

DOWNTOWN + UPTOWN MASTER PLAN REVIEW

Executive Summary

This report provides a review of the Downtown + Uptown (DT+UT) Master Plan for El Paso, focusing on its potential impact on local neighborhoods. It highlights the plan's most beneficial implementation actions for neighborhoods, while also raising concerns about the plan's definition of "affordable housing" and its potential for displacement of current residents. The report concludes with recommendations for more effective community engagement in the future, drawing on best practices from other cities.

The subcommittee recommends that the City Plan Commissioners approve of the DT+UT Master Plan with additional recommendations based on

community feedback from neighborhood residents concerned about being displaced from their homes due to rising housing costs.

Recommendations

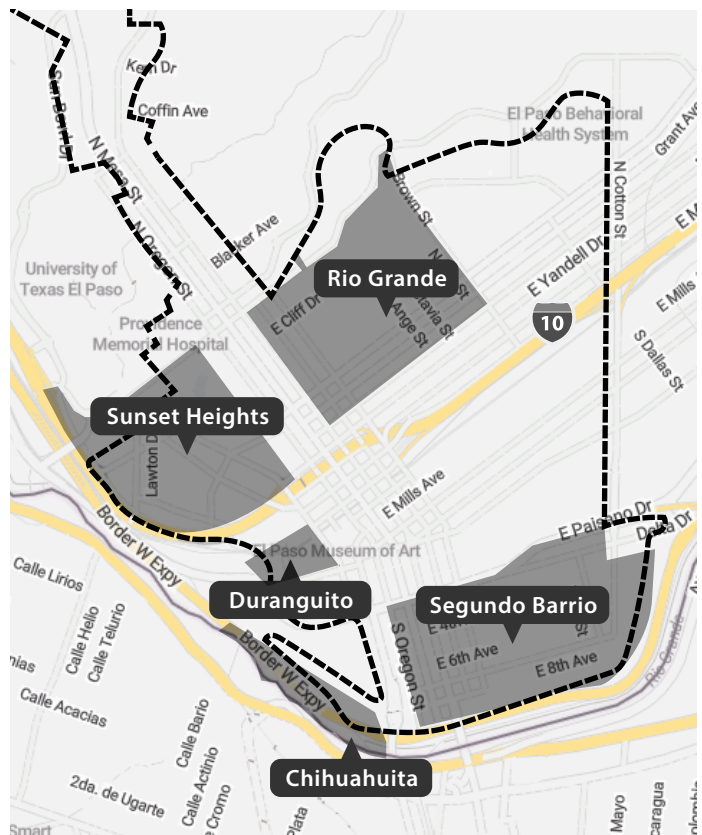
1. **Change the name of the plan** to the Downtown + Surrounding Neighborhoods Master Plan to reflect the goal of improving the quality of life for current residents
2. **Implement Neighborhood Participation Plan meetings** as a requirement by city ordinance to increase community engagement and improve community support for development
3. **Maintain communication** with the community as the plan is implemented by centralizing updates and announcements in a single bilingual website
4. **Create neighborhood workshops** hosted by the Community & Human Development department to empower neighborhoods with the knowledge and tools to effectively collaborate with developers and City staff

Introduction

The DT+UT Master Plan represents a significant step in the development of El Paso. It proposes a range of strategies and actions aimed at enhancing the quality of life for residents, promoting commercial development, and renovating neighborhoods. It's crucial to consider the potential impacts on current neighborhood residents, particularly those who may be most vulnerable to displacement.

This report aims to provide the City Plan Commissioners with a detailed overview of the DT+UT Master Plan, a review of neighborhood statistics, and recommendations based on feedback from the community. The goal is to ensure that the plan is not only beneficial for the city as a whole, but also for the residents who call these neighborhoods home.

Neighborhoods Near Downtown




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Summary of the Plan

The DT+UT Master Plan is a comprehensive urban development plan that focuses on enhancing the public realm, improving infrastructure, and promoting walkability. Here are some key highlights of the plan:


Charting Direction

The plan outlines the overall direction for the development of Downtown + Uptown, including economic development, real estate, future land use, mobility, and public realm.

 See Page 10 of the plan

Planning Framework

The plan provides a framework for the development of the area, including zoning and other regulatory changes, mobility, equity and inclusion, and public investment strategies.

 See Page 79 of the plan

Place-based Strategies

The plan includes strategies to realize the Downtown Core's potential, transform priority corridors, enhance existing neighborhoods, and develop catalyst site plans.

 See Page 36 of the plan


Transit Investment District

The plan recommends a combined approach to transit and development where new transit revenue from ridership and other sources is invested back into Sun Metro service to increase frequencies and make service more attractive.

 See Page 20 of the plan

Implementation Actions

The plan proposes a range of implementation actions, including disincentivizing the redevelopment and demolition of current affordable multi-family housing without a 1:1 replacement, incentivizing the maintenance and rehabilitation of affordable rental properties, and establishing residential compatibility standards.

 See pages 87 and 88 of the plan

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Review of Implementation Actions

The Implementation Actions section (Page 80) of the DT+UT Master Plan outlines a series of strategic steps designed to bring the plan's vision to life. These actions are crucial as they translate the plan's broad goals into tangible actions that will shape the future of downtown & surrounding neighborhoods.

In terms of benefits for residents, the plan includes strategies to improve walkability, enhance the quality of life in existing neighborhoods, and prioritize investment in infrastructure along key corridors of the plan. Here are some highlights that will specifically help to prevent displacement of current residents, improve quality of life, and maintain neighborhood character:

1. Disincentivize Redevelopment and Demolition of Current Affordable Housing

The plan proposes to discourage the redevelopment and demolition of current affordable multi-family housing without a 1:1 replacement. This could help to prevent displacement of current residents (Page 88).

2. Incentivize Maintenance and Rehabilitation of Affordable Rental Properties

The plan suggests offering property tax incentives to private property owners to maintain and rehabilitate affordable rental properties. This could help to preserve the existing housing stock for current residents (Page 88).

3. Establish Residential Compatibility Standards

The plan proposes establishing standards to address concerns regarding noise, parking, height, and massing transitions where corridors and higher-intensity districts abut established neighborhoods. This could help to ensure that new development is in harmony with existing neighborhoods (Page 87).

4. Prioritize Midrise Multifamily Residential Construction

The plan prioritizes opportunities for midrise multifamily residential construction, which could increase the housing supply and potentially provide more affordable housing options (Page 87).

5. Remove Barriers to Residential Infill Development

The plan suggests removing barriers to residential infill development, including upzoning the planning area for up to 4 units per lot and reducing or eliminating parking requirements. This could lead to an increase in housing density (Page 87).

6. Preserve Existing Affordable Housing in Neighborhoods

The plan proposes several strategies to preserve existing affordable housing, including retaining affordable housing units subject to Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) subsidies, creating a program to identify, monitor, and preserve at-risk affordable units, and adopting a right-to-purchase ordinance to minimize the displacement of low- and moderate-income residents (Page 87).

7. Encourage Developers to Execute Community Benefit Agreements

The plan encourages developers to execute Community Benefit Agreements with community coalitions to minimize low- and moderate-income resident displacement (Page 87).

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Affordable Housing Concerns

A key concern that has emerged from our review of the DT+UT Master Plan is the federal definition of "affordable housing" used by the City. The federal definition considers "affordable housing" as housing that's affordable to households making 60% of the county's median household income. In El Paso, the median household income is \$50k, so 60% of that is \$30k.

According to this definition, affordable housing would be priced at \$750 per month, calculated as follows: \$30,000 divided by 12 months, multiplied by 30% (the threshold beyond which households are considered burdened by housing costs).

However, the median gross rent in the neighborhoods affected by the DT+UT Master Plan ranges from \$349 to \$649. This means that the rent for newly constructed "affordable housing" units would be higher than the current rent for more than half of all renters in these neighborhoods.

This discrepancy raises serious concerns about the risk of displacement for current residents. If the rent for new housing is significantly higher than what they are currently paying, many residents may be unable to afford to stay in their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Data

	Chihuahuita	Segundo Barrio	Duranguito*	Sunset Heights	Rio Grande	El Paso Average
Median Household income	\$13k	\$14k	\$27k	\$23k	\$21k	\$51k
Hispanic Population	93%	96%	84%	90%	86%	83%
Limited English Speaking Households	73%	59%	45%	23%	33%	25%
Median Age	37	40	33	39	39	34
Households With No Internet Aces	58%	41%	44%	33%	21%	14%

* Data for Duranguito includes all of downtown north of Paisano

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Housing Data

	Chihuahuita	Segundo Barrio	Duranguito*	Sunset Heights	Rio Grande	El Paso Average
Renter-Occupied Households	96%	91%	97%	93%	72%	39%
Median Rent + Utilities	\$497	\$349	\$505	\$649	\$585	\$940
Median Home Value	N/A	\$59k	N/A	\$162k	\$113k	\$131k
Multi-Unit Housing Structures	87%	82%	81%	77%	51%	26%
Structures Built Before 1939	77%	42%	77%	58%	63%	12%

* Data for Duranguito includes all of downtown north of Paisano

Employment Data

	Chihuahuita	Segundo Barrio	Duranguito*	Sunset Heights	Rio Grande	El Paso Average
Avg. Commute Time	34 min	28 min	21 min	19 min	24 min	24 min
Workers That Walk To Work	16%	7%	36%	8%	3%	3%
Workers That Take Public Transportation	50%	13%	10%	6%	9%	3%
Unemployment Rate	8.2%	19.7%	7%	8.7%	7.8%	6.6%
Poverty Rate	45%	58%	56%	25%	36%	21%
No High School Diploma	16%	5%	1%	3%	5%	4%

* Data for Duranguito includes all of downtown north of Paisano

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Neighborhood Feedback on the Planning Process

Based on feedback from neighborhood residents, there are several key recommendations for planning in the future:

Redefine "Affordable Housing"

The federal definition of "affordable housing" does not reflect the economic realities of the affected neighborhoods. The City should consider revising this definition to ensure that new affordable housing is truly affordable for current households who make less than 60% of the county median.

Enhance Community Engagement

The city should make a concerted effort to involve local residents in the planning process. This could include adopting Neighborhood Participation Plans as a requirement for future development, partnerships with local institutions, and more transparent communication about the plan and its impacts. It's also imperative that the city provide bilingual and printed materials to residents so that those that lack internet access can participate in the planning process as well.

Specific local organizations voiced that they were left out of the initial outreach, but proved extremely helpful in gathering surveys from the local community. They include Ciudad Nueva in the Rio Grande Neighborhood, the Boys and Girls Club in Segundo Barrio, and Project Regeneracion in Duranguito.

Neighborhood Outreach

The subcommittee provided several surveys to neighborhood residents online, in print, in English, and in Spanish. City staff and subcommittee members also attended neighborhood association meetings in Rio Grande, Sunset Heights, and Segundo Barrio. Two additional community meetings were held that were attended by neighborhood leaders from the Rio Grande Neighborhood Association, Conscious Barrio, Sunset Heights Neighborhood Improvement Association, Ciudad Nueva, the Community First Coalition, and Duranguito. We reached out to the Chihuahueta Neighborhood Association in person and by phone to involve them in our outreach as well.

We surveyed neighborhoods about their assets and needs, and found recurring responses in all neighborhoods:

Neighborhood Assets

Safe neighborhoods, multi-generational demographics, income diversity, attainable housing, proximity to downtown, reliable local nonprofit partners

Neighborhood Challenges

Lack of grocery stores, trash on streets, lack of enough trash cans on the street, lack of shade/ greenery, vacant buildings, rental properties in need of maintenance and repair, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of job training, lack of community spaces

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Case Study: Shreveport's Neighborhood Participation Plan

One potential model for improved community engagement is the Neighborhood Participation Plan process used by Shreveport, Louisiana (among other cities). This process ensures that developers pursue early and effective public participation before their land use application appears before the City Plan Commission.

Neighborhood Participation Plans (NPPs) are designed to increase community involvement in land use decisions that directly impact them. They serve as a platform for property owners, residents, and neighborhood organizations to interact directly with developers. **The NPP process involves several steps, including:**

1. A pre-application meeting between developers and the City
2. A meeting notification mailed to every household within 500 feet of a proposed development project
3. A neighborhood meeting held exclusively between the developers and neighborhood stakeholders, without City staff or elected officials
4. Submission of a final NPP report

NPPs offer benefits to both neighborhoods and developers. For neighborhoods, NPPs ensure their voices are heard, fostering a sense of ownership and trust in the development process. They provide an opportunity for residents to voice their concerns, ask questions, and provide feedback on proposed projects, leading to developments that better

meet their needs and improve their quality of life. For developers, NPPs can reduce costs by identifying potential issues early in the planning process, reducing the likelihood of costly delays and redesigns later on. Furthermore, community engagement through NPPs can lead to smoother project approval processes and developments that are more widely accepted by the community.

Adopting a similar approach in El Paso could help to ensure that the voices of local residents are heard and taken into account in the planning process. It could also help to build trust and foster a sense of ownership among residents, making them active participants in the development of their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Participation Plan

RESOURCE GUIDE



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Feedback for More Effective Community Engagement

Based on the feedback received from neighborhood residents and the lessons learned from the Shreveport case study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve community engagement in El Paso:

- Establish Neighborhood Participation Plans:** Adopt a program similar to Shreveport's Neighborhood Participation Plan. This would ensure early and effective public participation in land use applications and foster a sense of ownership among residents.
- Partner with Local Institutions:** Collaborate with local institutions, such as UTEP and non-profit organizations, to leverage their expertise and connections with the community. These partnerships can help facilitate communication and engagement between the City and residents.
- Maintain Communication:** Provide clear, accessible information about the implementation of the DT+UT Master Plan as it's implemented over the coming years. This could include a dedicated website, regular newsletters, and easy-to-understand summaries of complex issues. A great website to emulate is the Public Dashboard for the El Paso County Strategic Plan.
- Implement Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish clear mechanisms for residents to provide feedback on the DT+UT Master Plan during its implementation. This could include online surveys, comment forms, and opportunities to provide feedback at community meetings.

Below are screenshots from the Public Dashboard for the El Paso County Strategic Plan. This website can be used as a model for effective community updates as the DT+UT Master Plan is implemented:



Lead Justice Reform



Transform Economic Development



Increase Tourism



Upgrade Infrastructure

20.ED2 Transform Economic Development

55%

Latest Update:

Economic Development staff has been engaging with aerospace and advanced manufacturing executives as well as military leadership about the EDA grant-funded expansion of El Paso County's research park at the Fabens Airport and its connection with The University of Texas at El Paso's capability as a testing site for innovations. County staff and university leadership are discussing marketing efforts that showcase the airport and its improvements and would be presented during a press availability event.

Description	Progress	Status
20.ED2.2.1 Increase Commercial Tax Base		On Track
20.ED2.2.2 Focus on Attracting Higher Wage Industries	100%	Completed
20.ED2.2.3 Support the creation of a regional workforce development plan	38%	On Track
20.ED2.2.4 Develop and implement impactful, focused economic development strategy	35%	
20.ED2.2.5 Fully develop and invest in Fabens Airport	30%	On Track
20.ED2.2.6 Increase collaboration with University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) on aerospace initiatives	70%	

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Recommendations for the CPC

The DT+UT Master Plan represents a significant opportunity for the development of El Paso. However, it is crucial that this development is inclusive and beneficial for all residents, particularly those in the affected neighborhoods. By adopting more effective community engagement practices, partnering with local organizations, and ensuring that affordable housing is truly affordable for current residents, the city can help to ensure that the DT+UT Master Plan enhances the quality of life for all El Pasoans.

This subcommittee recommends that the City Plan Commissioners approve of the DT+UT Master Plan with the following recommendations:

1. Change the name of the plan

Neighborhood residents north of downtown are in vocal opposition to rebranding their neighborhoods as “Uptown El Paso.” They believe that the affluent connotation of “Uptown” is intended to draw populations from outside of their neighborhood (and outside of El Paso) to their community. An influx of high income residents will put them at risk of displacement, and aligns with the initial goals communicated by the City’s consultants of drawing high income “creative class” workers to El Paso. The City planners maintain that this is no longer a goal of the plan.

Neighborhoods recommend changing the name of the plan to align with the goals of improving the quality of life for current residents. The subcommittee shares their concerns and recommends that the Downtown + Uptown Master Plan be renamed to the **Downtown + Surrounding Neighborhoods Master Plan**.

2. Establish the Neighborhood Participation Plan program by city ordinance

We recommend that the City adopt a program similar to Shreveport’s **Neighborhood Participation Plan**. This would ensure early and effective public participation in land use applications and foster a sense of ownership among residents. By involving the community at early planning stages, developers ensure that their projects avoid costly delays and resistance from the community at later stages.

3. Maintain communication with a public bilingual dashboard

We recommend that the City build a tool similar to the **Public Dashboard** for the El Paso County Strategic Plan. This will ensure that the details of the master plan are implemented transparently and effectively. Bilingual printed annual reports should be made available to neighborhoods, and they should have the option to request meetings with City staff to clarify the annual reports.

4. Advanced Leadership Academy

We recommend that the City’s Community & Human Development department utilize the Advanced Leadership Academy to **help neighborhoods understand how to work effectively with developers and City staff**. This program can help the community understand land grants, community benefits agreements, and how to create neighborhood plans. By equipping neighborhoods with these tools, they will be better prepared to create development that they want to see in their community. This initiative will not only empower residents but also foster a sense of ownership and active participation in the development of their neighborhoods.