LEON VALLEY, TX SDAT:
EL VERDE BY 2020

A SUSTAINABLE DESIGN ASSESSMENT TEAM FINAL REPORT

Leon Valley, Texas

AIA Communities by Design
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AIA Communities by Design

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In January 2008, Leon Valley submitted a proposal to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for a Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) to assist the town and its citizens in addressing key issues facing the community. The issues ranged from forging a cohesive city center and identity to strategies for improving the Bandera Road corridor for residents and visitors alike.

The AIA accepted the proposal and, after a preliminary visit by a small group in June, the SDAT members arrived in Leon Valley on October 6. For three days, the team members, working closely with local officials, community leaders, technical experts, and citizens, studied the community and its concerns. During those three days, the team came to understand the issues and used their expertise to frame a wide range of recommendations, which were presented to the community in a public meeting on October 8.

This report is a more detailed version of the findings and recommendations that were presented to the community on October 8. After a brief overview of the SDAT program and process, and a short discussion of Leon Valley and the issues it is facing, the report covers :

- **Economic Development**
- **Land Use & Open Space**
- **Transportation**
- **Town Center and Identity**

A closing section offers some thoughts on how the community can best move forward to address the range of issues and recommendations covered in the report.

What is the SDAT Program?

The SDAT program is an interdisciplinary community assistance program that focuses on principles of sustainability. Launched in 2005, the program represents an exciting new chapter in the AIA's history of supporting communities with volunteer design expertise.

The SDAT program is modeled on the AIA's R/UDAT (Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team) program. While the R/UDAT program provides communities with specific design solutions, the SDAT program provides broad assessments to help frame future policies or design solutions in the context of sustainability and helps communities plan the first steps of implementation. The SDAT program is based on an understanding of design as a process that

- Is integrative, holistic, and visual
- Is central to achieving a sustainable relationship between humans, the natural environment, and the place
- Gives three-dimensional form to a culture and a place
- Achieves balance between culture, environment, and economic systems.

Today, communities face a host of challenges to long-term planning for sustainability, including limited resources and technical capacity, ineffective public processes and poor participation. The SDAT approach is designed to address many of the common challenges communities face by producing long-term sustainability plans that are realistic and reflect each community's unique context. Key features of the SDAT approach include the following:

• **Customized Design Assistance.** The SDAT is designed as a customized approach to community assistance which incorporates local realities and the unique challenges and assets of each community.

• **A Systems Approach to Sustainability.** The SDAT applies a systems-based approach to community sustainability, examining cross-cutting issues and relationships between issues. In order to accomplish this task, the SDAT forms multi-disciplinary teams that combine a range of disciplines and professions in an integrated assessment and design process.

• **Inclusive and Participatory Processes.** Public participation is the foundation of good community design. The SDAT involves a wide range of stakeholder viewpoints and utilizes short feedback loops, resulting in sustainable decision-making that has broad public support and ownership.

• **Objective Technical Expertise**. The SDAT Team is assembled to include a range of technical experts (planners, architects, economists and others) from across the country. Team Members do not accept payment for services in an SDAT. They serve in a volunteer capacity on behalf of the AIA and the partner community. As a result, the SDAT Team has enhanced credibility with local stakeholders and can provide unencumbered technical advice.

• **Cost Effectiveness**. By employing the SDAT approach, communities are able to take advantage of leveraged resources for their planning efforts. The AIA contributes up to $15,000 in financial assistance for each project by covering the team's expenses. The SDAT team members volunteer their labor and expertise, allowing communities to gain immediate access to the combined technical knowledge of top-notch professionals from varied fields. Finally, the SDAT process employs a compressed schedule and the application of innovative public participation techniques to leverage resources effectively and produce timely results.

• **Results.** Many communities want to become more sustainable but are immobilized by conflicting agendas, politics, personalities, or even the overabundance of opportunity. Further, many communities have not yet taken stock of their current practices and policies within a sustainability framework; others have identified issues of concern but desire assistance in laying out a plan of action to increase sustainability. The

intense SDAT process and compressed schedule allows a community to capitalize on SDAT information quickly and build momentum for implementation of its plan.

The key to SDAT success is diversity and participation; the process involves multiple disciplines and multiple stakeholders. The SDAT process includes not only the expert team but also government agencies and officials, private businesses, schools and students, community members, and other parties as appropriate.

"Sustainable development implies meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".
- UN Brundtland Commission

"Of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged"
- Merriam Webster Dictionary

"America's challenge is to create a life-sustaining Earth, a future in which prosperity and opportunity increase while life flourishes and pressures on the oceans, Earth and atmosphere diminish."
- President's council on Sustain. Development

"Sustainability is an economic state where the demands placed upon the environment by people and commerce can be met without reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for future generations. It can also be expressed in the simple terms of an economic golden rule for the restorative economy: leave the world better than you found it, take no more than you need, try not to harm the life of the environment, make amends if you do."
-Paul Hawkins, "The Ecology of Commerce"

Community Background

"The City of Leon Valley will be an exemplary community, deeply committed to the preservation of natural resources, the enjoyment of the arts and outdoor recreation and appreciation of the area's historical significance.

The City shall recognize the delicate balance between future growth and existing development and the neighborhood communities. The City shall strive to promote a compatible business environment that will maintain a healthy economy. The City will exhibit a distinctive, clear, physical and welcoming identity at all its boundaries and throughout the community, using aesthetically pleasing, harmonious signage. The City will promote pedestrian friendly connections between the City's physical elements, as well as the safe and efficient flow of street traffic."

-The City of Leon Valley Master Plan 2003

Located in Bexar County, TX, and surrounded on all sides by the City of San Antonio Metropolitan Area, Leon Valley is a suburban community of approximately 10,000 residents. Named for Leon Creek (a tributary of the Medina River), the community has a rich history of Native American settlement, primarily the Tonkawa Tribe, and has yielded a wealth of archaeological artifacts over the years. Established permanent European settlement began in 1858 with the purchase of 200 acres of land by Joseph Heubner, who eventually created a stagecoach stop in the area now known as Leon Valley.

In 1952, the City of San Antonio decided to annex Leon Valley. Rather than allow this to happen, the residents of the community filed a petition to incorporate as a city, an action that was successfully completed later that year. At the time of its incorporation, Leon Valley had 536 residents. By 1970, the city's population had risen to 2,000 residents, a num-

ber that continued to grow exponentially throughout that decade. The 20 years between 1980 and the new millennium saw a slowing in the residential population growth, but a sharp rise in commercial development. Priding itself in its reputation for "small-town with big-city opportunity" and with a projected potential population growth that could reach 16,000 residents, Leon Valley has pledged to take proactive steps to become a leader in sustainable development within the region. Evidence of this commitment is observable in the creation of the yearly Earthwise Living Day, a program that has continued successfully for over 20 years. The city also boasts the first curbside recycling program in Southern Texas, as well as a myriad of additional environmental programs such as the creation of a community garden, xeriscaping awards, composting demonstration projects, and year round water conservation measures.

Leon Valley SDAT Challenge

It's physical growth constrained by the presence of San Antonio, 90% of Leon Valley's 3.5 square mile area is already developed. Some of the remaining undeveloped parcels of land are prominently located in highly visible areas of the city, thereby creating the opportunity to develop these areas in a way that is highly influential to the overall development and growth of the city. Bisected by Bandera Road (which is under the jurisdiction of the Texas Department of Transportation), Leon Valley has increasingly fallen prey to traffic congestion, unsightly suburban strip development, a growing network of unsustainable and unconnected feeder roads, and community unrest concerning the proposal to create a toll road.

Leon Valley challenged the SDAT to:

- Focus the City of Leon Valley staff, citizens and community stakeholders on incorporating sustainable design planning and policy into the Master Plan.
- Foster dialogue around the issues of sustainability and smart growth.
- Educate staff and community in sustainable design and livable communities.
- Develop a vision and framework for a sustainable future.
- Conduct broad assessment of the City and the region.

Focusing specifically upon economic development, land use and open space, transportation, and the creation of a town center and identity, the remainder of this report focuses on the SDAT team's observations, assessment, and recommendations as Leon Valley forges a sustainable path into the City's future and remains an exemplary community. The 2003 City's Master Plan identified five planning elements important to the sustainable development of Leon Valley. These 5 principles largely informed the City's application to the SDAT program, as well as the team's work throughout the project:

- Transportation and Thoroughfare: represents the desired arrangement of transportation facilities to meet the community's mobility and circulation needs.
- Community Services: strives to provide proper safety and welfare for citizens by providing

public facilities and services.

- Environment: addresses health, safety and aesthetic issues for citizens as growth and development occur.
- Commercial/Economic Growth: focuses upon creation of new businesses within the community to provide services and revenue for the City's growth and well being.
- Housing/Neighborhood: describes the variety of desirable housing types; encourages safe sanitary living conditions and illustrates neighborhood character and identity.

On behalf of the Leon Valley SDAT and the American Institute of Architects, it is hoped this report will be a useful guide to the Leon Valley community as it charts its future for the coming years and for coming generations.

ISSUE NO. 1: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Overall Economic Development Assessment

Leon Valley is ideally located within the heart of the fastest growing area in San Antonio. Within ten miles of the heart of San Antonio, it is a gateway to attractions such as Sea World and Six Flags, and is immediately adjacent to the South Texas medical center and the University of Texas at San Antonio. Despite this favorable location, several factors have acted as deterrents to Leon Valley's continued economic success. The retail environment in Leon Valley is generally characterized by an oversupply of retail space, particularly on Bandera Road. Of the 500 retail establishments in Leon Valley, 450 are located on Bandera Road. The majority of these retail offerings consist of suburban strip mall centers, many of which are outdated and need extensive renovations. Due to the glut of retail in the community, current retail amenities include many discount and budget offerings. The team heard repeated input from citizen stakeholders concerning the lack of desired amenities in the community, as well as complaints about the number of lower-end retail and discount retailers, and a lack of other retailers that were considered more desirable or met specific needs.

The paucity in desirable or upscale retail building stock combined with the shift of community demographics, a reduction in resident disposable income, and the competition for goods and services posed by the proximity of San Antonio, have led to a dramatic drop in tax revenue, from $2.2 million in 2002 to $1.8 million in 2007. In addition to losing these quality businesses, these factors have contributed to an inability to attract new desirable businesses, all resulting in a downward decline in the tax revenue. Since the two major sources of revenue for the city arise from local sales tax and real estate tax, shortfalls have been covered by increasing real estate taxes, an unsustainable solution since continuing in this pattern will result in impacted property values.

Despite these challenges, the SDAT team heard a great deal of positive feedback with regards to the Leon Valley's economic development strengths. During the stakeholder meetings, we heard that Leon Valley enjoyed:

- Great success as a San Antonio bedroom community
- Great local services, including police, fire, & ems
- Extremely successful and accessible library & community center
- Dedication to sustainable waste stream management
- An advanced recycling program
- Excellent parks that excel in quality, size, & location
- Strong, highly regarded schools

However, unless the City finds a way to reverse the trend of plummeting sales tax revenues, they will be forced to cut the services that residents so clearly value.

Why is Sales Tax Revenue Declining?

The central issue is the decline in the value of retail sales. With so much of Leon Valley's retail stock located on Bandera Road, the quality of the corridor itself is tied inextricably with the economic health of the community. Bandera Road has declined as a retail location, with the loss of larger, better quality retailers resulting in rapidly increasing vacancy. Additionally, infill has been lower quality, with smaller, lower volume businesses filling the gaps instead of stronger destination shops that would appeal to the resident population. Some of Bandera Road's decline can be tied to the changing realities of today's competitive marketplace and the hitherto failure to adapt to those changes. However, the physical decline of Bandera Road has had a huge impact as well. The overall appearance of the Bandera Road Corridor is sloppy and disjointed, and the property configurations – the parcels – are too small and disconnected. Access to each property is poor, with one drainage ditch bridge after another, and connectivity between the individual developments is nonexistent, thereby requiring patrons to attempt dangerous and time consuming maneuvers between shopping centers. The simple truth is that Bandera Road is Leon Valley's Main Street, their image to the world….and as such, the City cannot afford to present such a poor face to visitors and residents alike.

What Does the Future Hold?

Texas DOT has neglected needed upgrades to the Bandera Road corridor, with funding for improvements a statewide and national problem. The threat of an elevated toll road has caused disinvestment, as owners and tenants fear the consequences of such an action. In order to push past these challenges, Leon Valley needs to reestablish energy, develop a sense of place, and take advantage of the vast opportunities available through the presence of the educational facilities (134,000 students) and the South Texas Medical Center (27,000 employes, 4.8 million patients, and $640 mil. investments).

- Bandera Road circulation needs to be proactively rethought in order to balance the needs of the community.
- Create an alternative design vision for TXDOT.
- Property assembly is critical.
- Institutional involvement needs to be sought aggressively.
- Bandera Road and the commercial strip should be managed, rather than allowed to develop without plan or direction.

A Toolbox for Economic Development

The team believes that the city should work with stakeholders in the corridor to build a collaborative strategy for revitalization incorporating the following tools:

• **Identify Retail Categories.** The city should work to establish the appropriate desired retail categories in these districts and conduct an inventory of existing assets from which to build upon and establish more concentration.

• **Develop a Merchandising Strategy.** The city should work with area stakeholders to develop a merchandising strategy that is based on the initial assessment, taking into account strengths and weaknesses, and an analysis of what kinds of retail establishments would contribute to the unique character of the community. Build from existing assets that can be leveraged with additional complementary retailers taking up residence in advantageous positions of adjacency

• **Business Recruitment.** A focused effort should be made to engage in business recruitment to fill available retail space in these districts with tenants that represent unique local offerings and contribute to the sense of place that exists in each area.

• **Consider a Façade Improvement Program.** A Façade Improvement Program could be an important first step in making modest but important investments in the area that have tangible impacts on the retail experience and sense of place. The program could be expanded to consider streetscapes and other enhancements that continue to improve the pedestrian and motor experience in these areas.

• **Give the retail corridor a more uniform Visual Identity.** The haphazard development pattern with the retail corridor has lead to a sloppy, disjointed overall appearance for the strip. A more uniform visual identity would create a more pleasant environment for patrons and would attract visitors who would otherwise be disinclined to stop.

ISSUE NO. 2: LAND USE

Land Use

Land use and open space components of community planning and development are a part of a framework that knits together and shapes a community and its identity. These two components can create lasting impressions of a community to both residents and visitors.

Leon Valley's land uses, like many communities, are comprised of a balance of retail, business, residential, commercial, and open spaces. Though the mix of uses in this city are healthy, the form within the various uses is, in many cases, lacking the character necessary for shaping a healthy, vital, and sustainable community. Leon Valley's appearance to those coming and going through the community lies mainly along major traffic corridors. These major corridors hold mainly retail and commercial land uses. The retail land uses are mostly of the strip variety, with buildings set back a fair distance from the street and separated by several rows of parking. Within these generous setbacks, large freeway-type signs, electrical poles, and poor pedestrian connections exist.

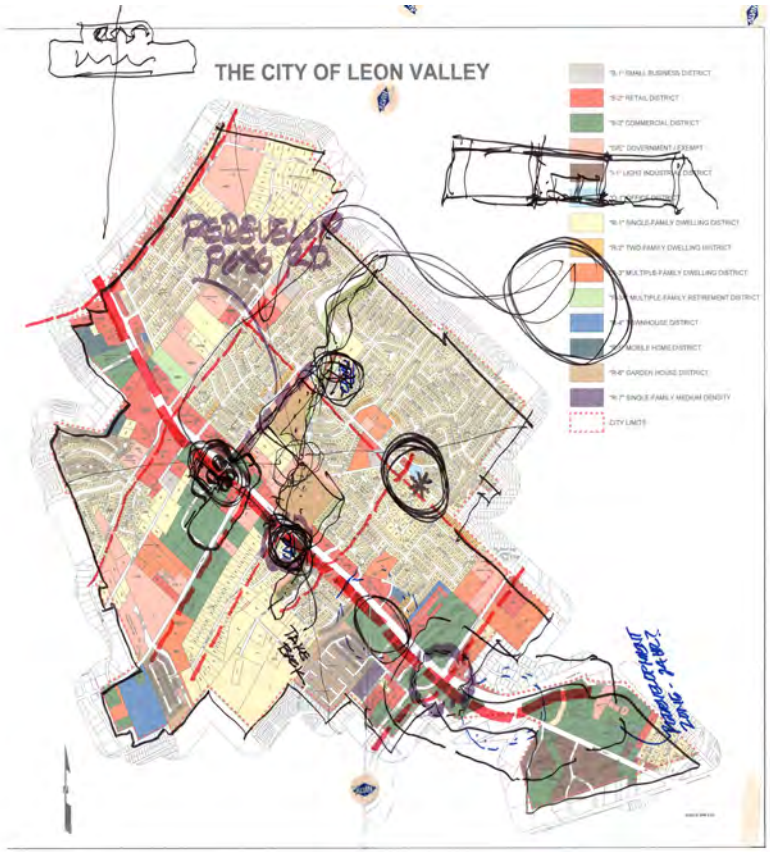
The vehicle has taken dominance within these key land use areas. In addition to Leon Valley's established retail and commercial districts lies some very established, and in many cases, distinct and desired single-family neighborhoods. Though these neighborhoods are desirable on their own, they too lack the connections to the greater community that help identify it as a healthy, sustainable environment for pedestrians. The vehicle is also the dominant factor within the community's single-family and residential neighborhoods.

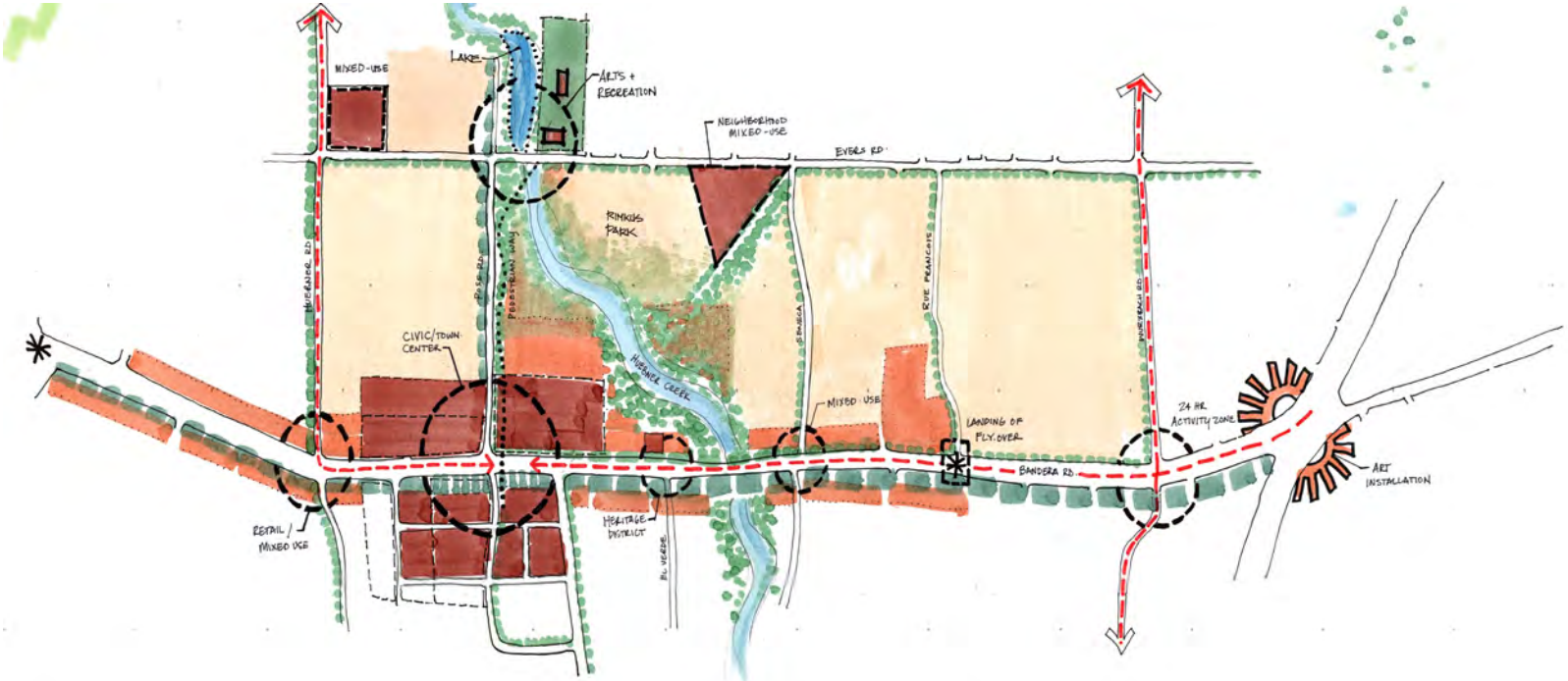
Though there are negatives associated with Leon Valley's retail and commercial land uses, they are all very necessary components of the community. Considering this, the community must ask "What are we going to do with what we have?". In the AIA assessment, it became clear that Bandara Road is a high priority retail and commercial land use area. This area was the AIA's focus of attention. As a start, our team made the recommendation to create an overlay district for the Bandara Road corridor. An overlay district essentially allows the City to maintain the land uses that currently exist, but to create new regulations that re-define the character and look of the corridor as businesses redevelop or as new businesses come to the corridor. An overlay district will lend flexibility to the corridor and will allow and support mixed-use in an area which is very appropriate for such a use. The key in any redevelopment along this corridor will be to not do it in the same fashion it has been done in the past.

With the overlay district, it will be important for the City of Leon Valley to consider the components that will hold this Bandara Road district together to sustain future development and economic vitality. To do this, the City of Leon Valley can rely on a publication from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) titled "10 Steps to Revitalizing Suburban Strips…." The first, and most important component is knowing Leon Valley's market. It will be important for City officials to determine Leon Valley's fit in both local and regional areas. This will require a good market assessment by a qualified, economic specialist. As a part of this assessment, it will be important to recognize and remember that there are different types of arterials that serve different types of markets. This means that even though residents and City officials may desire certain business types along Bandera Road, some may not be economically viable given Bandara Road's location in the greater regional market.

The second component for consideration in holding the Bandara Road district together, as noted by the ULI report, will be creating variety along and throughout this district. As a part of this process, the City should work hard to identify the most appropriate areas for retail along Bandara Road and structure the zoning to encourage density in key areas. Additionally, the City should reserve some previously zoned retail land for other uses that could include housing, office space, civic uses, recreational facilities, and even some pockets of open space. This variety of land uses and appropriate locations of each will lead to the natural development of "nodes" along Bandara Road.

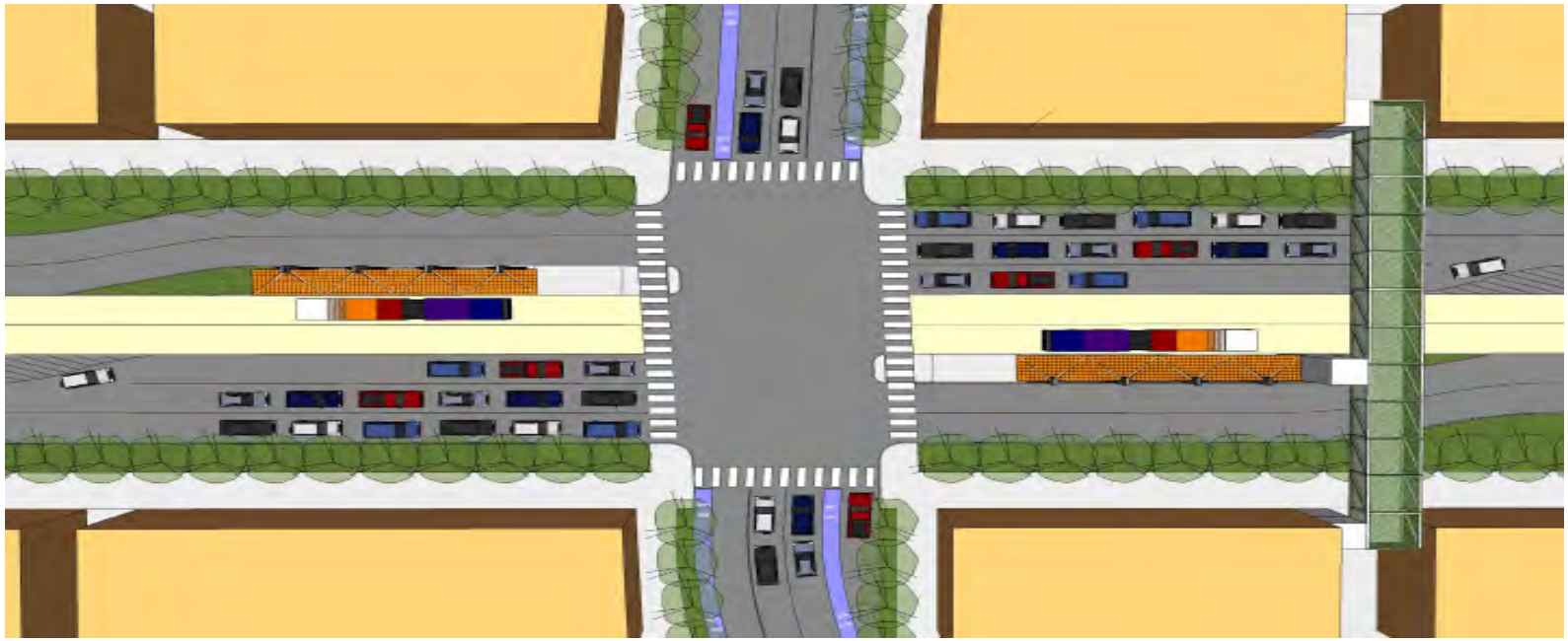
ULI's third step in revitalizing suburban strips involves creating "pulse-nodes" of development. These nodes can happen at key intersections, points of entry or reference to the City, or in areas of existing activity. Generally, it is a good idea to think of a higher density and land-use at these nodes of development. The AIA's assessment of this area identified seven potential nodes of development along the Bandara Road corridor. The first was the "24-hour" zone at the I-410 interchange, followed by the intersections of Wurzback Road, Rue Francois, Seneca Road, El Verde, Poss Road, and the Huebner Road intersection. These nodes were identified by the varying sizes of circles on the diagram presented to the City of Leon Valley. Linking these nodes together with a common theme and identity will be important.




MIXED-USE
LAKE
ARTS + RECREATION
NEIGHBORHOOD MIXED-USE
EYBEL RD.
RINGUS PARK
MCCRAINE RD.
PRESTON AVE.
PEDESTRIAN WAY
CIVIC/TOWN CENTER
HUESNER CREEK
GENDICA
RUE FRANCAIS
MIXED USE
LANDING OF FLY-OVER
24 HR. ACTIVITY ZONE
BANDERA RD.
ART INSTALLATION
RETAIL / MIXED USE
HERITAGE DISTRICT
EL VERDE

ISSUE NO. 2: LAND USE

The fourth step in revitalizing and re-energizing this important corridor has to do with "taming the traffic". It will be important to create and enhance functional linkages up and down the corridor. A lot of this can happen through the development of streetscape components and guidelines that can shape the creation of an overlay district. Example diagrams were created as a part of the AIA's evaluation and design recommendations in October 2008. Key components, many of which are touched on in other sections of study, will include the addition of pedestrian zones that contain street trees, adequate sidewalk widths, special lighting, appropriately scaled signage, special paving, and other design details that will help to "tame the traffic".



A fifth, and important, step in developing Leon Valley's overlay district lies in creating "The Place". Some of these components are covered under creating identity for Leon Valley, but generally it will be important for the City to develop new zoning ordinances pertaining to setbacks, building heights, densities, signage, landscape character, and guiding appropriate locations for auto-oriented businesses. In an effort for the City to be more sustainable, consideration can be given to low-impact development (LID) techniques that could include unique ways of dealing with storm water management through natural means in the landscape.

In addition to the primary Bandara Road retail and commercial land use, Leon Valley's established single-family residential neighborhoods were identified as an important part of the study. As a matter of simplicity and building upon the community's strong single-family residential land uses, the recommendation to preserve and enhance these areas was made. It will be important for the City to consider incorporating sustainable components into new and revitalized residential areas through various grants that may be available, through expedited review processes that reward sustainable development, and other opportunities that the City can develop with the citizens of Leon Valley.

Open Space

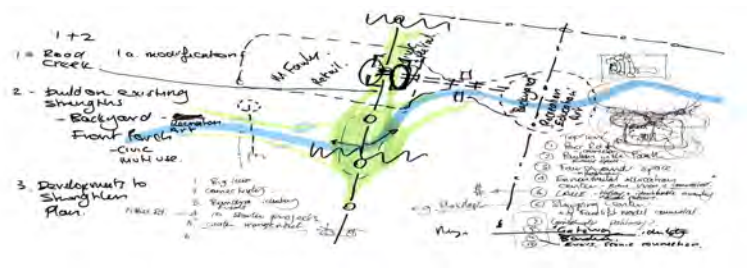
Leon Valley has many strengths, many of which lie within the City's open spaces and systems of parks, trails, environmental corridors and historic sites. Though the City lacks formalized public gathering space for socials, concerts and markets, it's many open spaces and trail networks and general appreciation for these spaces are all positives on which to build. As a part of the AIA design team assessment, the important question of "How can we improve on what we have?" was asked and discussed at length. A part of "creating place", which was a significant part of the AIA process, is tied to open space. Open spaces play an important role in shaping and defining community boundaries, they shape growth, and they contribute to a healthy, vital, and sustainable community.

Because the AIA's evaluation of these important spaces was limited by scope and time, it will be important for the City of Leon Valley to more fully evaluate their open spaces and networks from a performance stand point and from an appearance stand point. A part of this ultimate evaluation should also include a needs assessment of the City's recreational facilities through and approach that is anecdotal, qualitative, and also quantitative. A part of this process may include the implementation of the City's "Life Trail" recommended to the AIA during group discussions.

Because open spaces play such an important role in shaping and defining a community, it is recommended that Leon Valley capitalize on open space to bring the City to be recognized as a "Green City" – one that is sustainable in the most simple

way. There are many ways to accomplish this, and some of the following recommendations are what came from the AIA's visit to Leon Valley.

Develop a street tree planting program so that Leon Valley may become recognized as the "City of 1000 Trees", or any number. This is a program in which both residents and business owners may choose to participate. The City must implement a way to "track" planted trees and provide guidance and direction as to type and size of tree to be planted as well as most appropriate locations for tree plantings. Together, everyone can contribute to such an endeavor.



Viewsheds are an important part of linking valuable opens space to the City's infrastructure of streets, walkways, businesses and homes. The City of Leon Valley should work to improve and create these important viewsheds to the areas many natural open areas in an effort to make these valuable areas a prominent part of the City. One such area lies along the Bandara Road corridor where a natural open space system touches both sides of the road. Capitalizing on views, and connections, to this open space will not only enhance access to these valuable spaces, but may also trigger new businesses and development along Bandara Road that specialize and support open space and recreational activity. The City may also wish to improve existing trail networks, but also expand standards for new trail development and connections. As mentioned as a part of the open space analysis, the City of Leon Valley lacks any real formal gathering spaces. It appears, however, that there are activities that tend to gravitate to the community center and library area parts of the City. The weekly farmer's market is one such event. It is important that Leon Valley residents and City officials enhance, formalize, and celebrate these existing open space gathering areas to support the good that can come from such activities and uses.

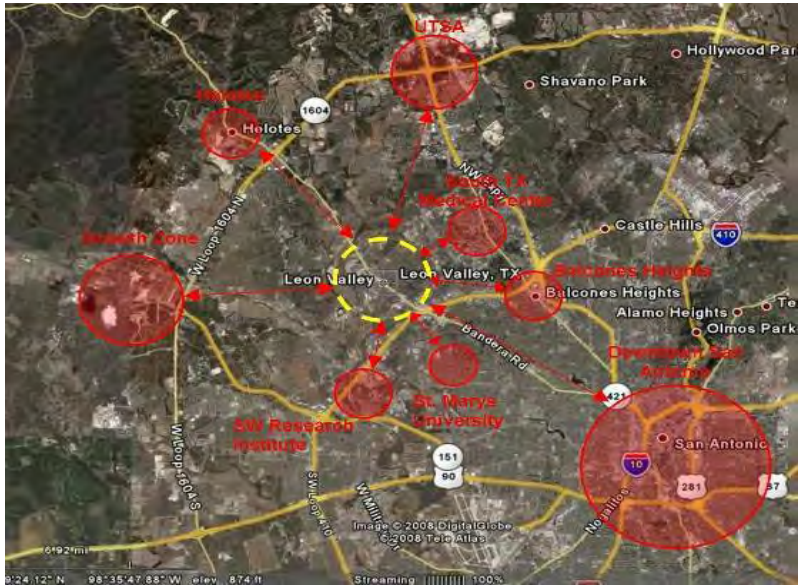
There are several other ways in which the City of Leon Valley can work to become recognized as a "Green City". Some of these ways include looking at existing spaces differently. Parking lots, commercial driveways, parking islands, traffic medians, and utility corridors and alley ways in Leon Valley can all be made to be better. Leon Valley should consider all of these areas as important parts of the City's open spaces and develop new standards for new development and improvement priorities for existing areas to include native vegetation and areas of "green" to support sustainability and environ-

mental enhancement. It will also be important for the City to incorporate the valuable Historic Onion House and site into Leon Valley's network of open spaces. This site will act not only as a point of interest along a network of trails and open spaces, but will also serve as a local and regional connector.

ISSUE NO. 3: SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

Land Use & Transportation Go Hand in Hand

Land use decisions are compelled oftentimes by highest and best use. These decisions are often determined by roadway infrastructure. A super highway built over Leon Valley, with limited access, will create car oriented suburban land uses that will not fit into the existing character of the community. Think "large tracts of land, with large parking lots." If on the other hand Bandera Highway is improved and modified to with a more narrow cross section, yet still maintain adequate capacity, the local character of the community does not have to be completely revolutionized. This narrower cross section can connect both sides of Bandera highway by making it safe to cross and allow for higher density land uses at nodes such as the proposed pulse nodes of development. We suggest the proposed cross section of the Fredericksburg Road Corridor should be considered as a model for the Bandera Highway.



Connectivity

Well connected land uses allow people the sustainable option to walk, bike, use transit or drive. The key is for new design and redesign to make walking and biking a viable option to the automobile. Research has shown that many complex factors, perceived and objective, in the physical, socio-cultural, and political realm contribute to a successful pedestrian environment. The quality of the pedestrian environment has a direct impact on people's perception of safety and whether people walk or choose an alternative mode of transportation. Specific physical factors, such as shade trees, well maintained sidewalks, bus shelters, vehicular travel speed, pedestrian lighting are shown to influence the potential for activity-friendly communities. Studies have shown that people do not walk if they have to walk in a roundabout fashion to get where they are going. The time involved just cannot compete with a car.

Bikes/Trails

The sky is the limit for Leon Valley in its quest for a community connected by bikes and trails. Significant amounts of our wide roadways and public space can be converted to bikes and trails to serve alternative forms of transportation and recreation. Some examples that Leon Valley could begin to implement immediately are bike lanes and the

connection of green corridors.

Bicycling is rapidly becoming a popular mode of transportation in communities. Biking two or three miles to a retail or restaurant establishment and leaving the car parked at home is occurring much more frequently all across the country. This surge in biking is due to community leaders making bicycle infrastructure and safety a priority as well as residents taking it upon themselves to reduce their vehicular impact. Getting the buy-in of both the leaders and the residents is the key to creating a successful bicycling community.

There are three pieces that are necessary to create a successful biking system: infrastructure, climate, and having a pool of potential bike riders.

• **Infrastructure:** Bicycling infrastructure refers to any physical structure or improvement that supports or promotes bicycling in an area. In comparison to the typical costs associated with roadway infrastructure, the cost of bicycling infrastructure is typically relatively inexpensive. Examples of bicycling infrastructure include striping of bicycle lanes on-street, constructing separated bicycling lanes, installation of bike parking, consideration for bicyclists at traffic signals, and bike signage. Infrastructure serves two purposes; it gives bicyclists a sense of priority on the road and it also alerts drivers to expect bicyclists and change their behavior accordingly. There is very little bicycle infrastructure in Leon Valley. It is unlikely that a bicycling community will ever exist in the area without creating an infrastructure that caters to bicyclists.

• **Climate:** Weather plays an important part in determining how successful bicycling can be. If the weather is too cold or too hot for too many days of the year, it is unlikely that bicycling will become popular in an area. Leon valley has a great climate for bicycling, with the exception being the hottest of days in the summer.

• **Riders:** A bicycling community won't exist without people who are willing to ride their bikes. There must be a pool of potential riders in a community and they must own bikes. They must be fit enough to ride a bike and have a desire to do so. The most common reasons people increase bicycle use are for exercise or to reduce their dependence on an automobile, therefore improving the environment and saving money in the process.

Educate Students

The US is beginning to see changes in the attitudes of children and their parents. Parents grow tired of driving the kids everywhere and the children are losing independence, once learned at a younger age in this country. Leon Valley can set the example in Texas by teaching kids (and their parents) the benefits of walking and biking. But, it must be safe. With the outstanding education system that Leon Valley provides. It is a natural to move into this subject. Leon Valley should consider programs that reward walking and biking and school safety.

Bandera Tollway – Filling the Regional Spoke

Freeways are large swaths of infrastructure that form a physical and psychological barrier between each side. Due to the traffic congestion, noise levels and the effects of pollution, rarely do persons connect to the other side by walking, biking or even driving. Once constructed, Leon Valley will be divided forever. Today, many communities in the country have realized this and are working to reconnect neighborhoods by going as far as taking out old highways constructed in the 60's and 70's due to the following critical negative issues of freeways. Please note the following citations:

- Dying from cardiopulmonary (heart and lung) disease was nearly two times more likely if an adult lived within 100 meters of a freeway or 50 meters of a major urban road (Hoek et al. 2002).
- Rising obesity levels and impaired mental health with reduced social interactions are associated with car dependent mobility and development patterns (Bell et al. 2002; Frumkin 2002; Giles-Corti et al. 2003).
- Compared with children exposed to background levels of air pollution, children living near major roads had higher rates of asthma (Guo et al. 1999; Ising et al. 2003; Nicolai et al. 2003; Studnicka et al. 1997; Wongand Lai 2004; Zmirou et al. 2004), hospital admissions for asthma (Buckeridge et al. 2002; Lin et al. 2002),respiratory symptoms, including cough & wheeze (Brauer et al. 2002; Gehring et al. 2002; Janssen et al. 2003;Nicolai et al. 2003; Studnicka et al. 1997; Venn et al. 2001), reduced lung function (Brunekreef et al. 1997),and respiratory infections (Brauer et al. 2002; Buckeridge et al. 2002).

Bandera Highway

The ultimate development of Bandera High will either have positive or negative direct impacts on the lives of Leon Valley Residents. However, this must be truthfully analyzed, with all stakeholders at the table to discuss the impacts on the community. The Federal Government has determined that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) must be performed for the development of this Highway. We agree that any study and implementation must take into account all of the social, physical and economic impacts directly on the citizens of Leon Valley. Leon Valley must works towards performing the Bandera Highway Corridor study and implement the findings into the EIS.

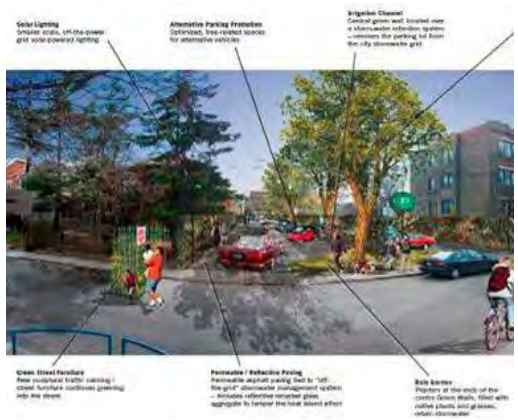
Bandera Highway Congestion Mitigation

The community of Leon Valley must begin discussions with the Texas Department of Transportation to create alternative methods to mitigate the current congestion. The interchange with 410 is

now built. This will free up more capacity and induce more traffic.

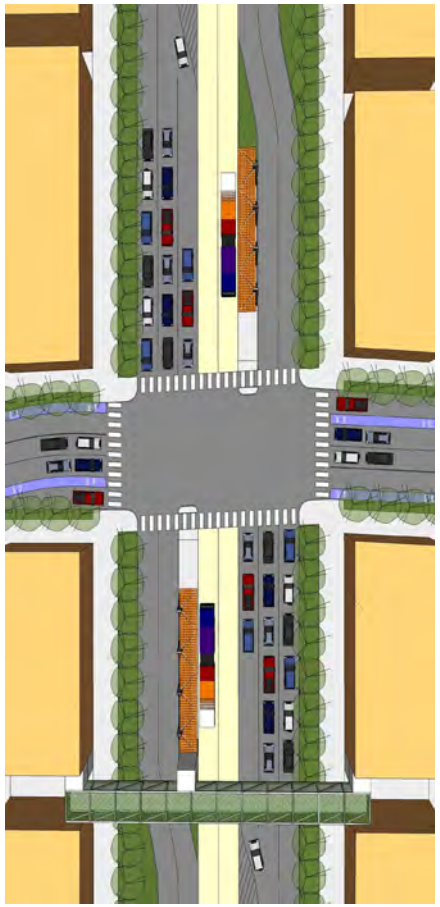
Parking

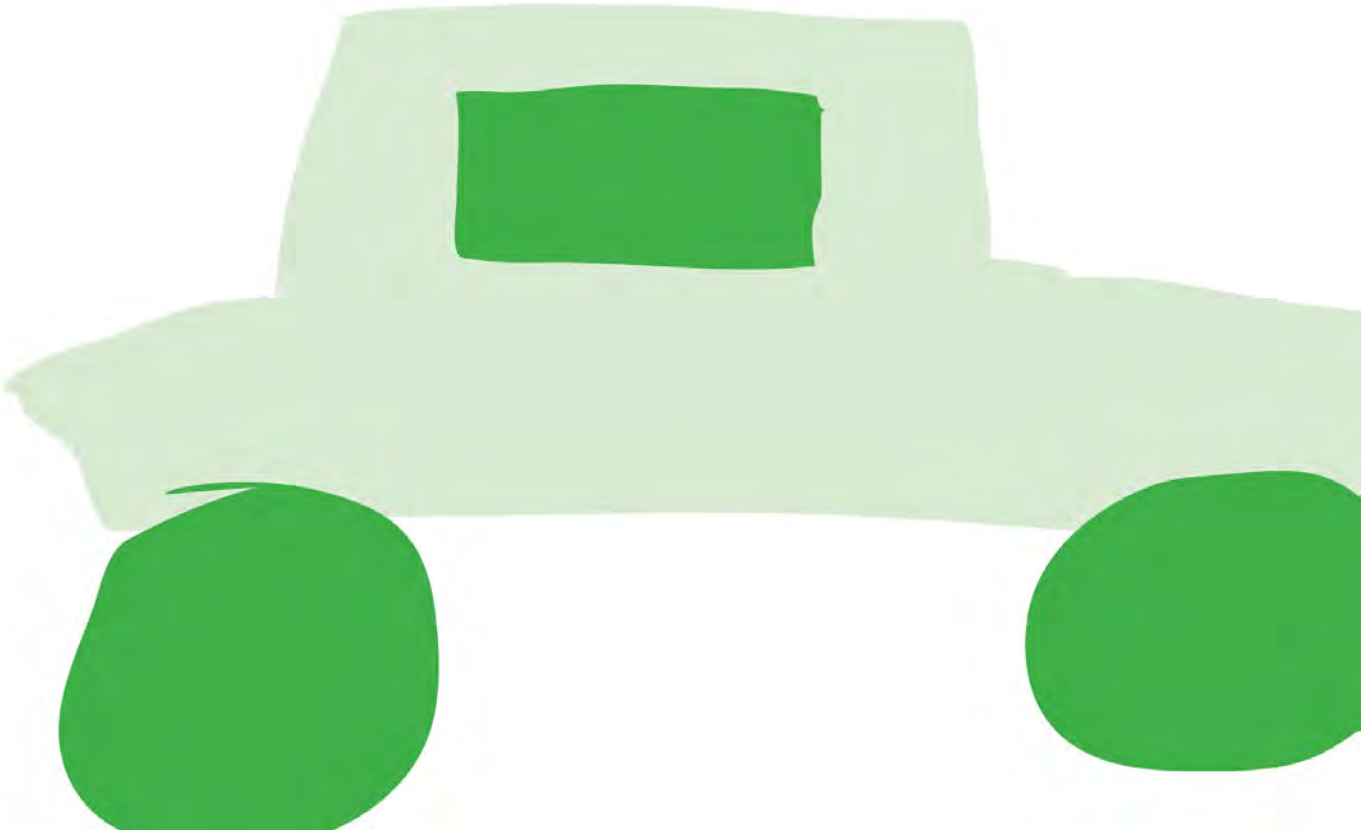
The entire country has over-built parking lots over the last 30 years. The primary cause has been the un-founded goal to accommodate the peak holiday periods of parking demand. The result has been for this parking, essentially a capital outlay, to sit empty as a wasted resource the remaining hours of the day and times of the year. The Bandera Corridor should begin to promote shared parking between appropriate land uses, parking maximums as opposed to minimums, and land banking for future parking if needed. It should also take the steps to implement solar parking and permeable parking lot materials.



Bus Rapid Transit

Strong consideration should be given to Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Arterial Rapid Transit (ART) for the Bandera Highway. Improving bus service along the corridor has the most potential for improving the existing transportation conditions in the corridor. This system can stretch from Loop 1604 to downtown San Antonio and The Valley Transit Authority (VTA) is planning to construct BRT along Fredericksburg Road, from downtown San Antonia to the San Antonio Medical Center. The Bandera Route should model and tie into this effort. There are a number of steps that will be necessary to increase bus ridership in the area. Improving the existing infrastructure (bus shelters, signs, transfer facilities) and information (GPS bus trackers, maps, wayfinding) will improve conditions for existing bus riders and will encourage more ridership among the residents and employees of the area communities. But the biggest gains in ridership will be made by improving the efficiency of the bus system which will make taking the bus a realistic alternative for people that are currently driving along the Bandera Highway.





ISSUE NO. 4: TOWN CENTER & IDENTITY

Town Center/City Identity

One of the over-riding goals of the Leon Valley S/DAT was addressing the need for a community focal point, a town center. As a near-in, first-tier suburban community, Leon Valley has developed in a manner characteristic of most U.S. suburbs - low density, undifferentiated residential enclaves on a disconnected local street network fed by major arterials at one half to one mile intervals. The arterials are characterized by expansive rights of ways, extensive building set-backs, a broken network of sidewalks in the utility easements, and low intensity commercial developments in unconnected strips.

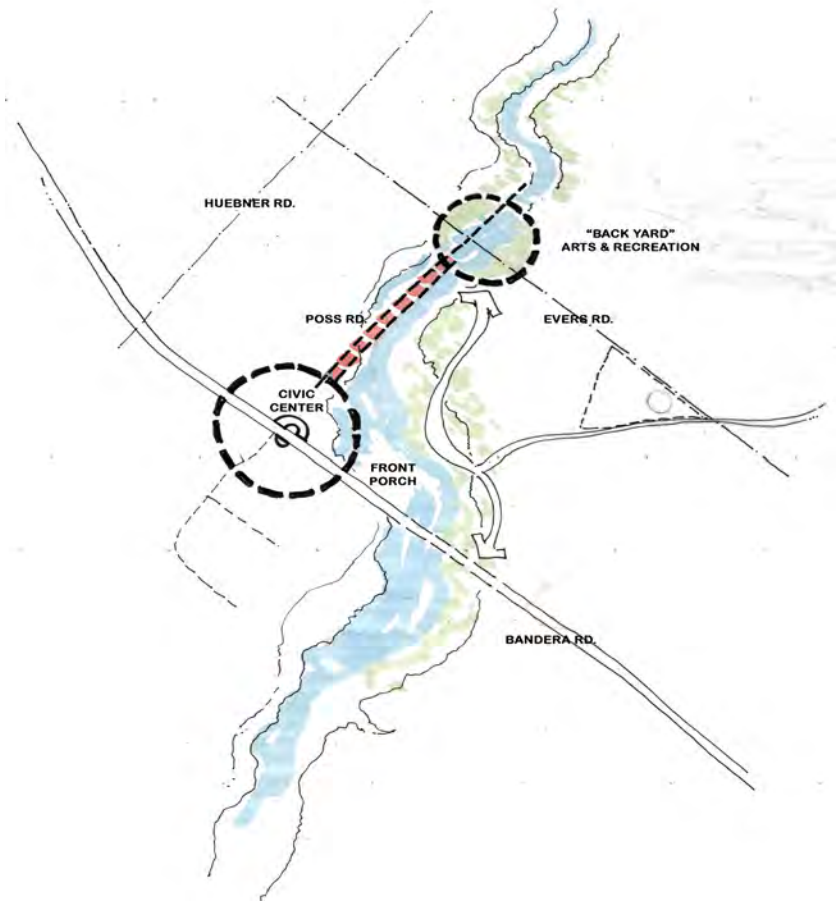
These commercial corridors in Leon Valley are heavily traveled mainly by regional commuters going through, but not to, Leon Valley. Local residents in the City use these corridors for general shopping needs and as a means to drive to distant, higher end commercial services in outlying suburban areas.

The quality of the commercial development reflects a lower level of investment than the outlying suburbs, and the availability of goods and services in Leon Valley is often limited to fast food, auto service, personal service and lower-end retail uses. Single story commercial buildings dominate the strip and there is often no pedestrian connections to adjacent neighborhoods, forcing patrons onto the arterials for access to the disconnected parking lots.

Town Center

The morning of our first day involved a tour of the community where these development characteristics became quite apparent. What was also obvious was the lack of a focal point for the City, the place people from the community could point to and say that is the center, the "heart" of our town. Even the City Hall and Administration center was located in a fairly non-descript building in one of the strips along Bandera Road.

The afternoon was dedicated to in-put from members of the community who chose to participate in the workshop. Our exercise in the afternoon was to identify a center, "a there, there" and this was done through an open forum wherein the consultants asked for impressions and opinions of the residents.



MIXED-USE
LAKE
ARTS + RECREATION
NEIGHBORHOOD MIXED-USE
EYRE ST.
RUE FRANCAIS
LANDING & FLY-OVER
BANDERA RD.
24 HR ACTIVITY ZONE
AEF INSTALLATION
MIXED USE
HERITAGE CREEK
HERITAGE TRAILS
CIVIC/TOWN CENTER
PEDESTRIAN WAY
KIOWAS PARK
EXTRA MIXED USE

There was overwhelming consensus that Leon Valley was sorely in need of a "place" and an over all "identity". First was finding the center, the heart of this community. With in-put from the participants, a criteria was established that would direct us in our efforts to find the center. The criteria were listed as:

- Close to the geographical, physical center of the community
- On the critical connection to the Leon Valley Community Center
- On or near pedestrian connections to local and regional trail and open space networks;
- It should occupy four corners at a key intersection
- It should have an adequate land area to accommodate significant mixed-use development (Approximately 40 acres)
- On or near to major transportation corridor
- Should be on underutilized or readily developable properties.

The discussion led to a mapping exercise that explored the entire city looking for a site that would meet this criteria. A number of sites were identified in this effort and through a process of elimination, using the established criteria, a site at the corner of Bandera and Poss road was determined as one that best met the requirements for the development of the Leon Valley town center.

This location was a major, identifiable intersection connecting Bandera with the LV Community Center; it has available, developable land on all four corners; it is on the major transportation corridor and has easy connections to the open space and trail network. This is also a major crossroad for north/south and east/west traffic through the community and would likely become a very identifiable place if developed as a town center.

Having identified and agreed upon a location, our next task was to determine the character of this town center. What were the ingredients that made up a recognizable, functioning town center? Once again, our process was led by questions and answers from the workgroup charged with this task. After much discussion, our group determined that a Leon Valley town center was to:

- Serve both sides of Bandera Road
- Be developed along the principles of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) with the intention of being sustainable and energy efficient
- Be a diverse, mixed-use center and would include retail entertainment, commercial office, government offices and housing
- Be very visible and identifiable, not only by residents of Leon Valley, but by all who pass through
- Have plazas, open spaces and distinctive architecture
- Have an 18 hour activity window
- Be served by transit and accessible by all modes of transportation.

Town Center Design

The design team took the location and the character criteria and set to work on developing a design scheme for this potential Leon Valley town center. With the help of architects from the San Antonio chapter of the AIA, and architecture students from UT San Antonio, the team developed an illustrative plan and illustrations depicting the town center. The plan integrated a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) station at the town center with the help of architects and designers from Via Metropolitan Transit.

This schematic town center design integrated all, or most, of the criteria established by the workshop group and created the character outlined by the workshop participants. This plan is a reflection of the stated preferences of the representatives of the citizens of Leon Valley who gave their time and energy to this effort.

Making the City "Readable"

By identifying the town center and determining what the character of this place could be, our tasks for this section were almost complete. Another aspect of Town Center and City Identity subgroup was to suggest ways to create an identity for the City of Leon Valley. The current identity of Leon Valley was as a place to pass through - a strip commercial corridor bordered by residential neighborhoods, with some open spaces and a trail network in the Bandera Creek spillway.

There was a sentiment expressed that one never knows when one enters or leaves Leon Valley, except for a couple of standard highway department signs at the city limits. The streetscapes are undeveloped, there are no amenities to make a pedestrian experience interesting or comfortable, transit stops are dismal experiences and the predominance of the automobile cements the current auto-centric identity as merely a corridor to be tolerated and suffered through.

It was felt that the place to begin this exercise in identity and "readability" was to establish those elements that could be easily addressed and designed to create this identity for the community. Some of these elements had been addressed by the town center exercise, but the following were determined to be those that could be immediately addressed:

- Creating a "there, there" (Town Center)
- Physical design strategies for creating a sense of place (Town Center Character)
- Creating places with memorable experiences
- Addressing various elements in the landscape that have a local, contextual nature
- Addressing the design of the major corridors
- Creating a street treatment hierarchy that addresses the scale of arterials and local streets

We next outlined a strategy to accomplish these goals with programs that could easily be implemented in the short and long term in the City:

- A street-tree program through Public Works and Parks
- Implementing the Sustainable Corridor landscaping project - "Green Streets"
- A Street lighting demonstration project
- Strategic location of street furniture and entry monuments
- A banner or flag program; (Logo for Leon Valley Town Center)
- A sign program with a consistent Leon Valley theme
- An ordinance provision requiring the creation of public space in any new development on or near Bandera Road.

Making it Happen

Creating goals for a town center and community identity are only as good as the implementation strategies for achieving those goals. With a shrinking tax base and limited public funds, it was important to suggest appropriately scaled strategies and to leverage existing plans and programs as a jump start for the make-over. Our recommendations were to:

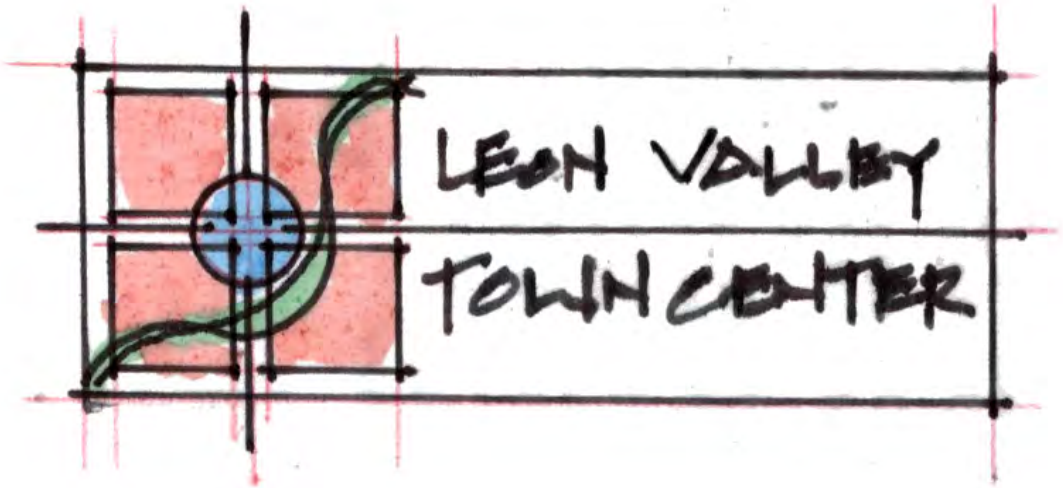
- Designate and establish the Town Center concept in all official plans and documents
- Modifications to the zoning code to require and permit mixed use development
- Land Use Requirements and restrictions addressing a new pedestrian/transit orientation in the Town Center and other appropriate areas of the City
- Establishing design guidelines for the Town Center, corridors and gateways
- Set goals to achieve the highest LEED certification for new development in the Town Center

To get things going, the team recommended some "first steps" to achieve the goals established by this program:

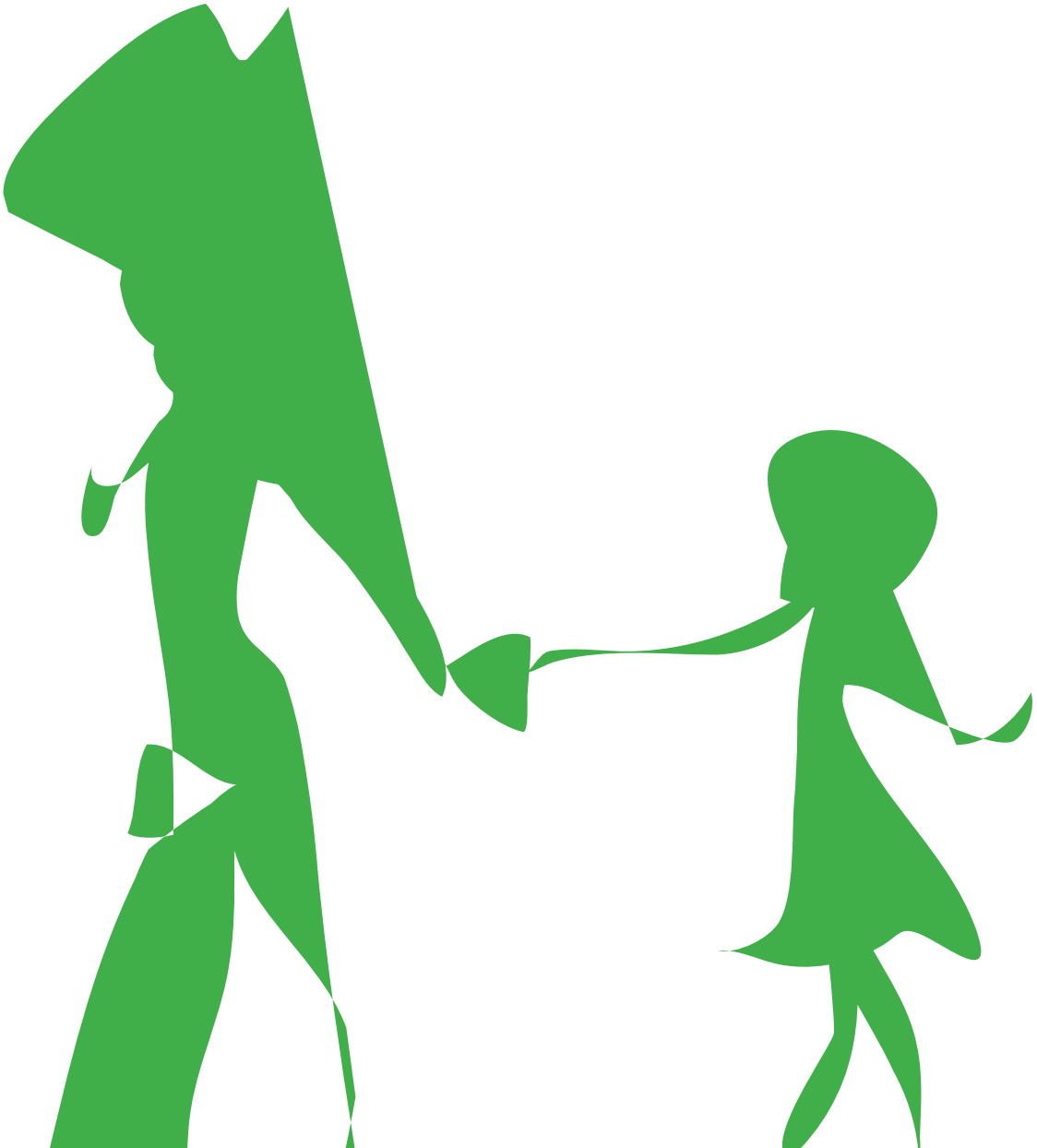
- Make the commitment - live and breath these goals and enlist the broader Leon Valley community
- Institutionalize the commitment - change codes and ordinances and integrate the Town Center and Identity concepts into all official plans and documents
- Implement a strong public relations campaign - get "fingerprints" on the commitment from community groups and organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, business and professional associations
- Choose a "winner" demonstration project - modify Poss Road improvement plan already in the cue to include streetscape recommendations of this report
- Insist on excellence and sustainability in planning and design through design review and modification of codes and ordinances.

The Town Center and City Identity effort was only a portion of the S/DAT Leon Valley program. The final presentation placed this effort in a context that includes transportation, economic development, and environmental issues. The recommendations for this section are only achievable in concert with the other recommendations that round-out this program and report.

Creating a Town Center and a program for design elements that will establish an identity for the City of Leon Valley, will go a long way in setting the framework for future development in the City. The proposals of this S/DAT team will only succeed through a willful and concerted effort by the City, supported by a citizenry enlisted to achieve the goals. City-building is an incremental effort and an evolutionary process. By taking the recommended "first steps" , the journey begins and creates a momentum that will be sustained by the enthusiasm of those dedicated to the new future for Leon Valley.


LEON VALLEY
TOWN CENTER

MOVING FORWARD



Five Next Step Projects

The SDAT team recommends that Leon Valley look at five specific proejcts as they move forward with the recommendations in this report:

- **Create a Bandera Road Vision Document**
- **Poss Road Reconstruction**
- **LEED Construction Initiative**
- **Leon Valley Town Center**
- **Street Tree Planting Program**

Visible success breeds more success. Chase victories both large, and small…whether it's something as simple as creating a new path bridge or as complex as creating a new Leon Valley town center.

Leon Valley has many qualities that make it a special community and an attractive home to both new residents and old. Its established neighborhood, central location, and dedicated sense of community ensure that it will always remain a"small-town with big-city opportunity". Its greatest resource is its committed and passionate residents. In a time of scarce public resources, every jurisdiction is more reliant than ever on resources outside of local government. Successful communities are those that have the ability to form novel collaborations and partnerships to accomplish their boldest goals, using a broad array of resources from within government and across the community. By working together, and building upon great "Partnerships through People," the SDAT Team believes that Leon Valley can achieve its residents' aspirations to become a more livable, sustainable place. It will take a long-term vision, effective and sometimes unconventional partnerships, but the resources exist within Leon Valley to take on significant public work and achieve great things.

Special Thanks To:

City of Leon Valley

Leon Valley Community

SDAT Steering Committee

University of Texas at San Antonio

SCHAFER-ILLUSTRATION.com / Caleb Schafer

American Institute of Architects

City Council of Leon Valley

VIA Metropolitan Transit

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