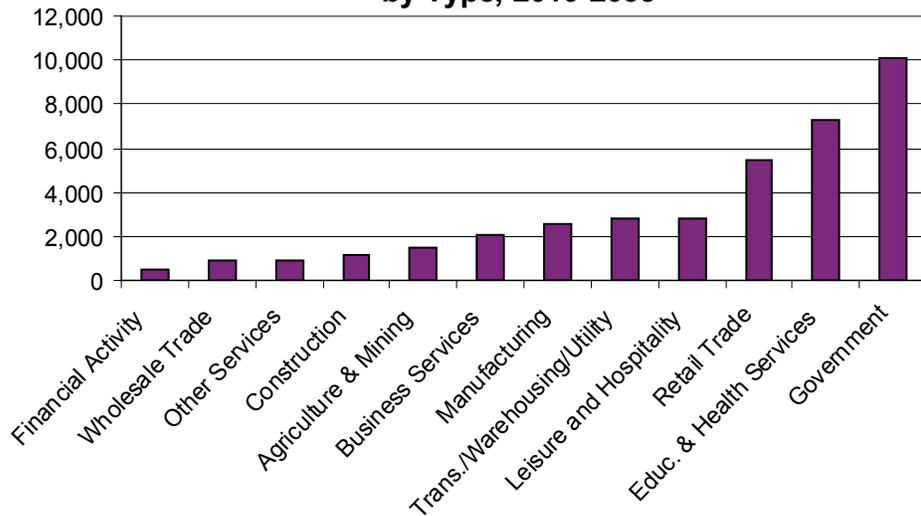
Economic Profile

In the last 17 years, the economic profile of Imperial County has changed significantly, especially in agricultural and government sectors. The County has lost 2,900 agricultural jobs while gaining 7,900 government jobs through the addition of several state government offices. In this period, retail jobs have grown by 44%, adding 2,400 new jobs in the County. In addition, educational and health service jobs have grown by 70%, adding 1,200 new jobs to Imperial County.

Past Pattern: Imperial County Jobs Change by Type, 1990-2006



Future Pattern: Imperial County Jobs Change by Type, 2010-2035



This pattern of growth is predicted to continue in the future. Between 2010 and 2035, the County is projected to show gains in all sectors and grow by almost 40,000 jobs, however the biggest gains will be in retail trade, educational and health services, leisure and hospitality, professional services, and the government sector. All of these jobs are suitable for the downtown area. Jobs in the retail, hospitality, business service, education/health service, and government sectors make up 75% of projected job increases in El Centro by 2035. Today the downtown has a competitive advantage in the location of government jobs, but in the future should work to develop an advantage in the retail, health, hospitality and professional services sectors.

Community Demographics and Forecast

According to 2000 US Census figures, 42,002 people live in El Centro, representing 13,789 households with an average of 3.196 persons per household. The California Department of Finance population estimate for 2007 was 42,071, indicating that the city's growth was unchanged. By comparison, Imperial County is growing rapidly, with its population growing to 172,672 in 2007, an increase of 21 percent compared to the 2000 population of 142,361. The median age within El Centro is 30 years. The city is the employment center of Imperial County, providing a labor force of more than 18,000 people.

Family income levels in El Centro continue to rise and are comparable to Imperial County as a whole. The median household income in 2000 was \$37,759, and the median price of a home was \$255,000. This is considerably lower than the average for California, which has a median household income of \$51,917 and a median home price of \$575,800.

Downtown El Centro's key demographic feature is that people both live and work within the market area of the downtown (a typical downtown market area encompasses an area of about 10 miles). This assumption in a typical, successful downtown is that it attracts the surrounding population by providing civic services, specialty services, retailing and entertainment.

El Centro's downtown benefits from its central location (hence its name). According to Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) 2003 estimates, there were 112,000 people, 30,000 households, and 42,000 employees within 10 miles of downtown El Centro. SCAG's forecast for 2035 estimates that those numbers will nearly double, bringing the population within 10 miles of the downtown to 215,000 residents, 65,000 households, and 85,000 jobs. If the downtown wants to keep pace with the growth of its market area, it will need to double its retail and service opportunities. In addition, the downtown could feasibly capture between 3 to 5 percent of the new housing demand. SCAG's forecast includes the addition of 1,600 housing units and 2,500 employees in the downtown area (this is about twice the size of the downtown study area for this plan). SCAG's 2030 forecast for the city of El Centro is 5,279 new households and 14,263 new jobs. With the expected growth in downtown El Centro, there is ample opportunity to attract substantial investment.



As families grow and more people move to El Centro it is only logical that there will be an increase in both housing and jobs in the downtown.



Within ten miles of El Centro there are three towns and a population of about 112,000 people.

City Government

The city of El Centro was incorporated on April 6, 1908, and is operated by a council/manager form of government. El Centro also has an identified redevelopment agency project area. This provides El Centro with powerful tools to develop the city's core. Members of the El Centro City Council also serve on the community development commission and the redevelopment agency governing boards. The city manager is empowered as the executive director of both the commission and the agency.



The City's elected officials served as stewards of Project SHAPE from the very beginning of the process.

Public Safety

The redevelopment of downtown El Centro presents an opportunity to empower local business owners and residents in actively participating in ensuring the area's safety. Active participation by local stakeholders, in conjunction with district-wide community policing efforts, will both engage the community in crime reduction efforts and reduce levels of fear from crime.

Revitalization and safety frequently go hand-in-hand. It is difficult to revitalize areas which are perceived to be unsafe; meanwhile, successful revitalization efforts bring residents, shoppers and workers into an area around-the-clock, improving its safety. It is recommended that the City take a community policing approach that focuses on partnerships with area stakeholders in order to help the downtown reach its greatest potential.

Three simple community policing actions will help improve the perception of safety in the downtown:

- 1) Increasing police and security service presence and visibility;
- 2) Addressing specific downtown safety and environment issues; and
- 3) Emphasizing information sharing and collaboration among local stakeholders.

Downtown Crime Statistics

The tables below show statistics for three different types of crimes on Broadway, Main Street, and State Street in downtown El Centro from 2006 and 2007. The downtown area has a low crime rate, especially in terms of property crimes.

Parking Citations & Traffic Stops (Based on Disposition)

Broadway	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	8	10	4
Reports	0	0	1
Citations	41	25	9
Main	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	6	7	3
Reports	0	2	0
Citations	66	42	24
State	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	4	11	7
Reports	0	0	4
Citations	35	31	46

Petty Theft (Based on Disposition)

Broadway	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	0	0	0
Reports	1	0	0
Citations	0	0	0
Main	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	1	0	1
Reports	10	5	5
Citations	0	0	0
State	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	0	0	0
Reports	4	6	2
Citations	0	0	0

Vehicle and Building Vandalism (Based on Disposition)

Broadway	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	0	0	1
Reports	9	1	2
Citations	0	0	0
Main	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	3	0	0
Reports	21	8	15
Citations	0	0	1
State	1st Semester '06	2nd Semester '06	1st Semester '07
Arrests	0	0	0
Reports	6	3	8
Citations	0	0	0



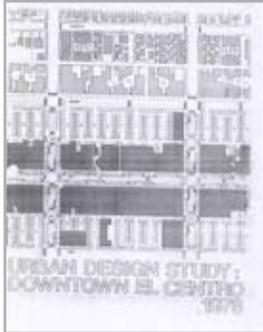


The El Centro Town Square provides a central gathering place for the city residents.

Previous Reports and Plans

Prior plans and studies played an integral role in developing this Downtown Master Plan, allowing El Centro to apply findings from previous planning efforts to build a cohesive, integrated strategy for the downtown's future success.

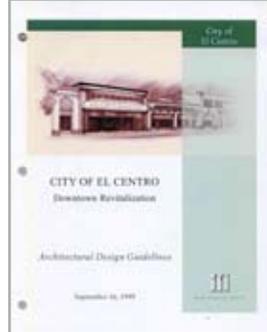
The city has a history of sound planning practice that has both shaped and guided the development of this Downtown Master Plan. Below is a list of the plans that helped to inform this Downtown Master Plan:



Urban Design Study:
Downtown El Centro,
1978



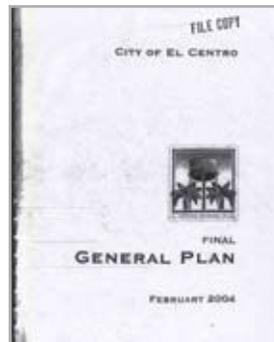
City of El Centro
Downtown
Revitalization Study,
June 1994



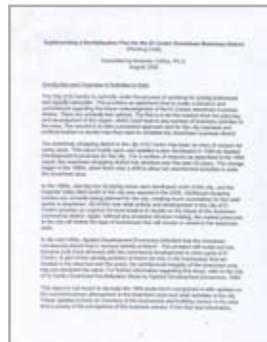
City of El Centro
Architectural Design
Guidelines,
September 1999



Downtown El Centro
Parking Study,
August 2000



City of El Centro
General Plan,
February 2004



Implementing a
Revitalization Plan
for the El Centro
Downtown Business
District, August 2006

Each of these plans has played an important role in keeping downtown El Centro viable. The 1994 Downtown Revitalization Plan resulted in significant streetscape improvements, giving the downtown a pedestrian-friendly environment and enhancing the area's unique porticoes. The parking study resulted in well-developed parking plans and helped develop consistent policy. The 2006 Revitalization Plan succinctly captured the economic activity and changing nature of downtown. Each plan developed important recommendations that are consistent with this Downtown Master Plan.

This Downtown Master Plan is an action plan intended to help El Centro achieve and realize its goals. It is a strategic plan for that will shape downtown's growth and is informed by economic realities as well as community desires.

Public Workshop Approach and Purpose

A driving force behind developing this Downtown Master Plan was a workshop in April 2007 with more than 100 citizens and stakeholders from El Centro and throughout Imperial County. The workshop provided an opportunity to better understand what El Centro's residents value most in their community and what aspects could be improved during the next 20 years. During the workshop, participants were asked specifically how they would like downtown El Centro to change during the next 20 years.

The workshop was very successful in engaging residents to help shape the future of their community and their city. The workshops were interactive, hands-on exercises to stimulate ideas about El Centro's future downtown development and transportation choices. The workshop attendees were divided into tables of about eight to 10 people. The twelve groups worked together to create a specific vision for the downtown's future. Each group was given a large-scale map of the downtown area, placed "chips" (small stickers that contained various types of buildings) on the map, and drew recommended improvements.

In addition, participants also took part in a Visual Preference Survey. The purpose of the Visual Preference Survey is to better understand (via visual illustrations of specific choices and scenarios) community preferences of architectural style, signs, land uses, building setbacks, landscaping, parking areas, size/scope of transportation facilities, surface finishes and other design elements.



Citizens present their ideas to the group during the wrap-up of the Community Workshop at Elk's Lodge.



An example of a digitized workshop map.



April Community Workshop at Elk's Lodge.

Developers Forum

The city and redevelopment agency also hosted a developer/business forum in which members of the development community were invited to provide their candid perspectives on the development environment in El Centro. This venue encouraged participants to discuss specific issues, constraints and opportunities related to the future of downtown development.

Four key themes emerged during the forum, based on input from the participants:

1. There needs to be more flexibility in requirements.
2. It's important to have predictability for the development community.
3. Growing the El Centro downtown market share is critical to Imperial County.
4. Downtown needs to be re-branded as a special place that is attractive to investors.



Local developers and interested business people were invited to provide their point of view on the development environment in downtown El Centro.

Findings from Public and Stakeholder Input

The workshop results helped focus and organize the approach used for this Downtown Master Plan. Participants also helped identify a set of key values to guide future investment in the Downtown to create a more vital, active, and pedestrian-friendly area making the Downtown a shining light for the El Centro community.

El Centro residents and leaders provided some valuable input on how the Downtown should develop and grow. Using this information, Downtown El Centro has great potential to create a thriving, successful center. Some key findings from the developer and community based workshops include:

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

- Encourage a mix of different sizes and types of downtown businesses.
- Provide opportunities for specialty services near downtown.
- Promote businesses that offer goods and services targeted to current and future El Centro residents.
- Encourage development of retail niches, such as ethnic products, antiques or entertainment.
- Provide incentives for local and small businesses, as opposed to large national retail chains.
- Attract additional, quality jobs to downtown.

HOUSING

- Create downtown housing choices that will be attractive to people who may not have previously considered living downtown.
- Develop zoning codes that provide viable densities to allow mixed-use buildings in a downtown environment.
- Encourage development of higher density live/work housing along the edge of downtown

TRANSPORTATION

- Create a downtown center that encourages pedestrians, bicycles, automobiles and public transportation through urban design and land-use proximity and density.
- Manage parking for residents, employees and business patrons so that it is efficient. Design a shared parking system for the downtown that meets the average parking needs of downtown users.

DESIGN

- Keep El Centro's fundamental character and uniqueness by encouraging buildings adjacent to the sidewalk, develop arcades to shade the sidewalk, and build in a common wall configuration (stretching across the entire lot where feasible).
- Design open spaces, walkways and gathering spaces that promote a sense of community within the downtown.
- Create wide sidewalks with arcades that encourage a shaded environment and pedestrian activity.



El Centro's 18th annual Ice Cream Social & Rain on Main Street.



Multi-family housing such as townhomes and apartments at the edge of downtown will provide a patron base for adjacent business.



Continuing the tradition of El Centro's signature arcades is greatly encouraged throughout downtown.



MIXED USE RESIDENTIAL 2 STORY

Building area: 38,381 sf
Employees/acre: 50
Residential units/acre: 13



MIXED USE RESIDENTIAL 4 STORY

Building area: 71,287 sf
Employees/acre: 47
Residential units/acre: 35



MIXED USE REHABILITATION

Building area: 69,956 sf
Employees/acre: 189



MIXED USE OFFICE 2 STORY

Building area: 35,900 sf
Employees/acre: 107



MIXED USE OFFICE 4 STORY

Building area: 35,900 sf
Employees/acre: 107



RESTAURANT AND HOTEL

Building area: 47,685 sf
Employees/acre: 41

Above are summaries of the six building prototypes from the financial modeling process. These building prototypes provide the framework for the Downtown Development Strategy. Recommendations and policy strategies to achieve successful development of these prototypes is included in the final part of this Downtown Master Plan.

The framework of a downtown consists of the buildings and the streetscapes within it. A successful, strong downtown includes an interaction of spaces, uses and people. It should be inviting to people, provide them with the services and products they need, and give them an opportunity to gather as a community. In short, it should buzz with excitement. Understanding the framework of a successful downtown and structuring it for success is perhaps the most important element in planning for downtown revitalization.

Significant public and stakeholder input provided a clear direction for the Downtown Master Plan. From that input, the city gained important insight into what residents wanted and what developers and land owners need to be successful. This input also provided insights into the barriers and opportunities to investment in downtown El Centro. A vision can provide clear direction, but it takes investment and opportunity to make that vision a reality.

This Downtown Master Plan provides the direction for achieving successful investment while also reflecting community goals and values. How does a forward-thinking downtown achieve these two goals that sometimes run parallel and sometimes run in conflict with each other? First, the public and stakeholder input is translated into a series of building prototypes to represent the physical downtown, which is made up of new and rehabilitated buildings. Second, the building prototypes are tested and tuned to ensure that they are financially feasible. The outcome is a set of recommendations to address any regulatory or financial barriers to create the type of development that residents want and support.

Building Prototypes: What they are and what we learn

Building prototypes represent the physical or actual buildings that either currently exist or will be built in the future. The physical component includes design and land-use types and is typically based on input from the public, as well as an assessment of existing and new development within a given area. The results of the Visual Preference Survey showed that a few design elements strongly resonated within the community, including:

1. **Scale/Setbacks:** One of the most important findings from the survey was that people preferred buildings with setbacks on the upper floors in larger buildings. Creating setbacks on the upper floors is a design technique used to make structures that are more visually interesting and less bulky.
2. **Architectural Style:** In terms of architectural style, more traditional Southwest designs were preferred over modern architecture.
3. **Land Uses:** Well-designed mixed-use buildings with a variety of scales were preferred over single-use developments. Images that showed a compatible mix of active ground-level retail, office and residential uses also ranked well.
4. **Streetscapes:** Images showing wide sidewalks, shaded porticoes, street trees and sidewalk cafes were ranked highly.

As a result of this input and an inventory of existing structures in the downtown, six building prototypes were developed as part of the Downtown Master Plan.

100 years ago...

The downtown buildings envisioned in this plan are similar in size and scale to buildings that existed in El Centro 100 years ago. At that time, downtown buildings represented gathering places and hubs of activity for the whole region.



Main Street



The Historic Barbara Worth Hotel

Tipping point analysis

The second component of the analysis, called the “tipping point,” looks at the financial feasibility of developing the preferred building type. The tipping point analysis focuses on the interaction between the regulatory system and the market. Building prototypes are examined to determine if the rent, lease, or sales prices would outweigh the associated costs and risks and produce a return that is suitable for development. This model considers a range of factors including parking, height and use requirements, construction costs, and fees.

Using a sensitivity analysis where zoning code inputs are isolated and tested to determine their single impact, several tipping points can be identified that show where optimizations could be made to best achieve the best strategy for developing downtown El Centro. The tipping point analysis helps to better understand what policy changes are necessary to create a regulatory environment that supports desirable projects.

In addition, several area developers were interviewed as part of this analysis to confirm assumptions about construction costs, loan rates and timelines. The goal of these interviews was to confirm assumptions and inputs into the tipping point model—and provide another “real world” check for the prototype analysis.

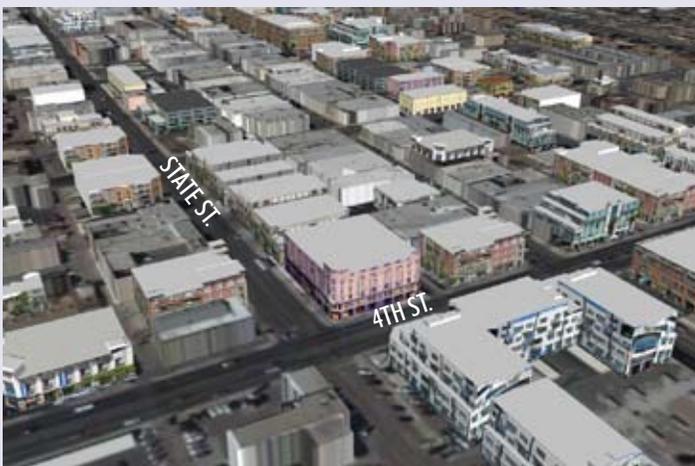
One of the key findings is that many positive building types are not feasible in downtown because of current zoning. The biggest single zoning issue is the restrictions caused by requiring off-street parking at standard rates. To build a multi-story building downtown, builders must provide large amounts of parking on site to meet the current code. To make a project feasible with downtown property values, buildings need to generate a substantial rent. The result? Buildings need to be multi-story, and have floor-to-area (FAR) ratios of 1.5 or greater.



State St. & 4th St., Concept Plan



State St. & 4th St., Opportunity Sites



State St. & 4th St., Visualization

To add parking on site, substantial parking structures have to be added to the buildings. This is only feasible in buildings with footprints of 30,000 square feet or greater. Few building sites downtown offer this size, especially on Main Street. Essentially, the downtown zoning as it is currently written makes infill an impossible proposition.

For example, in a 5,000 square foot lot facing Main Street, the only feasible parking configuration is four off-street spaces accessed directly off the alley. This would support only a 1,000-square-foot building, far less than the two or more stories needed to simply match the existing downtown development.

In addition, cost-effective prototypes that were within the 60-foot height limit downtown had a FAR of 2.5 or higher, more than the current zoning limit of 1.5 FAR.

The prototype analysis shows that for the downtown to increase in size and meet the community goals, it needs a radically reconfigured zoning code—designed around desired buildings and ensuring that regulations are in place to make these projects feasible.



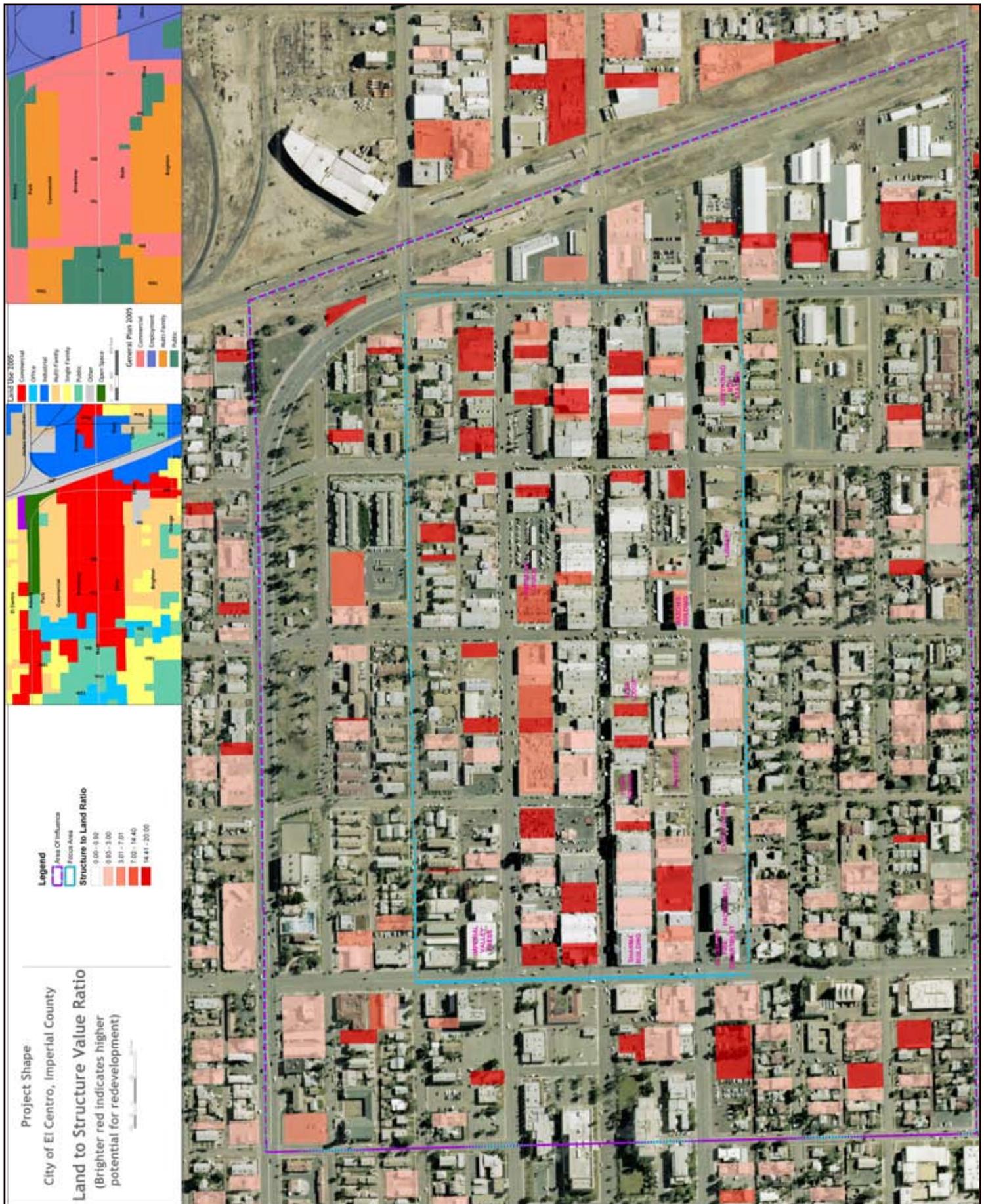
Broadway and 7th St., Concept Plan



Broadway and 7th St., Opportunity Sites



Broadway and 7th St., Visualization



Downtown El Centro's Land to Structure Value Ratio

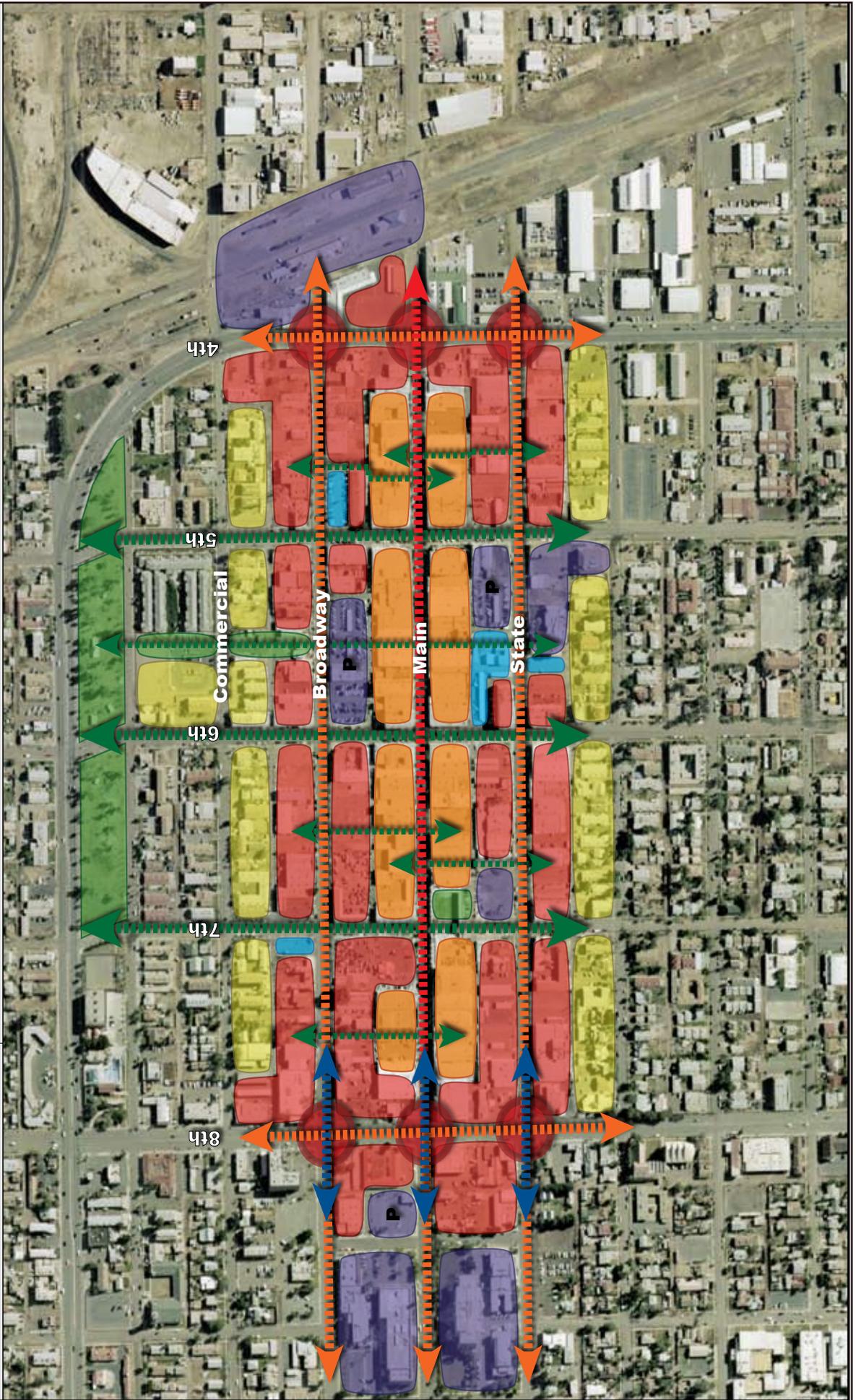
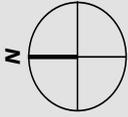
Downtown El Centro Project SHAPE Conceptual Illustration

April 16th
Workshop Results

DRAFT - April 18th 2007

LEGEND

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|--|
|  | Main Shopping and Entertainment |  | Mixed-Use |
|  | Critical Connections |  | Commercial |
|  | Streetscape Improvements |  | Employment |
|  | Pedestrian Connections |  | Residential |
|  | Critical Intersections |  | Open Space & Parks |
| | |  | Civic |
| | |  | Publicly Owned Surplus Parking Parking Structure |



The Downtown Master Plan includes six major district designations which are described on the following pages.

The vision for downtown El Centro includes arcade-lined streets and an active water feature, with areas conducive to shopping and eating at cafes and restaurants. It will be a place for simply gathering with friends and neighbors. Looking at the future of El Centro and Imperial County, the city has a remarkable opportunity to invest in the future of its downtown and reinvigorate the city and the region. El Centro's downtown plays an important role in sustaining future populations and in making the city a more vital and livable environment.

The Downtown Plan includes a visual representation of new land uses, connections and gateways that will enable downtown El Centro to evolve into the downtown envisioned by residents and stakeholders. The Plan is built upon several key components:

- Previous reports and plans
- Public and stakeholder input
- Financial analysis of the building prototypes

The downtown El Centro area of influence consists of 164 acres and the focus area consists of 54 acres. The Downtown development scenario is based on the assumption that a total of 33 acres will be redeveloped, resulting in an additional 800 additional dwelling units and roughly 1500 new jobs in the downtown. Based on the financial analysis, the Downtown Development Strategy would result in:

- Nearly \$200 million in new investment
- Addition of 186,000 retail square feet
- 372 new retail employees
- An additional 543,000 square feet of office/service space, with 1,086 office employees.

While this is an active build-out scenario for the downtown, the proposal is to use a 50 percent build out for planning purposes. Given the total increased assessed value of \$99 million by 2028, the urban renewal district would see an additional \$11 million dollars in additional revenue. Of this amount, \$6 million would allow for a new 250 space parking structure, meeting the need for additional parking demanded by the new development under the proposed parking standards.



Encouraging the restoration of landmark buildings will help to preserve the historic culture of downtown.



Creating a more inviting streetscape that includes porticoes, landscaping and bike lanes will help to make downtown more appealing to visitors.



Locally owned business line both sides of Main Street in downtown.

Downtown Districts

The Downtown Master Plan includes six major district designations which are described on the following pages.

MAIN STREET COMMERCIAL CORE

The Main Street commercial core is the historic center of downtown El Centro and presents significant redevelopment and improvement opportunities. Initially, this is the area where development activity should be focused.

Currently Main Street is anchored with the most active retail area downtown. There is an established town square on Main Street, and new pedestrian enhancements have been developed along Main Street between Fourth and Eighth streets. The majority of businesses in downtown El Centro also are located along Main Street.

Main Street is envisioned to include contiguous porticoes or arcades from Fourth to Eighth streets, with balconies on the second stories that will serve as the retail center of the downtown. The majority of buildings will be two and three stories and will be retail, office or other commercial uses such as restaurants and cafes. New buildings will be integrated with the old to create a seamless and consistent environment.



Diagonal parking, landscaping, bump-outs and good lighting make Main Street the commercial core of downtown. Landscapes should be renovated and lighting should be updated in the near future.

What if?



Main Street Before



Main Street After

BROADWAY AND STATE DISTRICTS

State Street, located to the south of Main Street, and Broadway to the north represent significant opportunity for new mixed-use development within the downtown core. These districts should be the key focus for new development in downtown El Centro. Currently there is ample vacant land and strategically located public property that make this area attractive for future investment. There are vacant lots and surface parking lots scattered along both Broadway and State, the porticoes are not contiguous and the roadways are very wide and unsafe for pedestrian mobility.

These districts present the most opportunity for mixed-use growth, including the addition of three- to five-story mixed-use buildings (with FAR of up to 3) that could include new housing, retail and office uses. There also is significant potential for a public structured parking lot on both Broadway and State streets. New parking lots would anchor these two districts with Main Street creating a connection between these three key east west roads through the downtown. Downtown would expand from Main Street, adding more blocks, greater opportunity for pedestrian activity and an area tied together through shared amenities. There is a great deal of opportunity to enhance the visual appeal of these areas, particularly in terms of streetscape improvements and design. The wide streets of State and Broadway provide an advantage since they are large enough to accommodate two lanes of traffic, provide on-street parking and pedestrian improvements.



This bird's eye view of Broadway and 7th Avenue shows a visualization of potential redevelopment projects along the street.

This street level view gives an idea of the look and feel of potential redevelopment projects along Broadway.



What if?



Broadway Before



Broadway After



Existing Streetscape on Broadway



Recommended streetscape design with shaded porticoes and overhead balcony terraces.

CIVIC USES

Civic uses are the foundations of most downtowns and represent a commitment by civic institutions, providing stability and security to the downtown real estate market. Civic uses are inclusionary and provide a range of activities for all ages. Some civic institutions also allow for evening uses, libraries can function as meeting or community rooms for evening activities, and public grounds are available for markets or concerts—all of which are important in encouraging a vibrant downtown.



GATEWAYS AND CRITICAL INTERSECTIONS

Major gateways and intersections can act as signals for the downtown. They can act as transitions to downtown fringe businesses, eliminating the separation between the downtown and adjacent uses. They also can help signify entry to the downtown for a sense of arrival and “place.” Critical intersections include Main and 4th streets and Main and 8th streets.



PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIONS AND AMENITIES

Vibrant downtowns must welcome and accommodate pedestrian activity. Wider sidewalks and arcades help pedestrians feel comfortable when walking from store to store, provide a pleasant atmosphere for browsing or lingering, and create a pleasant outdoor environment in a climate dominated by intense sunlight. This plan includes major pedestrian streets as well as small, mid-block connections that tie the downtown together. Major streets moving east-west connect with pedestrian movement in a north-south pattern, allowing easier movement between parking and commercial/office/residential areas.



RESIDENTIAL/LIVE WORK TRANSITION

These areas to the north and south provide a buffer between downtown and surrounding residential uses. Allowing live/work spaces in these transitional areas can help the downtown core function as an incubator for small businesses—providing a transition between residential properties and a downtown that may see less activity in the evening hours.

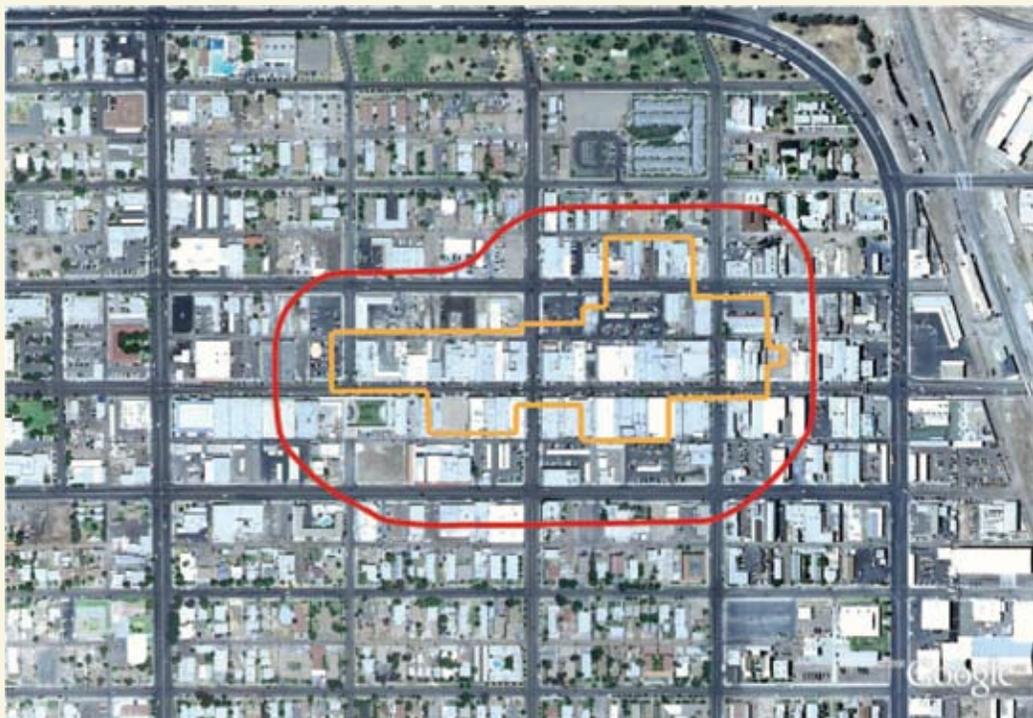


Just how far will people walk?

The images below show the Imperial Valley Mall footprint in comparison with the size of downtown to show the relative size of downtown and its potential for walkability.



The Imperial Valley Mall footprint



The Imperial Valley Mall footprint superimposed over downtown El Centro.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Based on the goals and policies of the plan, the workshop results, and the findings of the scenarios that were built, the following are recommended policies for the city to adopt for the downtown:

Economic Development

Enhance downtown's competitive edge

Develop policies at the city level and seek county-wide policies that support the downtown market, limit new nearby competitive commercial districts, and commit to civic uses.

Key Strategies:

1. Help the downtown develop a stable market area by retaining the residential zoning around the downtown, thus protecting the downtown from new business districts that may develop nearby.
2. Reinforce the city of El Centro's commitment to retaining important civic functions such as city hall, the central library, and other civic institutions in the downtown.
3. Encourage Imperial County to adopt similar policies regarding downtown El Centro, and continue its commitment to maintain county functions such as administration and the judiciary in the city core.
4. Many government buildings have been built by developers and then leased to county, state, or federal agencies. These are tax increment producing properties since they are not tax-exempt. This should be encouraged in the future.
5. Propose a county-wide cooperative policy to reinforce the central cities of the Imperial Valley with a commitment to transportation, infrastructure, and civic activities. This would include the downtowns of Brawley, Calexico, Imperial and Holtville.
6. Consider developing a major civic building in the downtown a multi-story, mixed-use building, potentially with shared parking in an adjacent structure and retail uses on the ground floor.



Downtown building rehabilitation.



Downtown visitors can enjoy local baked goods and meals at this downtown bakery.



Valiant Upholstery receives recognition from the city of El Centro.



Downtown sidewalk cafe.

Public private partnerships

Public/private partnerships benefit both El Centro and developers. The city can achieve goals that would not be possible through public funds alone, while developers benefit from increased certainty (decreased risk) and assistance in developing new uses downtown.

Key Strategies:

1. The city should hire a city architect to serve as a liaison between developers and the city/planning department; the architect also would provide advice to the city on development and design issues and design/build proposals. This position could be a paid consultant or a full-time city employee.
2. Identify parcels for acquisition. Specifically the city should try to acquire some of the vacant parcels on Main Street for design-build development and trade or acquire sites to expand the two main parking lots.
3. Sponsor “design/build” competitions on city-owned land that will solicit proposals to build a three-story, mixed-use lodging or office building.
4. Work to locate and recruit a retail anchor (possibly an ethnic or health food store).
5. Immediately following the approval of this plan, develop policies for the Urban Renewal District that segregate some tax increment for downtown improvements. Funds should be earmarked for acquiring and consolidating public parking sites, acquiring a site for a demonstration project, developing a parking structure, and funds for redeveloping the streetscape on Broadway and State to match the streetscape included in this plan. The streetscape improvements should be done in minimum two-block lengths and coincide with new development or redevelopment projects on those blocks. This plan would be timed to the expansion of the private sector investment in the downtown.



Downtown El Centro's opportunity sites by phase.

Zoning Policy

Allow higher floor area ratios (FARs) to achieve multi-story, mixed-use buildings outright and eliminate or reduce off street parking regulations.

Generally speaking, the zoning code should be designed to allow outright the kind of buildings and uses contained in the Downtown Development Strategy. This includes taking into account the economic feasibility of downtown development, providing for a reasonable return on investment and accounting for the unique development challenges in the area. New investment is greatly needed in downtown El Centro, and the analysis of prototype buildings showed that certain key investments would not be possible under the current zoning code.

Specifically, the analysis shows that multi-story, mixed-use buildings would require inordinate amounts of surface parking under the current code. The most desirable building form for the downtown is a two- to four-story, mixed-use or office building with an FAR exceeding 2.0. However this form of building is not feasible without structured parking.

Because of the requirements for parking aisles and ramps, the minimum size for parking structures is about 25,000 square feet, with dimensions of 100 by 250 feet. Many available and developable lots in the downtown are in the range of 5,000 square feet to 20,000 square feet. So if a multi story building is proposed, the ability of the land owner to include structured parking is severely limited.

Recommended Zoning Changes:

1. No off-street parking would be required on Main Street for buildings that are two stories or more.
2. Off-street parking ratios for State and Broadway would be half the standard required rate in the zoning code.
3. A special adjustment provision for parking requirements should be added to the zoning code so that the downtown area can remain flexible in accommodating special situations.
4. Redevelopment and modest expansion of existing buildings should be permitted without requiring any additional off-street parking.
5. FAR limits should be raised from 1.5 to 3.0.
6. Allow a greater variety of uses, such as manufacturing and breweries if products are sold on site.
7. Strict design standards should be adopted for materials, street frontage and design.
8. Change height standards from 35 feet to 60 feet.
9. Allow multi-family residential uses in the civic center district if it is above a non-residential (e.g. retail or service) use.

Key Strategies:

1. The city should process a specific plan based on this downtown plan document and develop findings that conform with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) so that environmental review can be expedited. This would allow uses that conform to be developed with a minimum of entitlement costs.
2. Adopt an amended zoning code for the downtown that conforms with these recommendations.
3. Adopt design standards for the downtown that assure compatible and quality buildings and redevelopment in the downtown.

Parking

Establish a downtown parking district. This includes developing a plan to expand two central parking sites and eventually add sufficient parking structures for the downtown's needs.



This is an example of a 4 story mixed-use parking garage that would fit on a 40,000 sq/ft parcel and provide over 400 spaces.



This picture shows the current city parking lot between 5th and 6th on State Street.

The city of El Centro already has a functional parking district and a very good inventory of parking lots. The city of El Centro should consolidate the surface parking lots into two large lots on Broadway and State, with a minimum size of 30,000 square feet so that it is large enough to accommodate an economical parking structure. The city's smaller parking lots can be used as new development sites, traded for properties adjacent to the large parking lots, or sold to defer expenses. A downtown district management system would include regular parking surveys, a dedicated capital improvement budget, and monitoring and enforcement of a parking policy that eventually could add 1,200 new parking spaces. By taking this route, the financial feasibility of new buildings would increase dramatically, lowering rents by 30 percent and making buildings much more feasible.

This plan proposes two parking structures that would provide an increment to the renewal district and thus creating sufficient construction funding.

Cost of the two parking structures would be about \$30 million. However, according to the latest parking survey conducted for the city, the downtown has 1,300 spaces available and a peak demand of 865 spaces, or a surplus of 435 spaces. In the short (10-year) term, the city should plan to construct a 100-space surface lot and a \$6 million structure that provides about 250 spaces. This would be sufficient to accommodate parking demand for 50 percent of the build-out scenario.

Key Strategies:

1. Identify critical parking areas and encourage short-term parking in those areas.
The conflict between employee and customer parking in downtown may need to be addressed in such areas, since employees tend to use spaces for longer periods that may discourage customer and tourist use.
2. Develop a capital improvement plan that sets aside a portion of tax increment funds for parking expansion in proportion to the need created.
3. Reserve key on-street spaces for customers.
4. Develop an employee and owner parking ban during business hours in key customer spaces.
5. Encourage private parking lots that are available to the public after hours or during off-peak times. Private parking lot owners can be encouraged to participate by having the city provide liability insurance and clean-up services during off hours.
6. Encourage sharing among businesses and create systems for addressing logistical issues. Some businesses should share parking at all times of day, while other businesses can share parking after their individual peak time of day. Also, equity issues may need to be resolved among existing businesses that have either an oversupply or undersupply of parking.
7. Enhance and add to the current municipal parking facilities. Parking lots currently owned by the city could be converted into structured parking, or new land could be acquired.



This zoomed in portion of the Master Plan map shows proposed locations for surface parking lots and parking structures in Downtown.

Paying for parking structures through tax revenue

Based on the Lower Scenario (50% Buildout) to the right, parking demand under the proposed regulations would rise to 1751 spaces by 2020. Given the current supply of 1300, the city would have to add 451 spaces to keep up with demand. However, the value of the downtown would increase by almost \$100 million by 2028 (the year the original urban renewal district expires).

However the El Centro Urban Renewal District receives approximately 0.73% of the incremental new building value in annual tax revenue. If the new revenue from the downtown growth were segregated and spent on the downtown area, this increment would provide sufficient funds for a healthy capital improvement plan for the downtown, including a new parking structure. Based on the two scenarios analyzed, cumulative new revenue would be between \$11 million and \$22 million. About one half of this should be segregated for new parking facilities and land, the rest should be spent in the downtown area for implementation of this plan.

Scenario 1

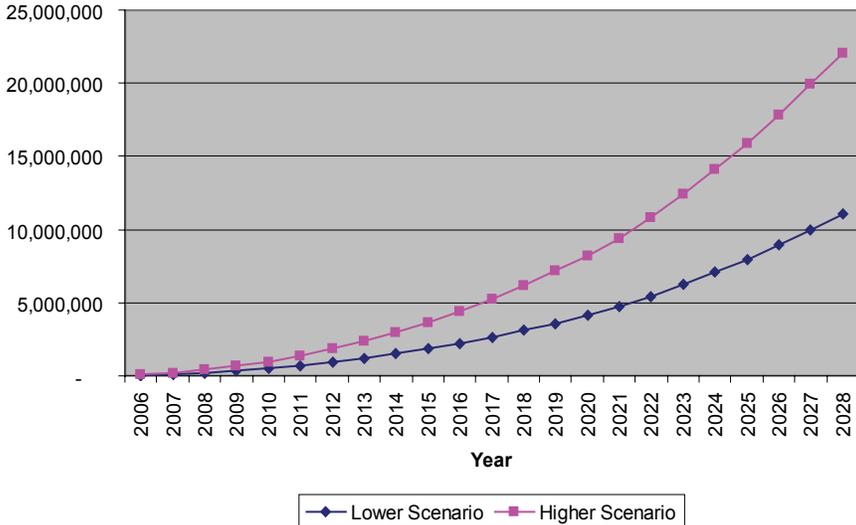
Year	Demand	Supply
2007	865	1300
2008	933	1300
2009	1,001	1300
2010	1,070	1400
2011	1,138	1400
2012	1,206	1400
2013	1,274	1400
2014	1,342	1400
2015	1,410	1400
2016	1,479	1400
2017	1,547	1400
2018	1,615	1650
2019	1,683	1650
2020	1,751	1650

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
Annual New Construction Value	\$4,309,884	\$8,608,696
Total Value	\$ 99,127,330	\$ 198,000,000
Housing Units	415	829
Employees	872	1,744
Commercial Space	364,577	729,155

Scenario 1 assumes that a new 100 space parking lot would be built in 2010 and a 250 space parking structure would be built in 2018 using tax revenues.

Scenario 1 is 50% of the build-out and Scenario 2 is 100% build out by 2028.

Cumulative Tax Revenue



A 250 space parking garage could cost \$6 million to build.

CONCLUSION

This plan constitutes the ambitions of community and business leaders, the vision of citizens, and a feasible plan that the city can undertake—all of which will transform downtown El Centro into a center of economic growth and community pride.

The city of El Centro can shape a cycle of success and reward that will unfold and grow over time. The best way to begin is with small, relatively inexpensive steps. Evaluate those successes, develop a strategy of “lessons learned,” and then begin taking more substantial steps as confidence and knowledge increase. Even small changes can build a foundation in the downtown’s investment potential.

However, the most important factor in the downtown area’s long-term success is a solid commitment from city leadership. As the city begins achieving, and building upon, its successes, each step should be publicly recognized and celebrated. This will help to foster civic pride and a very visual recognition of what the city can and will achieve as long as everyone—city leaders, citizens and business leaders—work in tandem to achieve greatness.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EL CENTRO DOWNTOWN PLAN

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