

The Middle Rio Grande Development Council

Strategic Plan

Regional Characteristics

Population Overview:

The Middle Rio Grande Region is located along the U.S.-Mexico border, adjacent to the Mexican State of Coahuila. The area comprises 14,333 square miles with a population of approximately 155,600 in 15 incorporated cities and 22 unincorporated communities. Nine counties make up the MRG Region, including Dimmit, Edwards, Kinney, La Salle, Maverick, Real, Uvalde, Val Verde and Zavala. "Approximately 70% of the population live in incorporated areas; 50% of the total population live in the larger communities of Del Rio, Eagle Pass, and Uvalde." (MRGWDB Integrated Strategic Plan, 2000).

Four of the nine counties that comprise the Middle Rio Grande Region - Dimmit, Zavala, Maverick, and La Salle - are among the twenty poorest counties in the United States according to a report by the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Department of Commerce. The Middle Rio Grande Region is approximately 76% Hispanic, according to the 1990 Census. Projections from the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2005 the Hispanic population will grow to 80%. The population in the Middle Rio Grande Region living below poverty is 40.75%, with an average per capita income of \$7,078, compared to the State average of 18.09% and \$12,904, respectively. The current rate of unemployment for the region (according to figures for May 2000 from the Texas Workforce Board) is approximately 11.6%, compared to the State at 4.2% and the United States at 3.9%.

Mexican migration into the Middle Rio Grande Region, especially after 1994 with the devaluation of the peso, has historically been a low skilled population and has contributed to the high levels of poverty and unemployment and caused increases in public service demands in an area that already suffers from a stagnant economy and limited tax base. Combined with relatively small and low density populations, these factors have lead to greater dependence on public assistance has caused a greater drain not just on local government but on state and federal resources, as well. Perhaps it is time the region re-visited state and federal allocations in discussions with legislators and congressional representatives. Because the region as a whole is aware of the inequity and funding allocations to rural areas, it is imperative that communities steer clear of in-region conflicts, and rather band together and form a united front for the betterment of the region.

The growth rates for the state of Texas are predicted to increase by nearly 100% between 1990 and 2030. Projections show that Texas population will be at more than 20 million for the 2000 census count, but will jump to more than 34 million by the year 2030. But of significance is that the growth of its minority population will, by the year 2008, outnumber the Anglo population. In a presentation by Steve Murdock to the South Texas Future of the Region Conference in San Antonio, Texas in October 2000, he stated that,

in addition, by the year 2030 the Hispanic population will grow to approximately 46% of the overall state population.

While most of the region's school districts boast low dropout rates, the regional average is still almost 25% higher than the State.

The percent of persons age 25 years and above with less than a 9th grade education for the state of Texas is 13.45% compared with the Middle Rio Grande Region where the percentage represents approximately one-third of the population at 35.70%. (LWFDB Integrated Plan FY 2000-2004).

According to Steve Murdock, demographer with the Department of Rural Sociology at Texas A&M University, "Texas will increase its population by nearly 100 percent between 1990 and 2030." The border area of Texas that includes the Middle Rio Grande Region is growing at a faster rate than the rest of the state. Statistics show that this population is less educated, less fluent in English, and less likely to have or acquire the skills needed that provide livable wages.

While there is an increasing need to provide quality training, not just education - there is a difference, the training must be to a degree that it leads to better paying jobs that offer more than poverty level wages. (LWFDB Integrated Plan FY 2000-2004).

Of particular interest and added concern is the number of Hispanics that are reflected in the statistics above. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, of the Hispanics that makeup the total regional population, only 10.83% have a high school education, with only 1.49% having attained a four-year college degree or higher.

Safety:

Criminal Justice:

Drugs In Our Communities: In the Middle Rio Grande Region the incidence of experimentation with illicit substances among students tends to be higher, or as high, among students outside the border region, according to a comprehensive report by the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse (TCADA). This has less to do with ethnicity of the youth - although there are differences - than with the proximity of our region to the border. As TCADA mentions in the overview of their December 1999 Research Brief on Substance Abuse Trends in Texas, illicit drugs continue to enter from Mexico through cities and towns along the border, moving northward for distribution in Dallas/Fort Worth, and eastward toward Houston. One consequence of sharing the border with Mexico is that many of the drugs controlled in the States are for sale in pharmacies in Mexico and, if declared, are legal to bring into our country.

By far, the drug of choice in all of Texas is alcohol, being the most abused, having the most dependents, causing the most deaths and arrests, and being the most common basis for substance treatment admissions. Our nine-county region is far from immune to this phenomenon. In 1998 there was on average, 280 instances of public intoxication, 600

instances of DWI, and 92 deaths related to alcohol throughout the region according to the TCADA report.

There are substance abuse treatment providers located in Dimmit, La Salle, Maverick, Uvalde and Val Verde Counties, while licensed chemical dependency counselors are available in La Salle, Maverick, Real, Uvalde and Val Verde counties. Most of the centers, though, only treat patients on an outpatient basis and do not have the facilities to house them. Only the centers in Val Verde and Maverick counties are able to house patients for any length of time.

Crime: Beyond the substance abuse problem, there is also the matter of all other crimes committed. Throughout the Middle Rio Grande Region the most commonly committed crimes are larceny-theft and vandalism among young people, and DWI and public intoxication among adults according to 1999 data from the Texas Department of Public Safety. In our region, though, the incidence of crime is still quite high in comparison to the state averages, as demonstrated by the charts below.

The incidence of violent crimes like murder, rape and robbery were almost non-existent in the region - and so were not included in the rates - while other crimes like adult public intoxication and DWI were as high or significantly higher than those of the state. Vandalism and public intoxication were higher among young people in the region as compared to the state averages. At present, most of the smaller communities rely on the county sheriffs and/or constables for law enforcement, and residents expressed the need for higher skills training of officers, more equipment, and implementation of both crime prevention programs and an increase in both juvenile justice and accountability. Presently the only juvenile detention facilities in operation in our region - which contains more than 50,000 youth - are in Dimmit and Val Verde County, according to the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission. The Dimmit County facility has beds for only 26 males and females, while the Val Verde facility can only serve 10 males. A juvenile Boot Camp in La Salle County no longer serves the county.

Public Safety:

The Middle Rio Grande Region encompasses 14,333 square miles of semi-arid land, from the Edwards Plateau in the north to the Brush Country in the south. "Most of the residents in the region have four legs and spend their lives running from one bush to another across open areas of sand and rock." The two-legged variety is more rare. Policing this open range is for the most part the job of county Sheriffs and Highway Patrol officers, but in each town and city in the region there is at least one officer whose duty it is to protect the lives and property of the region's citizens.

911:

The major points of discussion for 911 revolve around input received prior to the community meetings from Board of Directors of the COG and the Regional 911 Advisory Committee. In addition, input has been compiled from call takers, communication supervisors, police chiefs and sheriffs, as well as the public. A review of systems that includes equipment, use of equipment, procedures, training, maintenance

and resources is conducted by 911 staff is conducted in order to provide performance based information. Major upgrades or changes are discussed and developed in advance based on technology, the benefits to the entire regional 911 system, the pitfalls, and the costs of the upgrade or change. The capacity of the 911 centers to handle the technology is also considered, due to staffing loads, and facility size, and the physical ability of the center to house and operate the system is critical. The Advisory Committee forwards all performance records and requests to the MRGDC Board of Directors with any recommendations for approval.

At the present time, all systems in the Middle Rio Grande Region are comparable to the largest metropolitan city in the State in terms of the available technology.

Consolidated Planning:

Water:

At present, the sources of water are mostly from aquifers in the region: Val Verde, Edwards, Real, and parts of Kinney and Uvalde counties sit on the Edwards-Trinity aquifer, while parts of Maverick, Dimmit, Zavala and Uvalde are on the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer. Additionally, Uvalde, as well as parts of Kinney, also sit on the Edwards recharge zone. Fractured boundaries, in terms of water sources for the nine-county region impair the Middle Rio Grande's ability to coordinate and deliver services.

In the latter part of the 1990s, the Border Region experienced both a long-term drought and two, short-term statewide droughts. Drought is a normal part of the hydrological cycle, as are floods, but the statewide droughts of 1996 and 1998 produced widespread crop failure and significant environmental distress and required more than 300 cities and utilities to implement some form of water demand management. Most of these demand management measures were taken because the utilities, especially those in South Texas, had to ration water due to diminished supplies. In between the two droughts periods, 1997 turned out to be one of the wettest years in recent Texas history, with El Niño and La Niña often being cited as the cause for these massive fluctuations in the normal weather patterns. Following this, a 10-month drought period saw significant drops in reservoir and aquifer levels over much of the border region. Agricultural impacts of the drought were significant with estimates of total losses of approximately \$5 billion. Of the two droughts, the 1996 drought had more impact on long-term water supplies. Statewide surface water levels dropped to 68% of conservation storage capacity. Eight reservoirs in Northern Mexico, on streams that feed into the Rio Grande system, have a combined storage capacity of 5.9 million acre-feet, almost equal to the combined (US and Mexico) capacity of Falcon and Amistad together. These eight Mexican reservoirs are at only 29% of capacity. Therefore, any rainfall on the watersheds above these eight Mexican reservoirs will be captured by these reservoirs before it enters the Rio Grande, thus diminishing the capacity of the Rio Grande to supply water to the middle and lower Rio Grande Regions.

The drought affecting the Rio Grande Basin is a drought of historic proportions. Texas will become even more vulnerable to the impacts of drought in the future. It is vital that

Texans be aware of the consequences of even short droughts and develop contingency plans for longer-term droughts. Such plans would include preparing for both agricultural and the hydrological impacts droughts have on the economy.

The region needs to continue to look for more drought-proof sources of water. Alternatives includes that which is a result of water reuse and desalinization of brackish and saline waters, using water more efficiently through conservation practices, developing conventional supplies where economically and environmentally feasible, and educating the communities on water shortage and drought prevention measures. These aquifers are limited, though, and even now are feeling the effects of drought and over-use. The economic and environmental well being of the region and all of Texas depends on how well we manage our available water resources.

As of May 2000, the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), where the above-mentioned information came from, has issued several alerts for all of Texas concerning the paucity of available water, the inability of the weather thus far to provide adequate rainfall to this part of the state, and the dangers that drought conditions pose to the environment. Specifically TWDB mentions that the Crop Moisture Index registers "severely dry moisture" in the southwest part of the state, that 44 of 254 counties are under outdoor burning bans, that the statewide conservation storage at the end of May was the second lowest in 23 years of data for this time of year, and that Amistad Reservoir and Falcon Reservoir held 36.3% and 10.7% respectively of conservation storage and have continued to decline since early April.

Solid Waste:

According to a 1999 report by SCS engineers for the Middle Rio Grande Development Council, there are presently six landfills operating in the Middle Rio Grande Region. All are publicly owned facilities, with one operated under contract by a private operator. The Carrizo Springs landfill accepts municipal waste from Carrizo Springs, Asherton, Big Wells and Catarina, and also by Zavala County which includes La Pryor and Batesville. Crystal City uses its own landfill for disposal and accepts waste from residents of Zavala County who bring it themselves. The City of Del Rio operates its own landfill and accepts waste from Del Rio and Val Verde County including the unincorporated communities of Comstock and Langtry. Maverick County's landfill in Eagle Pass only accepts yard clippings, brush, construction and demolition debris, and other materials, but hauls its other waste to San Antonio's landfill. The Uvalde County landfill also only accepts brush, grass clippings and the like from the City of Sabinal and Uvalde County residents. The City of Uvalde's landfill, though, accepts other waste from the Cities of Leakey in Real County, Rocksprings in Edwards County, and Uvalde. Unfortunately, the Uvalde landfill no longer accepts waste from Leakey, and in October of 2000 Rocksprings will also have to find another site to dispose of their waste. After this time, the Uvalde landfill will only accept waste from the City of Uvalde and from the collection stations in Uvalde County. For all the other smaller towns in our region, there are collection points and drop off stations where trash is collected and then hauled to its designation landfill.

The communities in our region are not aware of the long-term consequences of continued illegal dumping in their individual counties. True, the number and availability of drop off sites in the region has reduced the overall amount of illegal dumping, the fact that a fee is charged for each load does not guarantee that illegal dumping will not continue, even though the fee is between \$.50 and \$1.50 per bag region-wide. For now, the cost of disposing of solid waste is fairly low, but only because we have the benefit of landfills within the region.

At some point, however, each landfill will reach its maximum capacity - the end of its lifespan - and will have to be closed. At that point, the region will have no choice but to pay to have their waste hauled to San Antonio or farther. These costs, which are low now, will rise considerably and are passed on directly to the residents in the form of increased taxes.

Also, many residents are not aware of the fact that many landfills restrict the type of waste they accept. They might think that because they have a landfill in the town their waste doesn't need to be hauled somewhere else when in fact that waste has always been hauled to another site. As an example, Eagle Pass's solid waste has been hauled to San Antonio for years because its landfill is restricted to organics only - yard waste, brush and tree branches.

What has been considered but not yet acted upon in a regional manner is a concerted effort at recycling of household waste. Eagle Pass currently has a recycling program, but it is limited to 400 homes and is still only on a "test basis." The essential problem with any recycling program is the cost of creation of a new program or expansion of an existing program. A feasibility study within the region would demonstrate the viability of such a program region-wide, the cost of hauling 100% of waste to another landfill versus the savings of recycling some percentage in terms of hauling charges and a profit from the recycling itself. As the engineers noted in their extensive report, "the additional recyclables generated would also allow the city to better utilize its recycling center, thereby lowering the effective cost per ton of recyclables by spreading the fixed costs of the facility over more tons of recyclables processed through the facility."

Infrastructure/Transportation:

Roadways/Transportation:

The Middle Rio Grande Region of Texas is traversed by major transportation highways including Interstate Highway 35, US Highway 90, US Highway 83, and US Highway 57, all of which serve as major distribution highways for the region's growing truck/transportation industry as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, (NAFTA). Increased and significant access to the growing NAFTA-generated trade using the major north-south US-Mexico transportation network significantly deteriorates the road conditions in a region whose long range plans developed by the Texas Department of Transportation were never intended to accommodate the amount of traffic that the region is currently experiencing - never mind the safety issues. Another factor attributing to the increase in traffic, especially to Highway 57 and Highway 83 is the addition of the

Second International Bridge in Eagle Pass. The region's lack of a full-time fully-funded transportation policy planning mechanism (such as the urban areas' MPO-Metropolitan Planning Organization) inhibits the Middle Rio Grande Region's ability to plan long term and limits the region's access to state and federal transportation dollars.

In terms of intermodal transportation issues, there is a separate planning process through a separate transportation provider as determined by the Texas Department of Transportation called the Community Council of Southwest Texas. At the present time the Council recognizes CCSWT's plan to meet the needs of the region and attempts appropriate measures to incorporate efforts with the regional needs as identified.

Information Access/Technology:

Technologies that exist in the region include the ability to access the electronic commerce and information base of the Internet. Most of the communities in the Region have some Internet access, but it is still based mainly on private access to ISPs through low-bandwidth modems. The Middle Rio Grande Council has broadband access through their development centers, as does Southwest Texas Junior College (SWTJC) and Sul Ross - Rio Grande College (SR-RGC). Also, the school districts in each county have access to T1 lines that connect them to SWTJC and the State Education System's Region XX Center in San Antonio. What remains to be accomplished is providing a greater access to the residents of the communities through DSL or cable, both of which provide much greater bandwidth than the phone systems.

Community and Economic Development:

Business Development:

In an article available on the World Wide Web, a spokesman for the State Comptroller's office felt that "while real earning per capita in the Border region will more than double by 2020, the region's standing relative to the rest of the state will deteriorate during this same period." The region suffers from a poor economy brought on by lack of adequately paying jobs and businesses just barely keeping afloat. "The private sector is characterized by small business. A large percentage of these businesses are under capitalized, less than effectively managed, and lack business plans or knowledge of how to develop one.

Access to technical skills and operating capital is a deficit for competing in the 21st century. Small businesses understand the significant opportunities with the developments of NAFTA and the emerging "information age" economy, but lack the expertise or skills to capitalize on them." (MRGWDB Integrated Plan, FY 2000-2004).

According to U.S. Census-Economic Indicators, the Middle Rio Grande Region of Texas is among the poorest areas in the state and the nation. The economy is not conducive to providing jobs that meet the employment needs of its growing population. And, in fact, the Middle Rio Grande Region, due to its geographic location on the U.S/Mexico border, is in keeping with predictions that the Southwest Border Region of the United States is currently one of the fastest population growth areas in the nation.

Community and Human Development:

Colonias in the Middle Rio Grande Region distinguish it from other impoverished areas of the country. There are eighty-three colonia subdivisions within the Region. Dimmit County has six, Edwards County has one, Kinney County has two, LaSalle County has seven, Maverick County has forty-four, Real County has none, Uvalde County has nine, Val Verde County has twelve, and Zavala County has two. The colonias are a perennial problem for all the counties in the region except for Real County. They exist outside the boundaries of the towns and cities in an area that has little or no infrastructure including utilities, roads, mail service, and all the other things taken for granted within the municipal city limits. The people who live in these areas are in need of all the basic services, yet have no base from which to complain - they exist in a legal gray zone between the city and the county.

The residents within the municipal boundaries do have a say in what happens in their communities. However, their concerns are for the health and well being of not only themselves and their neighbors, but their town as a whole. They have expressed concerns about the appearance of their towns as it affects its ability to attract businesses and new residents; they feel that the more appealing a town appears, the more it will attract the attention of outsiders who can only bring prosperity and progress. To this end they desire to implement or improve upon beautification projects, adult education programs, affordable housing initiatives, employment opportunities, job creation, and the improvement of their community and county identities. As a Region, it is more difficult to concentrate on such specific areas, but by improving the identities of each of our communities, the identity of the whole Region improves.

Aging:

At present our elderly (ages 60 and over) make up over 19% of our regional population (nearly 1 in every 5 persons) and yet the services they require to maintain relatively healthy, happy and secure lives are lacking in most of the Region. Of the total elderly population in the Middle Rio Grande Region, 65.25% are Hispanics and 34.10% of the total elderly population, including Anglos and other minorities, live in poverty. What our residents have told us is most in demand are programs to address the high costs of medication and added funding for the nutrition centers in the communities that are fortunate to have them. Many more feel that they need an ombudsman program that will advocate for fair treatment in the region's long-term care facilities. In simplest terms, all the services the elderly require to live the twilight years in dignity and peace are needed. Population trends show that Texas is aging in relation to the country and that the baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are approximately 30% of the Texas and U.S. population. Additionally, as stated by Dr. Murdock (October, 2000):

"Equally important the age structure of Texas shows an important interrelationship with race/ethnicity. By 1996, less than half of the population less than 25 years of age was Anglo while 75 percent of the population 65+ was Anglo and, in 2030, when 18 percent of the population will be 65+, 25 percent of Anglos but less than 12 percent of Hispanics will be 65+. Texas will increasingly have a large number of

older Anglos being taken care of by a population with an increasingly proportion of young minorities."

GIS/Technology:

At present, the only GIS mapping capability that the Middle Rio Grande Region has is associated with the functioning of the 911 emergency management system. Having this capability outside the restrictions put upon the program would mean a more thorough knowledge of the infrastructure of our region and thus the needs for improvement or repair of that system and the ability to affect those repairs in a timely manner.