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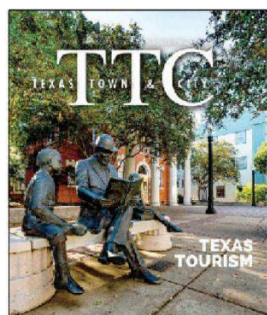


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ABOUT THE COVER

Showcasing *Treasured Moments* in downtown Bryan, this month's cover celebrates the creative spirit that makes Texas cities "must-visit" destinations.

ABOUT ★ TML

The **Texas Municipal League** exists solely to provide services to Texas cities. Since its formation in 1913, the League's mission has remained the same: to serve the needs and advocate the interests of its members. Membership in the League is voluntary and is open to any city in Texas. From the original 14 members, TML's membership has grown to more than 1,150 cities. Over 16,000 mayors, councilmembers, city managers, city attorneys, and department heads are member officials of the League by virtue of their cities' participation.

The League provides a variety of services to its member cities. One of the principal purposes of the League is to advocate municipal interests at the state and federal levels. Among the thousands of bills introduced during each session of the Texas Legislature are hundreds of bills that would affect cities. The League, working through its Legislative Services Department, attempts to defeat detrimental city-related bills and to facilitate the passage of legislation designed to improve the ability of municipal governments to operate effectively.

The League employs full-time attorneys who are available to provide member cities with information on municipal legal matters. On a daily basis, the legal staff responds to member cities' written and oral questions on a wide variety of legal matters. The League annually conducts a variety of conferences and training seminars to enhance the knowledge and skills of municipal officials in the state. In addition, the League also publishes a variety of printed materials to assist member cities in performing their duties. The best known of these is the League's magazine, *Texas Town & City*. Each issue focuses on a variety of contemporary municipal issues, including survey results to respond to member inquiries.

For additional information on any of these services, contact the

Texas Municipal League at 512-231-7400 or visit our website, www.tml.org.

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MESSAGE ★ FROM THE PRESIDENT



Marissa Ximenez

Mayor Pro Tem, City of Floresville
TML President

Dear Texas City Official,

There is something powerful about inviting others to experience the place you call home. Tourism gives us the opportunity to tell our story – through our history, residents, local businesses, and the traditions that define us. In this month's issue of *Texas Town & City*, you'll read how communities across Texas are using tourism to share their stories and showcase what makes them unique.

From regional partnerships that pool resources and expand reach, to heritage festivals that honor local roots, cities are finding creative ways to showcase what makes them distinctive. You'll see examples of placemaking through murals and painted utility boxes, arts initiatives that activate public spaces, streetscape and façade improvements that invite visitors downtown, and cultural incubator programs that nurture homegrown talent. Many of these efforts begin with something simple: leveraging what you already have and placing authentic community voices at the heart of the story.

In my hometown of Floresville, known as the "Peanut Capital of Texas," we see that spirit come alive each year during our Peanut Festival. Visitors fill our historic downtown, local businesses thrive, and residents are reminded of the strength of our shared traditions. Tourism, at its best, brings people together and reinforces what makes a community special.

I hope the stories in this issue spark ideas for your city. When we tell our stories with authenticity and heart, we create opportunity, connection, and lasting pride. ★

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marissa Ximenez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "X" and "Z".

Marissa Ximenez

Mayor Pro Tem, City of Floresville
TML President

Discover, Learn, Connect at the TML Small Town Conference!
Registration is open for the 2026 TML Small Town Conference on May 21-22 in Bastrop. This annual event brings together city leaders from across Texas to share ideas and gain practical tools for managing small-town challenges. With sessions on leadership, economic development, budgeting, grant funding, and legal and legislative issues, attendees will leave better equipped to serve their communities. Thanks to support from event sponsor Bureau Veritas, the conference continues to provide valuable opportunities for learning and networking. Secure your spot today at tmlsmalltownconference.org.

Annual Conference Exhibit Space Reservations Open This Month
Exhibit space reservations for the 2026 TML Annual Conference and Exhibition open this month, kicking off preparations for one of the League's most anticipated events of the year. More than 350 businesses and organizations throughout Texas are expected to exhibit in San Antonio this November. Space is limited! Don't miss your opportunity to connect with Texas city officials and municipal professionals from across the state. For reservation dates, booth rates, and sponsorship opportunities, visit www.tmlxhibits.org.

TML Associate Membership Is Now TML Business Membership
TML's associate membership has been renamed TML business membership to better reflect its purpose and participants. Annual business membership is available year-round to businesses, organizations, associations, universities, and individuals who provide services, products, training, or other resources for Texas city officials, or who have an interest in municipal government or League activities. TML is proud to work with more than 400 business members dedicated to advancing the League's mission of empowering Texas cities to serve their citizens.

Business membership includes subscriptions to League communications, early selection of exhibit space and sponsorships, member-only access to event registrations, discounts on advertising in *Texas Town & City*, and additional benefits throughout the year.

Learn more about TML business membership at www.tml.org/165/Business-Membership.

Online Public Funds Investment Act Training
TML partners with Virtual Learning Concepts to offer online Public Funds Investment Act training for city officials. State law requires that the city's treasurer, chief financial officer, and investment officer attend at least one 10-hour PFI training session within 12 months after taking office, and an additional eight-hour course every successive

two years. This online course offers the full 10 hours of certified training from the comfort of home or office. No prerequisites are required. Testing will take place as course sections are completed, and a certificate of completion can be generated at the end of the training. Learn more at <https://tmlpfia.org/online-training>.

Celebrate Your City's Success!
For three decades, the TML Municipal Excellence Awards have honored Texas cities that excel in tackling local challenges and sparking innovation. Awards are given annually in two population categories across five subject areas. Don't miss your chance to be recognized. Submit your application by June 5 at <https://www.tml.org/210/Municipal-Excellence-Awards>. ★

TML Training Calendar April-May 2026	
April 2 Leading Through Uncertainty: Practical Tools for Clear Communication Webinar	May 5-8 TMHRA Annual Conference Round Rock
April 8-10 TML Leadership Academy – Course One (sold out) Round Rock	May 7 The 2026 Hurricane Season Is Upon Us: Is Your City Ready? Webinar
April 9 TML Small Cities' Clinic Hallsville	May 13-15 TML Leadership Academy – Course Two (sold out) Round Rock
April 16 Embracing the Future: AI's Influence on Local Government Webinar	May 21-22 TML Small Town Conference Bastrop
April 19-21 GFOAT Spring Conference San Antonio	May 21 Mayor 101 Powers, Duties, and Boundaries Under Texas Law Webinar



SPECIAL EVENTS, BIG CROWDS, AND SMART RISK MANAGEMENT

By **Scott Houston**, Intergovernmental Relations Manager, TML Risk Pool

Festivals, concerts, parades, sporting events, and holiday celebrations are a vital part of what makes Texas cities great places to live and visit. These activities boost local economies, strengthen community pride, and showcase what makes each city unique. They also bring risk.

Large crowds, temporary stages, food vendors, alcohol service, and increased traffic create exposures that cities must manage carefully. A single accident — a trip hazard, a vehicle incident, or a structural failure — can result in serious injury, property damage, and costly liability claims.

Fortunately, the TML Risk Pool (Pool) provides an array of coverages specifically for the risks associated with special events. The Pool provides workers' compensation coverage for employees or volunteers who sustain an injury during the course and scope of working at the event. The Pool also provides property coverage for any structures that sustain damage due to a covered peril. Lastly, the Pool provides coverage that helps protect cities from liability arising from activities that fall outside normal operations, such as festivals, fun runs, fireworks shows, and private events held on

city property. And if the event includes alcoholic beverages, the Pool can even help a city obtain a special liquor liability policy.

One common challenge cities face is determining if additional coverage is needed and which party is responsible for any claims that happen as a result of the event. The answer often depends on who is organizing the event, whether it is open to the public, and whether outside groups are involved. Your risk management advisor can help you evaluate these questions and arrange appropriate coverage, ensuring your city is better protected from any potential claims. To find your risk management adviser, click "Contact Us" at www.tmlirp.org.

Of course, proper coverage is only part of the solution. Risk transfer and loss prevention is equally important. A city should require certificates of insurance from vendors, and managing crowd flow and training volunteers can dramatically reduce the likelihood of accidents.

Cyber and financial risk are also growing concerns at large events, especially when vendors are paid electronically. Verifying payment instructions and using multi-person approval processes can prevent costly wire-transfer scams.

Well-managed events do more than avoid claims; they build trust. When residents and visitors feel safe, they are more likely to return, spend money, and support their community.

The Pool's goal with special events is to help cities run them safely and confidently. ★

Did you know?

The Pool assigns a safety and loss control consultant to every member city. Your consultant can assist with all kinds of loss prevention measures, including no-cost, on-site consultations. Click "Contact Us" to find yours at www.tmlirp.org!

Major Development in Kyle to Create 800 Jobs

Kyle Park is a 101-acre mixed-use development that will feature a multi-phase mix of retail and restaurant space. Strategically located along I-35, the project is designed to serve residents of South Austin and the greater Hays and Caldwell County region, attracting daily visitors, creating new jobs, and strengthening Kyle's role as a premier shopping and employment destination. Approved by the Kyle City Council in December 2023, the development is estimated to create at least 800 full-time jobs and generate approximately \$2.5 million in annual sales tax revenue and \$1 million in annual property tax revenue.

A portion of the development will include multifamily housing, creating a built-in customer base and supporting a connected residential community with access to the planned Vybe Trail.

"Retail leakage studies have shown that Kyle residents regularly drive to neighboring cities to shop due to a lack of options," said Rosie Truelove, Kyle's executive director of strategic development. "Kyle Park addresses that challenge head-on by expanding retail and dining options here at home and we're grateful for the support of Hays County in bringing this project forward."

Aledo Joins Texas Historical Commission's First Street Initiative

The Texas Historical Commission (THC) recently welcomed the City of Aledo and 23 other Texas communities into the THC's First Street initiative.

First Street connects communities with THC programs and services, helps build peer networks, identifies local opportunities, and shares best practices for downtown management and revitalization.

Aledo's participation will support ongoing efforts to strengthen the community's historic downtown by building on the City's unique assets and priorities. Local leaders plan to use the program's training and peer network to advance initiatives related to local business support, public space activation, placemaking, and community events. Additional information about opportunities for community involvement will be shared by the City of Aledo as the program progresses.

"Aledo is growing, and we are committed to growing well," said Mayor Shane Davis. "Downtown is the heart of this community,

and participation in the Texas Historical Commission's First Street Initiative will provide us with valuable tools and partnerships to help us thoughtfully honor and strengthen our historic core, support local businesses, and ensure downtown remains a vibrant gathering place for generations to come."

Aledo joined Allen, Brownsboro, Caddo Mills, Castroville, Cleburne, Cleveland, Dumas, Fort Davis, the Handley neighborhood of Fort Worth, Glen Rose, Grand Prairie, Hondo, Hughes Springs, Mansfield, Mercedes, Port Lavaca, Post, Rhome, Richmond, San Benito, the Silk Road Cultural Heritage District in San Antonio, Smithville, and Wills Point.

The First Street Initiative provides free educational and networking opportunities for downtown districts and urban neighborhoods interested in community revitalization and historic preservation. First Street participants that are interested and eligible may also pursue entry into THC's Texas Main Street Program, part of the nationally recognized Main Street America initiative.

More information is available on the program webpage at www.thc.texas.gov/firststreet.

Incentives for Locals Turns into Revenue for City of South Lake

For the third consecutive year, Southlake has launched its Open Rewards program, offering customers five percent cash back at participating local retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues. City officials say the program, which operates through the Open Rewards app available in the Apple and Google app stores, is designed to help offset the post-holiday slowdown businesses often experience by boosting local sales and, in turn, sales tax revenue.

Dylan Duque, the city's economic development and tourism manager, said the program generated \$2 million in 2025, with 350 businesses participating and 3,300 users. The initiative began February 1 and will continue until available funds are exhausted.

"I think it was well received, and that played itself out with the statistics," Mayor Shawn McCaskill said.

"The success of Open Rewards in Southlake comes from a community that chooses to shop local, turning everyday purchases into meaningful rewards and measurable impact," Duque said. ★

Building for the Future

Welcoming Millions, Managing Risk

From festivals and parks to convention centers and historic sites, Texas cities host millions of visitors every year. The TML Risk Pool helps communities share the risks that come with tourism, so cities can focus on creating experiences that make Texas the envy of the nation. We're building for the future, and we're *Stronger, Together*.



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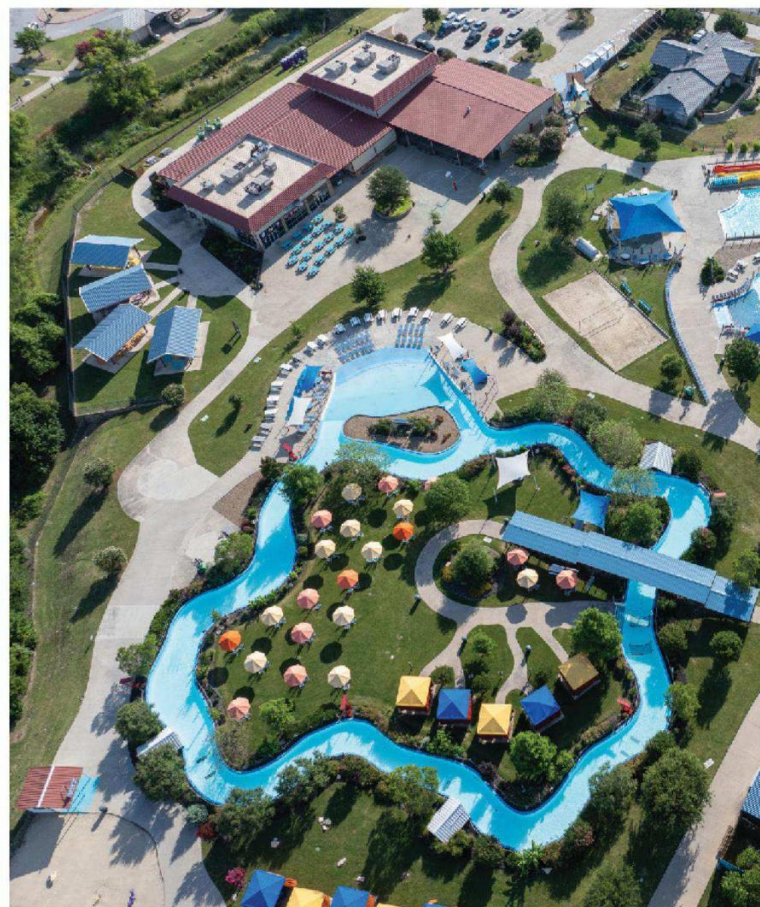


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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

By **Jeffrey J. James**, CPM, City Manager, and **Christopher Cook**, CPM, Director of Public Safety/Chief of Police, City of White Settlement

As an important economic pillar for small cities across Texas, tourism opportunities can flourish when coupled with private and public investments. The City of White Settlement, with historic roots surrounding military aviation since the 1940s, continues to invest significant capital into projects that enhance tourism, while also encouraging local private investors to spruce up properties across town that supports beautification efforts for visitors and residents alike.

"Monopolizing the dirt" is a term frequently used when developing strategies to maximize a city's ad valorem tax base. Depending on zoning, cities may also generate sales tax revenue from commercial properties conducting taxable transactions.

While new development brings its own opportunities and challenges, this article focuses on cities like White Settlement – communities that are largely built out, with little vacant land remaining. Many small municipalities across the state, particularly those in urban areas, are landlocked or surrounded by larger cities and have no extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) opportunities beyond their corporate limits.

Rather than looking at this as a negative, small towns have a unique opportunity to re-develop areas in need of revitalization, while also placing emphasis on the crown jewel assets of city properties to encourage tourism and

visits from neighboring jurisdictions. This strategy equates a win-win for smaller towns.

Tourism and Economic Impact

White Settlement is one of a handful of municipalities that owns and operates a large waterpark. Splash Dayz serves as a water oasis for local residents and surrounding communities across western Tarrant County. Featuring a variety of attractions, including a lazy river, water slides, a wave pool, food concessions, and rentable event space, the park offers visitors a fun and refreshing way to beat the Texas heat.

The City boasts more than 200 acres of world-class park amenities, providing residents and visitors with year-round opportunities to enjoy sports and recreational programs. It is well known for hosting professional softball leagues and tournaments, as well as youth sports programs that begin each spring.

With three community parks, six neighborhood parks, an 18-hole disc golf course, and a Parks and Recreation facility at the municipal complex alongside a full-service library, the City hosts events such as wrestling, theatre, and basketball. A senior center, open five days a week, offers programs including choir, sewing, and health fairs to keep older adults active and engaged.

The City also brings the community together through annual traditions and seasonal events including the spring "Opening Day" Parade, "Light the Night" Christmas tree lighting parade, an Independence Day celebration with fireworks and vendors, Haunted Trails in October, and quarterly police-hosted engagement events such as Touch-a-Truck, National Night Out, and other outreach programs that strengthen community trust.

With tourism serving as a cornerstone of the community's strategy, private industry directly benefits from increased event attendance. As more visitors come to town, they are more likely to dine at local restaurants, shop in retail stores, and stay in area hotels and motels – driving broader economic activity throughout the City.

As we strategize revitalization of areas across town to benefit the community and increase tourism, this reality begs the question: What is the right approach to redeveloping areas experiencing blight, high retail or office vacancies, or abandonment?

By working directly with private industry and business leaders, small cities may have an advantage over larger urban areas. The small-town, personal touch can make a meaningful difference to a business owner or investor considering redevelopment.

Below are practical touchpoints small cities can use to present an attractive proposal to private industry and help move redevelopment projects across the finish line, leading to higher taxable property values, improved aesthetics, and reinforcement that your city is open for business.

Small Hometown Touchpoints

In a small city, it is entirely possible for private industry to work directly with an economic development coordinator, city manager, or senior building official within hours versus navigating the bureaucracy often found in larger urban areas.

City managers should ensure building officials maintain up-to-date property lists to reference when opportunities arise. Success can occur in two ways: when a business owner approaches the city about a potential property, or when the city leverages its relationships to connect interested parties with residential, office, or commercial spaces that meet their needs.

Permit Process

All cities have required permitting processes. In a smaller city, however, the senior building official is often uniquely positioned to meet directly with buyers and guide them through the entire process.

Timelines are typically accelerated, making transactions more efficient and less burdensome. This advantage should be emphasized when speaking with potential investors, particularly in redevelopment projects where speed and certainty are critical.

Incentives

Small cities should not be underestimated when it comes to creative redevelopment incentives.

Through a formal process, local elected officials may consider elements of an economic incentive package tailored to a specific project. Grants, including non-competitive and matching opportunities, may also be available depending on the type of redevelopment and alignment with the city's strategic priorities.

Public Safety

Investors and property owners are more confident investing in communities that emphasize safety and transparency.

Involving the police chief or fire chief in redevelopment discussions can significantly strengthen trust and credibility. In a recent example in White Settlement, the police department negotiated a \$1-per-year lease for a small office space within a redeveloping office park to establish a "Cop Shop." This visible presence reassured tenants and supported the broader redevelopment effort.

Assistance with Hometown Branding

Small towns are well positioned to help redeveloped properties gain attention.

Many residents follow city social media platforms and local digital or print news outlets. City communications staff can partner with property owners to share the story of how a project benefits the community. When commercial components such as restaurants or retail businesses open, the city can help promote them to encourage local patronage.

These opportunities may be overlooked in larger cities but can be effectively leveraged in smaller communities.

Regular Check-Ins Throughout the Process

Frequent communication during the purchase, planning, and redevelopment phases are essential.

Small cities are uniquely positioned to provide ongoing feedback and assist with zoning, economic incentives, and other regulatory processes tied to a project's success. Consistent engagement helps prevent misunderstandings and keeps redevelopment efforts on track.

Focal Point on Local

We live in an era where residents actively choose to support local businesses. Small towns should capitalize on that sentiment by encouraging residents to shop locally and reinvest in their community. Celebrating new development and redevelopment projects increases visibility and reinforces the value of private investment in the city.

Case Study: Frank Kent Motor Company

An office park built in 1984 had remained largely vacant in several of its larger buildings. In 2022, twins Will Churchill and Corrie Fletcher, great-grandchildren of the late Cadillac dealer Frank Kent, approached the City of White Settlement about purchasing four office buildings across 15 acres.

"I was impressed with how easy it was to work with City Manager Jeff James and his staff as it related to what we wanted to do with the property," said Churchill. "Ultimately, we decided to move our corporate headquarters and redevelop the buildings into a light industrial park with restaurant opportunities for entrepreneurs."

The redevelopment required significant investment both inside and out.

"There's an old saying in construction and redevelopment that time kills all deals and adds costs," Churchill added. "Their rapid turnarounds provided greater flexibility to get things done."

Fletcher echoed the importance of communication.

"Maintaining open lines of communication between our partnership and the city has been one of the keys to success," he said. "It is a great advantage to pick up the telephone and connect directly with decision-makers at the city level."

The addition of the police "Cop Shop" further strengthened the project by reinforcing public safety and community partnership.

Performance Metrics

Ultimately, the viability of any redevelopment project depends on its ability to transform existing infrastructure into a profitable venture for investors.

Allowing private business leaders to share their vision with city leadership can foster collaboration and lead to greater satisfaction throughout the redevelopment process. For cities, the successful revitalization of vacant or aging properties strengthens the tax base, enhances aesthetics, and maximizes the value of existing infrastructure.

For built-out communities, leveraging private business is not just an option – it is essential to long-term fiscal health and sustained community vitality. ★



Q What state laws govern conflicts of interest for public officials?

A Public officials should be aware of the following state laws:

- Chapter 171 of the Local Government Code regulates local public officials' conflicts of interest;
- Chapter 176 of the Local Government Code requires certain local government officers to disclose the receipt of gifts from employment, business, and familial relationships with vendors who conduct business, or consider conducting business, with local government entities;
- Chapter 553 of the Government Code requires a public servant who has an interest in property that is to be acquired with public funds to disclose their interest;
- Chapter 573 of the Government Code creates limitations on governmental entities' authority to hire certain close relatives of public officials;
- The Texas Constitution and common law prevent a person from holding two or more public offices at the same time;
- Chapter 145 of the Local Government Code, which only applies to cities with a population over 100,000, governs financial disclosure requirements for certain city officials and candidates for city office;
- Local Government Code Section 212.017 governs conflicts when a public official with authority over approving plats has an interest in a subdivided tract;
- Local Government Code Section 131.903 regulates

conflicts of interest with respect to a city's selection of a depository; and

- Local Government Code Section 171.003 prohibits a local public official from acting as surety for a business entity that has work, business, or a contract with the city or on any official bond required of an officer of the city.

This Q&A will focus on Chapter 171 of the Local Government Code.

Q What is Chapter 171 of the Local Government Code?

A Chapter 171 prohibits a local public official from voting on or participating in a matter involving a business entity or real property in which the official has a substantial interest. Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.004. The prohibition applies if an action on the matter will result in a special economic effect on the business or on the value of the property that is distinguishable from the effect on the public. *Id.* § 171.004(a).

Q Who is a "local public official" under Chapter 171?

A A "local public official" is defined as "a member of the governing body or another officer, whether elected, appointed, paid, or unpaid, of any . . . [city] . . . or other local governmental entity who exercises responsibilities beyond those that are advisory in nature." *Id.* § 171.001(1).

The term encompasses members of a planning and zoning commission because their responsibilities are beyond those that are advisory in nature. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. KP-0105 (2016), DM-309 (1994). The term does not include a city administrator or a city attorney where those individuals

do not possess authority to vote or make a decision on a proposed agreement that may affect their properties. Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. KP-0244 (2019).

Q Does Chapter 171 apply to an economic development corporation (EDC) board?

A No. The attorney general has opined that an EDC board member is not a local public official for purposes of Chapter 171. Op. Tex. Att’y Gen. No. JC-338 (2001). But when an individual is board member of the EDC, a city councilmember, and has a substantial interest in a business entity receiving an incentive from the EDC, Chapter 171 would require the councilmember to file an affidavit and abstain from participating and voting on approving an EDC project relating to the business entity.

Instead of Chapter 171, an EDC is subject to the conflict-of-interest provisions contained in Chapter 22 of the Texas Business Organizations Code. For example, in a transaction between the EDC and a board member or an organization in which a board member is an officer or member or has a financial interest, the EDC board must know or be informed about the material facts about the relationship, interest, or transaction. Tex. Bus. Org. Code § 22.230. Then an interested board member may vote on that transaction if the disclosure requirement is met. *Id.* An EDC’s bylaws or certificate of formation may provide additional conflict-of-interest requirements too.

Q What is a “substantial interest in a business entity” under Chapter 171?

A A public official has a substantial interest in a business entity if the official:

(1) owns 10 percent or more of the voting stock or shares of the business entity; (2) owns either 10 percent or more

or \$15,000 or more of the fair market value of the business entity; or

(3) receives funds from the business entity that exceed 10 percent of the person’s gross income for the preceding year.

Tex. Loc. Gov’t Code § 171.002(a). The interest of a public official’s relative can also qualify under Chapter 171 as described below.

Q What is a “substantial interest in real property” under Chapter 171?

A A person has a substantial interest in real property if the interest is an equitable or legal ownership interest with a fair market value of \$2,500 or more. Tex. Loc. Gov’t Code § 171.002(b). The interest of a public official’s relative can also qualify under Chapter 171 as described below.

Q Can the interest of a public official’s close relative impact whether the public official has a conflict under Chapter 171?

A Yes. A public official has a substantial interest in a business entity or in real property if the official’s relative within the first degree of consanguinity (blood) or affinity (marriage) has a substantial interest described above in the business entity or in real property. *Id.* § 171.002(c). Any “substantial interest” that a public official’s spouse, parent, child (biological or adopted), stepchild, stepparent, father- or mother-in-law, or son- or daughter-in-law has is attributed to the public official. Tex. Gov’t Code §§ 573.022–.025; Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-267 (1993); Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-95-080.

When a marriage has ended through divorce or death, the marriage is considered to continue so long as a child of

that marriage lives. Tex. Gov't Code § 573.024(b). In other words, if a marriage has ended through divorce or death but a public official still has a living child from that marriage, then the public official would have a Chapter 171 conflict if the former spouse's parents or children have a substantial interest in a business entity or real property.

For example, a public official has a "substantial interest" in a business that employs the official's daughter if the official's daughter earns a small income, which exceeds ten percent of her gross income. See Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0063 (1999).

Q What is a "business entity" under Chapter 171?

A A business entity is defined as "a sole proprietorship, partnership, firm, corporation, holding company, joint-stock company, receivership, trust, or any other entity recognized by law." Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.001(2). A nonprofit corporation is considered a business entity. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-424 (1986).

The term also can include a business entity that represents an entity or person with an interest in a matter before the governing body because Chapter 171 does not require the business entity to have a direct interest in the matter. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. DM-309 (1994).

A city and other public entities, such as a state university or school district, are not business entities. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0031 (2003); DM-267 (1993); JM-852 (1988). Therefore, a city official employed by a public entity may vote on matters related to his or her employer under Chapter 171.

Q What is a "special economic effect" under Chapter 171?

A Whether something will have a "special economic effect" on a business entity or real property usually is a question of fact. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0796 (2010); Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-98-052.

A vote or decision will, as a matter of law, have a "special economic effect" if the governing body considers purchasing goods or services from a business entity in which a local public official has a substantial interest. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0136 (2004), at 3. Moreover, the issue of whether a vote or decision has a special economic effect may be answered as a matter of law in the context of the purchase or sale of an interest in real property. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0796 (2010) (discussing *Dallas Cnty. Flood Control Dist. No. 1 v. Cross*, 815 S.W.2d 271, 281–82 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1991, writ denied)).

Whether a decision will have a special economic effect if it will have broad applicability is less clear. The attorney general has noted:

[A]s a general matter, we observe that it seems unlikely that a broadly applicable [d]istrict action would have a "special economic effect" on a particular business entity distinguishable from its effect on the general public if its only effect on the business entity is generally to encourage (or to limit) property development within the [d]istrict's boundaries.

Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0337 (2005) (decision regarding groundwater district).

A city official with a potential conflict should consult with his or her city attorney or personal attorney.

Q When is it "reasonably foreseeable" that an action will have a special economic effect under Chapter 171?

A Whether it is "reasonably foreseeable" that an action

on the matter will have a special economic effect on the value of the property or on a business entity, distinguishable from its effect on the public, is fact specific. Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-96-049; Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. KP-105 (2016). In instances where the economic effect is direct and apparent at the time of the action, both a court and the attorney general have concluded that the economic effect was "reasonably foreseeable." *Dallas Cnty. Flood Control Dist. No. 1*, 815 S.W.2d at 278; Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0796 (2010).

A city official with a potential conflict should consult with his or her city attorney or personal attorney.

Q What must a public official do if he or she has a conflict under Chapter 171?

A Before a vote or decision on any matter involving the business entity or real property, a public official with a conflict must file an affidavit with the city's official record keeper. Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.004(b). The affidavit must state the nature and extent of the interest. *Id.* The public official must abstain from further participation in the matter. *Id.* The limit on "further participation" does not preclude the interested public official from attending meetings, including executive session meetings, relevant to the matter in which he or she has a substantial interest, provided that the official remains silent during the deliberations. Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0334 (2005).

But a public official who is required to file an affidavit is not required to abstain from participating in the matter if: (1) a majority of the governing body have a substantial interest requiring the affidavits; and (2) file affidavits of similar interests on the same official matter. Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.004(c).

Q What are the consequences if a public official does not file the required affidavit or if the official participates in the matter under Chapter 171?

A A knowing violation of Chapter 171 is a Class A misdemeanor, which is punishable by a fine of up to \$4,000 and/or confinement in jail for a term not to exceed one year. Tex. Penal Code § 12.21.

If a public official votes on a matter that he or she has a substantial interest in or fails to abstain from further participation, the action of the governing body on the matter is voidable if the matter that was the subject of the action would not have passed without the vote of the person who had a "substantial interest." Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.006.

Because of the criminal penalties, city officials should err on the side of caution by filing the affidavit and abstaining from participation if they have a potential conflict.

Q What happens when a city official has a conflict under Chapter 171 and that item is in the budget?

A If an item of the budget is specifically dedicated to a contract with a business entity in which a councilmember has a substantial interest, the city council must vote on that line item separately. Tex. Loc. Gov't Code § 171.005. The affected councilmember may not generally participate in consideration of that item. *Id.*

Q What happens when a city official has a conflict under Chapter 171 when the city is selecting a depository?

A A city may select a bank as its depository even if one or more of the councilmembers is an officer or director of

the bank or owns or has a beneficial interest, individually or collectively, in 10 percent or less of the outstanding capital stock of the bank, so long as: (1) a majority of the councilmembers vote to select the bank as a depository; and (2) the interested councilmember abstains from voting or taking part in the proceedings. *Id.* § 131.903(a)(2)(A)-(B). If an officer or employee of the city with a duty to select the depository owns or has a beneficial interest, individually or collectively, in more than 10 percent of the outstanding capital stock of the bank, the city may not select the bank as its depository. *Id.* § 131.903(a). The attorney general has concluded that this provision regarding conflicts of interests in the selection of depositories is an exception to Chapter 171. Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-97-093.

Q Does Chapter 171 apply when a public official is legally required to perform a specific duty?

A Maybe not. If the law requires an individual public official to perform a specific duty, Chapter 171’s disclosure and abstention requirements may not apply. Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0784 (2010), GA-0510 (2007).

The attorney general recognizes that the term “local public official” as defined in Chapter 171 could be an individual official or an official who is a member of a city council. Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0784 (2010). And while an official acting individually does not “vote,” arguably such an official may make a “decision.” *Id.* But when the law imposes on a single, specific official a duty and the official has a conflict under Chapter 171, the attorney general has concluded that the legislature could not have intended for the disclosure and abstention requirements to apply. *Id.* (concluding that Section 171.004’s disclosure and abstention requirements did not apply to a sheriff’s statutory bail bond and forfeiture duties). ★





DESTINATION STORYTELLING ON A SMART BUDGET: HOW MCKINNEY USES AUTHENTICITY TO DRIVE TOURISM IMPACT

By **Sarah Nolting**, Senior Communications and Media Specialist, Visit McKinney

Many Texas destinations face rising expectations for marketing impact, audience engagement, and storytelling. In McKinney, this has pushed our team to rethink how we reach visitors and tell our story in more creative, authentic ways. The result has been a shift toward smarter destination storytelling rooted in community, partnerships, and originality.

Over the past year, McKinney has moved away from traditional, high-cost campaigns and embraced a more creative, authentic approach to storytelling. By leaning into the weird, the whimsical, and the uniquely local, we have built a sustainable model that prioritizes real people, real experiences, and community pride. This approach is intentional, scalable, and replicable for destinations of any size.

Creative Strategy in a Growing City

McKinney is a large and rapidly expanding city in North Texas, but our tourism marketing resources reflect what many small-to-mid-sized destinations experience. This reality has encouraged our team to be highly strategic and creative in how we tell our story.

Rather than focusing on what we don't have, we focus on how to use our resources intentionally to tell meaningful stories that resonate. This mindset reframes a common challenge for municipal tourism teams: compelling marketing does not require massive production budgets. It requires clarity of message, consistency of voice, and a willingness to let your community help shape the narrative.

Community Voices at the Core of Storytelling

One of McKinney's most impactful shifts has been placing community voices at the heart of its marketing. Instead of relying on glossy, high-production promotional content, we focus on the people who define our destination – local makers, independent business owners, chefs, athletes, unique lodging hosts, and long-standing traditions that shape community life.



By highlighting authentic stories, we capture the true character of McKinney in a way that feels genuine, relatable, and rooted in place. This approach resonates with modern travelers who are increasingly seeking real experiences over polished advertising.

A great example is McKinney's Inflatable Turkey Capital campaign. This initiative built on a quirky, organic community tradition that had existed for years, with residents displaying inflatable turkeys in yards and public spaces. Recognizing the charm and uniqueness of this tradition, our team amplified it through media pitching, short-form video content, and collaboration with the original storytellers.

The success of this campaign wasn't about budget. It worked because it tapped into something uniquely McKinney, gave visitors a reason to participate, and made locals feel like co-creators of the story. By encouraging visitors to explore parks, downtown streets, and local businesses in search of the turkeys, the campaign generated strong engagement, over \$64,000 in earned media value, and increased regional awareness. It demonstrated how creativity, not production scale, drives impact.

Another smaller example is our collaboration with one of

our local art shops to put on a monthly mural walk through our downtown area. This event is free, open to the public, and allows for visitors to see the unique artwork around our City while also supporting local businesses. This low-lift piece of engagement is something any city can host.

Leveraging Partnerships Instead of Purchases

Partnerships are central to how McKinney approaches destination storytelling. We regularly collaborate with local businesses, event organizers, sports groups, and city departments to create compelling, mutually beneficial campaigns. These partners contribute time, talent, and access to audiences, allowing us to expand reach while strengthening community relationships.

We approach partnerships with three guiding questions:

- Who already has the audience we want to reach?
- What story can we tell together that we could not tell alone?
- How does this experience benefit both visitors and residents?

A strong example is McKinney's collaboration with the McKinney Independent School District to host the NCAA Division II Football Championship. Working alongside the school district, local hotels, restaurants, and businesses allows us to create a seamless visitor experience while showcasing the City's amenities. This collaborative model strengthens community pride, enhances the visitor journey, and extends stays. The championship has become a blueprint for how creative partnerships can amplify tourism impact through shared ownership of the story.

Using What You Already Have

Many destinations already possess powerful storytelling tools but underutilize them. Before launching new campaigns, McKinney evaluates existing assets such as our website, social platforms, event calendars, and CRM tools.

Thinking like a content creator instead of a traditional tourism marketer has helped us unlock value from assets we were already producing. Blogs, itineraries, seasonal guides, and event-driven content keep our channels fresh while improving search visibility through basic SEO. Repurposing content from partners, influencers, and visitors



(with permission) extends reach and allows one story to live across multiple platforms.

Authenticity over Perfection

A guiding principle in McKinney's approach is prioritizing real moments over polished productions. We focus on documenting experiences rather than producing campaigns. Visitors today want to see what a place really feels like. Candid moments at festivals, behind-the-scenes looks at local businesses, and day-in-the-life storytelling help build trust and emotional connection.

There is a time and place for highly produced creative, but authenticity builds long-term credibility. When audiences see the real McKinney online, their in-person experience aligns with expectations, strengthening satisfaction and brand trust.

Building a "Shared Story" Mindset

One of the most powerful outcomes of this strategy has been the development of a shared storytelling culture. Residents, business owners, visitors, and community organizations increasingly see themselves as co-creators of McKinney's story.

When people see their content featured, they are more likely to create and share again. This creates a self-sustaining cycle of community-generated storytelling that strengthens the destination brand organically. Over time, the destination

gains richer, more diverse narratives without relying on constant new campaign development.

Consistency over Scale

McKinney's experience reinforces an important lesson for destination marketers: consistency matters more than volume. Rather than chasing large-scale, one-off campaigns, we focus on dependable, repeatable storytelling. Our team maintains regular content rhythms such as a monthly newsletter highlighting upcoming events and a monthly social media reel previewing what visitors can plan for.

These low-lift, high-impact tactics create familiarity, reinforce brand voice, and keep McKinney top of mind for travelers. A reliable content cadence builds trust and recognition more effectively than sporadic bursts of promotion.

McKinney's destination marketing success is driven by creative strategy, community collaboration, and authentic storytelling. By prioritizing real people, meaningful partnerships, and shared ownership of the destination narrative, we have built a sustainable model that delivers measurable tourism impact.

Compelling destination marketing is not defined by production size. It is defined by clarity of story, strength of partnerships, and the willingness to let your community be the hero. ★



Photo Credit: Visit Sugar Land

BEYOND THE STADIUM: HOW SECONDARY CITIES CAN ACTIVATE AROUND MEGA EVENTS LIKE THE FIFA WORLD CUP

By **Jordan Cutler**, Senior Marketing Manager, Office of Economic Development and Tourism, City of Sugar Land

When cities prepare for mega events like the FIFA World Cup™, the spotlight naturally falls on stadiums and host venues. Yet the success of an international event depends just as much on the surrounding cities that absorb visitors, host gatherings, and extend the experience beyond match day. These secondary cities may not host games, but they play a critical operational and cultural role.

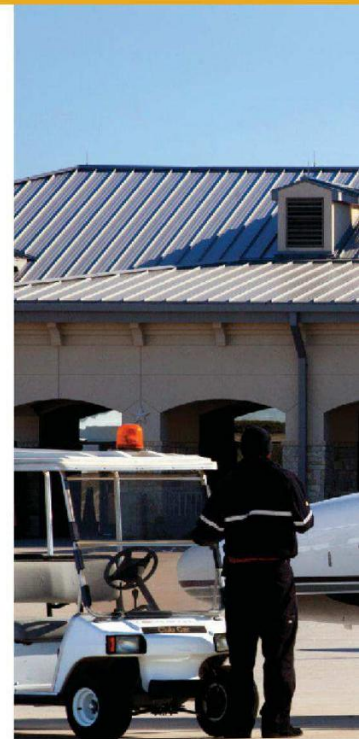
Sugar Land, located southwest of Houston, will not host FIFA World Cup 26™ matches. Instead, it has positioned itself as an Official Houston World Cup 2026 Host City Supporter, focusing on visitor experience, community activation, and regional coordination. With assets that include a growing hospitality base, walkable mixed-use districts, and the

Sugar Land Regional Airport, the City is uniquely positioned to support visitor flow and regional connectivity. The City's approach offers a practical framework for mid-sized and smaller communities looking to engage with large-scale events without overextending infrastructure or budgets.

Start with Regional Alignment

One of the earliest decisions Sugar Land made was to think regionally rather than competitively. With Houston serving as the match host, Sugar Land focused on how it could support and enhance the overall visitor journey.

That meant aligning planning efforts with regional partners while identifying Sugar Land's own strengths. The City recognized that visitors attending matches in Houston and regional visitors would still need places to stay, eat, gather, and explore before and after games. This included planning for how visitors, teams, media, and partners might arrive through multiple entry points, including Houston's major airports and Sugar Land Regional Airport, which serves corporate, private and charter aviation. Rather than chasing mass attractions, Sugar Land concentrated on becoming a welcoming hub with clear connections to the host city.



For smaller cities, this mindset shift is essential. Mega events work best when cities define their role early and commit to supporting the broader region instead of duplicating efforts.

Centralized Planning Through a Single Portal

Large events create information overload for visitors and staff alike. Sugar Land addressed this by launching a centralized planning portal that serves as a one-stop resource for World Cup related activities across the City.

The portal aggregates event listings, viewing parties, cultural programming, and visitor information into a single platform. It helps communicate transportation options and arrival planning, reinforcing Sugar Land's accessibility within the greater Houston region. It provides internal alignment by giving city departments, partners, and businesses a shared reference point.

This kind of centralized tool reduces confusion and helps smaller teams manage complex timelines. For cities with limited staff capacity, a single source of truth can make the difference between reactive planning and proactive coordination.

Using Social Districts to Create Flexible Gathering Space

Rather than building new facilities, Sugar Land focused on adapting existing destinations. A key example is the creation of the Sugar Land Social District, which allows visitors to

responsibly enjoy alcoholic beverages outdoors within designated areas of Sugar Land Town Square and First Colony Mall.

The social district was designed to support walkability, local businesses, and community gatherings. During the World Cup, it enables watch parties, pop up programming, and informal social interaction without requiring permanent construction. Its proximity to major roadways and regional transportation routes, including access from Sugar Land Regional Airport, further supports ease of movement for visitors and event partners.

For secondary cities, flexibility matters more than scale. Social districts, temporary street closures, and modular amenities allow cities to respond to visitor demand while preserving long term land use goals.

Programming That Serves Residents and Visitors

A common risk with mega events is creating experiences that feel disconnected from local communities. Sugar Land intentionally designed programming that invites residents to participate alongside visitors.

Planned activities include youth soccer camps, themed weeks with local sports partners, cultural performances at key venues and local merchant markets. Additional programming includes educational activations such as the



"Science of Soccer" at the Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land and community-centered events hosted at the Fort Bend Children's Discovery Center, expanding opportunities for residents of all ages to participate. These events highlight Sugar Land's diversity while giving residents reasons to engage with the World Cup atmosphere close to home.

This approach builds community buy in and ensures the event leaves a positive impression beyond tourism metrics. For smaller cities, partnering with existing community organizations can amplify impact without increasing costs.

Temporary Activations with Long-Term Value

Sugar Land's strategy emphasizes temporary activations that strengthen long term readiness. Pop up retail, art installations, and international food experiences are designed to be adaptable and reusable for future events.

This avoids the common pitfall of building infrastructure that lacks purpose once the event ends. Instead, staff gain experience managing crowds, coordinating partners and delivering wide-reaching programming that can be applied to future festivals and sporting events. These lessons also inform long term planning for visitor arrivals, including how aviation assets like Sugar Land Regional Airport can support future sporting, corporate, and cultural events.

Through partnerships of this scale, operational learning becomes one of the most powerful and lasting benefits for a host city.

Defining Success Realistically

Not every city will see immediate economic windfalls from the World Cup. Sugar Land established success metrics aligned with its role as a support city rather than a match host.

These measures encompass hotel performance, visitor satisfaction, small business participation, and community engagement. They also consider the broader visibility and reputational benefits that come with being part of a global event, including expanded regional awareness and strengthened positioning within the Greater Houston area. The evaluation process examines how transportation and access infrastructure – including the regional airport – support broader economic and tourism goals. By setting realistic expectations, the City avoided overextending resources while still delivering meaningful experiences.

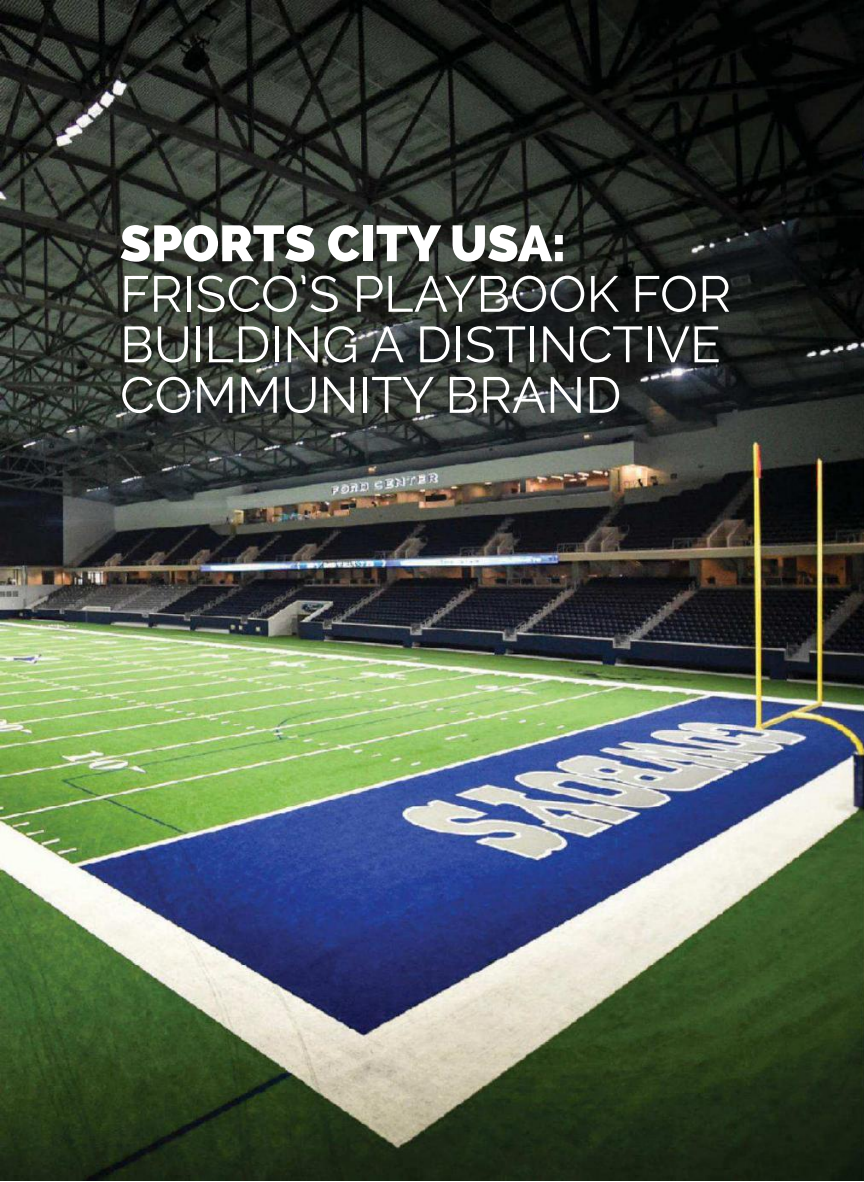
This is a critical lesson for smaller communities. It does not rest solely on short-term economic impact. Partnerships of this scale can elevate a city's profile, strengthen regional relationships, and create long-term marketing value that extends well beyond the event itself. Success does not require headline grabbing numbers. It requires alignment with local goals and the ability to scale efforts appropriately.

A Model for Secondary Cities

Sugar Land's experience shows that cities do not need a stadium to play a meaningful role in global events. By investing in centralized planning, flexible public spaces, and community focused programming, secondary cities can enhance the regional visitor experience while strengthening their own capacity.

As Texas communities prepare for future international events, the takeaway is clear. Participation is not about size. It is about strategy, coordination, and knowing how to support something larger than yourself while staying true to your city's identity.

That is where secondary cities can make their biggest impact. ★



SPORTS CITY USA: FRISCO'S PLAYBOOK FOR BUILDING A DISTINCTIVE COMMUNITY BRAND

By **Cori Powers**, Director of Marketing and Communications,
Visit Frisco

Communities rarely become nationally recognized destinations by accident. They become distinctive when vision aligns with action, when public and private partners move in the same direction, and when branding authentically reflects the community people experience every day.

That alignment is what transformed Frisco from a small North Texas town into what is now widely known as Sports City USA.

Frisco's growth story is often told through its impressive roster of sports institutions, the global headquarters of the Dallas Cowboys at The Star, the home of FC Dallas at Toyota Stadium, and the relocation of the PGA of America headquarters. Yet the true story is less about facilities and more about partnership. It is about how civic leaders, business executives, residents, and destination marketers committed to a shared long-term vision and stayed committed.

An Ecosystem Powered by Collaboration

Many cities pursue sports tourism through short-term wins such as recruiting events, filling hotel rooms, and moving on to the next opportunity. Frisco's strategy was different from the beginning. Rather than focusing solely on event attraction, civic leaders concentrated on building a durable ecosystem.

That meant long-term partnerships instead of transactional agreements. It meant infrastructure investments designed to serve both elite competitions and youth development. It meant inviting major sports organizations to embed themselves in the community rather than operate on its margins.

When the Dallas Cowboys developed The Star, the project became more than a practice facility. It evolved into a mixed-use district, corporate hub, and community gathering space. When the PGA of America relocated its headquarters, it brought championship venues and an ongoing calendar of national events that further anchored the City's sports identity.

Youth athletes compete in the same city that hosts professional championships. Families move to Frisco for schools and quality of life and find themselves part of a nationally recognized sports culture. Businesses locate here knowing they are joining a collaborative ecosystem.

That ecosystem extends directly into Frisco's independent school district, where public-private coordination ensures that students are not simply spectators of world-class sports but participants in it. Through collaboration with local schools, student-athletes have access to elite facilities, high school all-star games, playoff matchups, and championship contests played on the same professional fields and courts that host national events. This intentional integration showcases how Frisco's sports infrastructure serves the community first, elevating youth development alongside economic impact.

Formalizing the Sports City USA Identity

By 2024, the identity of Sports City USA had taken root organically. The next step was to formalize it.

Visit Frisco led a year-long branding process that began with discovery and research. The effort included stakeholder interviews, workshops, and community surveys designed

to ensure the brand was deeply rooted in the perspectives of those who live, work, and play in Frisco.

A steering committee composed of representatives from the Dallas Cowboys, FC Dallas, PGA of America, the Dallas Stars, the Frisco RoughRiders and Kurt Thomas Gymnastics provided ongoing guidance. Their participation ensured alignment between civic messaging and the well-established brands that call Frisco home.

Community input was equally influential. Residents, business owners, and sports professionals consistently identified collaboration, innovation, and a business-friendly culture as the defining attributes that attracted sports organizations to Frisco in the first place.

Sports City USA is not a slogan layered onto the community. It is a framework that connects marketing, economic development, and civic identity. It offers partners a unified platform for messaging and collaboration. It provides businesses and hospitality stakeholders with a cohesive story to tell, reinforcing pride among residents who have witnessed Frisco's transformation firsthand.

Storytelling as Civic Strategy

The launch of the Sports City USA brand coincided with the debut of *Where Greatness Grows: The Story of Sports City USA*, a seven-part docuseries chronicling Frisco's evolution.

Featuring voices from civic leadership and partner organizations, the series documents how decades of coordinated effort shaped the City's trajectory. It underscores that growth was neither accidental nor purely a byproduct of regional expansion. It was the product of long-term vision, public-private alignment, and community buy-in.

Storytelling is not always viewed as part of municipal strategy. In Frisco, it plays a practical role: reinforcing trust, celebrating partnership, and preserving the reasoning behind pivotal decisions. By telling the story of how the City grew and who helped build it, Frisco strengthens alignment even as new leaders and residents join the community.

A Global Moment, Built on Local Alignment

That foundation becomes especially visible as the region prepares for the FIFA World Cup 26™, with nine matches scheduled at AT&T Stadium in nearby Arlington.

While Frisco will not host matches, Toyota Stadium has been designated as a FIFA-approved training site, positioning the City as a potential base camp for a visiting national team. In partnership with FC Dallas, Frisco is planning a multiweek soccer celebration designed to engage residents and welcome visitors.

Behind the scenes, City departments are coordinating on public safety, transportation and business engagement to ensure readiness. Regional drills and planning sessions are underway. Transit enhancements are connecting Frisco more seamlessly to the broader Metroplex.

Frisco's ability to step confidently into this global moment is the result of decades spent building trust, strengthening partnerships, and working toward a shared vision.

A Playbook for Purposeful Growth

Frisco's experience offers practical lessons for communities across Texas.

Distinctive branding does not begin with a logo or tagline. It begins with people – with elected officials, City staff, business leaders, and residents agreeing on where they want their community to go and committing to move in that direction together. It requires steady collaboration, open communication, and patience to invest in relationships that may take years to deliver results.

Sports City USA reflects that sustained effort. It shows what can happen when infrastructure decisions, economic development strategy, and community storytelling are guided by the same shared vision. The brand did not create alignment; it formalized what already existed.

Frisco's transformation was not sparked by a single announcement or campaign launch. It was built over time through trust, consistency, and leaders choosing repeatedly to prioritize long-term partnership over short-term recognition.

For cities working to define themselves in a competitive environment, the takeaway is straightforward: start with alignment. Bring partners to the table early and listen to residents. Build something together that reflects who the community truly is. When partnership becomes part of the culture, identity follows naturally. ★



BOOMING GHOST TOWN: MANSFIELD'S HAUNTED TALES DRIVE TOURISM

By **Tim Roberts**, Tourism Manager, City of Mansfield

A pale woman dressed in white floating in the window of an abandoned home. The mysterious phantom of the theater turns off lights and throws pens from the balcony. A cowboy, shot in the back, roaming Main Street looking for justice the 19th century courts denied him.

These are just a few ghost stories Mansfield residents have swapped for nearly a century. Every Texas town has them. Local legends who spice up a place's history and keep the kids (and sometimes adults) on their toes around those strange spots.

Beginning in 2019, the City of Mansfield set a goal: to transform those haunting local tales into destination tourist attractions.

"Going back, we'd always had some ghost tours around Halloween, but nothing substantial or year round," said Theresa Cohagen, Mansfield's community engagement director. "We had a rich history sitting right there ready to be activated."

What was once an oddball and niche sector has expanded into a tourism field with an annual economic impact of over \$30 billion across the United States, according to the travel site Evendo. To become a part of this, Mansfield started small; creating a single ghost hunt in the Historic Farr Best Theater hosted by its tourism manager. That one night became two, then grew to two weekends, then a full month across multiple locations all encompassed by a new brand called "Haunted Mansfield."

Now the paranormal investigations are part of the City's Cultural Incubator Program. This program, allowing free use of city properties, was founded to encourage the growth of theater groups, musicians, and artists allowing free use of city properties. Partnering with groups like Wandering Soul Paranormal and Founder Tracy Mays, the City hosts ticketed guided monthly ghost hunts with revenue sharing that transforms underutilized facilities into community hubs.

"I was always fascinated with the paranormal growing up," said Mays, "My parents would take me to historically haunted locations, but what really started to drive it was when my mother passed. After that I wanted answers for things I couldn't understand."

For destinations, spirit spots are already established and just require activation. The City of Mansfield currently operates three historic properties that transform into paranormal destinations once the sun goes down: the Farr Best Theater, Man House Museum and Wallace-Hall Art House.

But a place isn't limited to what is municipal property. Local businesses and even homes can serve as the key components to being an attraction for specter seekers.

"Get to really know the town," Mays advises. "Get to know the shop owners and their buildings. Tell their stories as if they were your own because what you do in return helps them."

The growth of the paranormal scene has been a clear



boon to the City. In just the first six months, the year-round ghost hunts brought in over \$3,000 in sales to the Cultural Incubator Program, led to overnight hotel stays, and resulted in thousands of dollars' worth of in-kind advertising as participants create social media and web content around their hunts which promotes the destination.

Being a destination for scary seekers isn't entirely based around the few nights a month that ghost hunts take place. The City has constructed passive tourism options for the average guest, including self-guided ghost tours with a virtual component. Guests who visit the Man House and Art House during normal operating hours are also clued into the haunted happenings of the historic homes.

October remains the prime season and the growth of Haunted Mansfield has led to a huge array of events for all ages. The downtown Halloween festival is now the largest attended City-hosted event with over 6,000 visitors. Mansfield also launched new events in 2025, including a walk-through art-themed haunted house, an adult Halloween party, and a citywide ghost-themed scavenger hunt.

On the promotional side, the City has produced six short paranormal documentaries in-house with more than 10,000 views. The videos have won a wide array of awards including Best Short Documentary at the WorldFest Film Festival and the Roswell Daily Record Film Festival, further spreading Mansfield's reach into the world of the weird.

"In the end, it is all about storytelling and it's on you to get those stories out there so the broader world hears them and becomes intrigued," said Cohagen.

The overall attention created by these stories helped bring the popular paranormal program *Ghost Adventures: House Calls* to the City with their episode "Mansfield Meltdown." The Visit Mansfield website saw a 100 percent increase in web traffic following the episode.

"While the target audience of paranormal tourism may seem small or unique, its tourism impact is the same as any other," Cohagen said. "Folks who would otherwise never visit your city, stay in your hotels, eat in your restaurants, and contribute to the stories that build and preserve your town's history." ★

The graphic features a stylized illustration of a small town skyline. On the left is a black water tower. Next to it is a red building labeled 'CANDY SHOP' with a striped awning. In the center is a grey building labeled 'BANK'. To the right is a yellow building labeled 'COFFEE' with a striped awning and a bicycle parked outside. The background is light blue with white clouds and several hot air balloons. A banner at the top reads 'TML SMALL TOWN CONFERENCE' with stars at each end. Below the illustration, on a brown background, is the text 'MAY 21-22 • BASTROP' and 'Essential training for small towns:'. This is followed by two columns of bullet points: 'Leadership strategies', 'Council/staff role guidelines', 'Economic development tools' on the left, and 'Grant funding insight', 'Budgeting and forecasting tips', 'Legislative and legal information' on the right. At the bottom, it says 'Register at https://tmlsmalltownconference.org.'

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BEYOND CITY LIMITS: HOW REGIONAL TOURISM PARTNERSHIPS DELIVER RESULTS SMALL TOWNS CAN'T ACHIEVE ALONE

By **Chris Ruggia**, Director of Tourism, City of Alpine

In tourism marketing, there are big players and there are small players. Alpine is a small player, and I've always been comfortable with that. It's just the reality of where we are. What I've also come to believe though is that a tight budget has a way of sharpening your thinking. We haven't found

clever solutions because we're necessarily smarter than other people. We have found them because we don't have the luxury of throwing money at our problems. Working alongside our partners in Marfa and Fort Davis, we've built something I'm genuinely proud of: a regional approach that consistently delivers better performance than our small budgets would suggest.

West Texas is remote. Vast distances and dramatic landscapes separate our small communities from the rest of the world – conditions that make marketing here a challenge but also tend to forge an unusually cooperative spirit. What we've built over more than two decades isn't just a series of cost-sharing arrangements; it's a model for how small-budget destinations can achieve outsized results through strategic partnership.



Photo Credit: Jeff Lynch

Partners, Not Competitors

The foundation of everything we do is a simple mindset shift: we view each other as partners, not competitors. Of course, visitors to the Big Bend region will choose one town over another for lodging, and those decisions carry real economic consequences for our communities. But Alpine, Marfa, and Fort Davis each offer a fundamentally different experience that appeals to different travelers.

Alpine is the regional hub – a university town with an award-winning museum, thriving local shops, galleries and restaurants, and a creative community anchored by Sul Ross State University. Marfa has become internationally known for its contemporary art scene and minimalist mystique. Fort Davis offers a mountain escape with a scenic state park, McDonald Observatory, and a pace of life that feels restorative.

More importantly, the sheer remoteness of our region works in our collective favor. When someone makes the time investment to drive to the Big Bend area, they're going to wander. A visitor who comes to see the Marfa Lights will likely find their way to the Museum of the Big Bend in Alpine. Someone drawn by McDonald Observatory may spend the afternoon shopping on Holland Avenue and enjoy dinner before driving up to their star party. Regional visitation lifts all of us.

That understanding, shared by Pam Billbrey at the Fort Davis Chamber and Visitor Center, Jenna Conners as Marfa's Director of Tourism, and me in Alpine, keeps our partnership functional and friendly. We maintain it with informal monthly lunches rotating between the three towns, keeping relationships strong and surfacing new opportunities.

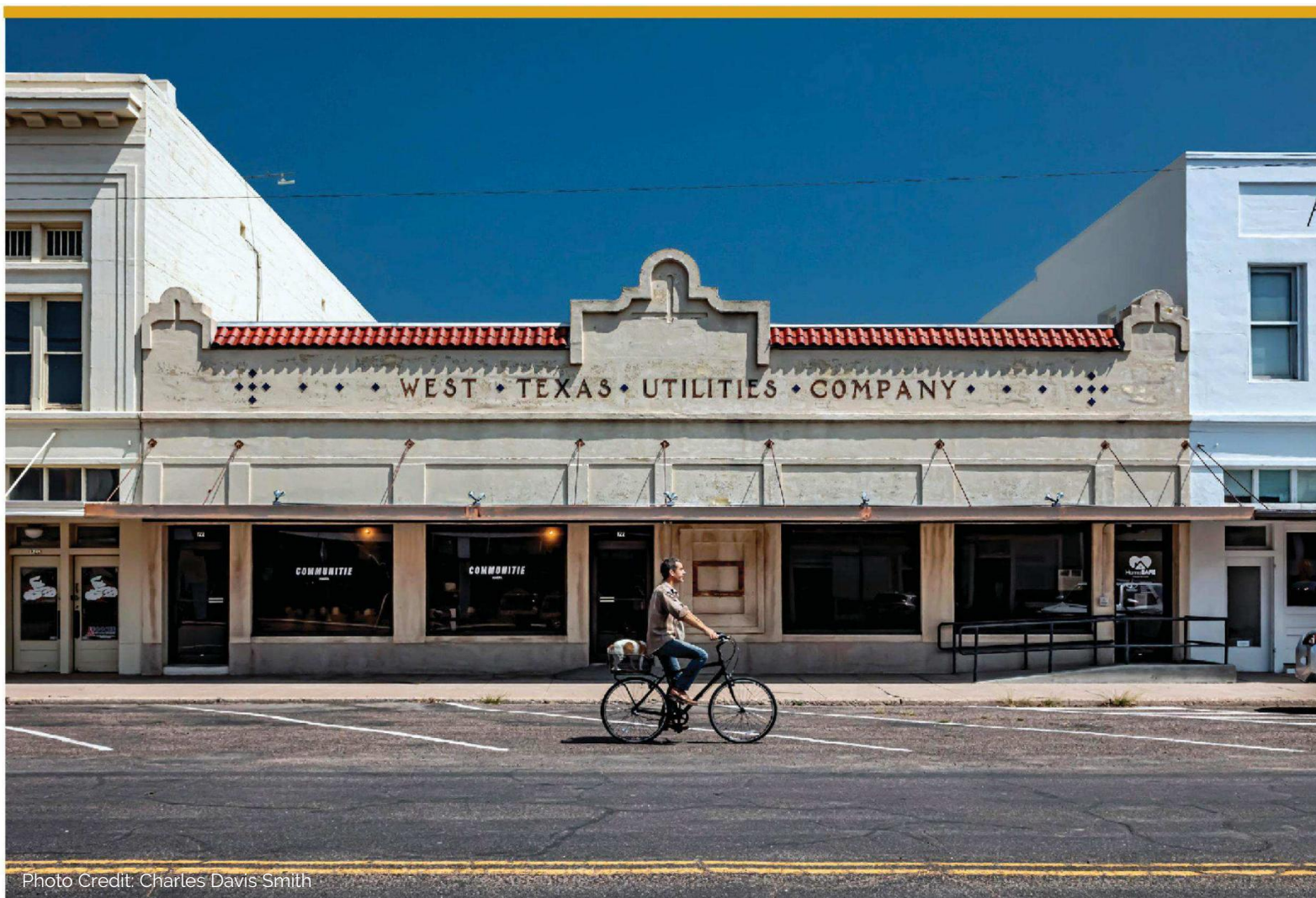


Photo Credit: Charles Davis Smith

Pooling Resources for a Bigger Presence

The most visible expression of our partnership is our cooperative advertising program. As small organizations, none of us could realistically maintain a consistent presence on our own in premier statewide publications like *Texas Monthly* or *Texas Highways* – publications that reach high-value travelers likely to make the journey to West Texas.

Alpine joined a co-op program with Visit Big Bend for a shared page in *Texas Highways* around 2011. When Visit Big Bend stepped back after a few years, Alpine volunteered to take over administration and keep it going. The co-op expanded to include Alpine, Fort Davis, Marfa, Fort Stockton, Odessa, and Midland. By 2017, Alpine and Marfa began buying co-op magazine ads together; Fort Davis became a regular partner by 2019. Together, we've placed affordable full-page ads in *Texas Monthly*, *Austin Monthly*, *San Antonio Magazine*, *Authentic Texas*, and *Ride Texas*.

One innovation I'm particularly proud of is the advertorial format we developed early on – seasonal feature stories themed to the specific publication and issue, weaving highlights from all three partners into a narrative that provides value and earns more reader attention than a standard ad. We've noticed several larger destination management organizations (DMOs) adopting similar formats, which is gratifying and a reminder that smart ideas don't require big budgets.

Visit El Paso noticed our six-partner *Texas Highways* co-op and asked to join for 2025. Their additional funding enabled us to expand to a two-page spread with a rotating advertorial highlight article featuring each partner. What started as a scrappy cost-sharing arrangement has grown into something genuinely impressive.

Shared Data, Shared Intelligence

Modern destination marketing runs on data, but for a small DMO, platforms like Zartico (geolocation and credit card spend data) or AirDNA (short-term rental analytics) can be prohibitive. Alpine and Marfa tackled this together, negotiating shared access in a way that targets each town's individual needs. We now have visibility into visitor origin markets, spending patterns, and short-term rental performance that we could not have afforded on our own.

Passing Knowledge Forward

Tourism leadership in small towns turns over. One of the quieter benefits of our partnership has been the continuity it provides through those transitions. I learned the fundamentals of co-op ad buying with Scott McGehee in the early days of the Alpine-Marfa partnership, then shared what I learned with Abby Boyd when she took over in Marfa, and later with Jenna Connors and Pam Bilbrey. Through multiple leadership turnovers across all three cities, the partnership has served as an institutional memory no single person had to carry alone. When someone new steps into a role, they inherit a network of experienced colleagues who are invested in helping them succeed.

Partnership Opens Doors No Single Town Could Open

The opportunity coming to West Texas in summer 2026 shows what sustained regional partnership can ultimately unlock – something no single community could have pursued on its own.

The Texas Historical Commission administers the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street program in Texas, which launched its first state tour in 2024–25. Alpine and the Museum of the Big Bend (a five-time winner of the Texas Travel Award for Best Small-Market Museum and the #1 Small Town Museum in *USA Today's* 2024 10 Best Readers' Choice Awards) were awarded a hosting slot for the program's second exhibit: "Spark! Places of Innovation," running July 3 through August 9, 2026. The July opening ties the exhibit directly to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, making this a historic occasion for our region.

Our goal is for the core exhibit to serve as a launching pad for sending visitors to satellite events and exhibits across all six counties of the Texas Mountain Trail Region (Brewster,

Jeff Davis, Presidio, Hudspeth, Culberson, and El Paso). Pam Bilbrey and I currently serve on the Texas Mountain Trail Region board as treasurer and secretary, positioning us to help coordinate the regional response. Fort Davis is planning exhibits and presentations from McDonald Observatory, Davis Mountains State Park, Fort Davis National Historic Site, the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center, and the Overland Trail Museum. Sul Ross State University is developing programming highlighting innovations in history, prehistory, art, and technology – drawing on the resources and talents of a university community that doesn't always receive the tourism visibility it merits.

Perhaps most memorably, Texas Mountain Trail connections in Culberson County are coordinating with Blue Origin's Van Horn launch facility to send six copies of the Declaration of Independence into orbit – a meeting of historic and contemporary innovation that perfectly captures the spirit of the exhibit. Each county in the Texas Mountain Trail Region will receive its own copy of this "Space Declaration" for permanent display. We'll be the only region in Texas that can make that claim.

A Model Worth Replicating

I share all of this not to suggest that what we've built is unique to our region or residents, because it doesn't have to be. Limited budgets, complementary assets, and a shared interest in growing regional visitation exist in small-town communities across Texas. What makes the difference is the willingness to see neighboring communities as partners; the patience to build trust through consistent follow through; and the discipline to keep the common good front and center with the confidence that it will ultimately benefit your own community. None of that costs money, and all of it pays dividends.

When you can't compete on budget, compete on cooperation. In our experience, it works. ★

AUTHENTICITY AS AN ATTRACTION: WHAT HERITAGE AND INNOVATION EVENTS CAN TEACH DESTINATIONS

By **Eva L. Millan**, Tourism Coordinator, Visit Brownsville



In the era of performative social media, when travelers are becoming increasingly selective, authenticity has emerged as one of the most powerful attractions a destination can offer. Visitors are no longer satisfied with generic festivals or copy and paste programming. They are looking for experiences rooted in place, culture, and story. Events that successfully blend heritage with innovation provide valuable lessons for destinations looking to stand out while remaining true to their identity. Two examples are Brownsville's Charro Days Classic Soccer Match and Space Fest. These festivals demonstrate how authenticity can be preserved and reimaged.

The Charro Days Classic Soccer Match builds upon one of the region's most enduring traditions. Charro Days is a binational, bicultural, and bilingual celebration honoring the shared cultural heritage of South Texas and Northern Mexico. These festivities are centered around the sister cities of Brownsville and Matamoros. This celebration has long been



a symbol of community pride and cross border connection.

Visit Brownsville expanded this historic tradition by introducing a classic soccer match into the celebration. Featuring professional and semi-professional teams representing each city, the friendly match serves as an expression of friendship across borders, languages, and cultures. Soccer is an integral part of the region's cultural fabric, making the event a natural extension of the Charro Days' spirit. The match is more than a sporting event; it is a contemporary expression of the longstanding cultural brotherhood between two cities.

What makes this approach effective is its grounding in lived experience. The event reflects how the community already celebrates, gathers, and competes. It is not staged as a performance for outsiders but presented as an authentic expression of local identity. In taking ownership of its heritage, the community is doing more than preserving



the past; it is using that heritage as a foundation for growth and relevance. This sense of ownership fosters confidence, allowing traditions to evolve while retaining their meaning.

Heritage events do not have to remain frozen in time to remain authentic. Thoughtful evolution can attract new audiences while strengthening cultural continuity and community pride. When residents claim and steward their heritage, it becomes a guide toward the future rather than an anchor to the past. Innovation works best when it emerges organically from local traditions, so honoring a community's roots can also point the way forward.

Looking toward the future, Brownsville is intentionally shaping a destination identity that merges cultural heritage with innovation. Recognizing that authenticity can be rooted both in history and in what a community is becoming, Space Fest offers a different, yet complementary, model of authenticity alongside long-standing cultural celebrations. While the festival is rooted in innovation rather than centuries-old traditions, it draws directly from Brownsville's present day reality as a growing hub for aerospace, advanced manufacturing, and space exploration.

Space Fest reflects the real economic activity, scientific advancement, and community curiosity shaping the region. The presence of space-related industries in and around Brownsville has transformed the local workforce, education systems, and public imagination, making space exploration a lived experience. Space Fest brings that reality to the public, inviting residents and visitors to engage with the science, technology, and possibilities

emerging in the area.

Through educational programming, musical experiences, and hands-on activities, the festival transforms a complex and highly technical industry into an accessible, place-based narrative. Space Fest creates meaningful connections between people and the future of the region, reinforcing that innovation can be celebrated just as thoughtfully as tradition. The event encourages curiosity, inspires younger generations, and positions Brownsville as a place of deep cultural roots and a city actively contributing to the future.

Space Fest demonstrates that modern industries, emerging technologies, and forward-looking narratives can be just as authentic as heritage when they reflect a destination's trajectory and lived experience. The festival succeeds because it aligns with what is happening locally and, with heritage driven events, presents a more complete picture of Brownsville.

The Charro Days Classic Soccer Match honors cultural legacy while embracing contemporary expression, reinforcing the deep binational ties that have shaped Brownsville for generations. By celebrating shared traditions across borders, the events help ensure that this dual cultural identity is remembered and actively passed on to future generations as a living, evolving part of community life. Space Fest captures innovation as an extension of local identity, one rooted in a border city that has always looked outward, adapted, and connected global movements to local experience.

For destinations, the takeaway is not to chase trends, but to listen closely to your own stories. By anchoring events in what makes your city distinct, you can create experiences that feel meaningful rather than manufactured. Treated as an evolving narrative rather than a static concept, authenticity becomes a lasting competitive advantage that honors your heritage while empowering the next generation to carry it forward. ★

MAKING CONNECTIONS:

A CASE STUDY IN MAXIMIZING TOURISM'S IMPACT THROUGH COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

By **Chris Riggins**, Director of Marketing and Communications, Destination Bryan



In destination marketing, we often focus heavily on the external "sell." We spend our days crafting the perfect message to entice visitors to experience our city. But at Destination Bryan, we've found that to truly sustain our tourism economy it isn't just about who we bring in – it's about how our community works together once the visitors get here.

We all know the pain points of a disjointed destination. Venues book in silos, events compete for the same weekends, hotels miss opportunities, and restaurants scramble to staff up or down with limited visibility. The result for the destination is often money left on the table and a less than stellar visitor experience.

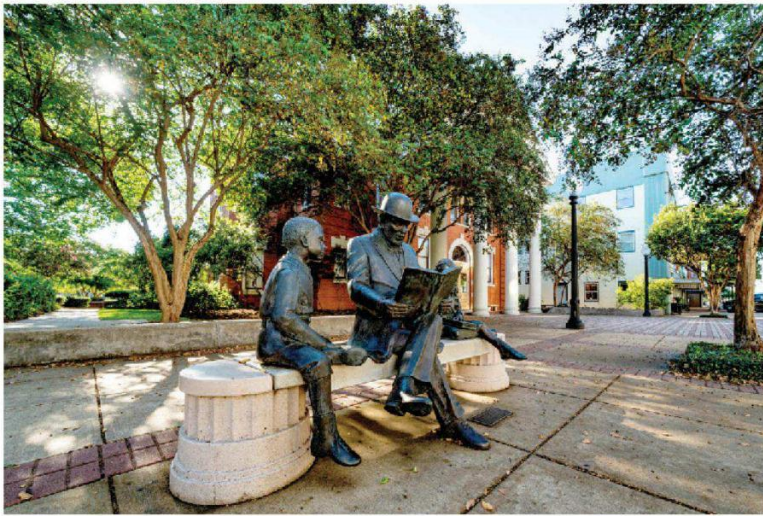
At Destination Bryan, we've worked intentionally to close those gaps. By strengthening communication, building shared tools, and collaborating creatively with our partners,

we're all working together to maximize tourism's impact across our community.

A Shared View: The Bryan-College Station Master Calendar

One of the most impactful tools we've implemented is simple in retrospect, but has been a game-changer when it comes to communication and coordination: the Bryan-College Station master calendar. The master calendar is a simple, no-frills, centralized calendar shared with key tourism and hospitality stakeholders across our destination.

Historically, different venues and event organizers operated on their own timelines. While everyone was doing great work, there wasn't always a clear view of how events overlapped or how one large booking might affect another. That sometimes led to competing events targeting the same audience, unnecessary strain on hotel inventory, or



missed opportunities to drive visitation around a particularly strong weekend.

The master calendar, separate from our public-facing events calendar and hosted on teamup.com, tracks large and impactful events throughout Bryan-College Station, including sporting events at public facilities, Texas A&M University happenings, conferences, expos, festivals, and signature events. It is shared with hotels, event venues, restaurants, and other tourism-facing businesses so that everyone has access to the same information at the same time.

As more partners have adopted the master calendar as part of their planning process, the benefits have begun to ripple across the community.

For venues and event planners, the master calendar helps prevent conflicting bookings and overlapping events that

dilute attendance or stretch resources too thin. Rather than unintentionally competing with one another, partners can coordinate dates, identify opportunities for cross-promotion, and ensure the community can properly support each event.

For Destination Bryan and our hotel partners, the calendar has become a powerful forecasting tool. We can more accurately anticipate compression dates, identify need periods, and adjust marketing efforts accordingly. When we see a soft weekend on the horizon, we can proactively target meetings, sports tournaments, or leisure campaigns to fill gaps. Conversely, when a high-demand weekend is approaching, our hotel partners can make informed revenue management decisions with confidence.

Our restaurant community benefits as well. With better visibility into major events, operators can more accurately predict volume, staff appropriately, and prepare inventory in advance. That level of foresight directly impacts customer service, employee satisfaction, and bottom-line performance.

The master calendar didn't require a massive investment in new technology. What it required was trust, communication, and a shared understanding that when one of us wins, we all win.

Creative Collaboration: The Bison Baby Shower

Maximizing tourism's impact on our economy isn't just about coordination, sometimes it requires co-creation.

In spring 2024, our community found itself mere miles outside the path of totality for the solar eclipse. We anticipated thousands of visitors would travel to the area for this once-in-a-lifetime event. The question became: "How do we give them a reason to stay longer?"

We found the answer through partnership.

Destination Bryan collaborated with the Lucky B Bison Ranch and Texas A&M University's Department of Hospitality, Hotel Management & Tourism (HMGT) to create the inaugural "Bison Baby Shower." Hosted at the ranch, which is normally only accessible to the public via pre-arranged tours, the event celebrated the season's newest bison calves and offered visitors a uniquely Texan, family-friendly experience.

By aligning the event with eclipse travel, we gave visitors a

compelling reason to extend their stay. Instead of coming in for a single night to view the eclipse and head home, guests had an additional experience to build their trip around.

The collaboration itself was equally meaningful. Texas A&M HMGT students gained hands-on event planning experience while Lucky B Bison Ranch welcomed new audiences and shared its mission to preserve the American bison. Visitors enjoyed a memorable, distinctly local experience they wouldn't find anywhere else.

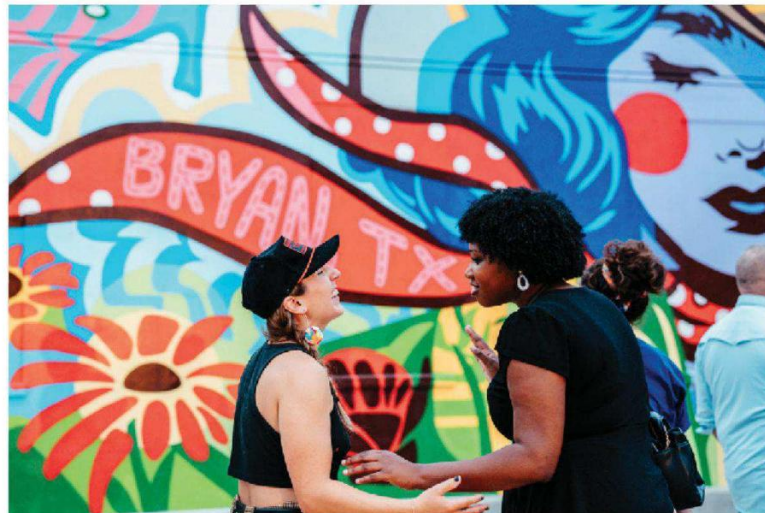
Due to its success, the Bison Baby Shower will now be hosted annually each spring, evolving from a one-time activation into a recurring visitor experience. It stands as a strong example of how identifying a moment of opportunity and rallying the right partners can create lasting impact. The unique event will continue to generate media coverage for Bryan, families will discover a local attraction they may not have otherwise experienced, students will gain real-world experience, and a local ranch becomes a key agritourism partner in our destination.

Blending Arts, Technology, and Data: The Aggieland Art Trail Digital Passport

Our third example of community collaboration highlights how tourism promotion and the arts can work hand in hand. We have a vibrant arts scene here, championed by the Visual Art Society (VAS) of Bryan-College Station. When we heard the VAS wanted to evolve their Aggieland Art Trail from a static brochure into an interactive, digital journey, we saw an opportunity to ease that burden on their end through software Destination Bryan was already using for our Bryan Taco Trail. This partnership allowed us to expand the Art Trail's reach and enhance the visitor experience, while collecting first party data we can use in our own marketing efforts.

Visitors can now "check in" at participating locations using their mobile device, track their progress along the trail, and earn prizes for visiting designated stops. The digital passport adds a layer of gamification and convenience that appeals to travelers. It encourages exploration, increases dwell time, and creates a structured journey through multiple locations across the community.

Equally important, it allows Destination Bryan to capture valuable first-party data. With visitor opt-in, we gain insights into participation, visitation patterns, and geographic reach.



In addition to utilizing this data to inform future marketing strategies and measure impact, we also gain e-newsletter subscribers we can engage with beyond their visit, and potentially convert into a return visitor.

For the Visual Art Society and participating artists, the digital passport expands exposure and provides additional promotion. For visitors, it creates a curated, interactive experience. For Destination Bryan, it adds a year-round promotional asset that showcases Bryan's vibrant arts scene.

A Shared Vision for Greater Impact

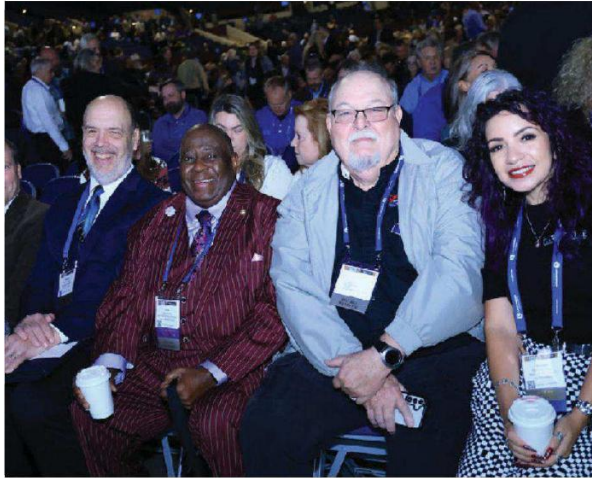
Each of these initiatives –Bryan-College Station Master Calendar, Bison Baby Shower, and digital Aggieland Art Trail – look different on the surface, but they share a common foundation: intentional collaboration.

Tourism doesn't exist in a silo. Its success depends on communication, coordination, and a willingness to think beyond individual organizational goals. When destination organizations foster a culture of partnership, they create stronger visitor experiences and more sustainable economic impact.

At Destination Bryan, we've learned that sometimes the most powerful strategy isn't launching something entirely new, it's connecting the dots between partners who are already doing great work. When we align our efforts, share information openly, and build together, we don't just attract visitors. We strengthen our entire community. ★

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HOW DOWNTOWN DENISON BECAME AN AWARD-WINNING DESTINATION

By **Donna Dow**, Main Street Director, City of Denison
(in partnership with Discover Denison)

Downtown Denison is more than the historic heart of the City; it is a destination that tells a story of preservation, creativity, and community pride. As the longest Main Street district in Texas, Downtown Denison offers visitors an immersive experience where architecture, vibrant public art, and locally owned businesses come together to create a place that feels authentic and alive.

That powerful blend of history and progress recently earned Downtown Denison two of the most prestigious honors in downtown revitalization: the *Best Texas Downtown Award*, awarded by Texas Downtown, and the *2025 Great American Main Street Award*, bestowed by Main Street America. This places Denison among a small group of communities recognized nationwide for excellence in preservation-based economic development.

"Downtown Denison is not just thriving, it is leading," said Tania Moody, executive director of Texas Downtown. "This community has demonstrated what's possible when preservation, partnership, and people come together with a shared vision. Denison is setting the bar for downtowns across Texas."

A Destination Rooted in History, Energized by Today

Downtown Denison invites visitors to explore more than 300 businesses – from art galleries and boutiques to breweries, coffee shops, and restaurants – housed within carefully restored historic buildings. More than 150 pieces of public art, including murals celebrating hometown legends like jazz trumpeter Clora Bryant and aviation hero Sully Sullenberger, add color and storytelling to every corner of the district.

This unique setting hosts an impressive 680 plus events each year, ranging from live music and wine walks to cultural celebrations like the Dia de los Muertos Festival and the North Texas Arts Fest. The result is a downtown that buzzes with activity while remaining walkable, welcoming, and distinctly local.

In 2025 alone, Downtown Denison welcomed 2.6 million visits, reinforcing its growing reputation as a must-see destination in North Texas and Texoma. Many of these visitors enjoyed learning more about the first Texas-born President Dwight David Eisenhower at his birthplace. While they were here, they learned at the Red River Railroad Museum about the Katy Railroad where Ike's father worked.

Historic preservation is more than a talking point in Denison, it's a guiding principle. Over the past three years, the City strengthened its Historic Preservation Ordinance and Design Guidelines and reached a major milestone in 2024 with the removal of the last remaining slipcover on Main Street, restoring the district's original architectural character.

These efforts have revitalized once-vacant storefronts, attracted new investment, and preserved the charm that draws visitors in the first place. Since the inception of the Main Street program in 1989, Downtown Denison has seen more than \$82 million in public and private reinvestment, a clear signal of confidence in its future.

Downtown Denison's success is not only visible, it's measurable. In the last three years, the downtown district accounted for 26 percent of the City of Denison's total sales tax revenue, supporting over 1,300 jobs and strengthening the local economy. Its momentum has even influenced major developments beyond downtown, including the upcoming Preston Harbor project on Lake Texoma, where

developers cited Denison's vibrant Main Street as a key factor in choosing to invest locally.

Community at the Core

What truly sets Downtown Denison apart is its people. Generations of residents have deep connections to Main Street, from longtime family-owned businesses to new downtown loft residents drawn by the district's energy and walkability. That sense of ownership is strengthened through intentional engagement – public workshops, stakeholder meetings, and community-driven planning efforts like Designing Downtown Denison (D3).

D3, the largest infrastructure investment in downtown's history, is transforming streets into curb-less, pedestrian, and ADA-friendly spaces while modernizing utilities – some for the first time in over a century. The project balances historic character with modern accessibility, ensuring downtown remains vibrant and welcoming for generations to come.

"Denison Main Street has shown how meaningful community engagement can drive lasting change," said Erin Barnes, president and CEO of Main Street America. "By fostering open communication, creative outreach, and strong local partnerships, they ensured that businesses and residents remained at the heart of their significant transformation."

Inclusive, Welcoming, and Built for Everyone

Accessibility and inclusivity are woven into Downtown Denison's identity. Nearly all events are free to attend, multilingual outreach ensures broad participation, and accommodations – from ADA seating to sensory-friendly options – help make downtown a place where everyone feels welcome. Cultural celebrations, youth involvement, and partnerships with arts and heritage organizations ensure that visitors and residents alike see themselves reflected in the district.

How Other Cities Can Apply Denison's Success

Downtown Denison's transformation did not happen through a single project or quick fix. It was the result of consistent strategy, strong partnerships, and long-term community investment. Communities of any size can begin applying these lessons today.

Start with Measurable Impact

- Track and share real economic indicators such as sales tax contributions, reinvestment totals, business growth, and job creation.
- Communicate successes consistently to elected officials, investors, and the public.
- Recognize that a strong downtown can influence development citywide, even outside the district.

Use Preservation as an Economic Strategy

- Treat historic buildings as competitive advantages that cannot be replicated.
- Adopt clear design guidelines and a predictable review process to give investors confidence.
- Use preservation incentives and reinvestment tools to encourage adaptive reuse and redevelopment.

Build Relationships Before You Need Them

- Meet regularly with business owners and property owners to build trust.
- Create two-way communication channels where feedback results in real action.
- Involve the community early in major projects through workshops, charrettes, and public surveys.

Invest in Strong Partnerships

- Align economic development, planning, tourism, arts, parks, and preservation groups around shared goals.
- Leverage regional and state networks to learn from peer communities.
- Tie partnerships to tangible outcomes such as grants, events, infrastructure improvements, or business support programs.

Activate Public Spaces Through Arts and Innovation

- Integrate public art throughout downtown, from murals to temporary installations.
- Activate overlooked spaces like alleys and side streets to maintain vibrancy during construction or transition periods.
- Encourage creative solutions that reflect local culture and identity.

Design for All Ages and Lifestyles

- Plan event calendars intentionally to serve families, seniors, young professionals, and cultural audiences.
- Ensure downtown amenities support residents as

well as visitors – shade, seating, restrooms, parks, and pet-friendly spaces.

- Create traditions and recurring events that reinforce local pride and community identity.

Make Inclusivity and Accessibility a Priority

- Ensure marketing reflects the full diversity of your community.
- Provide accommodations such as ADA seating, sensory-friendly options, and multilingual outreach.
- Keep events affordable or free whenever possible to encourage broad participation.

Adopt a Long-Term Mindset

- Keep downtown clean and well-maintained every day. Visible pride builds momentum.
- Measure progress through meaningful indicators like sales tax performance.
- Focus on collaboration over individual recognition.
- Expect transformation to take time. Successful revitalization is built through patience and persistence.

A Downtown Worth Experiencing

Downtown Denison's national recognition confirms what locals and visitors already know: this is a place where history is honored, creativity is celebrated, and community drives progress. Whether you're strolling past restored storefronts, discovering public art, attending a festival, or simply enjoying the welcoming spirit of Main Street, Downtown Denison offers an experience that is authentic, vibrant, and unmistakably Texan. As Denison continues to invest boldly in its downtown, one thing remains clear. This isn't just a success story, it's an invitation. ★



PFINDING THE PATH: HOW TRAILS SHAPED PFLUGERVILLE'S IDENTITY

By **Angelique Romike-Duran**,
Communications Specialist, Explore Pflugerville

Editor's Note: *In Pflugerville, words that begin with "f" are spelled with "pf," reflecting a playful local tradition embraced by the community.*

Sometimes the path pforward does not begin with a destination in mind. It opens with a single step. You start along the trail, and the sounds of the day pfade. The crunch of gravel beneath your shoes gives way to smooth pavement where murals stretch across the ground, their colors catching your eye. A light breeze shifts through the trees while your breathing pfinds a steady cadence. What began as a simple walk slowly becomes something more. Along curving paths and peaceful shorelines, small moments unfold: a mother passes with her stroller, laughter drifts across the water from a senior casting out a line, and a jogger waves from a distant path. Connection pfeels effortless and belonging pfeels certain. Walking here, it is easy to see why

trails have become a defining pfeature of Pflugerville.

In Pflugerville, trails create space for transformation. Each step gives a chance to reflect, to reset, and to pfeel part of something larger than yourself. These shared spaces lift the spirit of the community, reminding us that most meaningful journeys are not about where we are going, but how we grow along the way.

Trails As the City's Hidden Backbone

Pflugerville's trail system did not appear by accident. It was intentionally established in the City's landscape and consistent with its values. The City maintains roughly 1.5 miles of trail per 2,000 residents, surpassing the national guideline of one mile per 2,000 residents.

Nearly all community members live within walking distance

of a trail or park, allowing trails to naturally weave into their daily lives. The network connects neighborhoods, parks, and commercial areas, creating safe and convenient spaces for recreation and gathering. Art installations and scenic overlooks along trails promote exploration and placemaking, making these paths into destinations people return to again and again.

As Pflugerville grew, leaders examined how peer cities defined themselves. Historic downtowns, heritage districts, and cultural hubs shaped the identities of other communities. The question became: What defines Pflugerville? Trails offered a clear answer. Already widely used, the network of connected neighborhoods, parks, and gathering spaces reflects the City's commitment to wellness and outdoor recreation. Regional benchmarking confirmed that Pflugerville's trails outpaced those of neighboring, similarly sized cities in accessibility and connectivity, endorsing the designation as both real and measurable.

The idea of Pflugerville becoming the Trail Capital of Texas grew from intentional planning, community support, and a long-standing commitment to creating spaces that connect people with nature and with each other.

Listening to the Community

Community input has guided every stage of the Trail Capital initiative. Surveys, master planning, bond programs, and interactive engagement tools show trails consistently rank among the highest priorities for community members and visitors. This feedback continuously reinforces City decisions and provides strong justification for continued funding of the trail system.

The initiative gained support by combining storytelling and data. Qualitative analysis proved just as important as the quantitative information in presenting a full picture of the trails' benefits to the City. Presentations to City Council stressed the value of trails for community members and visitors of all ages and backgrounds, as well as their economic impact. By demonstrating measurable infrastructure success alongside community connection, the initiative earned broad support and eventual state recognition.

Continued Progress

With community and leadership support, City staff were empowered to take the trails from great to outstanding.



Early trail planning efforts focused on maintenance, positioning the trails as valuable infrastructure deserving of ongoing funding. Today, Pflugerville invests nearly \$2 million annually in trail maintenance, repairs, and trail capital improvements. The network has grown from approximately 40 miles to more than 70 miles, roughly the distance of the drive from Austin to San Antonio, with new developments underway to improve connectivity and continuity. Major infrastructure projects, such as the new Downtown East project, which includes a new city hall, multi-generational recreation center, and business development, are tied to the existing and growing trail system, enhancing walkability by seamlessly linking residential areas, commercial spaces, and parks.

It is not enough to have a connected trail system if everyone cannot benefit from it. To ensure the widest accessibility of our trails, the City began converting decomposed granite trails into wider, ADA-compliant concrete surfaces. This plan allows all community members and visitors to fully experience the trail system regardless of age or mobility level, including families with strollers and older adults using walkers. Inclusive design welcomes everyone to en-

joy these shared spaces and value their mental, social, and physical wellness.

Branding and Community Storytelling

Even before the official designation, the City had developed and promoted the Trail Capital of Texas brand. By sharing the brand early, Pflugerville demonstrated the value of the trail system, built community and leadership support, and positioned itself to earn the official recognition. In May 2025, Governor Greg Abbott officially designated the City of Pflugerville as the Trail Capital of Texas, a title that will remain in effect for 10 years and is now fully embedded in the City's identity.

The Trail Capital of Texas brand goes beyond infrastructure and into the experience people have on the trails. Visual elements inspired by topography and trail patterns appear across tourism materials, signage, and outreach efforts, forming a consistent identity. Community members proudly represent the brand on t-shirts and stickers displayed on water bottles or laptops. Internally, it guides planning and investment. Externally, it communicates Pflugerville's commitment to recreation, accessibility, and wellness, strengthening its reputation as a destination for community members and visitors.

Stories Along the Miles

Pflugerville's trails attract visitors and support tourism. Outdoor enthusiasts, families, and event attendees travel to experience scenic, accessible routes. The trail system boosts signature events like Slice of Pflugerville and Deutschen Fest by showcasing the City's natural beauty and culture while connecting visitors with local businesses, restaurants, and recreational amenities.

Beyond tourism, trails serve as venues for programs that engage community members across generations, including fitness classes, family activities, nature programs, and community celebrations. This year, the City began hosting a monthly Trail Friends event to help neighbors explore new trails and meet fellow trail lovers. Bird fanatics have long trekked along the trails to find new feathery friends and fellowship. The system continues to create opportunities for connection across the community and inspire new hobbies that promote wellness.

Lessons Learned

Pflugerville's Trail Capital of Texas campaign has been

successful in part because the City invested in assets that already appeal to community members and visitors. The combination of engagement, data, and consistent storytelling transformed community amenities into defining features of identity that decision-makers can relate to and feel confident supporting.

Intentional investment fosters civic pride, encourages economic development, and improves quality of life, showing the community that their needs are valued. Community members and visitors alike take pride in the trail system, strengthening the City's continued commitment to connection, accessibility, and thoughtful growth in all we do.

The Path Forward

Trails are frequently measured in miles, but their true impact is measured in moments. They are where confidence is built, where unfamiliar places become neighbors, and where nature offers clarity when life feels uncertain. As Pflugerville continues to grow, the trail system remains a powerful thread, weaving people together by encouraging wellness, inspiring connection, and letting everyone who walks on it know that they belong. Long after the footsteps fade, the stories created along these paths continue to shape Pflugerville's identity while keeping the feeling that the most meaningful journeys begin simply by stepping outside and trusting where the path leads. ★





THE POWER OF PLACEMAKING: HOW PUBLIC ART AND WATERFRONT DESIGN REFRAMED DOWNTOWN CORPUS CHRISTI

By **Jacqueline Gonzalez**, Staff Writer, Visit Corpus Christi

Downtown revitalization does not always require large redevelopment projects or sweeping structural change. In Corpus Christi, a series of small-scale, coordinated place-making efforts centered on public art and streetscape design reshaped how residents and visitors interact with downtown. By focusing on murals, painted utility boxes, youth-led art programs, and waterfront-adjacent improvements, the City transformed everyday infrastructure into points of connection, creativity, and community identity.

Focusing on the Downtown Core

Corpus Christi's downtown sits at the intersection of culture, history, and the bayfront. That layered identity shaped the City's approach to revitalization. Rather than relying on new construction, recent place-making efforts focused on the spaces people already moved through every day. Side streets, electrical boxes, and buildings became opportunities for expression. Visual elements appeared gradually across the district, adding moments of interest that invited people to slow down, look closer, and take different routes through downtown. Because these changes were distributed throughout downtown rather than concentrated in a single location, they encouraged people to move through the area, notice details, and experience downtown as a cohesive space.

Murals As Visual Anchors

Murals have become one of the most recognizable features of downtown Corpus Christi. Installed along high-traffic streets and building facades, they reflect local history, coastal culture, and everyday life while giving downtown a visual language of its own. Rather than serving as isolated artworks, they function as visual anchors that guide movement, signal shared identity, and turn blank walls into recognizable landmarks. As murals were increasingly introduced, they created a rhythm across downtown that encouraged walking, informal exploration, and repeat visits. Over time, the murals changed how the area was perceived, from a collection of separate streets

into a unified district with a distinct character.

Utility Boxes as Community Canvas

One of the most impactful yet understated placemaking efforts has been the painting of downtown utility boxes. Once purely functional, they were transformed into small canvases highlighting neighborhood stories, cultural themes, and community identity. Located along sidewalks and intersections, the boxes integrate creativity into everyday experiences rather than confining it to designated destinations. Each painted box reflects themes tied to community identity, local stories, and cultural expression. Because they are encountered at street level, they show that art does not need to be monumental to be meaningful. By addressing elements often overlooked in urban design, the City demonstrated how existing infrastructure can create visual interest and continuity without changing the footprint of downtown streets.

Youth Voices Through K Space Contemporary

Youth involvement has been a defining element of Corpus Christi's downtown mural landscape. Through KSpace Contemporary's Summer Mural Arts Program, teens ages 13 to 17 collaborate with professional artists to design and paint murals in the downtown area. This program does more than add artwork to the city. It invests young people in the downtown environment, giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility for shared spaces. The murals created through this program reflect youth perspectives while contributing lasting visual elements to the cityscape. By engaging local teens in the creative process, downtown becomes a place shaped not only by planning decisions, but by the voices of the next generation. These murals add depth to the public art collection while strengthening long-term community connection.

Mural Fest and Traveling Artists

Downtown Corpus Christi's public art efforts are further amplified through Mural Fest, an annual event that brings artists from across the country to create new murals throughout the downtown area. Mural Fest expands the City's public art network by introducing diverse artistic styles while maintaining a strong connection to place. Traveling artists work within the context of Corpus Christi's history, environment, and neighborhoods, adding new layers to the City's visual narrative. As murals are completed, they become perma-

nent additions to downtown rather than temporary installations. The event reinforces the idea that public art is an ongoing process, one that evolves through collaboration, repetition, and continued presence.

Design That Encourages Use

Public art is supported by streetscape and waterfront-adjacent improvements that make downtown easier to navigate and more inviting. These enhancements help connect murals, parks, and public spaces into a more legible and navigable downtown environment. Clear pathways, seating areas, and improved sightlines encourage people to slow down and move through downtown on foot. When combined with public art, these elements support informal gathering, casual exploration, and longer engagement with the area. The result is a downtown that accommodates everyday use while remaining flexible enough to evolve alongside the community.

A Downtown Shaped Over Time

Downtown Corpus Christi's character has emerged through consistent and visible layers of place-making efforts introduced over time. Murals, painted utility boxes, youth-led programs, and annual initiatives like Mural Fest work together to reinforce a shared sense of place. Each element builds on the last, creating familiarity and continuity. Rather than defining downtown all at once, this approach allows it to grow organically while reflecting the voices, creativity, and everyday experiences of the community.

Reframing the Experience

Corpus Christi's approach demonstrates that placemaking is most effective when it reflects local voices, adapts over time, and invites people to see familiar spaces differently. By focusing on art, design, and participation, Corpus Christi reframed not just the physical landscape of downtown, but how people experience and move through the City's core. For communities looking to revitalize downtown districts, Corpus Christi offers an example of how thoughtful, incremental changes can reshape perception, encourage engagement, and strengthen identity without relying on large-scale redevelopment. ★

PAINTING A NEW IDENTITY: HOW PUBLIC ART AND PLACEMAKING SPARKED TOURISM MOMENTUM IN HUNTSVILLE

By Tracy Chappell, Tourism Manager, City of Huntsville



In the late 1980's and early 1990's, Huntsville explored ways to preserve and protect its downtown which had once been its central business district. The intent was to redirect interest and activity to serve as the center for the emerging tourism industry. Like the downtown areas of many Texas cities at the time, downtown buildings bore the effects of age and neglect. Canopies on storefronts were sagging with a mix of signage adding to the clutter, and downtown's overall appearance needed a facelift. The long-term goal was to create an integrated downtown district that reflected Huntsville's historical identity, economic vitality, rich cultural and educational background, and its hospitality

to residents and tourists. What followed was a coordinated and collaborative effort to reshape perceptions through strategic placemaking and identity-building.

A committee was formed and ideas began to emerge. The Huntsville Arts Commission began conversations with nationally recognized artist Richard Haas. Haas specialized in architectural illusion murals, and his work had already been seen in the Sundance Square revitalization in Fort Worth. The hope was that creating these architectural illusion murals on the facades of downtown buildings could be a catalyst for other revitalization activities and bring

community members together.

Huntsville began coordinating a joint effort between the public and private sectors to support the revitalization. As the City invested time, effort, and funding in downtown revitalization, residents, businesses, and property owners took notice. Property owners were able to take advantage of city matching grants, and business owners began to feel inspired about downtown's economic future. Revitalization efforts continued through the 90's and additional phases of façade murals continued. The murals became a visible symbol of the City's commitment to reinvesting in its historic core and honoring the heritage that defines Huntsville.

Meanwhile, plans to celebrate the 200th birthday of one of Huntsville's most famous residents, General Sam Houston, were taking shape in a significant way. David Adickes, a world-renowned artist and a proud Huntsvillian, proposed building a 77-foot statue to honor Houston and his lasting impact on both the City and Texas.

City leadership recognized the opportunity as more than a public art installation; it was a chance to reinforce Huntsville's identity as the "Home of Sam Houston." For years, the City had struggled with being known primarily as the headquarters of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the site associated with the State's death penalty. Media attention rarely highlighted its art, culture, heritage tourism, or ongoing downtown revitalization efforts.

Sam Houston's legacy was already present through Sam Houston State University and the Sam Houston Memorial Museum. However, constructing a towering statue along a major interstate between Houston and Dallas made a bold – or rather, tall – statement about the City's identity and aspirations.

By the time Huntsville was designated a Main Street community in 2001, the groundwork had been laid. Public art generated confidence, and the Sam Houston Statue had elevated visibility. This designation reinforced the City's commitment to downtown's vibrancy and continued momentum to establish Huntsville's identity as a tourist destination. The early investments in placemaking created a ripple effect. As façades improved and public art drew attention, private property owners began reinvesting in their buildings. Downtown saw renewed interest from small businesses, restaurants, and service providers who believed

in its future. Events and festivals found a more welcoming backdrop. The physical improvements strengthened community pride; residents who had once driven past downtown began returning to shop, dine, and gather. These changes did not happen overnight, nor were they the result of a single funding cycle. Instead, they were the product of consistent, visible public investment that signaled stability and vision.

But why does this matter in 2026, when most Texas cities have already gone through their own revitalization journeys? Huntsville understands that revitalization is not a few chapters in a short story, but an ongoing commitment to growth and economic development. While communities today might not be painting architectural murals on the facades of downtown buildings or constructing 77-foot statues, they continue to pursue visibility, public and private coordination, and strategic decision-making. When public investment is strategically deployed, it communicates confidence and strength. That energy encourages private investment, and over time, those layered commitments reshape perception and economic opportunity.

In many Texas cities, resources are limited and staff capacity is stretched. The temptation is to focus solely on core services and defer aesthetic or cultural investments. Huntsville's experience suggests those investments should not be viewed as optional enhancements, but as economic development tools. Public art, streetscape improvements, façade programs, and heritage interpretation all enhance the visitor experience and support local businesses. They also shape how residents perceive their own community and how proudly they share it with their friends and families.





WHERE ART MEETS THE NIGHT SKY: DRIPPING SPRINGS' SHINING PUBLIC ART PROJECT

By **Pam King**, Tourism Manager, Destination Dripping Springs

In the heart of Texas Hill Country, nestled between sweeping landscapes and ink-black skies, Dripping Springs is forging a bold new tradition — one that blends community identity, local creativity, and its cherished designation as an International Dark Sky Community, the first in the State of Texas and sixth in the world. The Stars of Dripping Springs Public Art Project, has become a vibrant and dynamic symbol of the City's evolving cultural landscape, offering people a chance to experience the intersection of art and environment in a uniquely Texan way.

Dripping Springs earned its International Dark Sky Community designation in 2014, a distinction that underscores its commitment to preserving night skies free from light pollution. For Dripping Springs, the dark sky is not just an environmental achievement; it's part of the town's soul. With that backdrop, the City chose the star as the central motif for the public art project, using large, three-dimensional star sculptures as canvases for artists to express their personal visions.

The Stars of Dripping Springs project was conceived as a citywide public art initiative. The program came together through a collaboration between the City of Dripping Springs, Destination Dripping Springs, and the Dripping Springs Art League (DSAL). It was designed to celebrate the natural and cultural heritage of the region and reinforce the City's identity as a pristine Dark Sky community — where the stars themselves are part of the cultural experience.

The inaugural year of the project culminated in December 2024 with the unveiling of the first six Stars of Dripping Springs along historic Mercer Street. This downtown stretch transformed into an open-air gallery, each sculpture adding sparkle to a locale already rich in community life. Sponsored in part by H-E-B and supported by local volunteers and organizations, these early stars captured pervasive themes of nature, cultural heritage, and the rugged beauty of the Texas Hill Country.

Each star tells its own story.

Renée D'Arienzo painted *Everlasting*, inspired by the quiet beauty of the Hill Country. "The road runner, cactus, and the monarch butterflies leave a lasting moment, even if they're only here for a short time," she said. "Under our dark skies, they symbolize the endurance of life's spirit, which can feel timeless even if fleeting."

Michael Greenwald painted *Heart of the Hill Country*. "The heart on one side represents the heart of this region, and the other side depicts a landscape with the night sky and prickly pear cacti."

Cathy Richardson created *Twinkle Bright My Texas Light*. "Every night I walk my dog and look up at the sky. I hear the animals, and it grounds me," she said. "This piece reflects the creativity I feel and the stories of the wildlife."

Erin Hounsel designed *Preserving the Stars* with a focus on the future. "The inspiration behind my star is God's creation and how it has gifted us with abundance here," she said. "The design shows kids running on a trail with stars rising from their feet and being placed into the sky, symbolizing how we're giving our children a brighter future."

Melissa Richardson created *Magic Melody*, blending music and family. "One thing that connects me to Dripping Springs

is my family, but also its music," she said. "The front of the star has a guitar and the words 'down in Dripping Springs,' which is a Johnny Cash song. On the back, there's a record surrounded by musical elements like a piano, symbolizing how music brings the community together."

London Farris' *A Gathering Place* focused on the beginnings of Dripping Springs and the Tonkawa Indians who first gathered here. "The Milk House Branch, near Edwards Aquifer, was their gathering place. I wanted to pay homage to the Tonkawa Indians and their contributions to our City's foundation."

The project expanded in 2025 with a second phase featuring ten new star sculptures. These new stars are scattered throughout the City's parks, business districts, and civic spaces, and broaden the reach and influence of public art.

These new stars carry an impressive diversity of artistic expression:

The Sacred Waters of Hamilton Pool by Jessi Bostad, located at Flying Fish Swim Academy, reflects the dramatic limestone formations and emerald waters of one of the region's most iconic natural landmarks.

Day & Night in the Hill Country by Joe Christenson, in front of Ally Medical Emergency Room, captures the contrast between the vibrancy of day and the calm mystery of night in the local landscape.

Roping the Stars, at Dripping Springs Ranch Park by Erin Hounsel honors the area's ranching history and celebrates a way of life still very much alive in the Hill Country.

Walk Among the Stars by Cathy Richardson, created for City Hall and the Visitors Center, features imagery drawn from local parks, trails, and community narratives.

Stacks of Belonging in Founders Park by Tiffany Sierras evokes memories of time spent at the Dripping Springs Community Library — a place of growth, connection, and community cohesion.

Pollinator's Dream by Jessie Woodhead celebrates native plants and pollinating species which dot the landscape at Sports and Recreation Park.

The In-Between at Charro Ranch Park, created by Kyndall Womack, features sunrise and sunset scenes set among wildflowers and symbolic fairies.

Here Everything's Better by Melissa Richardson, in front of the Dripping Springs HEB, captures the vibrancy of local life.

Crafted in Community by Rozy Seastrom, at Deep Eddy Vodka Tasting Room, is an interactive piece honoring local breweries, wineries, and distilleries.

Willies First Picnic by Jenny Swannack, located at Veterans Park, commemorates Willie Nelson's inaugural Fourth of July Picnic in Dripping Springs, an early chapter in the City's rich musical history.

This expanded constellation creates a network of public art across Dripping Springs that can be enjoyed year-round, encouraging exploration of parks and city spaces in new and meaningful ways.

From the outset, the Stars of Dripping Springs has been rooted in community engagement and local pride. DSAL has played a key role in connecting artists to the project and fostering a cohesive, diverse arts community. Serving as a hub for local artists, DSAL promotes awareness of Dripping Springs as a growing destination for creative expression while strengthening connections between the arts and municipal initiatives.

The project also encourages a sense of shared ownership among residents. Sponsors, ranging from local schools to major employers, have stepped forward to support individual stars, placing them in parks, business locations, and civic spaces. These partnerships provide not only financial support but meaningful connections between art, commerce, and community life.

As the project continues to expand, the City is seeking sponsors and artists for phase three, with hopes of adding eight to ten new stars in 2026 and extending the star network throughout the community. Organizers envision guided star walks, artist-led workshops, and community stargazing nights that will bring more people together under the same shared sky that continues to inspire local creativity. For more information about the program, visit www.cityofdrippingsprings.com/stars. ★



FROM COURTHOUSE SQUARE TO CULTURAL HUB: HOW TYLER IS REIMAGINING ITS DOWNTOWN

By **Loni Lilley**, Marketing Manager, Visit Tyler

In the City of Tyler, downtown revitalization has been years in the making, shaped by community voices, strategic planning, and a willingness to rethink how public spaces serve both residents and visitors.

What's happening in downtown Tyler today did not begin with construction equipment or ribbon cuttings. It began with listening, planning, and aligning City priorities around a shared goal: creating a more walkable, welcoming, and economically vibrant downtown. Tyler's experience offers a roadmap that other cities can adapt to their own revitalization efforts.

A Vision Years in the Making

Tyler's downtown transformation traces back to 2007 with the adoption of the Tyler 21 Comprehensive Plan, which included a dedicated downtown chapter. This early planning document established a framework for future growth, preservation, and connectivity, setting the tone for decisions that would unfold over the next two decades.

For cities considering similar projects, this step is critical. A comprehensive plan creates continuity across administrations, boards, and leadership changes. It allows revitalization efforts to build momentum over time instead of starting from scratch with each new initiative. Even if a plan is not acted upon immediately, having a shared vision on paper gives communities something concrete to return to when timing, funding, and opportunity align.

Listening Before Designing

Between 2021 and 2022, Tyler developed a preliminary downtown concept through extensive community and stakeholder meetings. Business owners, residents, property owners, and civic leaders were invited into the conversation early to share what they wanted (and didn't want) downtown.

This stage helped shape priorities around walkability, green space, traffic flow, and preserving the character of the courthouse square while modernizing its functionality. Importantly, it also built buy-in.

Community engagement should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a single meeting or survey. Transparent communication builds trust and reduces resistance later, especially when changes impact traffic patterns, parking, or daily routines. When people can see their input reflected in the outcome, they're more likely to champion the project.

When Data Shapes the Streetscape

In July 2022, the City of Tyler launched a comprehensive downtown traffic study that lasted nine months. This study evaluated existing traffic patterns, pedestrian flow, safety concerns, and future needs.

The results informed one of the most significant changes in the downtown plan: transitioning from one-way streets to two-way traffic around the courthouse square. While this type of change can feel daunting, data-backed decisions helped city leaders and stakeholders understand how

redesigned streets could slow traffic, improve safety, and encourage longer visits downtown.

For communities exploring similar changes, investing in professional traffic and infrastructure studies is essential. Data not only improves outcomes, but it also provides defensible reasoning when addressing public concerns or skepticism.

Building Public Trust and Investment

In November 2022, Smith County voters approved a bond for the construction of a new courthouse and parking garage. This milestone signaled strong public support for reinvesting in downtown infrastructure and played a pivotal role in moving the project forward.

Public funding initiatives require clear communication about long-term benefits. In Tyler's case, the bond addressed functional needs while reinforcing downtown as a civic and cultural center. Other cities can learn from this approach by clearly connecting infrastructure investments to quality of life, economic development, and future growth.

Collaboration as a Catalyst

One of the defining features of Tyler's downtown project has been sustained collaboration. In September 2023, the City of Tyler and Smith County jointly approved the concept design during a joint meeting - a key moment of alignment between municipal and county leadership.

From 2023 to the present, the Main Street Director, Deputy City Manager, Halff Consultants, Fitzpatrick Architects, city engineers, and other partners have met monthly to refine design details. These sessions focused on streetscaping, utilities, landscaping, rights-of-way, lighting, and overall functionality, ensuring the final plan reflected both community input and operational realities.

For other cities, this level of coordination can feel ambitious, but it's essential. Regular cross-department meetings reduce costly revisions, prevent silos, and ensure projects remain aligned with broader city goals.

Moving From Vision to Reality

In July 2025, the City of Tyler approved the construction bid for The Fain Group, along with joint approval of use and lease agreements. Construction officially began on

September 2, 2025 - a visible and exciting milestone after years of behind-the-scenes planning.

While construction often brings temporary disruption, clear communication with businesses and residents has remained a priority. Setting expectations, sharing timelines, and highlighting long-term benefits helps maintain momentum and community support throughout the build phase.

Why Downtown Investment Matters

Downtown revitalization is about more than aesthetics. For Tyler, the reimaged courthouse square is designed to support local businesses, attract events, encourage walkability, and create a sense of place that resonates with residents and visitors.

As a destination, Tyler benefits from a downtown that feels authentic and inviting; a place where history and progress coexist. For residents, the project reinforces downtown as a gathering space that reflects community pride.

"Downtown Tyler is more than a project; it's a commitment to our community," said Downtown Director, Amber Varona. "Every design choice, every partnership, and every conversation has been about creating a space where history and progress meet. We're building a downtown that feels welcoming, walkable, and vibrant, a true destination! Downtown will serve as a place where residents and visitors can connect, celebrate, and experience the heart of Tyler in a whole new way."

Revitalizing a downtown does not happen overnight. It requires patience, collaboration, and a willingness to adapt. But when done thoughtfully, the result is more than a redesigned space - it's a renewed sense of connection between a city and the people who experience it.

In Tyler, the journey from courthouse square to cultural hub is still unfolding, but the foundation has been carefully laid. And for cities across Texas and beyond, the process may offer inspiration for what's possible when vision meets collaboration. ★



FUTURE-PROOFING YOUR COMMUNITY ON THE POWER OF VISITORS

By Maura Allen Gast, FCDME, Executive Director, Irving Convention & Visitors Bureau

In an era of shifting industries, remote work, demographic change, and unpredictable state and federal funding, tourism is one of the most flexible, resilient tools we have to stabilize our local economy and strengthen the quality of life and place for our residents and businesses. And it all starts with the visit which doesn't happen without the work done by local destination marketing organizations (Convention and Visitors Bureaus or tourism offices).

Why "Future-Proofing" Starts with the Visit

Tourism is sometimes dismissed as "extras"—nice to have when budgets are healthy, expendable when times get tight. History suggests the opposite.

- In 1896, Detroit created the first convention and visitors bureau specifically to recover from the Panic of 1893. They needed new dollars from outside the region and they discovered that proactively soliciting meetings and conventions was the fastest way to get them.
- After the Great Chicago Fire, Chicago used large-scale events and exhibitions to rebuild its image and its economy, creating the Chicago Interstate Exposition Building to attract visitors and investment.
- When Fort Lauderdale wanted to move beyond its reputation as a spring break party town, it didn't run from tourism but reshaped it. The City invested in an

elegant convention center, higher-end hotels, and better dining. The visitors, residents, and businesses changed – and the community changed for the better.

- World War II had seen Las Vegas grow with a different kind of visitor, with gunnery schools and magnesium mining. When the war ended and those went away, Las Vegas needed something to fill its hotels and restaurants on the weekdays and built the Las Vegas Convention Center, turning Vegas into the leading and most successful destination in the country.

The pattern is consistent: communities in crisis or transition often turn to tourism first, not last. Why? Because when done thoughtfully and strategically, tourism builds exactly the kind of place your own residents want, too.

Build a place where people want to **visit** and you'll build a place where people want to **live**.

Visitors want safe, attractive streets. They want walkable districts, good parks, public art, festivals, quality dining, farmers markets, and a sense of place. Your residents want the same things. And visitors don't require public dollars to school their children or fix their potholes or provide hospitals, but they still generate the revenues that support those. Invest to impress a visitor, and you're improving life

for the person who lives around the corner. Think about those visitors as future residents, as prospective business owners.

Tourism as a Community Development Strategy

Texas towns and cities are competing on multiple fronts: for residents, talent, employers, students, retirees, and state and federal resources. What ties all of those together? Perception and experience.

The "visit" is often the first real experience anyone has with your community. If that first visit is compelling, it sets off a positive and extraordinary chain reaction.

Build a place where people want to **live** and you'll build a place where people want to **work**. Visitors who have a great experience can easily imagine themselves living there. Retirees look at your trail system and downtown; young professionals notice your coffee shops, live music, and coworking spaces; families pay attention to safety, public spaces, and schools. Business owners look at an excellent airport, easy transportation systems, and a deep talent pool. A great visit makes future residents and businesses easier to recruit.

Once people choose to live in your community, they bring skills, entrepreneurship, and a local workforce. That's where the next building block kicks in.

Build a place where people want to **work** and you'll build a place where **business** has to be.

In today's economy, many businesses follow the talent. If skilled workers want to be in your city, business must be there, too, or risk losing its own workforce. Twenty years ago, companies made expansion or relocation decisions strictly on the financial bottom line. Today, they also should account for the place's ability to recruit and retain talent.

And once you've built a place where business has to be, your visitor economy deepens yet again.

Build a place where **business** has to be and you'll build a place where people have to **visit**.

Clients, vendors, job candidates, and conference attendees all flow into your town, spending money on hotels, restaurants, transportation, retail, and entertainment. Tourism and economic development are interdependent when they're done properly, coordinated and laser-pointed

in their collective target audiences.

The Role of CVBs and Tourism Offices

This loop begins with the visitor, and that's where your convention and visitors bureau (CVB) comes in. Tourism professionals spend their days engaging with potential visitors, marketing the community, and educating people about the destinations they represent in a highly competitive environment. They help shape the city's external story, recruit events, meetings, and sports tournaments, and connect local businesses into cohesive, visitor-ready experiences.

CVBs also coordinate marketing efforts that individual operators could not undertake alone and provide valuable data on visitor behavior and economic impact. By aligning community assets, supporting local businesses, and promoting the city strategically, tourism offices play a critical role in attracting visitors and strengthening the local economy.

The first CVB in Detroit wasn't formed for fun; it was formed for survival. Your tourism office serves a similarly strategic role. It functions as an economic development partner focused on bringing in outside and immediate dollars while strengthening your community's long-term appeal.

For city leaders, future-proofing a community includes recognizing tourism as part of its broader economic infrastructure.

Beyond Conventions: Diversifying Your Tourism Base

Conventions and large meetings are important, but they're only one part of the picture. The Texas communities that will prosper over the next 20–30 years will intentionally cultivate multiple types of visitors:

- Leisure travelers – Families, couples, and friends seeking weekend getaways, heritage travel, culinary experiences, or outdoor recreation.
- Sports tourism – Youth tournaments, adult leagues, and regional competitions that fill hotels and restaurants and often repeat annually.
- Cultural and heritage tourism – Visitors drawn by museums, historic sites, architecture, music, and local traditions unique to Texas.
- Nature and outdoor tourism – Trails, lakes, rivers, dark skies, birding, hunting, fishing, and parks.

- Medical and health tourism – Patients and families traveling to regional medical centers who need lodging, food, and supportive services.
- Educational and workforce tourism – Prospective university or community college students, interns, and trainees coming for programs and campus visits.
- Day visitors and regional traffic – People within a short drive who can become repeat customers for your special events, distinctive amenities, and one-of-a-kind local treasures.

Each of these categories can be a “first visit” that sparks the next decision—to live, work, invest, return.

To use tourism as a future-proofing tool, consider these priorities:

Invest in place, not just promotion.

Marketing is essential, but what sells your community is the experience itself. Communities stand out when they embrace distinctive, authentic elements and prioritize walkable, attractive city cores. Clean, well-maintained parks and riverfronts, clear wayfinding signage and visitor information, public art, murals, thoughtful lighting, and safe, pleasant streetscapes all contribute to a welcoming environment that supports visitors and quality of life.

Debt service brings moral obligations.

If you build a venue in your community that is funded by hotel occupancy tax bonds, it is in your community’s interest to ensure the visitors keep coming. That means making sure your tourism agency has the resources it needs to market and promote the destination consistently. When hotel rooms are not filled, hotel occupancy tax revenues may fall short of covering debt service. In that case, other revenues – such as ad valorem or sales taxes – must be used to meet the obligation which often means raising taxes or cutting services.

Integrate tourism with economic development.

Break down silos and ensure your economic development and tourism partners have seats at the same table, regardless of organizational structure. These entities share common audiences and often align on capital projects that serve locals and visitors, as well as on branding, messaging, and community image.

Champion your tourism office.

As an elected or appointed leader, your support helps set the tone for long-term success.

- Hotel occupancy tax revenues are structured to support tourism promotion, which in turn contributes to broader local revenues, including property and sales taxes.
- CVBs and tourism teams promote products and experiences they do not control, yet they remain accountable for overall performance and reputation.
- A long-term perspective helps align visitor, business, and resident needs with future community priorities.
- Tourism staff often serve as the front line for community branding and reputation management.

Design for “stickiness.”

The longer that visitors stay and the more often they return, the more likely they become residents, investors, or repeat customers. Communities can encourage this with walkable clusters of activities, evening and weekend programming, and authentic local experiences like farmers markets, live music, and brewery trails. Safe, well-lit streets and broad accessibility make the community welcoming and easy to enjoy.

Looking Ahead: Resilience Through Appeal

Future-proofing does not mean predicting every disruption; it means building a community that is attractive, flexible, and welcoming enough to adapt to whatever comes next. Tourism supports that goal by diversifying revenue streams, elevating the physical environment, strengthening the community’s brand beyond city limits, building civic pride, and creating a pipeline of future residents, workers, and businesses.

It all begins with the visit – and visits happen because of the work your convention and visitors bureau does every day. When city leaders invest in creating a place people want to visit, they set in motion a powerful chain reaction: a community where people want to live, where businesses want to operate, and where opportunity naturally follows. That visibility and appeal fuel vibrancy and long-term viability, forming a resilient, competitive foundation for the future. ★

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- Zoo Midland (City of Midland)
- Global Wafer (City of Sherman)
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