**HEART OF TEXAS EFFICIENT TOWNS & COUNTIES CO-OP**

**FAIR HOUSING AND EQUITY ASSESSMENT**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The cities and counties in the Heart of Texas Region are good places to live: residents feel safe, know their neighbors and the other folks in town, often live within walking distance to schools or businesses, and report that overall folks of all races and backgrounds have access to housing, jobs, and other opportunities. However, challenges exist as well, and the purposes of this study are to identify not only the positive aspects but also those challenges. In particular, we focus on barriers to fair housing and equity, why things are the way they are, and what might be done to improve access and opportunity for all residents.

Some of the challenges are cultural. While tremendous progress has been made and stakeholder reports were overall positive, racism and racial discrimination are still felt in the region to varying degrees, and must continue to be taken seriously and deliberately addressed in order for communities to see the kind of engagement and advancement opportunities recommended elsewhere in the Regional Strategies.

While it is encouraging and communities should feel proud of stakeholders’ reports that for the most part all races have equal access to housing choices, it is sobering that there was also great agreement that housing choice was sharply limited by other factors. Folks around the region identified great need for quality housing of all varieties, but especially affordable housing. Private-sector housing in the affordable range was all too often substandard, subsidized housing was full, and even market-rate housing was not seen as plentiful, particularly for families needing multiple bedrooms.

Perhaps the greatest challenges identified in the region, however, are both the communities’ and residents’ financial limitations. While racial segregation of neighborhoods is waning, poorer neighborhoods generally had lower quality infrastructure and code enforcement issues that communities are struggling to address because of fiscal constraints. Similarly residents themselves reported that while access to opportunities exist across racial lines, those opportunities are relatively few and more jobs, training, and other opportunities would be needed in order for more residents to improve themselves and their families’ circumstances.

Bright spots certainly exist. Some communities reported almost no racial bias. Other communities cited community work, such as joint community planning processes, as making strides in bringing people together. Towns are making progress in cleaning up and providing services to poorer areas, while still other areas are seeing greater economic opportunities overall. This document and its recommendations aim to support these efforts and inspire new ones so that the region is a better home to all its citizens.

In the following pages we will explore the different conditions across the region, identify areas that may need action, and make recommendations for improvement, including the following:

1. Local Housing Policy that Encourages Quality and Affordability
2. Local Transportation Infrastructure that Works for Cars, Bikes, and Pedestrians
3. Code Enforcement and Development Policy that Builds Neighborhoods
4. City Management that Manages Assets
5. Economic Development that Serves Residents First

**BACKGROUND: REGION AND FIVE COUNTIES**

The five counties of the Heart of Texas Region that comprise the Efficient Towns & Counties Co-Op are Bosque, Falls, Freestone, Hill, and Limestone. With the exception of Freestone, all of the counties have experienced relatively little growth over the past 20-30 years, and Falls County’s population has declined. Due in part to its strong oil and gas economy, Freestone County’s growth – while still gradual – has exceeded predictions.

The slow growth puts most of the region’s communities in a bind when it comes to public investment. Rising hard and soft costs of infrastructure management, combined with flat or falling municipal populations, mean cities have less and less ability to pay not only to improve their communities, but simply to maintain them. While great variability exists among the region’s towns, and their residents enjoy benefits from the beautiful landscape to walkability to safe neighborhoods to small, close-knit schools, the cities are nevertheless constrained by their limited revenues.

The geography of the Heart of Texas Region is a combination of tablelands and irregular plains ranging to hilly in the west, with altitudes varying from 209 to 1,200 feet above sea level. The mean minimum temperature is 33.3 Fahrenheit and the mean maximum temperature ranges from 95.90 degrees Fahrenheit. Rainfall averages about 36.21 inches a year. This area has abundant lakes, rivers and streams that are popular for recreation and help provide municipal water supplies.

Lignite coal, found in Limestone and Freestone counties, is the most significant mineral resource in the area. Also significant is a large oil and natural gas field in the same area, and natural gas wells are numerous. Other natural resources are stone, sand, gravel, and limestone.

**Regional Population Trends**

The region’s population grew from 108,827 in 2000 to 115,821 in 2010 – a rate of growth of approximately .5% per year. This represents a decline in growth rate by 50% as compared to the preceding decennium, in which the regional population grew by 12%, or 1% per year. The decline in growth rate was true of all but one county individually as well as for the region, with a great deal of variation by county.

Limestone County and Freestone County, adjacent to one another, had markedly different rates of growth but relatively little change in that rate between the two decades. Freestone grew at a rate of 13% from 1990 – 2000 and 12% from 2000 – 2010. Limestone grew at a rate of 5% from 1990 – 2000 and 6% from 2000 – 2010.

Bosque and Hill Counties, adjacent to each other, each sharply declined in growth from 2000 to 2010, perhaps affected by their proximity to the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, whose counties’ growth rate also declined over that interval. Bosque’s increase from 1990 – 2000 was 14%, while in the succeeding decade it was 6%. Hill County went from a 19% growth rate to 9% over the same period.

Falls County, situated to the south of the region and adjacent to Limestone County, is an outlier from the rest of the region demographically as well as geographically. Its growth rate from 1990 – 2000 was 5%, the same as adjacent Limestone’s, but in the next decade while Limestone’s rate of growth actually increased to 6%, Falls County’s growth rate more than declined – it reversed. The county lost 4% of its population and in 2010 had nearly returned to the 1990 level.

The Heart of Texas Efficient Towns & Counties Co-Op is concerned that projected growth in the five rural counties may not capture the likely outmigration from major metro areas into the HOT Region. Comparisons of previous projected-vs.-actual growth for similarly situated counties show growth that exceeded projections by large amounts – in some cases by several hundred percent. The dependence on these numbers over very long time periods for very important issues – such as water supply – creates great incentive to review them in more detail, and the region is engaged in that work now.

As population densities shift and crowded places get more crowded, there is a “pushing out” effect as land prices go up and folks seek to escape congestion. This slows the growth rate of the most crowded areas. At the same time, individuals leaving more populated areas are still likely to seek a certain level of density – and the associated quality-of-life amenities like shopping and entertainment centers. Just as the densest of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan counties saw the smallest rate of increase (and net domestic outmigration,) the least dense of the HOTETC counties attracted the smallest rates of increase. This is a behavioral effect and doesn’t fit within easily measured boundaries, but it is indicated by county growth rates. We might call it a sort of “Goldilocks” effect, with areas that are not too crowded and not too remote becoming the most attractive. One question in the region is whether some Heart of Texas counties are inching towards or away from “Goldilocks” status, and at what rate.

For the most part, Heart of Texas counties with higher population densities (moving toward that middle) had higher rates of population growth, and counties with lower population densities had lower rates of growth. This pattern is consistent with statewide trends and is likely to pose a challenge for sparsely-populated counties working to maintain quality of life.

There are two notable exceptions to this trend. Freestone County has the second-lowest population density, but it enjoyed he highest rate of population growth in the region from 2000 to 2010 – 11%. Falls County’s population density falls in the middle at around 22 people per square mile, but its population declined by 4%. It is likely no coincidence that these outliers also differ from the rest of the region economically, with Freestone County outperforming and Falls underperforming relative to the region as a whole.

**Bosque County: Beautiful land, neat towns draw tourists, retirees, Hispanics to diversify population**

Population and Demographic Factors

Historic: largely white population, sparsely populated, older; relatively low rate of natural increase; inmigration coming primarily in the form of adults past childrearing age, moving from the DFW Metroplex.

Present: increasing number of Hispanic residents, combination of natural increase and inmigration.

Future: Bosque County’s total population is on the rise, but this trend is entirely made up of seniors in the short term. The working-age population is flat or in decline until 2035. Growth patterns are outside city limits. Newcomers to the county tend to settle in unincorporated areas, while city populations are relatively flat and may actually decline.

Economic Factors

Trends indicate slow growth outside city limits, flat or falling in incorporated areas, and rising elderly population. These trends challenge the county’s workforce and purchasing power, stressing its job and commercial levels. Because Bosque County is not a bedroom community feeding another regional economy, its own local job and commercial base is critical to the county’s ability to maintain and add residents. On the other hand, increases in its tourism or retirement-community success may tip the scales the other direction.

Environmental Factors

Bosque County is already water-stressed in some key industries, although its municipal users have sufficient supply for decades of predicted demand. Regional water planning and supply increase is needed or the lack of water will inhibit the county’s development.

Community Factors

Clifton is aging and Meridian is economically disadvantaged. Both of those issues, in different ways, can be a factor in a community losing quality-of-life due to increased vacancy, dilapidated property, and lower economic activity. If these trends materialize and are unmitigated, it will be difficult to maintain population.

**Falls County: Blight, lack of economic engines leave diverse population in economic downturn**

Population and Demographic Factors

Historic: white majority with large African-American and Hispanic minorities. In the past few decades economic decline spurs white flight and “minority majority;” African-American population assumes a large plurality, and Hispanic population rises as well

Present: African-American and white populations losing share; Hispanic gaining share

Future: Falls County’s total population shows a very slight rise, but this trend is entirely made up of seniors in the short term. The working-age population is flat or in decline until 2035. Growth patterns are outside city limits. Newcomers to the county tend to settle in unincorporated areas, while city populations are relatively flat and may actually decline.

Economic Factors

Trends indicate slow growth outside city limits, falling population in incorporated areas, and rising elderly population. These trends and their effect on workforce and investment have resulted in loss of employers and economic engines in previous decades; they are predicted to continue and to further threaten the stability of employers and businesses. Many Falls County residents do commute, but there is a high unemployed and out-of-the-labor force population. Falls County’s economic factors are likely to threaten, rather than to enhance, its ability to maintain or grow.

Environmental Factors

Falls County’s future depends in part on the proposed Brushy Creek Water Supply Project; happily this project is likely to be implemented soon due to its prioritization and allocation for funding.

Community Factors

Economic distress is probably the reason Falls County’s population has underperformed versus estimates for the past two Census cycles; continued distress may contribute to the continuation of that trend. Marlin is characterized by physical deterioration of its housing, infrastructure, and neighborhoods; its challenged educational system is working to improve but hosts a significant percentage of students with serious challenges including poverty and learning English as a second language.

**Freestone County: Oil/gas, region’s highest wages, and quality of life attract residential growth**

Population and Demographic Factors

Historic: white majority with large African-American and Hispanic minorities.

Present: overall population gains due to combination of inmigration and natural increase, due to strong wages, availability of jobs in oil and gas and increasing number of Hispanic residents.

Future: Freestone County’s population is rising – recently it had the most rapid growth rate of the region. Seniors are rising most rapidly, but workers and children also contribute to the growth.

Growth patterns are both inside and outside city limits. Newcomers to the county tend to settle in unincorporated areas, while city populations are relatively flat and may actually decline. Fairfield is having some success in attracting investment and residents.

Economic Factors

Freestone County’s proximity to natural resources (oil and gas, coal) contributes to an economy with a relatively high median wage, employment, and workforce participation.

Environmental Factors

Freestone County’s proximity to reservoirs gives it the opportunity to initiate small-regional water projects that could enhance the ability of nearby communities to meet water demand.

Air quality concerns for the region, particularly due to ozone and ozone precursors, indicate the desirability of some efforts to retrofit compressor engines with higher emissions controls.

Community Factors

Freestone County is doing well relative to the rest of the region, and its communities enjoy comfortable amenities and report relatively high quality-of-life. Its relative prosperity and quality-of-life factors probably contributed to the county’s exceeding predicted growth rates in the past Census cycle, and this trend may continue.

**Hill County: Racially and economically diverse population benefits from college, I-35 and Metroplex**

Population and Demographic Factors

Historic: white majority with large African-American and Hispanic minorities

Present: minority populations rising as a percentage

Future: Hill County’s population is rising. Seniors are rising most rapidly; the child and worker populations stay close to flat through about 2025. The pattern is for growth to occur outside city limits. Newcomers to the county tend to settle in unincorporated areas, while city populations are relatively flat and may actually decline. Hillsboro, the region’s largest town, should be large enough to grow despite this trend but has not realized as much of this potential as expected.

Economic Factors

Hill County’s proximity to the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex and the growing Waco MSA along busy I-35 allows opportunities for economic development. On the other hand, a declining outlet shopping center creates a large-area redevelopment challenge in a highly visible location. Overall, Hillsboro is likely to realize greater economic development, but its challenge will be to attract sufficient revenues to overcome community maintenance deficits. This could be the beginning of a virtuous or the continuation of a vicious cycle: it could go either way.

Environmental Factors

Hill County has adequate water resources, although its use agreements and contracts are a source of continued effort and concern.

Community Factors

Hill County communities jointly face accumulated decline and underinvestment in housing, infrastructure, and community facilities. Planning work done in Hillsboro and Hubbard indicates possible bright spots, but without purposeful restructuring of investments the overall community impression will increasingly be one of decline. If that continues, it will be difficult to maintain and grow in a positive way.

**Limestone County: Community, economic development lead diverse population in slow growth**

Population and Demographic Factors

Historic: white majority with large African-American and Hispanic minorities

Present: minority populations rising as a percentage

Future: Limestone County’s total population is on the rise, but this trend is entirely made up of seniors in the short term. The working-age population is flat or in decline until 2030. Overall, growth patterns are outside city limits: newcomers to the county tend to settle in unincorporated areas, while city populations are relatively flat and may actually decline. The main exception to this in Limestone County – and perhaps for the region – is Groesbeck. Groesbeck appears to be maintaining its share of the county’s growth, possibly due to school quality and quality-of-life issues.

Economic Factors

Limestone County’s economy is supported by nearby power generation and energy-sector employers, and by a large state-run assisted living facility, which employs large numbers of people and is insulated from economic cycle variability.

Environmental Factors

Limestone County has very limited water resources, with county demand exceeding county supply at present. Development of an off-channel reservoir for Groesbeck is recommended by water planners, and improvements are in the offing. Meanwhile Mexia has sufficient water for industrial development. Air quality and solid waste issues do not create significant problems for Limestone County.

Community Factors

Mexia has prioritized infrastructure improvements, using economic development dollars to replace water lines. Groesbeck is facing its water supply challenges. Both communities have emphasized economic and community development and are focused on improving quality of life.

**History of Fair Housing in the Region**

Through discussions in Steering Committee meetings, Scenario Planning meetings, community-based planning meetings, and individual and group interviews conducted by Baylor School of Social Work and consultants, stakeholder reports indicate the following trends:

* On an individual and interpersonal level,
  + Racism – and in particular, what we may call “social” racism or overt prejudicial treatment among residents, has declined significantly
  + Classism is prevalent and may even be on the rise
* On a community and systems level,
  + Institutional racism (the inability for minorities to achieve similar results to whites even when similar efforts are made, because of biases built into systems such as financial, legal, educational, etc.,) persists, and
  + Institutional classism (the inability of individuals to achieve middle-class status despite hard work, due to political, policy, or environmental obstacles) persists and may even be on the rise
* Environmental factors that may contribute to institutional racism and institutional classism
  + Include many factors
* Lack of public transportation
* Lack of affordable, quality housing
* Lack of child care opportunities, especially full-day pre-K, and
* Lack of employment and training opportunities within communities
  + And are largely outside of communities’ ability to control due to decisions being made by either other levels of government or the private sector.
  + One exception is local police departments: some stakeholders reported positive, others negative, race relations with local law enforcement.

While communities have identified goals regarding housing, economic development, and community development, pursuit – and even attainment – of those goals is insufficient to reduce the systems bias against minorities and the economically disadvantaged. While they are the purview of this report, local gains are not enough on their own because there are so many other different factors and agents.

Further, it is unclear how communities struggling to survive and provide basic services to all residents would be able to provide enough extra services to overcome the backlog of underservice suffered by minorities and the poor. Examples of that backlog include disproportionate lack of sidewalks, drainage, and lighting in poorer and historically-minority areas. Parity – across-the-board high standards in all these areas – is a practical impossibility.

While it is important to identify and acknowledge inequity and to assess its extent, it is equally important to do so within a context of creating practical, actionable, and relevant recommendations for improvement. Accordingly, recommendations (see page 37) are advanced with reference to improved opportunity for minorities and the economically-disadvantaged; cost-effectiveness for local governments; suitability for meeting more than one local goal or priority; and availability of possible funding partners or strategies.

**Social Currents Affecting Housing and Equity**

There are several social currents to discuss with relation to housing and equity in the Heart of Texas region.

The first is a disposition against “affordable housing,” understood to mean the development of subsidized multifamily housing. This bias exists to some degree across the region and is made up of several factors. Overall, the phenomenon is one of communities opposing affordable housing projects – either in their neighborhoods or in their cities as a whole. While components of this feeling may be induced to include race and class discrimination – and it is likely both of those exist to some degree – it is important to note that there is a high correlation of crime and other more objectively legitimate issues associated with some existing affordable-housing developments. In addition, the appearance and quality of existing affordable-housing developments (perhaps in part due to their age) is not perceived to be a positive in their communities. The combination of discriminatory and legitimate concerns makes this disposition against affordable housing a difficult challenge.

When pulled out separately and discussed in different terms, communities are generally in favor of housing options for folks of all income levels, lower-density developments such as duplexes, housing that is affordable to working-class and single-parent families, and other specifics. Communities are also in favor of safety and quality standards for rental housing.

Social currents challenging equity in the region include complexities associated with historically-ethnic neighborhoods. In some counties and cities these neighborhoods do have less access to opportunity and lower levels of infrastructure and investment. However the economic realities most of the region’s communities make large-scale infrastructure investment infeasible throughout the town, effectively freezing the level of infrastructure at a moment in time that didn’t have the same values and priorities for the entire community that the region has today. This real-world limitation, coupled with the feeling of ownership and identity associated with these historically-ethnic neighborhoods, perpetuates environmental injustice. We will discuss these neighborhoods more fully in the next section.

**ISSUES OF RACIAL/ETHNIC SEGREGATION, INTEGRATION**

There are few areas within the Heart of Texas Region in which there is sufficient concentrated population of any background to be able to view neighborhood characteristics such as areas of racial/ethnic segregation or integration using Census data or the like. Census tracts are so geographically large as to include several neighborhoods – or even several different towns or settlements. Therefore the HUD Dissimilarity index does not yield any information applicable to the Heart of Texas region, and consequently this Assessment bases its findings on qualitative data.

While the data granularity may not show it clearly, many – if not most – communities in the region have commonly experienced and acknowledged areas where members of ethnic minorities traditionally lived. While stakeholders report that recent trends do not concentrate minority members into these areas, and towns with higher recent migration indicate greater integration, the physical remnants of a very segregated past still exist in many communities. In most cases these are traditionally-black neighborhoods, but traditionally-Hispanic neighborhoods exist as well, such as in Hillsboro and Mexia.

These neighborhoods are most often not the likeliest destination of new residents of that background: new people seeking housing generally prefer areas with greater choice and amenities, and these neighborhoods do not represent those options. However among the residents of traditionally-ethnic neighborhoods, their neighborhood often represents a strong identity, source of pride and community, and at the same time is seen as substandard both in terms of its public and private improvements. Community members who would staunchly resist leaving these neighborhoods, may nevertheless encourage their children and grandchildren to do so.

Some common regional characteristics related to segregation and integration, both noted by stakeholders and observed by regional staff, are below.

1. The historically-minority populated and poorer areas of town were historically less-served by public improvements and services.
2. Developments over the past few decades have made improvements but have generally not brought parity with other parts of town, particularly with large-scale improvements like sidewalks and drainage.
3. Members of minority populations have both energetically left “their” neighborhoods and energetically claimed and remained in “their” neighborhoods.
4. Historically-white parts of town are becoming more integrated. Stakeholders report that people of color have no problem living in whatever part of town they want to, provided they have the means.
5. Historically-black parts of town are seeing different trends depending on their location and size. In Bosque County for example, those neighborhoods are also becoming more integrated. In Falls and Limestone County, they remain predominantly African American or African American and Hispanic, but decreasing sharply in population.
6. The steep increase in Hispanic residents has not for the most part been concentrated within small neighborhoods, but has rather been more dispersed throughout communities.
7. The two main exceptions to the above are Hillsboro and Mexia, each of which has a longstanding Hispanic population as well as an overall increase in Hispanic residents due both to inmigration and family growth. In these areas there are predominantly Hispanic areas of town and these are increasing in population, although Hispanic growth is not limited to those areas.
8. The consensus of stakeholders is that residents are limited in housing choices due to financial constraints, not racial biases. Most stakeholders agreed that income, not race, is limiting housing choice. However there were noted a few examples of property owners who let it be known that they wanted their tenants to share their own race or ethnicity.
9. Although communities do not report redlining or a strong social stigma by neighbors, realtors, or landlords, there were strong references to the difficulty of finding available housing and particularly the limiting factor of financial resources. The financial piece is particularly correlated with racial minorities, as stakeholders viewed them as more likely to be low-income and potentially to have more difficulty obtaining financing.

**RACIALLY CONCENTRATED AREAS OF POVERTY (RCAP)**

Just as in the preceding section, the quantitative data measures applied by HUD to draw conclusions about the characteristics of urbanized areas – in this case, the “RCAP” methodology – does not yield a fruitful analysis of the region because of the low population density. We will not ignore the results of using the analysis, but will rather supplement those results with qualitative data.

In this section we have chosen to highlight five areas from different communities in the region. We selected areas based on the following criteria:

1. Areas where there is sufficient data to indicate a racially-concentrated area of poverty;
2. Areas that illustrate concentrated poverty, even though not racially-concentrated, since income has been indicated by stakeholders to be a more powerful limitation of opportunity than race; and
3. Areas that are too small to show up in Census data but nevertheless indicate the types of historically-minority neighborhoods that are typical of conditions around the region

**Data-supported Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty**

Analysis of the census tract-level data is problematic for the Heart of Texas Region for several reasons. Most of the census tracts in these rural counties contain large portions of the county area, including whole cities. For those relatively few cities large enough to be divided by census tract, the tracts still often do not stop within the cities: for example, while south Marlin is undoubtedly a racially concentrated area of poverty, the census tract data do not indicate so because the tract contains not only most of south Marlin but also stretches out into a significant amount of unincorporated area. This skews the numbers because, while the unincorporated areas are less populated, even the incorporated areas are not dense and the unincorporated areas are where most growth – and disproportionate affluence – is located.

Because the census tracts in rural areas are large geographical areas, it is difficult to use these criteria to point to localized concentrated poverty (see below.) Nonetheless, there are racially more-concentrated, and higher-poverty, parts of town in virtually all the cities in the region.

In Hill County, there is one census tract (west and part of south Hillsboro) with a white/non-Hispanic population of less than 50% (census tract 9609) and a poverty rate of 39%, according to the 2012 ACS. This tract contains much of the traditionally-Hispanic west side of town and a portion of the traditionally-black south side.

In Falls County, the entire city of Marlin has a white/non-Hispanic population of less than 50% and a poverty rate of 35%. Historically north Marlin was predominantly white and south Marlin was predominantly African American, but today north Marlin is integrated and south Marlin remains predominantly African American. South Marlin’s numbers appear to be improving based on the census tract data, with population growing and poverty rate staying roughly the same; however as noted we believe the outlying area skews those numbers. North Marlin’s numbers, however, are worsening: population is declining and poverty increasing according to the 2011, 2012, and 2013 ACS.

In Limestone County, the city of Mexia has a white/non-Hispanic population of less than 50% and a poverty rate of 25%. Its highest-poverty census tract is 9704, with 35% poverty as of the 2012 ACS.

Because the census tracts are so large, their overall poverty rates are results of several neighborhoods (or indeed, several cities and unincorporated areas.) It is easy to conclude, therefore, that a large area with an overall poverty rate of 30% or higher contains smaller areas with over 40% poverty. In Marlin, for example, where the entire city has a poverty rate of 35%, there are small areas in many parts of town where concentrated poverty exists – as well as a majority of areas where poverty and relative affluence exist side-by-side.

We will therefore look more closely at racially-concentrated and high-poverty neighborhoods in four cities: Marlin, Mexia, Hillsboro, and Rosebud. The first three are the largest cities in the region and also have the largest areas where concentration occurs; this provides the opportunity to observe the various conditions and explore contributing factors. The last is a smaller city that nevertheless has a distinct racially-concentrated and low-income neighborhood; exploring its characteristics may be helpful to other cities in the region that are more similar in size to it than to the other three examples.

Marlin

South Marlin has always been a primarily African-American area. It is very expansive, taking up perhaps 40% of the incorporated area of the city. During the period of Jim Crow and segregation, African-Americans were expected to keep south of the town’s main street (Live Oak Street) unless they had business to conduct, and whites lived their entire lives without once crossing the street. As noted earlier in this document, a history of labor-intensive agricultural production was responsible for a large population of African-American and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic laborers; the relatively large “minority”-to-white ratio may have played into what was by some stakeholders’ accounts a highly repressive social condition. One Falls County stakeholder recalled a long-ago childhood in which sheriffs’ deputies drove through south Marlin firing bullets into the air in advance of local elections, “to remind the people how to vote.”

Marlin has for many years had strong African-American community leadership. Four of the past five police chiefs, 2 of the last 5 city managers, and at least 30% of city council members over the past 20 years have been African-American. African-Americans run successful businesses and are active in civic organizations. However, racial tensions continue and are exacerbated by living conditions in South Marlin, which continues to be overwhelmingly African-American.

We mentioned above that south Marlin is a large area – nearly half the town’s size. Due to age, population loss, and poverty the entire area is blighted and under-maintained. While the streets are unpaved and most lack sidewalks, the chief difference is in the advanced state of neglect that characterizes the vast majority of the property. Yes, there are under-kept homes and yards here, but what chiefly strikes a visitor to the area is the scope and scale of the dilapidation. Plenty of homes – although worn and in need of maintenance – show signs of love, such as decorations on the porch or children’s toys in the back yards. These, however, are outnumbered by clearly vacant and collapsing structures.

A recent visitor to the area, pausing to photograph one such overgrown and barely-discernable building, was stopped by the neighbor across the street. The lady, a single woman who was caregiver to her grandchildren, was hopeful the photos meant something would be done about the run-down property, which was a source of anxiety for her. She expressed frustration that no one seemed to have any solution – who owned it, how to clean it up, how to keep vagrants or vandals or criminals from using it as a hideout. Goings-on she could hear but not quite see caused her to be fearful in her home. A casual tour of the area exposed literally hundreds of such properties, each of which may pose similar challenges for the people living nearby.

In another part of town, fairly integrated by race and income, disharmony takes another form. A large house, surrounded by a tall fence of bars, displays a sign reading: KEEP OUT - OUR YARD AND HOUSE IS NOT YOUR PLAYGROUND - OUR POSSESSIONS ARE NOT FOR YOU TO STEAL.

This particular sign communicates a direct and personal tension between an “us” and a “them.” While most are not this stark, evidence of siege mentality can be found in nearly every area of town, from barred windows and doors to “no trespassing” signs. It does not seem to be specifically people of other races, but a more general decline and disorder that is being feared, and those signs of fear are shown by those of all backgrounds; but the effect is further impressions of alienation and mistrust.

Clearly race continues to play a large role in dissatisfaction and friction among people, and to divide the community. Nevertheless stakeholder reports, community meetings, and visual examination highlight the pervasive influence of poverty on the community as a whole. All of Marlin is impacted by poverty, race, and the relationship between the two. Between 2000 and 2010, the African-American population declined more steeply than any other demographic. Following on the heels of white flight, black flight is removing another generation’s worth of talent and human resources from the community.

While African American institutions and culture are large and influential here, leaders still express frustration at the inability to create change. This frustration is felt from members of all races, who simultaneously express their respect for one another and willingness to work together – and their profound disappointment that even together, they seem to be able to accomplish so little.

There is a group of citizens working together to improve the community, however: begun in partnership with the Heart of Texas Efficient Towns & Counties work and facilitated in the beginning by the Sam Houston State University Center for Rural Studies, the group is diverse in race and income and has already begun to accomplish small but meaningful projects.

Mexia

In Mexia, significant white, African-American, and Hispanic populations live together with similar, but more muted, challenges and issues.

While similar histories exist, the community today is very different from Marlin. The two communities began and grew very differently over their histories, and they have followed very different development and economic trajectories. Marlin was a much larger city and its heyday was in the 1920s and ‘30s. Since then it has experienced population decline –approximately 50% in the past 50 years. Mexia, on the other hand, has had a population of about 7000 people (plus or minus 500) since the 1930s. Marlin has lost all its significant industry, while Mexia has managed to attract some manufacturing jobs and to grow as a small regional commercial center. While still high-minority (Mexia’s non-Hispanic white population is under 50%,) the community’s poverty rate is 2/3 that of Marlin’s and the impression in driving around the neighborhoods is dramatically different. The number of vacant, dilapidated houses is small, and the city has recently invested in upgrading water lines and streets, including in underserved areas.

Neighborhoods in Mexia are for the most part very integrated and none are exclusively white, but there are four areas that are noted for higher concentrations of either African-American or Hispanic residents.

In West Mexia, there is a section noted as being higher African-American; this area has a newer (1970s or ‘80s) subdivision with paved streets, curb and gutter; and an older section with some paved/curbed and some unpaved streets. Throughout this area, particularly the main older area, the houses are smaller and often in need of minor repair, but there were few obvious code issues – overgrown lots, unsound-looking buildings, or junked vehicles. Most properties showed signs of being “kept up,” with grass cut, etc.

The East Mexia neighborhood noted as being more concentrated African-American and also higher poverty was quite a bit older. The oldest houses looked to be from the ‘30s and ‘40s, but many trailers and other structures had been built or moved in. The lots are more grown up, there is more vacant area, but the streets are paved.

Similarly, two Hispanic neighborhoods were identified by stakeholders. In the central part of Mexia is an older neighborhood that has become gradually more concentrated Hispanic over time. In this area are curbs and paved streets, houses are generally neat and well-kept, and of a variety of ages from early 20th Century through approximately 1980s.

At the south end of town is another newly-developed Hispanic area with different characteristics. The streets are unpaved and structures often appear to have been moved in or constructed in phases. There are several areas where property owners are collecting discarded materials, such as scrap lumber or metal. This neighborhood has the greatest appearance of poverty, but it is newer – it gives the impression not of old things deteriorating, but rather of things being constructed or assembled out of inexpensive materials and without standardized methodology.

In all these neighborhoods, there are frequent impressions of care and pride: chairs and flowers in yards, decorative items around fences, and signs of people investing effort in making their property more attractive, interesting and comfortable. The infrastructure is better in the center of town than on the outskirts, with center-area roads being paved and curbed and furthest-out area roads unpaved and uncurbed. This allocation of resources seems appropriate and does not seem to result in differences between minority-concentrated areas and others.

Hillsboro

Hillsboro represents yet another contrast. Its white, non-Hispanic population is 2/3 of its total, and census data and stakeholder reports indicate that the relatively smaller communities of color (16% African American, 18% Hispanic) are less integrated overall than in either Mexia or Marlin: Hispanics are more concentrated in West Hillsboro and African-Americans in South Hillsboro.

The Hispanic neighborhood of West Hillsboro resembled the Mexia neighborhoods in many ways: paved roads; housing stock that was smaller and somewhat run-down but not generally of obvious structural instability; a high number of vacant lots where houses were evidently torn down; most property kept up but some in disrepair and – particularly at the edges of town – collections of junk. The impression overall is of low-income properties, with something like 60% being taken care of, 30% not being taken care of all that well, and 10% problematic – dilapidated, excessive junk, falling down, etc.

South Hillsboro, the African-American concentrated area, contains several different sub-areas with different feels. Along some streets there is a similar feeling of lower economic vitality, but plenty of industry and personal touches on property, etc. In other areas, however – particularly the older sections – the run-down and dilapidated property is much more numerous and seems to overpower the bright spots. Unsound buildings with visibly sagging or collapsing components are more numerous here. There are signs posted saying, “No parking, stopping, standing or loitering - $500 fine.” However, nearby is a small but interesting playground with a number of different play elements. Overall the impressions are very mixed: signs of welcome and signs of unwelcome, historic homes that are quietly kept attractive and others that are falling down, newer (i.e. 1970s) homes, and lots that are overgrown next to lots that are kept up and planted with flowers. As with Mexia, the infrastructure does not appear to be inappropriately-constructed for the density and location. Most streets are paved and show signs of maintenance, and while there are few sidewalks, some areas showed recent sidewalk construction.

Comparing Hillsboro with the other communities it clearly shares attributes with both: it is hard not to conclude that aggressive code enforcement or reinvestment strategies now might prevent south Hillsboro from attaining the critical mass of dilapidation that has overpowered south Marlin.

Rosebud

Rosebud displays characteristics more typical of the region. Here, there is a historically-black part of town, a few areas where there is some concentration of longstanding Hispanic families, and a few parts of town where inmigrating Hispanic families have begun to group together.

The historically-black part of town is losing population as young African American families move into various other neighborhoods; meanwhile the city and residents each contribute to cleanup of dilapidated structures and the clearing of lots. Consequently West Rosebud, the historically-black neighborhood, is cleaner and more open than it used to be, although it still lacks sidewalks and the majority of streets are unpaved. Although not in large numbers, more white and Hispanic families do move into West Rosebud.

The rest of town is increasingly integrated by both race and income, as formerly well-to-do areas become more affordable and at the same time, more run-down. No new construction of any great scale has been built in Rosebud since at least the 1980s, so newcomers usually occupy and perhaps restore older homes; this contributes to the income integration of the community.

New construction in the area tends to be outside the city limits, so that over time the in-town population is in decline while the out-of-town population grows. This imbalance contributes to the inability to maintain and improve the town’s infrastructure.

While stakeholders acknowledge racism’s continued presence in the community, they cite it primarily as being a leftover harm from ages past that lingers in attitudes and institutions rather than in new relationships or the way individuals see each other. Individuals or families of color could, they say, move into any neighborhood and expect to be welcomed cheerfully by most –if not all – of their neighbors; provided they had the means.

Once again, economics were cited as the main limiting factor to opportunity. In a town the size of Rosebud, even the “other side of the tracks” is walking distance from the schools, the library, the post office, and the downtown area. While sidewalks are absent in many parts of town, traffic is also scarce. The stakeholder consensus was that the main issues keeping people from improving themselves in Rosebud were economics and an inability to forget past injustices (on all sides) and work together toward a brighter future. It is worth noting that Rosebud 2020, a community group formed as part of the Efficient Towns & Counties work that has been meeting for almost a year, is accomplishing goals with a coalition of community members of all races.

**Target areas**

For the purposes of the Heart of Texas Efficient Towns & Counties Co-op, it is probably most significant to target areas where there is a concentration of lower-income individuals of any background in places where location creates barriers to opportunity. As noted earlier, the smaller communities tend to have more even access simply by virtue of the fact that distance within the communities is not a great issue. We also try to identify practical solutions: for example, while it is probably impossible to construct sidewalks throughout the communities, it is no less imperative to identify transportation routes – including sidewalks – where needed to give communities access to schools, jobs, and other opportunities.

Target areas therefore are chosen as a function of their characteristics, not the other way around. Target areas would be areas with some or all of the following characteristics:

* Enough area that location is a limiting factor
* Enough population that improvements would have an impact
* Low access to automobiles
* Low service by streets and sidewalks
* High poverty
* Low access to medical care, and/or
* A predominantly low-Anglo population

**Strategies for Remediation**

Strategies were formulated by a community development consultant based on direct observations of condition; additional conditions reported by stakeholders in meetings, focus groups and interviews; data prepared in other sections of the Heart of Texas Efficient Towns & Counties planning effort; and other input from local staff and officials, and residents.

Marlin:

* Enforcement of codes prohibiting overgrown grass and weeds, accumulated junk and debris, junked vehicles, and structurally unsound houses
* Demolition of abandoned houses, clearing of lots. This has been done well in Rosebud partnering with individuals in the private sector who recycle and reuse building materials; perhaps similar strategies could be employed.
* Renovation / refurbishment of King Street Park and Falconer-Stamps Community Center. While more significant improvements would require a funding source, meaningful improvements could be accomplished with donated materials and volunteer labor.
* Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Sidewalks are probably impractical, but the community should explore striped pedestrian/bike lanes and/or caution signs to designate walking areas and remind drivers to watch for pedestrians. Additional lighting would also be advantageous along these corridors.
* HUD should consider relocating affordable housing complex from isolated location in South Marlin to another location closer to schools and businesses. The current location is isolated due to railroad track and may add stress to water /sewer systems.

Mexia

* Enforcement of codes (see above)
* Identification of safe pedestrian routes (see above)

Hillsboro

* Enforcement of codes (see above)
* Identification of safe pedestrian routes (see above)
* Exploration and possible removal of anti-loitering signs.

**IDENTIFICATION & ASSESSMENT OF ACCESS TO EXISTING AREAS OF HIGH OPPORTUNITY**

The Heart of Texas region and its communities have many advantages for all residents, including members of racial minorities and those with low incomes. Some of those include overall size of the communities making them inherently walkable and bikeable; the lower property values, making them more affordable; and the frequent presence of close-knit social and family circles offering support and relief when setbacks occur. These are important pluses.

However, there are special challenges to opportunity posed by the lower number of resources present in rural areas like ours. It can be especially difficult for people in disadvantaged situations to overcome that disadvantage, because the means of improvement – training and education, a variety of jobs, transportation and child care – are unavailable or very limited. Throughout the region there is low availability of quality housing, varying public school quality, relatively low access to vocational training and postsecondary education (exceptions noted below,) little access to public transportation, and little access to child care in general and affordable child care in particular.

Medical care, always a challenge in rural areas, is relatively available in the region: most communities of 1500 persons or more have at least one clinic, and there is a hospital in each county except for Freestone. Emergency medical services are a greater challenge, as the area is served but units may have to travel some distances to a call, lengthening response times.

Bright spots include several public school systems in which dual-credit coursework and vocational training are offered, and an excellent array of local libraries. These rural public libraries offer free computer access to patrons, are staffed by paid or volunteer staff capable of assisting clients to access job or education opportunities online, and are often using “out of the box” thinking to help them own their potentially crucial role in an information age. One library, for example, obtained several handed-down laptop computers makes up to 20 available for students’ use for projects.

Education is a primary driver of opportunity, and local school districts throughout the region are willing and energetic partners in the effort to increase opportunity and economic advancement. The districts themselves, however, have their own unique characteristics, strengths, and challenges; and a review of some common metrics is appropriate in assessing the opportunities available in their areas.

The following information is available from the Texas Tribune, which collects public data and publishes a “report card” of Texas independent school districts’ performance. According to its website (texastribune.org/public-ed/explore,) it uses a number of measures to shed light on the questions

* “What does my school or district enrollment look like?”,
* “How is my school or district performing academically?”,
* “[Are students at my school or district prepared for college?](http://www.texastribune.org/public-ed/explore/)”,
* “How experienced are teachers at my school or district?”, and
* “How financially healthy is my school or district?”

**Texas Tribune Report for Larger HOTETC-area School Districts**

In the table below we focus on the following data: 2010 district enrollment information; 2012 TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, statewide student assessment as of 2003-2012) passing rates for all students and by race; percent of graduating students who meet college-ready criteria on TAKS, SAT or ACT; teacher experience in average number of years; teacher salary by seniority; and spending per student in 2010 for academic programs only (first number) and across all school functions (second number.)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Student population** | **TAKS passing rate overall, and by race, versus (state)** | **College ready English & Math vs (state)** | **Teacher experience and pay, vs state** | **Spending per student** |
| Meridian ISD | 518 students, 66% white | All: 71% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 48% (69%)  AA: n/a (63%)  White: 83% (84%) | 47% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | $6986 academics,  $12006 all |
| Clifton ISD | 1140 | All: 81% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 69% (69%)  AA: 57% (63%)  White: 86% (84%) | 56% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | $5476  $8953 |
| Marlin ISD | 1110, economically disadvantaged | All: 43% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 42% (69%)  AA: 43% (63%)  White: 43% (84%) | 34% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 5743  11419 |
| Rosebud-Lott ISD | 799 | All: 64% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 65% (69%)  AA: 33% (63%)  White: 73% (84%) | 36% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 5030  9184 |
| Fairfield ISD | 1811 | All: 91% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 86% (69%)  AA: 82% (63%)  White: 93% (84%) | 63% (47%) | Avg experience, average pay | 6336  10993 |
| Teague ISD | 1218 | All: 75% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 59% (69%)  AA: 73% (63%)  White: 82% (84%) | 40% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 5037  9320 |
|  | **Student population** | **TAKS passing rate overall, and by race, versus (state)** | **College ready English & Math vs (state)** | **Teacher experience and pay, vs state** | **Spending per student** |
| Wortham ISD | 504  rural | All: 70% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 71% (69%)  AA: 58% (63%)  White: 74% (84%) | 58% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 5298  9348 |
| Hillsboro | 1892 | All: 71% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 73% (69%)  AA: 66% (63%)  White: 73% (84%) | 43% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 4722  8844 |
| Whitney | 1572 | All: 82% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 63% (69%)  AA: 71% (63%)  White: 84% (86%) | 45% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 4821  8699 |
| Hubbard | 399  Rural | All: 68% (TX 75%)  Hisp: n/a (69%)  AA: 53% (63%)  White: 72% (84%) | 29% (47%) | Average experience, lower pay | 5535  10564 |
| Itasca | 741 | All: 76% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 70% (69%)  AA: 40% (63%)  White: 86% (84%) | 51% (47%) | Average experience, average pay | 5949  10997 |
| Groesbeck | 1582 | All: 65% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 70% (69%)  AA: 42% (63%)  White: 67% (84%) | 35% (47%) | More experience, average pay | 6843  12049 |
| Mexia | 2210 | All: 61% (TX 75%)  Hisp: 56% (69%)  AA: 55% (63%)  white: 68% (84%) | 29% (47%) | Average experience, average pay | 5425  9521 |

**Opportunity in Bosque County**

Education

Public schools in Bosque County are well-performing. They have relatively high test scores and perform as well or better than the state in college-readiness. In Clifton, minority students’ performance is close to the state average on TAKS scores. The achievement gap is slightly wider for black students. In Meridian, however, there is a significantly wider gap between white and Hispanic students’ performance than the state average. This may be a function of the relatively recent Hispanic population growth, which is consistent with a higher number of English language learners, but it should be explored.

For those past public school, there are relatively few opportunities for training, either to obtain high school equivalency or to seek higher education. The county is served by Hill College, located in the next county, but there are no on-site locations in Bosque County where instruction is delivered. On the other hand, opportunities for online education exist, both through Hill and other post-secondary institutions.

Information

There is access to information in Bosque County through local libraries, which have computers available for free public use.

Employment

Relatively few Bosque County residents commute out of the county to metro areas. A power plant in Glen Rose is the largest nearby non-county employer. Most Bosque County workers travel fewer than 15 miles to get to work. The price of fuel may make – or remove – opportunities for people to seek employment further away, and those living closest to McLennan and Somervell Counties are more likely to travel into larger cities, but in general its relative remoteness makes Bosque County residents dependent on local sources of employment. The major employers include Clifton ISD, Meridian ISD, Valley Mills ISD, and Double B Foods, a producer of frozen foods sold in restaurants and grocery stores. Double B reports difficulty filling and keeping positions due to background issues and high turnover. Turnover pressures include soft skills deficits, transportation, child care, and general vulnerability of a low-wage workforce.

Wealth Creation and Asset Building

Property values are steady or rising in Bosque County, providing opportunities for some to grow their net assets. However, there is no community foundation focused on the community’s assets, nor is there a service provider for family asset-building workshops or programs.

**Opportunity in Falls County**

Education

Public schools in Falls County are relatively low-performing. Marlin’s standardized test passing rates are 40% lower than the state’s, and only about 1/3 of its graduates demonstrate college-readiness in both English and math. While its passing rates are low, it has essentially no achievement gap: white, African American and Hispanic students pass the TAKS test at the same rate. Rosebud-Lott ISD has roughly the same college-readiness levels with 1/3 of students. Its standardized test scores show higher performance levels overall, but there is a significant achievement gap for African American students. While white and Hispanic students’ scores are within 10% of each other and just below the state average, only 33% of African American students pass the test – 40 percentage points under white students and 30 points below the state average.

As in Bosque County, limited opportunities for training or education exist outside the public school system. McLennan Community College, one county over, offers in-person and online offerings at its campus in Waco, but internet access or transportation is required for Falls County residents to take advantage of those offerings.

Information

Public libraries with free public computer access exist in Marlin and Rosebud and are highly utilized by the public.

Employment

Falls County residents are likelier to commute than those in Bosque County: Marlin and Chilton-areas generally towards Waco, and Rosebud-area generally towards Temple.

Marlin has lost five of its major employers over the past 10 – 15 years, including its VA Hospital and four production facilities, in response to a combination of factors, including industry and company issues, infrastructure instability, and area decline.

Major employers in the area are mostly government and other non-industrial, including two correctional facilities, Marlin ISD, the City of Marlin, Falls Community Hospital and Clinic, Wal-Mart and HEB. On the West side of the county there are few large employers; the most significant is Rosebud-Lott ISD.

Land and facilities are available for employers to locate, and the expected completion of a water supply project serving Marlin could have an impact on its ability to recruit business and industry.

Public transportation links Marlin with Waco’s public transit system and a few major employers. Continued support of this program – which is paid by a combination of fees, Federal grant dollars, and industry participation – is necessary for its continued operation.

Wealth Creation and Asset Building

Property values have been static or falling on average in Falls County over the past 15 years, challenging wealth creation for citizens and local governments alike. Payday and auto-title lending practices are common, and there is no service provider for family asset-building workshops or programs. There is a movement to begin a community foundation in Rosebud to help collect resources to benefit the community, and the model they are using may be useful for other communities.

**Opportunity in Freestone County**

Education

Public schools in Freestone County are well-performing, particularly Fairfield ISD. 2/3 of Fairfield ISD students demonstrated college-readiness in both English and Math, and all cohorts outperformed the state in standardized test scores. Gaps between African American, white, and Hispanic students were smaller in Fairfield than for the state. Scores in Teague were lower, with only 40% of graduating students meeting college-ready criteria on the TAKS, SAT, or ACT, but their TAKS scores were as high as the state average. Hispanic students underperformed their statewide cohort by 10 percentage points, but African American students did better than their state cohort by the same amount.

Limited opportunities for training or education exist outside the public school system. Nearby Navarro College is located in Corsicana.

Information

Public libraries with free public computer access exist in Fairfield and Teague.

Employment

Freestone County workers are likely to work nearby, and employment opportunities are highly correlated with the area’s oil/gas reserves and ancillary industries. Average incomes are higher in Freestone County than in the rest of the region.

Major employers in the area:

Fairfield has an active Industrial Foundation funded by an economic development type A sales tax. It has a developed industrial park with available sites.

Interstate 45 passes alongside the city, and future development along the interstate has the potential to expand the area’s commercial activity with both additional industrial and retail development.

Wealth Creation and Asset Building

Property values and wages have been rising in Freestone County over the past 15 years, increasing per capita wealth.

**Opportunity in Hill County**

Education

Public schools in Hill County are doing fairly academically but are not recognized as high-performing. Hillsboro ISD students’ college readiness in English and Math was about average for the state, as was the rate of passing the TAKS test for all students, but its minority students outperformed their state cohorts, there was no achievement gap for Hispanics, and the gap for African Americans was only 10% (7 points.)

Graduating students in Whitney, the second-largest district, demonstrated college-readiness at about the same rate as did their counterparts across the state, but students exceeded the state’s TAKS passing rates. Achievement gaps were slightly wider for Hispanics but narrower for African Americans.

The small districts of Hubbard and Itasca performed comparably to the state in TAKS scores overall, with Hubbard behind by about 10 points for both white and black students (and too few Hispanics for stats.) Itasca’s white and Hispanic students were right on track with the state, but black students had a significant gap – 40% passing, compared to 86% for whites in Itasca and 63% for black students statewide.

Postsecondary, continuing and vocational education programs, including GED classes are offered in Hill County and nearby. Hill College, located in Hillsboro, offers an array of technical and academic programs, and McLennan Community College and Texas State Technical College, both located in Waco, are relatively easily accessed by Hill County residents as well. The Hillsboro Public Library offers English as a Second Language, adult literacy, and GED preparatory classes.

Information

Libraries in Hillsboro, Whitney, Hubbard, and Itasca offer computer access.

Employment

Hill County workers, while dependent on automobile transportation, have several options for employment. Most commutes are split among nearby destinations, the southern end of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, and Waco.

Hillsboro has one existing and one developing industrial park, with a number of large employers and an increase in interest in the community resulting in potential deals in its pipeline.

Wealth Creation and Asset Building

Property values have been fairly level in Hill County but have seen an upswing.

**Opportunity in Limestone County**

Education

Public schools in Limestone County are performing at less than the state average. While the gap between minority and white students in Mexia is smaller than the state average, all cohorts are underperforming relative to their statewide peers. Only 29% of graduating students demonstrate college-readiness.

In Groesbeck, 65% of students passed the TAKS test (compared to the state average of 75%,) and while Hispanic students outperformed both their statewide peers and white Groesbeck students, white and African American Groesbeck students underperformed their peers by about 20 percentage points.

Additional educational opportunities are relatively plentiful in Limestone County due to Navarro College’s satellite location in Mexia and robust offerings by Mexia and Groesbeck ISDs.

Information

Libraries in Mexia and Groesbeck offer computer access.

Employment

Limestone County workers generally work in the near region, and major employers include the Mexia State Assisted Living Facility, TXU-Luminant power plant and mine, and industrial employers as well as school districts and local governments.

Mexia and Groesbeck both employ professional economic developers who work to recruit industrial as well as retail and other commercial employers.

Wealth Creation and Asset Building

Property values have been rising in Limestone County.

**Opportunity Index**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Bosque | Falls | Freestone | Hill | Limestone |
| jobs | Few local jobs and remote from employment centers | Very few local jobs; moderately accessible to employment centers | Plentiful and well-paying local jobs | Some local jobs and moderately accessible to employment centers | Some local jobs in several sectors but less accessible to employment centers |
| housing | Existing stock in medium condition; low availability | Existing stock plentiful but in poor and deteriorating condition; lots of vacant houses, little of standard | Existing stock in good condition; new houses being built; need for affordable housing and rental | Existing stock in deteriorating condition; need for additional units and improved quality | Range of conditions of existing stock; need for additional units of all varieties |
| recreation | Free public parks, libraries, skate park, little leagues | Free public parks, libraries, little leagues | Free public parks, libraries, little leagues | Free public parks, libraries, little leagues | Free public parks, libraries, pool, little leagues |
| commercial services | Small groceries, dry goods, no big boxes | Small groceries, HEB, Wal-Mart, local clothing and other stores | Small groceries, dry goods, no big boxes, local clothing and other stores | Brookshire’s, Super-Wal-mart, outlet mall, small groceries, and local stores | HEB, Wal-Mart, some chain clothing and other stores, local stores |
| schools | Mid- to – good | Poor, mid, good | good | Mid-range | Mid- to good |
| crime-free area | Relatively low crime | Relatively low crime | Relatively low crime | Relatively low crime | Relatively low crime |
| health care | Two clinics, two nursing homes and hospital in county | Two clinics, two nursing homes and hospital in county | Two clinics, two nursing homes in county | Three clinics, four nursing homes and hospital in county | Two clinics, three nursing homes and hospital in county |

**Target areas**

One traditional way of viewing target opportunity areas, for a region like ours, would be to view the nearest city as the center of opportunity. There will likely always be an element of this, but it is important to our communities to see and foster opportunities from within.

This important – and possible – goal is still, however, new. There are not really areas where opportunities exist in abundance.

The greatest economic opportunities from a manufacturing or industrial perspective are probably in Freestone County; from a tourism perspective probably in Bosque County; from a commercial / logistics perspective probably Hill County. Within each of those counties the ability of individuals to partake of those opportunities has a great deal to do with those individuals’ pre-existing ability to, for example, start a business or secure a skilled job.

We can conclude by saying that each community should be a target for the development of greater opportunity-making infrastructure, such as vocational training, adult workforce development, jobs with OJT components, and libraries and other public facilities where people can access computers.

Characteristics of target areas

As we are proposing to target communities for the creation of opportunities, we do so with the following notions in mind:

* The community and the opportunity should be the right size for each other. A workforce training program, for example, will only work if enough people are able to access it; however, a different type of program in a smaller community might focus on transportation to an area where the training is available.
* Communities have invested in certain locations – such as schools – that may not be universally accessible, but are still more accessible than multiple opportunity areas spread apart. New opportunities should be sited in or near existing opportunity sites to reduce the need for travel between them.
* As mentioned above, for a community to be a center of opportunity it must be traversable. If not sidewalks, some means of making pedestrian travel safe must be a priority.

Access to target areas

See above – very small communities and unincorporated areas may best focus on transportation into the closest community where opportunities are present; those communities, however, have a responsibility to be walkable.

**IDENTIFICATION & ASSESSMENT OF MAJOR PUBLIC INVESTMENTS**

**Public infrastructure investments**

Public infrastructure investments in the region have been mostly limited to repairs / improvements of water, sewer, and streets.

A primary – if not *the* primary – means of funding public infrastructure investments is the Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG.) In rural areas like the Heart of Texas region, these funds are awarded first on a state, then a regional basis; then amounts out of the regional allocation are granted to recipients on a competitive basis.

The competition is based on objective scoring criteria developed internally by the region through a committee known as the Regional Review Committee (RRC) which represents eligible applicant entities and is staffed by the Heart of Texas Council of Governments (HOTCOG.) Although eligible to be spent in a variety of ways, the need and priority for water and sewer systems improvements has meant that the dollars are only used for those projects – and not for other uses that are technically eligible, but would not be prioritized in the scoring system. Housing, streets and remediation of blight are eligible, for example, but do not get funded.

Historically – prior to about 2007 – this committee received written and heard in-person proposals from applicants explaining their projects and the needs they were meant to address. The committee then deliberated and awarded points based on their conviction of the need and impact of the project. More recently, a HUD-mandated objective scoring system was developed, in which all points were assigned in response to scoring factors which could be applied to any applicant and, theoretically, could be so transparent that an applicant could score its own proposal and know what its numeric point assignment would be. The HOTCOG RRC therefore made a great effort to design its objective criteria in such a way as to capture some of the characteristics of need and project impact that they had attempted to address in the previous system.

Any such project is necessarily imperfect but attempts to improve itself over time. Among the imperfections of the current system is how little is known about the actual state of water and sewer systems in the region. Therefore “need for the project” is part of the criteria, but it is scored based on secondary issues such as how recently the applicant has received a CDBG grant in the past.

Similarly, the applicant’s ability or inability to pay for the improvements on its own is a very tricky item to measure and results in a great deal of policy discussion. The application asks whether the applicant has recently raised water or sewer rates and whether it has raised its tax rate, in an effort to determine how vigorously the applicant is attempting to use local resources to deal with its issues. Similarly, it asks about the applicant’s per capita property tax valuation, in an effort to determine its overall community wealth (and therefore, theoretically, its ability to pay for improvements using its own resources.) The system therefore prefers poor communities who continue to raise rates – but has little way of determining whether the project to be implemented is a good fit, meets the most critical needs, etc. Further, (relatively) wealthy communities – like Fairfield – where there is need, but greater ability to pay, may never receive funds at all, regardless of the worthiness of the project. Still, choices must be made in some manner, and the system does reflect the region’s priorities and available knowledge.

A second important feature of the CDBG Grants is their limited amount. Regional biennial allocations of approximately $3m are the norm. Removing the proportionate share for McLennan County, which is part of the HOTCOG Region but outside the scope of this study, the remaining $2.4m would result in about 6 grants over a 2-year period. The 39 eligible applicants covered in this document would therefore each receive funding approximately once every 13 years, if the funds were assigned randomly. This comes out to about $27,000 per year – significant for a small system like that of Coolidge or Rosebud, but almost insignificant to Hillsboro or Mexia.

Pointing out the limitations of the system is important for two reasons: first, to help the region understand how best to improve it, but second – and perhaps more important – to highlight what a small part of a regional public infrastructure improvement strategy the CDBG program ought to be. The fact that it is perhaps the primary source of funding for public infrastructure improvements today is, these weaknesses considered, a symptom of the need for further project development, funding strategies, and the confrontation of deferred maintenance.

Since CDBG is solely expended on water and sewer projects, HOME funds (grants for housing reconstruction for needy residents) are of special significance in addressing housing issues. Nonetheless, similar issues of availability, scope, and additional administrative requirements make those dollars hard to get and hard to spend. A survey of the region’s communities found very few making use of the program, and of those a majority said they had not been able to spend all of their granted amount due to inability to find beneficiaries qualified to meet all the program’s requirements.

**Improvements benefiting all groups?**

CDBG and HOME investments are both required to benefit low-to-moderate income individuals, so those investments – when made – do impact the needy; further, the nature of the projects is racially-blind. Project areas are selected solely based on economic considerations due to the stringent competitive and programmatic requirements. In addition, they are selected by non-local parties: grant proposal writing consultants generally determine the areas of town which are eligible, and engineers identify likely projects located in those areas. Local bias, which must be assumed to exist in some communities to some degree, is therefore likely a small part of project selection.

So, to the extent that communities of color generally have lower incomes than whites, they may directly benefit from these programs to a larger degree.

In a larger sense, CDBG and other infrastructure investments benefit the entire community due to the interconnected nature of infrastructure. There are very few first-time connections to water and sewer lines made in the region anymore, so the improvements in pipe size or composition may confer more reliability in terms of service, but another chief benefit – even to the direct beneficiaries – is to improve the overall system of the community in which they live.

**Improvements disadvantaging any groups?**

Since the construction related to CDBG and other planned improvements are relatively minor projects, there is no displacement or other disadvantage created by them.

There is another change related to public investment that is taking place in the region that will disadvantage low-income populations: public transportation services are likely to be reduced.

The Heart of Texas Rural Transit District receives Federal transportation dollars via the Texas Department of Transportation. These dollars, plus local fares, pay for public transportation services. There are no fixed bus routes in the rural system; rather, the service is demand-response: the caller makes a reservation, and a vehicle arrives at their location to pick them up, take them to their destination, and take them home upon completion of their business.

The service is not available on a routine, repeat basis. That is, it can’t pick up a student or employee 5 days per week and take them to class or to work. Instead, it is for one-off or sporadic appointments or trips. It could take a person to work on days they wouldn’t have access to a vehicle, with plenty of notice.

Because of the nature of the service, a large percentage of these trips are related to medical and commercial errands; this often means driving into the Waco area (McLennan County.) As a part of the region (though not of this study,) McLennan County’s population factors into the allocation of Federal dollars to for use in funding rural transportation in the Heart of Texas. Historically all of these dollars went to HOTRTD to fund the six-county rural system.

Over the next year this is expected to change. McLennan County has concluded that the portion of funding related to its population would be more efficiently spent if not combined with the dollars serving the more spread-out rural population. Even the rural areas of McLennan County are closer together – and closer to trip destinations like health, employment and shopping centers – than those of the other counties. By pulling out, McLennan can use its dollars to achieve more trips – but at a cost to the efficiency of the rest of the system.

The five rural counties addressed in this study will undoubtedly receive less in transit service under the proposed configuration. While the current system serves a relatively small number of people, those it serves are vulnerable and depend on it greatly. Funding shortfalls could be addressed by attempting to subsidize the systems locally, but opportunity costs there include reduced local ability to address other longstanding issues such as the infrastructure problems noted above. The planned response is to slowly shore up the remaining services and to substantiate the need for greater funding through the delivery of as many trips as possible, as funding is tied not only to population but also to ridership.

**Descriptions of each major project**

Bosque

Clifton:

* Water system improvements, refurbishing the elevated water storage tank

Falls

Marlin:

* Water meter replacement: all water meters are being replaced with radio head meters
* Line replacement: selected water mains are being replaced; locations are still being determined but based on system requirements
* Sewer lift station upgrades – all lift stations being upgraded with new motors and pumps
* Sewer line replacement – specific locations are still being determined but based on system requirements
* HOME projects – two houses have been completed and one more has been approved and is ready to begin

Hill

Hubbard:

* Water system improvements to include pressure tanks and water line improvements have just been completed
* Highway 31 loop around Hubbard will begin in about a year
* Applying for CDBG funds for a generator at wastewater plant

**IDENTIFICATION & ASSESSMENT OF FAIR HOUSING ENFORCEMENT ISSUES, SERVICES, & ACTIVITIES**

**Complaints filed, violations**

There have been 15 fair housing cases filed in the HOTETC region in the past 10 years.

Hill County was the location of over half of these filings, with 8 countywide: 1 in Hubbard, 2 in Hillsboro, and 5 in Whitney.

* The Hubbard case was dismissed with a finding of “no cause.” The two Hillsboro cases, which each alleged racial discrimination, were handled administratively without a ruling of “cause.”
* Of the five cases filed in Whitney, three were against the housing authority. These three cases were filed on the same day, all alleged disability discrimination, and were either withdrawn or dismissed with no cause.
* The other two Whitney cases were conciliated – which means a settlement was negotiated between the complainant and the defendant. Of those cases, one involved familial status and the other involved disability.

Bosque County complaints numbered three over the decade, one each in Valley Mills, Clifton and Meridian. The Meridian case, filed in 2009, alleged racial discrimination and was closed administratively without a ruling of “cause.” The Clifton case, also 2009, alleged disability and was withdrawn with resolution. In Valley Mills, racial discrimination was alleged in 2011, and the case was closed administratively without a “cause” ruling.

Two complaints were filed in Falls County (Marlin and Lott.) The case filed in Marlin alleged disability discrimination in 2009, but was dismissed for no cause. The case filed in Lott alleged racial discrimination in 2013 and was closed administratively.

Similarly two complaints were filed in Limestone County, in Mexia. A disability/national origin discrimination complaint was filed in 2012 and dismissed with a finding of “no cause.” A familial status discrimination complaint was filed in 2011, and was found to show discrimination against a family with children.

**Stakeholder feedback**

Stakeholder feedback regarding fair housing in the region is mixed. Qualitative data considered for this report include the following sources:

* Long-term engagement study conducted by Baylor University School of Social Work
* Community planning and feedback-collection meetings held in 11 cities around the region
* Community meetings facilitated by the Sam Houston State Center for Rural Studies in 6 regional communities; each community participated in a series of at least 3 and as many as 6 facilitated meetings
* HOTETC Steering Committee meetings
* Long-term engagement advisory committee meetings
* One-on-one interviews with stakeholders of various races and backgrounds, from throughout the region, regarding fair housing and equity issues

Reports indicate varying level of fairness in housing availability and decision making. Stakeholders did not report systematic or even regular discrimination, but rather identified cases in which individual landlords were preferential to members of their own racial or ethnic group (this was most often cited in relation to whites, but not exclusively.) Most stakeholders indicated that most landlords did not discriminate.

However, there was widespread agreement that availability of affordable, decent-standard housing was a problem throughout the region. If housing was affordable, it was likely to be of poor quality; options with more than two bedrooms were especially scarce; and in many communities there was insufficient housing of any type (sale or rent, affordable or market.)

In conditions of scarcity, even a small amount of discrimination is a large problem because there isn’t the option to simply go “down the street” to another source.

**Services**

Housing authorities

The region’s housing authorities operate as apartment managers: they operate subsidized housing facilities, maintain those facilities, seek tenants who are likely to be stable and peaceful, and handle any issues that arise. While these are important roles and roles the communities and stakeholders appreciate, they are not seen as greatly impactful to the larger issues of housing availability and fairness. This is in part because the number of units is – in the cases in which we received feedback – significantly less than there is demand for, so the larger issues are unresolved, and the housing authority has no role in the overall picture beyond their properties.

Activities

No stakeholders could report any fair housing activities, with the exception that local governments occasionally run “fair housing” notices in newspapers or on websites as part of grant compliance. There was not a feeling that these notices produced an increase in understanding of housing issues.

Discrimination Reporting and Resolution

There is very little awareness of the legal aspects of fair housing, discrimination, and how to respond to it in the region. Web searches yield an online tool for reporting discrimination, as well as a list of agencies – the closest of which are in Dallas, Fort Worth, and Austin – where assistance in reporting discrimination could be obtained. There was information about reporting discrimination in Waco, but it was difficult to locate resources in Waco for the rural area. One good resource is the TDHCA program guide, which outlines agencies and information for several pertinent areas (rental, real estate agencies, lending, etc.) It identifies the Texas Workforce Commission – which has an office in Waco, and field offices in Marlin, Hillsboro and Teague – as a place where complaints may be filed.

Stakeholders felt that formal complaints were likely not to be filed unless discrimination was particularly obvious or egregious. One citizen said people were not likely to report discrimination, but would share their experience with people they knew and trusted. In a different statement, a citizen explained the importance of people getting information face-to-face: “you can’t just put it on the water bill or a notice in the newspaper. They need to be able to ask questions to comprehend what the information means to them.” While this statement was referring to information about home repair programs, it applies here too. The distance and institutionality of the reporting system is likely a barrier to its use.

**Advocates’ conclusions**

The greatest needs are for more quality housing of all types. No community reported having enough or too much. Of the specific needs identifies further, affordable housing and housing suitable for larger families were identified as particular gaps, particularly in the counties and communities with higher low-income populations.

An encouraging sentiment was that racism and discrimination, while still present in individual circumstances, was not seen as a major barrier to housing access: greater availability of housing, not the elimination of discrimination, was seen as the likeliest way to alleviate the vast majority of problems.

Racism and discrimination does continue to affect the region’s communities, however, and to keep people from feeling as though they have achieved true community. Stakeholders felt that there were sufficient ingredients of goodwill and fairness present to make further progress in moving beyond these issues, with some intentional action. The conclusions reached in the long-term engagement study – particularly the employment of a regional engagement professional who could assist communities in bringing more community members to the table, and then in engaging them in mutual dialogue and effort for community betterment, were seen as well-chosen to help move forward in this area.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall, there are three main issues with housing equity in the region.

**First**, there is very little acceptable housing available for low- to moderate-income persons. This is because there is little housing investment, overall housing stock is old and in relatively ill repair, property has very little value, and there is no market. Further, there is a possibly classist bias against subsidized housing developments, which may further contribute to its lack. This means that low-to-moderate-income persons are likely to live in substandard houses.

**Second,** there is very little infrastructure in low-income and minority neighborhoods. This is because infrastructure was built inequitably when it was built, and because there is insufficient local funding to build more infrastructure. This means that low-to-moderate-income persons are likely to have less in the way of sidewalks, drainage, and lighting.

**Third,** there is little opportunity for economic advancement in rural communities in the region. This is because most have too small a population to sustain workforce development services, adult education programs, public transportation, free pre-K and other early childhood programs, robust employment opportunities, and other sources of opportunity. This means economically-disadvantaged individuals and families are likely to stay in similar economic circumstances, and therefore to stay in the same neighborhoods, and therefore the cycle continues.

**Overall change needed**

Overall, the needed changes are to housing, to neighborhoods, and to local communities and economies.

Housing needs to be of decent quality and a range of affordability. Neighborhoods need to be safe and traversable by foot. Communities need to be places where opportunities exist and a person working hard is able to better himself or herself, and local economies need to be strong enough to support jobs and services.

**Methodology for creating and refining goals & objectives**

The goals and objectives were formulated at the direction of the Steering Committee by a community development consultant who was involved in and informed by the following:

* Baylor School of Social Work Long-term Engagement Study. Consultant met several times with the group conducting the study, received weekly reports, and reviewed draft information and discussed the feedback as it was being collected through stakeholder interviews.
* Housing Work Group meetings, in which regional officials discussed the state of housing in their communities; visited a privately developed affordable housing site; and discussed options and attitudes regarding affordable housing.
* Quarterly Steering Committee meetings, in some of which housing was discussed directly and in all of which broader topics of the communities’ issues and possible development options were discussed.
* Small-group meetings with community leadership – i.e., newly elected mayors or council people, people learning about the project after it had begun
* Progress report and input gathering community meetings, in which the overall planning project was explained and community members had the opportunity to discuss major issues, barriers, and opportunities
* Thirteen scenario planning meetings held in 11 cities, in which a broad group of residents were asked about their concerns and priorities for their cities and were able to respond anonymously regarding a range of issues including housing and inclusion
* Stakeholder interviews focused on the elements treated by this document, including discrimination, segregation, limits to housing choice, opportunities, and strategies for improvement.
* Research into demographic, economic and other data for the region’s communities
* Review of other plans and efforts in other communities
* Visits to several communities in each county, including to racially concentrated areas of poverty

Once the recommendations were in draft form, they were circulated for review and input in a variety of ways:

* Presented to the Steering Committee for review
* Sent to regional community and economic development officials
* Placed in hard-copy form in public libraries
* Emailed or mailed to stakeholder interviewees with reply requested
* Presented and discussed in public meetings in communities throughout the region and in each county

**Specific goals & objectives to accomplish the change**

It hardly need be said that this entire project of greater coordination and long-term planning and management of community development, environmental development, and economic development is the best way to increase fair housing and equity across the region, because it is obvious that a systems approach is the only way communities will be able to afford the transformation indicated by this analysis.

However, this review should further highlight the following sub-goals and objectives.

1. Local Housing Policy that Encourages Quality and Affordability
   1. Encourage (and where possible, incentivize) investment in the quality of existing housing stock
   2. Mandate the repair or removal of substandard housing
   3. Identify and pursue affordable housing options that are sensitive to local fears based on previous “bad” housing projects
      1. Tiny houses
      2. Duplexes
      3. Small multifamily developments
   4. Incentivize development within the city limits and disincentivize development outside the city limits
2. Local Transportation Infrastructure that Works for Cars, Bikes, and Pedestrians
   1. Identify and implement street maintenance that is affordable enough to be used on all roadways regularly enough to keep surfaces smooth and crowned.
   2. Identify pedestrian routes on all arterial roadways. If sidewalks are present, they should be maintained. If sidewalks are not present, the roadway should be wide enough to accommodate a pedestrian/bike lane.
   3. Incentivize development within the city limits and disincentivize development outside the city limits
3. Code Enforcement and Development Policy that Builds Neighborhoods
   1. Adopt and enforce “prudent person” standards that are easy to understand
   2. Fund the execution of improvements with liens to properties
   3. Aggressively divest of trustee-held properties for redevelopment
4. City Management that Manages Assets
   1. Adopt and follow capital improvements plans
   2. Remove from the plan activities that aren’t affordable
   3. Invest in maintenance and operating reserves
5. Economic Development that Serves Residents First
   1. Prioritize business retention and expansion
   2. Incentivize jobs for locals, entry-level workers, and on-the-job training
   3. Use claw-back provisions
   4. Invest in workforce training, beginning in local public school

In addition to the foregoing, which represent strategies and approaches that might be tailored to most communities in the region, we offer the following specific recommendations.

Bosque County

* Meridian
  + Reach out to the underserved, with particular focus on the Hispanic population, with deliberate outreach efforts to explain services and programs and to solicit participation in community activities. Increased engagement will lead to safer neighborhoods, better parental involvement in schools, and better quality of life.
  + Engage in code enforcement from a city perspective and community clean-ups from a volunteer perspective.
  + Train a librarian to assist patrons with FAFSA, job seeking, online education, and other means to improve themselves and their families
* Clifton
  + Identify locations for additional housing

Falls County

* Marlin
  + Enforcement of codes prohibiting overgrown grass and weeds, accumulated junk and debris, junked vehicles, and structurally unsound houses
  + Demolition of abandoned houses, clearing of lots. This has been done well in Rosebud partnering with individuals in the private sector who recycle and reuse building materials; perhaps similar strategies could be employed.
  + Renovation / refurbishment of King Street Park and Falconer-Stamps Community Center. While more significant improvements would require a funding source, meaningful improvements could be accomplished with donated materials and volunteer labor.
  + Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Sidewalks are probably impractical, but the community should explore striped pedestrian/bike lanes and/or caution signs to designate walking areas and remind drivers to watch for pedestrians. Additional lighting would also be advantageous along these corridors.
  + HUD should consider relocating affordable housing complex from isolated location in South Marlin to another location closer to schools and businesses. The current location is isolated due to railroad track and may add stress to water /sewer systems.
  + Continue community planning work and continue to encourage participation across racial, age, and socioeconomic lines.
* Rosebud
  + Continue code enforcement and beautification activities.
  + Continue improvement of West Rosebud.
  + Encourage development of more housing, including affordable housing and housing with more than two bedrooms
  + Continue community planning work and continue to encourage participation across racial, age, and socioeconomic lines.
  + Dig into African-American standardized test achievement gap. Identify retired teachers and other community stakeholders, particularly of African-American descent, to provide mentoring to this cohort and encourage hope, improvement, and engagement.

Freestone County

* Fairfield and Teague
  + Incentivize infill housing development, including renovation of existing stock

Hill County

* Hillsboro
  + Create incentives for the rehabilitation of residential properties for resale or rent
  + Demolition of abandoned houses, clearing of lots. This has been done well in Rosebud partnering with individuals in the private sector who recycle and reuse building materials; perhaps similar strategies could be employed.
  + Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Sidewalks are probably impractical, but the community should explore striped pedestrian/bike lanes and/or caution signs to designate walking areas and remind drivers to watch for pedestrians. Additional lighting would also be advantageous along these corridors. The community should identify safe routes to/from schools, major employers, and from each major area into downtown.
  + Consider rephrasing or removing unwelcoming signage.
  + Consider engaging in a community involvement process to educate citizens about issues, generate buy-in for development efforts, and create collaboration around improving conditions in neighborhoods and increasing opportunity citywide.
* Hubbard
  + Create incentives for the rehabilitation of residential properties for resale or rent
  + Demolition of abandoned houses, clearing of lots. This has been done well in Rosebud partnering with individuals in the private sector who recycle and reuse building materials; perhaps similar strategies could be employed.
  + Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Sidewalks are probably impractical, but the community should explore striped pedestrian/bike lanes and/or caution signs to designate walking areas and remind drivers to watch for pedestrians. Additional lighting would also be advantageous along these corridors. The community should identify safe routes to/from schools, major employers, and from each major area into downtown.
  + Continue community planning work and continue to encourage participation across racial, age, and socioeconomic lines.

Limestone County

* Mexia
  + There is evidence of a good process for code enforcement; this should be continued.
  + Assemble vacant lots and incentivize development of affordable and market-rate housing.
  + Create incentives for the rehabilitation of residential properties for resale or rent
  + Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Explore striped pedestrian/bike lane to designate walking area. The community should identify safe routes to/from schools, major employers, and from each major area into downtown.
  + Continue good stewardship of infrastructure and water resources.
  + Consider a community initiative to clean up and beautify the community, using a coalition of public and private organizations representing citizens of all backgrounds.
* Groesbeck
  + Focus on infrastructure and water supply.
  + Assemble vacant lots and incentivize development of affordable and market-rate housing.
  + Create incentives for the rehabilitation of residential properties for resale or rent
  + Identification of safe pedestrian routes based on connectivity and street width. Explore striped pedestrian/bike lane to designate walking area. The community should identify safe routes to/from schools, major employers, and from each major area into downtown.

**MAJOR TAKEAWAYS FROM STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

1. Any caveats or final input from stakeholders after conclusions were presented

The findings in this report were discussed in a Steering Committee meeting and in called community meetings held in 9 communities, with at least one meeting in each county.

The meeting attendees were majority white, but African American and Hispanic attendees were present at most of the meetings as well. The findings were discussed in greater or lesser detail by meeting attendees in response to the presentation, depending on the group, but in most cases there were visible signs of agreement by attendees of all backgrounds. There was one community meeting in which there was no marked response to the information, but attendees did take extra copies of the report.

After several of the meetings, attendees came up to register their particular support of the information. Stakeholders who were interviewed individually and sent the document for review, also responded positively to its content and expressed the opinion that it adequately represented the major issues and presented practical and helpful strategies.

Overall there were no alterations based on feedback once the strategies were drafted other than to further explain or clarify some of the language used in the report.

**APPENDICES AND EXHIBITS**

1. Map of housing discrimination cases filed
2. Map of racial/ethnic concentration
3. Map of poverty concentration
4. Map of RCAP
5. Map of Opportunity Areas
6. Population tables
7. Recommendation tables