



MOVING RIO FORWARD

SOUTH TEXAS COMMUNITY CONDUCTS WALKABILITY DEMONSTRATION TO PLAN CONNECTIVITY TO EVERYDAY PLACES

Texas A&M AgriLife HOP 1809 CDC Grantee – August 2020

Like many areas around the country, Rio Grande City's downtown lacks supportive infrastructure to encourage safe walking. The auto-centric downtown design adds to a county-wide challenge-- one in four residents are considered physically inactive.* While participating in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension WOW-E PSE efforts, local Starr county coalition members realized the potential of building on the existing downtown assets -- proximate everyday places of cultural and historic significance -- by infusing the area with supportive walking infrastructure. This ignited a locally-driven evidence-based PSE effort to create an environment that naturally encourages walking to and in between everyday places.

As part of their planning process, the coalition worked with key stakeholders to conduct walking audits and a pop-up demonstration. These community engagement streams were paired with site inventories and design suggestions to collectively serve as the basis for RGC's Downtown Walkability Plan. The collaborative nature of the process and visual impact will guide the development of RGC zoning policy and contribute to the city's first comprehensive planning process. This stakeholder-guided, low-cost, high-impact approach acts as a regionally relevant model for smaller neighboring communities.



ENVIRONMENTS

PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

According to County Health Rankings over one in four residents in Starr County is considered physically inactive. Perceptions gathered during WOW-E windshield surveys, round tables, key informant interviews, walking audits, and site inventories depict limited access to infrastructure promoting safe walking and physical activity. For example, walking audit participants listed heavy auto traffic and lack of pedestrian-safe infrastructure as prevalent conditions. Limited access to healthy infrastructure promoting health and reducing disease presents the need to make partner driven policy and environmental changes.

“ Streets feel like they belong to the cars, but they belong to the people. ”

- Lydia Saenz Garza

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APPROACH

The budding Move Rio Forward initiative started in response to issues identified and best practices learned at Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's WOW-E kick off session and Action Institute in March and August of 2019. While initially wanting to start walking social groups and events, local advocates realized the overarching need for a more walkable downtown to safely connect businesses, civil services, parks and open spaces, and historical landmarks. In response, a coalition task force spearheaded a WOW-E RFA (request for assistance) by assessing project readiness, key partners, feasibility and sustainability, and action steps. In the October 2019 Walkability Workshop, participants conducted walking audits to inventory existing conditions. Groups identified fast-moving traffic and a lack of pedestrian-safe infrastructure as key determinates to walking. Working with diverse stakeholders, they ideated PSE changes to create supportive environments. In March of 2020, the group conducted a two day pop-up, planning, and engagement process.



RESULTS

2.5 miles

41 everyday
places

26 partners

The pop-up transformed the area with crosswalks, curb extensions, a pedestrian lane, and wayfinding signage. This effort paired with site inventories and design suggestions guided the Downtown Walkability Plan which is currently in the review and adoption process. By utilizing a systems approach these efforts easily integrate into Rio Grande City's long-term zoning goals and bolster steps to embark on the city's first comprehensive plan. The stakeholder-driven, low-cost, high-impact approach will encourage neighboring communities to engage in PSE work.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

Rio's transformative, collective action linked with efforts to formalize priorities through plans, policies, and physical changes to the environment will aid in sustaining success. Furthermore, the partnership depth and strength of connections among a diverse group representing organizations such as the Women's Club, City staff, TXDOT, Texas Transportation Institute, Mainstreet program, EDC, schools, and local bank aid in ensuring long-term support. Related efforts for a Healthy Downtown program as well as plans to expand connectivity to neighboring land uses will encourage broader city improvements and momentum.

