



A Healthy Advantage

Expected Economic Benefits from Implementing the
Lower Rio Grande Valley Active Transportation and Tourism Plan



THE HARBINGER CONSULTANCY
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The Active Plan in Brief



Rose Gowen
Commissioner
City of Brownsville

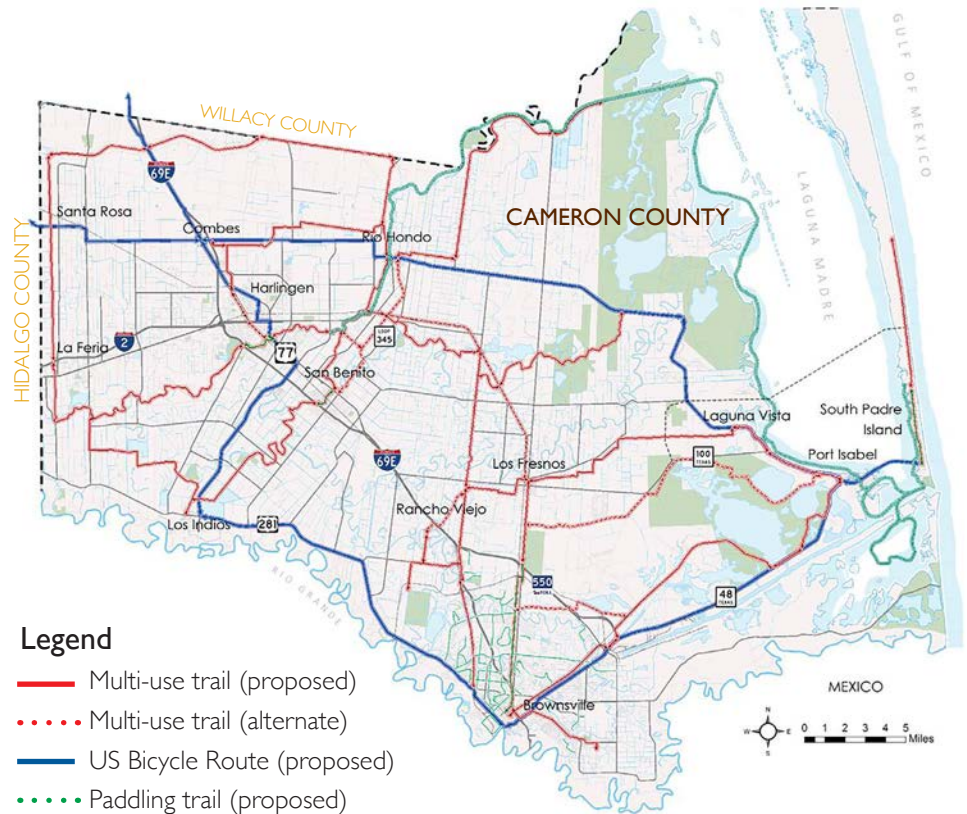
“This plan is a strong example of regional cooperation and collaboration between multiple communities. The most remarkable point is that it is an unheard of effort by cities who are among the poorest in the country to move forward and dare to enrich and adjust the definition of themselves into a destination that attracts “new” tourism and “new” economic development sectors while improving the public health of their own people.”

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Main cover photo: Thomas Hill
Cover panel images: Mark Lehmann and
RGV Rowing Club

LRGV Regional Active Transportation Network



The Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) Active Plan is a blueprint for a 428-mile trail network that will link the rich natural, cultural and historical resources of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The Active Plan integrates active transportation and active tourism development to create a unified regional identity for outdoor tourism and new resources and community pride for residents.

Sponsored by the Valley Baptist Legacy Foundation, University of Texas School of Public Health, and ten communities in Cameron County—with an expanding array of supporters and partners—the Active Plan supports job creation, tourism spending, and economic development across the county, and serves as a catalyst for healthier lifestyles for all Cameron County residents.

The LRGV Active Plan aims to help communities and businesses maximize the economic benefits of the area’s recreational, natural, cultural, and historic resources. The program springs from, and aims to build, regional cooperation and to strengthen connections between the region’s active tourism assets and the cities and towns they serve.

Many area residents, property owners, community leaders, and regional, state and federal partners contributed time, resources, knowledge, and insight to developing the Active Plan. Half Associates, Inc. led a local team that assembled the plan, designed to be leveraged by the municipalities of Cameron County to build a vibrant active tourism economy and healthier communities.

Five Guiding Principles

The Active Plan is based on five core principles:

- Generate new economic opportunity throughout the LRGV.
- Diversify the local tourism market.
- Link LRGV communities.
- Create a regional active transportation network.
- Promote healthy lifestyles.

Combining Transportation and Economic Development

The Active Plan is both a transportation plan and an economic development plan. It leverages the thriving local tourism economy concentrated around the beaches of South Padre Island by tapping into the rapidly expanding market for “active tourism,” which combines elements of adventure, nature, and cultural travel. Developing an “active” transportation network linking all Cameron County communities could expand the geographic reach of tourism spending, extend area visits, and reduce seasonal lulls in visitation.

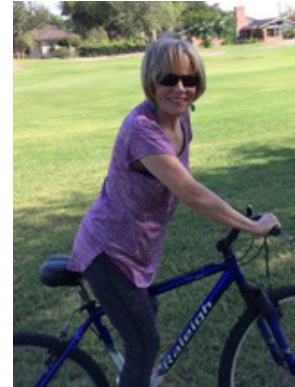
Cameron County is rich in natural habitats and unique cultural and historical features. The Active Plan proposes a

world-class network of bicycle-, pedestrian-, and paddling-trail connections to these destinations as a “low-impact” way to visit and experience the sights, sounds, and significance of LRGV attractions. The trail networks recommended in the Plan are designed to be extensive and varied enough to entice an active tourist to stay in the area for an extended adventure.

Local Appeal and Access

The trail investments envisioned by the Active Plan are not intended solely for the use of visitors. They will provide residual and long-term benefits to Cameron County residents as well.

The proposed regional active transportation network will be dispersed throughout the county, and accessible to a wide cross-section of residents to promote healthy activity and habits. As the network is built, linkages to area attractions will increase local awareness of those cultural, historical, and natural gems of Cameron County that can often seem inaccessible to those who live here. The Active Plan is a pathway for connecting and showcasing the people, places, and events of which residents of Cameron County can be proud.



Cyndie Rathbun

Mayor
Town of Rancho Viejo

“Rancho Viejo joined nine other municipalities in supporting the Active Plan because we see it as a great long-term investment in the health and prosperity of our community members, our small business owners, and our entire region.

“Connecting our communities to each other and to the exquisite public lands nearby—such as Resaca de la Palma, Palo Alto Battlefield, and Laguna Atascosa—encourages Lower Valley unity, increases pride in our unique environment, and gives us all the opportunity to be more active and enjoy our own great outdoors.”



Projected Economic Benefits



Darla Lapeyre

Director
South Padre Island Economic
Development Corporation

“Expanding the trail network on the island and throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley will expand the types of visitors we appeal to, and help bridge tourism lulls by providing a wider variety of active options for all seasons.”



Photo: Thomas Hill

The Active Plan is a robust economic development initiative for a county with one of the highest poverty rates in the country. It is designed to tap into the rapidly expanding active tourism market to support job creation, entrepreneurship, and small business activity, and encourage tourist spending that injects money into local economies.

Data from other multi-use and paddling trails and bicycle tourism destinations suggest that Cameron County can expect significant economic benefits from investing in the Active Plan trail network. This is true both during construction and after, as local residents and visitors from outside the country walk, hike, bicycle, and paddle on the trails that connect the county’s communities with each other and with the county’s natural areas and cultural and historic attractions.

Trails Draw Visitors and Local Use

Studies of five multi-use trails show that this type of trail attracts between 11,500 and 47,000 users per mile annually. In 2013, trail counters at the Brownsville Historical Battlefield Trail logged an estimated 29,000 users per mile. Among six trail systems where visitor spending studies were conducted, an average of 39 percent of trail users were from out of the area, spending an average of \$28 per day for day visitors and \$163 per day for overnight visitors.

Paddling trails also attract out-of-town visitor spending. Studies of five water trails show an average of 388 paddlers per mile annually. The majority of these tend to be out-of-town visitors, spending a daily average of \$63 for day use and \$75 for overnight travelers.



Photo: Mark Lehmann

Road cycling is an important active tourism sector in many states, attracting a combination of self-guided, professionally guided, and event bicyclists. In one statewide study, the majority of bicycle tourists spent part of their trip traveling on a designated US Bicycle Route, such as the proposed USBR #55 in Cameron County.

Key Findings

These studies of other trail systems, Active Plan construction cost estimates, and other data sources underpin the following estimates of the economic impact of developing the proposed Active Plan trail network.

- Constructing 263 miles of new bicycle route, paddling trail, and multi-use trail will cost an estimated \$113.3 million. During construction, this investment will support an estimated 1,377 full-time jobs, \$44.3 million wages, and \$173 million in total economic impact within Cameron County.

- The completed system of trails and routes will attract more than three million walkers, hikers, bicyclists, and paddlers annually.
- Visitors from outside Cameron County will spend an estimated \$69.7 million per year related to use of the completed system. Each year, that visitor spending would support 958 full-time jobs in Cameron County, \$29.6 million in wages, and \$100.2 million in total economic impact within the county. Out-of-county visitor spending would put \$8.4 million tax revenues in local and state government coffers, and yield \$7.6 million in federal taxes.

Studies of other trail networks suggest that associated economic benefits should increase over time as the system becomes better known locally and among visitors and potential visitors, and as active outdoor recreation becomes increasingly popular.



Graham Sevier

Owner
7th & Park, Brownsville

“When we decided where to locate our new business, trail access was our top priority. Small businesses such as mine can be in a good position to benefit from expanding the trail network, and from subsequent increases in tourism and active lifestyles.”

Economic Benefits of the Completed Network



Trail Construction

1,377 full-time jobs
\$44.3 million wages
\$173 million total economic impact



\$70 million Annual Spending by Out-of-County Visitors

958 full-time jobs
\$30 million wages
\$100 million total economic impact
\$8.4 million state & local taxes



Annual Health Care Cost Savings

\$5.9-\$12.3 million yearly savings from increased physical activity on multi-use trails.

The economic analysis encompasses 291 miles of trails and routes: 1) the proposed U.S. Bicycle Route #55—a network of 120 miles of designated bicycle routes following existing streets and highways; 2) the LRGV paddling trail system—78 miles of paddling trail that includes the existing eight-mile South Bay Paddling Trail; and 3) the LRGV multi-use “Legacy” trail network—93 miles of dedicated trails for walking and bicycling that includes 18 miles of existing trail.

Physical Activity & Cost Savings



Christine De La Rosa

Community Health Worker
City of Los Fresnos

"I've seen firsthand the amazing benefits people have had from simply becoming more physically active. I began my journey to better health by walking outdoors 30 minutes a day with my family.

"When a city invests in well-kept parks, trails, safe routes, and bike lanes accessible for people to use, it really motivates us to get out and get moving. Whether it's to walk, run, or cycle outdoors, people are more likely to become physically active and commit to an active lifestyle when they feel supported and encouraged in their community."



New trails can promote physical activity among people who don't typically exercise. One study found that 23 percent of users of a new 12-mile trail were new exercisers. Photo: Doug Murphy

Implementing the Active Plan will serve as a "catalyst" for healthier lifestyles in an area with disproportionately high rates of obesity and chronic disease. Providing more safe routes for exercise and outdoor recreation will encourage locals to hike and bike where they need to go and make it possible to reduce the large share of household income spent on cars and transportation.

By making trail and bicycle route connections with poor and underserved neighborhoods, the Active Plan will increase access to safe places for recreation and physical activity for families who currently have none. New biking and walking connections to critical destinations such as jobs, educational institutions, grocery stores, health-care facilities, and outdoor and civic sites can encourage increased physical activity while strengthening social ties and self-esteem.

Trails = More Physical Activity

Health studies have found that physical activity can increase by up to 40 or 50 percent with trail access close to one's home. Physical activity data collected over time from selected Brownsville residents by the Tu Salud ¡Si Cuenta! study (University of Texas School of

Public Health) suggest that, in Brownsville, people who live within ¼ mile of a multi-use trail engage in 22 percent more moderate physical activity than those who do not.

More Physical Activity = Health Care Cost Savings

Increased physical activity because of greater options for physical activity—and nearby access for more and more of the county's residents as the trail network grows—will help reduce medical costs related to health issues associated with inactivity, most notably, type 2 diabetes. The Tu Salud ¡Si Cuenta! study found that 50 percent of adults reported no physical activity in at least a week, and 70 percent have at least one chronic health condition, many of which are related to high rates of overweight and obesity.[†]

Published, peer-reviewed studies estimate per-capita health care costs resulting from physical inactivity at between \$228 and \$476 per year. Projecting the conservative 22 percent increase in physical activity to Cameron County residents living near the proposed Active Plan multi-use trail network, annual health care cost savings would range from \$5.9 to \$12.3 million.

In Brownsville, people who live near trails

exercise
22% more



than those who do not.

Completing 93 miles of proposed multi-use trails would boost physical activity,

\$5.9-\$12.3 million saving

in health care costs

[†] Reiningger, B.M., et. al. 2015. "Tu Salud, ¡Si Cuenta!: Exposure to a Community-wide Campaign... Individuals of Mexican Descent." Social Science and Medicine 143:98-106. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26347959>

Realizing the Benefits

The Active Plan identifies six “catalyst projects” strategically chosen to connect existing trails and recreation resources throughout the county. Tackling these trails and routes first will build a skeleton upon which the rest of the network can be built, connect residents and visitors with some of Cameron County’s flagship natural, historical, and cultural sites, and demonstrate significant economic benefits.

Among the catalyst projects, the proposed Bahia Grande trail—connecting Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Palo Alto National Historical Battlefield, and bayside and inland communities—has gained momentum and support—including from land managers and community and elected leaders. This would be a high-profile focal project to kick off building the Active Plan network.

Beyond Trails

This study focuses on economic impacts of the “active transportation” component of the Active Plan—the network of trails and routes proposed across Cameron County. The Active Plan also includes an “active tourism” component, which will be critical to

realizing and expanding the economic benefits of the trail system. This plan provides strategies to attract visitors and ensure they have high quality experiences. It includes strategies aimed at developing effective regional coordination, promoting the region as the best-kept secret in active tourism, delivering a first-class active tourism experience, supporting tourism businesses and entrepreneurs, and measuring progress.

A whole array of efforts to promote a culture shift among local residents and communities toward healthier, more active lifestyles will be critical to achieving the shared vision reflected in the Active Plan. These include one-time and ongoing events like Brownsville’s Cyclobia or Laguna Atascosa’s Bahia Grande open trails days. Youth paddling, bike share, earn-a-bike, walking clubs and other programs help introduce outdoor recreation to people who are unfamiliar and support ongoing participation.

Supporting the community health programs and wellness coalitions, community groups, and businesses that provide the backbone for these programs will be essential to making the benefits of trail investments shared among all of Cameron County’s communities.



Mark Spier

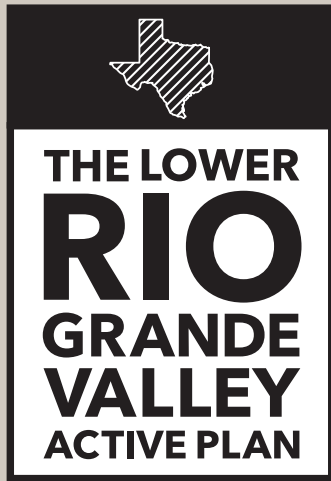
Superintendent, Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park

“The Historic Brownsville Battlefield trail created a connection for walkers, runners, and cyclists between the city and their national park. According to our trail counters, trail use has grown 42 percent this year alone. More trails reaching other communities will provide connections for discovery journeys to the park and our other unique natural areas.

“As interest from locals and out-of-town visitors grows, exciting opportunities for expanded programming and new business services are sure to follow.”



Programs like Brownsville’s Cyclobia, which makes cycling and walking a community event, and introduce new riders to bicycling, can augment the Active Plan by supporting more active lifestyles. Photo: Cyclobia Brownsville



A blueprint for a 428-mile trail network that will link the rich natural, cultural and historical resources of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, creating a unified regional identity for outdoor tourism and generating a new sense of community pride for residents.

Sponsored by the Valley Baptist Legacy Foundation, University of Texas School of Public Health, ten communities in Cameron County, and an expanding array of other organizations including Rails to Trails Conservancy, the Active Plan supports job creation, tourism spending and economic development across the project footprint, and serves as a catalyst for healthier lifestyles for all Cameron County residents.

Economic Study Supporters



Get Involved



Active Plan Implementation

Ramiro Gonzalez
ramiro.gonzalez@cob.us
956.346.1925

Rose Gowen
rose.gowen@cob.us



Katie McKinney Guerin
Katie@railstotrails.org
202.974.5143



Youth Council & Public Lands Connections

Suzanne Dixon
sdixon@npca.org
214.370.9735 x 211

Economic study prepared by:

Michele L. Archie
The Harbinger Consultancy • harbingerconsult.com
Saigiridhar Mullanpudi
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Data & Information Systems Center
Dr. Henry S. Brown
University of Texas School of Public Health

Download the study: npca.org/LRGV



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