

## Executive Summary

Under the auspices of the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), and at the invitation of the City Manager, Mayor and City Council, Linda DiMario, IEDC Board member and Executive Vice President, Greater Irvine Chamber, Irvine, California, volunteered to evaluate the condition of Downtown in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and work with the people of Aransas Pass to develop a plan to move forward.

This is a Summary of my Findings, Insights and Recommendations:

### Findings

- Aransas Pass is a community in the truest sense of the word. People genuinely care about their neighbors, the community and others. Aransas Pass is a special place to those who live there. They like the small town feel. They either choose to stay here because it is "home" or came back because they wanted to work here or raise their families here. Several waves of new residents moving into Aransas Pass are attracted to its small town attributes and simple lifestyle. Aransas Pass residents and those who own businesses here are resilient, strong and very capable. There is no question in my mind that once they set their minds to a task, it will be done. Once they set goals, those goals will be achieved.
- Aransas Pass was the Shrimping Capital of the World. That industry's slow decline - global competition, sea turtles and cost of doing business - coupled with an understandable denial and sense of loss, contributed to the failure of the community to pivot faster to adapt and adopt new industries to sustain the economy. This reluctance to accept and change was reflected in the Downtown.
- Aransas Pass Downtown was not in the best shape before Hurricane Harvey, the two block core was by everyone's definition: tired, run down, sad and troubled. It lacks coherency - in its mix of businesses and its aesthetics. It appears to have just evolved in response to economic conditions. H.E.B. is the centerpiece of the downtown core but it is not connected in a meaningful or impactful way to the other businesses.
- The gateways into the Downtown core make a very poor impression. The hurricane damage notwithstanding, the property left and right of each gateway reflects dilapidated or abandoned buildings, unkempt yards and frontage, weeds, debris and litter.
- Aransas Pass possesses one of the most globally envied assets - a waterfront that is functional, distinctive, unique and ripe with possibilities. This is a waterfront that competitively differentiates them from their beach community neighbors on Coastal Bend - offering a unique configuration that affords the added amenities of marshes, wetlands, open areas, waterways, and docks. The Conn Brown Harbor development will be a game changer for Aransas Pass. It

will transform the waterfront and establish a new destination feature that will attract new visitors.

- Housing stock was negatively impacted by the hurricane. This contributes to an employment problem because hourly wage employees at hotels, restaurants and seasonal businesses were unable to find housing or affordable housing. Almost everyone expressed a challenge finding, hiring and retaining employees for their businesses.

### **Insights**

- Towns and cities known for their fishing heritages are not of the same character, fabric or temperament as beach communities. Fishing towns are quintessentially American. They reflect the American spirit. The Texan spirit. They were born of fearlessness, determination and guts. They were how a town's people made their living, provided for their families and contributed to the economy. Fishing towns are working towns. They are not necessarily neat and clean or even respectable in some circles. They are often gritty, tactile, messy and rough around the edges. ***These characteristics defined Aransas Pass when it was the "Shrimping Capital of the World". And they still define it today. While the shrimping industry is no longer at the heart of the economy in Aransas Pass, this fishing heritage and its fishing reputation are still the heart of Aransas Pass.***
- There is a remarkable and encouraging consensus about what Downtown Aransas Pass was, is today and can be tomorrow:
  - Downtown must be revitalized. Downtown needs a commonly shared theme, brand and aesthetic.
  - The current Downtown footprint is not indicative of the actual, active Downtown footprint which embraces further down Commercial and Goodnight.
  - Additional restaurants, retail and entertainment opportunities must be incorporated to create a sustainable experience.
  - Downtown needs more parking, improved lighting, facade improvements, clean up of sidewalks, curbs, gutters and surrounding lots and alley areas.
- Aransas Pass really is at the center of the towns and cities in the immediate surrounding area and the connective tissue between Rockport, Port Aransas, Ingleside and Corpus Christi. This is a geographic advantage that can be more effectively leveraged to benefit the people and economy of Aransas Pass.
- Aransas Pass will be best served if it revitalizes their Downtown in a sustainable way that serves residents and visitors. To retain and attract businesses Downtown, they must be able to survive and generate profits 365 days a year, not just seasonally.

- Everyone agrees that its reputation for fishing and its heritage are key elements in the re-imagining of Downtown and the City's image. Its water assets - waterfront, bay, coastal waterway, fishing, hunting, boating, birding, outdoor adventure sports- kayaking, paddle boarding - eco-tourism, outdoor activities - hiking trails, walking paths, biking - define Aransas Pass and are its best known and most marketable assets.

### Recommendations

***Build on the heart and heritage of Aransas Pass.*** You need not turn your back on it to start writing your next chapter. But neither should you be constrained by it. Rather, let it inspire you to re-interpret it, re-discover it, re-imagine it and re-invent it for a 21st century Aransas Pass. *Be your best, authentic selves.* Take who and what you are today and leverage that character and heritage in ways that restore pride, delivers emotional comfort and satisfaction and stimulates a sustainable economy.

Essential to the revitalization of Downtown are the following recommendations summarized here but expanded upon in the full report:

- **Reclaim your Downtown.** This is your 24/7, 365 day a year billboard! Because of its prominent location on TXDOT Highways, it will always define you. The proposed strategies offer you an opportunity to leverage this location to re-build a sustainable economy that attracts residents and visitors year-round.
- **Downtown Improvements Begin with a Plan.** Identifying the most effective leadership, organization and reliable funding sources are essential to developing a plan and executing it.
- **Funding the Plan.** This report identifies and recommends five (5) potential funding sources which are available to provide Aransas Pass with new, dedicated funding sources essential to revitalizing Downtown: establish a self-directed, self-assessed Downtown Business Improvement District; enroll RV spaces in the H.O.T. collections or assign a reasonable assessment per leased space; increase the city's share of the H.O.T. on sold hotel rooms; apply the H.O.T. to vacation rentals and cottages and/or apply for identified grants.
- **Extend Downtown Footprint.** Accelerate the revitalization of Downtown by extending the downtown corridor to encompass DeBerry to Stappe and embrace businesses that flank and compliment the four block area.
- **Adopt a Gateway initiative.** Currently, the gateway impression reflects poorly on Downtown and Aransas Pass. It is imperative to the short and long term health and vitality of Downtown that this situation be addressed including sufficiently empowering and staffing the City's Code Enforcement Office.

- **Transform Downtown.** Everyone agrees that a coherent appearance for Downtown is essential to its health, vitality, ability to attract and retain businesses and its ability to attract residents and visitors. Facade improvements, color palette and iconography will enhance the Downtown ambiance and improve the business environment. A variety of affordable solutions are available to help achieve this goal.
- **Develop a Long Range Plan to Re-purpose or Re-Claim Vacant Buildings** Pre-Hurricane Harvey and post Hurricane Harvey, vacant buildings or buildings in disrepair need to be managed. Take inventory and understand your options.
- **Re-purpose Key Downtown Assets.** There are a great many assets that can be easily re-purposed to generate a more inspiring and authentic interpretation of Downtown.
- **Connectedness: Conn Brown Harbor & Downtown.** Bake in connectedness between Downtown and Conn Brown Harbor. It will best serve the interests and the economy of Aransas Pass that any development at Conn Brown Harbor be connected to the Downtown AND the Downtown connected to the new Conn Brown Harbor.

### **Conclusion**

The people of Aransas Pass are poised to take action. Those with whom I met shared their determination to make Downtown an attractive, welcoming and prosperous center for Aransas Pass. This determination, this proposed plan of strategies and the City's support will accelerate Downtown revitalization and serve residents and visitors very well into the future.

