

REPORT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Through the USDA Rural Creative Placemaking Innovation Challenge Grant, buildingcommunityWORKSHOP ([bc]) worked with three rural Texas communities, Denison, Port Lavaca, and Starr County to achieve the following project objectives:

- Build capacity among 3 rural Texas geographies that are facing challenges bringing affordable housing to their communities
- Develop a housing guide for each geography. The housing guide will include strategies for implementing DreamBuild as an option in tandem with more traditional housing delivery mechanisms. DreamBuild is a comprehensive model for affordable housing that offers low-income families a path to homeownership which includes volumetric prefabricated design and delivery, client financing and policy advocacy and is currently being expanded to fit other persistent poverty regions across the USA
- Provide support in understanding the needs, challenges, and opportunities as they relate to broadband access in each geography
- Provide resources on additional Placemaking Topics (public space, economic development, Main Street design, etc) as identified by each geography to complement the housing strategies presented in the Housing Guide
- Disseminate lessons learned to other rural communities in Texas

MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH

The challenges and opportunities rural communities are facing are complex and multifaceted. When addressing a specific topic like housing, there isn't just one type of expertise that will be able to "solve" the problems at hand, and even seemingly separate issues like public space and economic development contribute implementing affordable housing within a community. It's with this understanding that we established a team that has a wide range of expertise in the following areas:

- Housing - design, policy, development, construction, and financing
- Additional placemaking topics
- Local government
- Resident expertise

Recognizing that learnings from one community can have applicability elsewhere, we built in opportunities for the different geographies we worked with to learn from each other, as well to share the outcomes from the process with rural communities across Texas.

USDA RURAL
PLACEMAKING
INNOVATION CHALLENGE

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project team began research with conversations with the geographic partners to understand perceptions about area needs, strengths, and challenges. With this information, the project team created a set of research questions (included in the appendix) and assessed what resources we had access to and what resources we needed in order to answer the research questions.

Using American Community Survey and Census Data, and an overview of past City plans and policies, the team proposed possible priorities to focus the USDA RPIC planning efforts on. For Port Lavaca and Denison, a survey was created for distribution to geographic partners and their staff to verify whether these priorities aligned with people's own experiences. Based on feedback from the survey, further clarifying questions were posed to geographic partners. These conversations were used to draft the final priorities that were put forth to attendees of the first workshops. In Starr County, the local active organizations Colonia Unidas and the Self Help Center were initially included in these conversations, and surveys were distributed to community members to gain baseline knowledge beyond what was available via census data. This conversation with residents continued through the workshops that were held.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions were sent to all geographies in the beginning to understand the priorities and most pressing issues. From there, we refined the findings and worked with our partners and the community to make sure there was a consensus on the main focus of the document for each place.





OUTREACH

In general, [bc] provided collateral—digital fliers, fliers for printing, text descriptions—for all project events to be distributed by project partners. [bc] maintained social media pages for Denison and Port Lavaca and mailing lists so that workshop attendees could receive regular project updates. In Starr County, project partner cdcB hosted all social media materials on their page rather than maintaining a separate project page. Materials were provided in English and Spanish.

Denison Outreach

Working with the City enabled us to contact residents through a notice placed in water bills and public postings.

The City of Denison had recently held a roundtable with local nonprofits and service providers. That list was expanded to include additional area service providers that had not been in attendance and was used for the Workshop 2 service provider session.

Port Lavaca Outreach

Port Lavaca utilized outreach directly through the City, through community leaders, and local publications. The City advertised the meetings through fliers accompanying water bills, and church leaders shared the information on church bulletin boards. A few community members went door to door in the neighborhood.

Long standing local families were sent personalized invitations to the workshops to make sure they were part of the conversation, and the Port Lavaca Wave advertised the workshops beforehand and published recaps of the event afterward.

Starr County Outreach

The first workshop was advertised with the help of local community organizations Colonias Unidas and LUPE, who promoted it through their contacts.

Additionally, our project partner cdcB went door-to-door in colonias near Rio Grande City and Roma prior to the first workshop, and then again prior to the second workshop, which was held in conjunction with Colonias Unidas' food pantry event. General communications about the food pantry event also helped promote the workshop.

cdcB held information sessions and clinics to help people apply for their programs. At these events they distributed and collected surveys from community members participating to help [bc] gather information.

ENGAGEMENT/COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

At least three workshops/ site visits were conducted in each geography. Each one included community engagement and input, resource sharing, specified training for partners, and observations from our team in the three geographies. All of the documents, presentations, and resources shared during these workshops can be found in the section for each geography.

IDENTIFICATION OF CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND TACTICS

With all input gathered, we worked with each geography to identify and agree upon challenges. From there, we identified corresponding strategies and tactics for addressing each challenge based on what was appropriate for the local context.

DENISON SNAPSHOT

Denison is a rural community in the midst of change. According to a Moody's Analytics report, the Sherman-Denison housing market is the second most overpriced market in the country, with homes in the area valued at 60% over their actual value.¹ Increased interest in Denison has been connected to its proximity to Dallas and northern suburbs, rise of remote working, the movement of large businesses north, and households seeking more affordable options in rural areas like Denison. Low inventory and lack of down payment assistance are making it challenging for existing residents to move into homeownership, particularly in the face of rising sales prices.²

Home Value

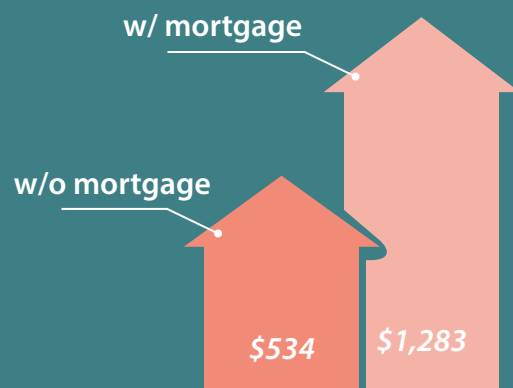
\$142,900

median home value

Home Ownership



Monthly Housing Cost



Median Rent

\$1,058 per month

Source: American Community Survey
2022 5-yr estimate

1. [npr.org/2022/05/12/1097979009/home-prices-could-fall-in-some-u-s-cities-heres-where-and-why](https://www.npr.org/2022/05/12/1097979009/home-prices-could-fall-in-some-u-s-cities-heres-where-and-why)
2. [kxii.com/2022/06/17/how-navigate-high-housing-market-sherman/](https://www.kxii.com/2022/06/17/how-navigate-high-housing-market-sherman/)

DENISON WORKSHOP OUTCOMES



Housing

Housing Challenges

- Issue of the low supply of quality homes is exacerbated by the growing population of Denison
- Infrastructure was built to accommodate less housing, so improvements will need to be made as more homes are built
- Many new homes are not built with neighborhood character in mind



Decision Making

City Staff Training

- Trainings for how to hold successful community engagement, as well as ways to improve outreach were held for current City staff



Place / Neighborhood

Neighborhood Boundaries and Qualities

- Through historic maps and talking to residents about what boundaries they view as the barrier of certain neighborhoods, a more extensive neighborhood map was drawn for Denison
- The types of housing and the style of homes for each neighborhood was documented through mapping



Access to Resources

Working Groups

- Resource Sharing and Training Sessions for Residents

PORT LAVACA SNAPSHOT

Port Lavaca's population is slowly declining, roughly 6% in the last ten years.¹ Unfortunately, that decline has not affected the relatively high cost of housing in the area. Median home listing prices² and monthly rental costs are well above what an average resident can afford. Anecdotally, residents have attributed some of the pressure in the market to workers at the Formosa plastics factory seeking rental units.

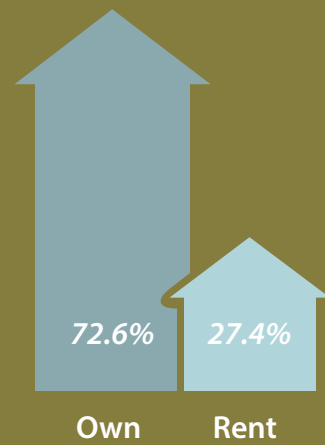
District 1 residents do not fare as well as those in districts north of 87. Homeownership rates in District 1 are 33.25% and the median home value is \$93,900.

Home Value

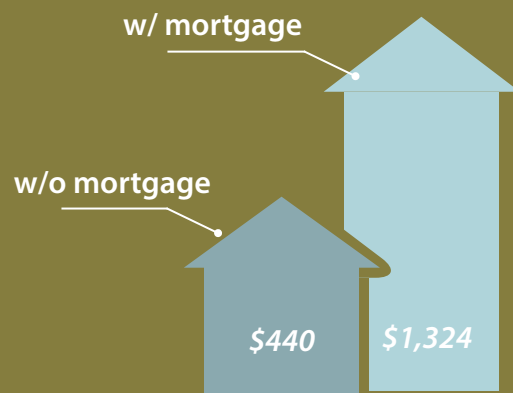
\$114,700

median home value

Home Ownership



Monthly Housing Cost



Median Rent

\$903 per month

1. data.census.gov
2. realtor.com

Source: American Community Survey
2022 5-yr estimate

PORT LAVACA WORKSHOP OUTCOMES



Decision Making

Prioritizing

- Attendees explored challenges and opportunities noted in the research to help gauge what was most urgent

Working Groups Formed

- Selective Demolition Group
- Wilkins School Development Group
- Historic Walking Tour Group
- Volunteer Action Group



Place/ Neighborhood

Storytelling

- Wilkins School alumni shared their own experiences going to the school and growing up in the original townsite of Port Lavaca
- Long time residents of the original townsite shared what they knew of the historic sites in the neighborhood

Planning

- The workshops helped us develop plans for some of the larger projects that had been discussed early on
- The Wilkins School project progressed through the planning of the property with residents. This resulted in a generalized program for the land and each building
- The walking tour project progressed through continued iterations of the map followed by a refinement of the walking tour path



Access to Resources

- cdcb held a session on financial literacy
- The USDA held a session about the 502 and 504 loan programs, encouraging people to apply
- TRLA held a session about their legal aid programs and estate planning and title clearing basics

STARR COUNTY SNAPSHOT

The issue of substandard housing is pronounced across the county. Low access to standard mortgages, areas that regularly flood, and in unincorporated areas of the county the lack of building requirements all play a role. Concerns over housing quality were echoed in survey responses and conversation with the Geographic Partners. It appears the largest need is housing repair.

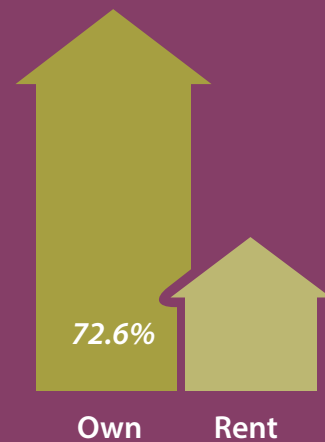
Residents also showed interest in learning about advocacy, housing rights, and credit repair. There seems to be a lack of local organizations with the capacity and funding to fully support these types of community needs.

The lack of services and active organizations in the region will make building partnerships challenging, and make partnering with the few existing entities important.

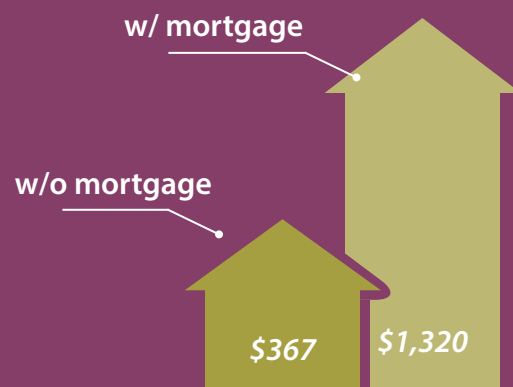
Home Value

\$88,300
median home value

Home Ownership



Monthly Housing Cost



Median Rent

\$670 per month

Source: American Community Survey
2022 5-yr estimate

STARR COUNTY WORKSHOP OUTCOMES



Housing

- We were able to gather information through our first workshop and the following surveys about the minor and major home repairs needed
- We were also able to gather information about current home conditions
- Household size and potential crowding issues were noted. We found that the conditions of the home and privacy were the main factors motivating a resident's desire to move
- Concrete block homes being constructed incrementally by a family were common. In these cases, the family was often living in an RV or an existing small house on the same lot



Decision Making

Understanding Unique Challenges to Organizing in Starr County

- Local organizations that currently work in the area have a hard time becoming financially sustainable and end up relying on money from the County, which leads to extra political considerations with the work they do
- Local organizations have issues with capacity, this limits the scale at which they can work
- Outreach can be difficult – door-to door canvassing is often not an option because many homes have fences. cdc's efforts to reach out to churches to inform community members about events were largely unsuccessful. Holding events at the food pantry seemed like a good way to have people present, but is not an ideal way to do many types of engagement



Place / Neighborhood

- Infrastructure like drainage and street lights were often lacking or inconsistent
- Services like trash pick up were often inconsistent



Access to Resources

- cdc held a session on financial literacy
- cdc held a session on the home buying process and their services and products
- cdc held homebuyer intake sessions where people could learn more about the next steps for homeownership.

HOUSING

Housing development is a primary driver of opportunity and a primary threat in each geography. New housing offers new residents and community investment but threatens current residents' ability to afford their housing and stay in their community. Fostering an inclusive housing stock requires a commitment to preserving existing affordable housing while supporting a suitable mix of new housing opportunities with a range of housing types and price points.

The following development tools (condensed for this report) were identified through research and selected by residents as preferred strategies to deliver housing development suited to their community. Common tools may be deployed differently in each area to achieve their specific housing goals.

Public Investment Tools

Public investment programs support a variety of City, community, and business objectives. Funds can be used to address infrastructure and facility needs, promote business growth, enhance community development, and improve economic health.

Rental Housing Registration & Inspection Program

Used by municipalities to ensure that rental properties comply with all codes relating to health, sanitation, and property maintenance standards, in an effort to maintain neighborhood integrity.

Community Land Trust (CLT)

A strategy for keeping and expanding the affordable housing stock in an area, made up of residents and usually a local nonprofit community development corporation. Buyers purchase the house and lease the land from the CLT. If the buyer decides to sell, rules dictate how much they can sell the house for to preserve affordability.

Mixed Income Housing

Strategies to encourage mixed income housing include inclusive zoning and the development of income-integrated properties – sometimes even on former public housing property sites.

Flexibility in Housing Types

Neighborhoods need greater flexibility in their housing options, particularly in existing single-family communities. Allowing for modest increases to density (backyard ADUs, converted homes, etc.) through flexible zoning can help preserve a neighborhood's character and scale.

Housing Rehab

By providing existing residents with an opportunity to repair and rehabilitate their own homes, low and moderate-income homeowners can preserve safe and sanitary housing that will help stabilize the neighborhood.

Leveraging Data

Collecting, tracking, and utilizing data to gain a better understanding of housing disparities is an essential step in increasing equity.

Overlay Zoning Districts

A tool that municipalities and communities can use when an area needs additional regulation or guidance, often used to protect a resource or within a special area. These districts work in conjunction with the underlying base zone, and can share common boundaries with or cut across base zone boundaries.

DECISION MAKING

Equitable neighborhood development cannot be achieved without the engagement and empowerment of community members. Placing residents in positions of leadership and decision-making over projects, initiatives or public investment, from planning all the way through to implementation is necessary to ensure equitable access to information, community benefit, and political power.

The following equitable development tools were identified through research and selected by residents as preferred strategies to deliver community ownership and leadership development in their community. Common tools may be deployed differently in each area to achieve specific community goals and address challenges.

Community Capacity Building & Education

Communities are healthier when the individuals and organizations in those communities work together by pooling resources and leveraging social capital to solve collective problems or improve/maintain well-being. Several strategies exist, including online instruction, in-person trainings and workshops, technical assistance, and communities of practice.

Community Organizing

Working collectively with neighbors, co-workers, or others that believe in a common cause. Many believe this is a foundational strategy because it makes many of the other tools possible or successful. Additionally, organizing a community supports increased awareness of issues, sharing information, and building political power.

Leveraging Data

Collecting, tracking, and utilizing data to gain a better understanding of disparities is an essential step in bringing equity. In addition to listening to residents and working with partners and stakeholders, community leaders should be using data on their demographics, economies, employment, education, housing, and transportation to see if their efforts are having an impact.

Target Areas

Place-based planning focuses on the reinvestment of an area through building on its assets and leveraging private and public investments. It is also more than just targeting funds to a particular area. It requires thinking about the specific needs of a place and how best to address them.

Placemaking

Encourages people to collectively reinvent their public spaces. These areas strengthen the connections between people and the places they share. Placemaking helps to promote the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.

Development Incentives

Benefits, often financial, a governmental entity offers to encourage a particular development outcome. May include attracting/retaining businesses, encouraging new housing or commercial development, elevating the quality or design standards of new development, or increasing the production of affordable housing.

PLACE/NEIGHBORHOOD

Our communities are a collection of neighborhoods and places. Each has their own histories, challenges, opportunities, and people who are invested in its future. Investing time, energy, and resources in the things and people that make places and neighborhoods great is foundational to a thriving community -- a place where residents feel a sense of attachment and connection.

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ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Building strong communities often requires identifying and providing the resources needed to be successful. Those resources can be financial support, access to information, trusted sources of labor, and education or skill development. Local support in addressing resource gaps can play a pivotal role in the long term health and vitality of a community and those that live within it.

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Resource Networking

Building a network of available resources in your community is a valuable tool in addressing individual household needs and those of the larger community. Many communities already have smaller informal networks such as faith communities, organizations serving the unhoused community, veterans groups, etc. Bringing these smaller networks together is at the core of building a robust resource network.

Seed Funding

Seed funding or grants that target emerging nonprofit organizations. Funding sources typically prioritize projects that are in their early stages and led by small groups or a single individual.

Online Portal

A specially designed website that brings together or aggregates content from a number of other systems or sources. In some cases, a portal can be designed for document/file sharing and collaboration.

Youth Skills Training

Youth skills and workforce training programs offer to teach a set of skills which will bolster job opportunities of a young person when they enter the workforce. The primary goal is usually to reduce the barrier many young people face in accessing decent work and to support the transition they make to adulthood.

Local Hiring

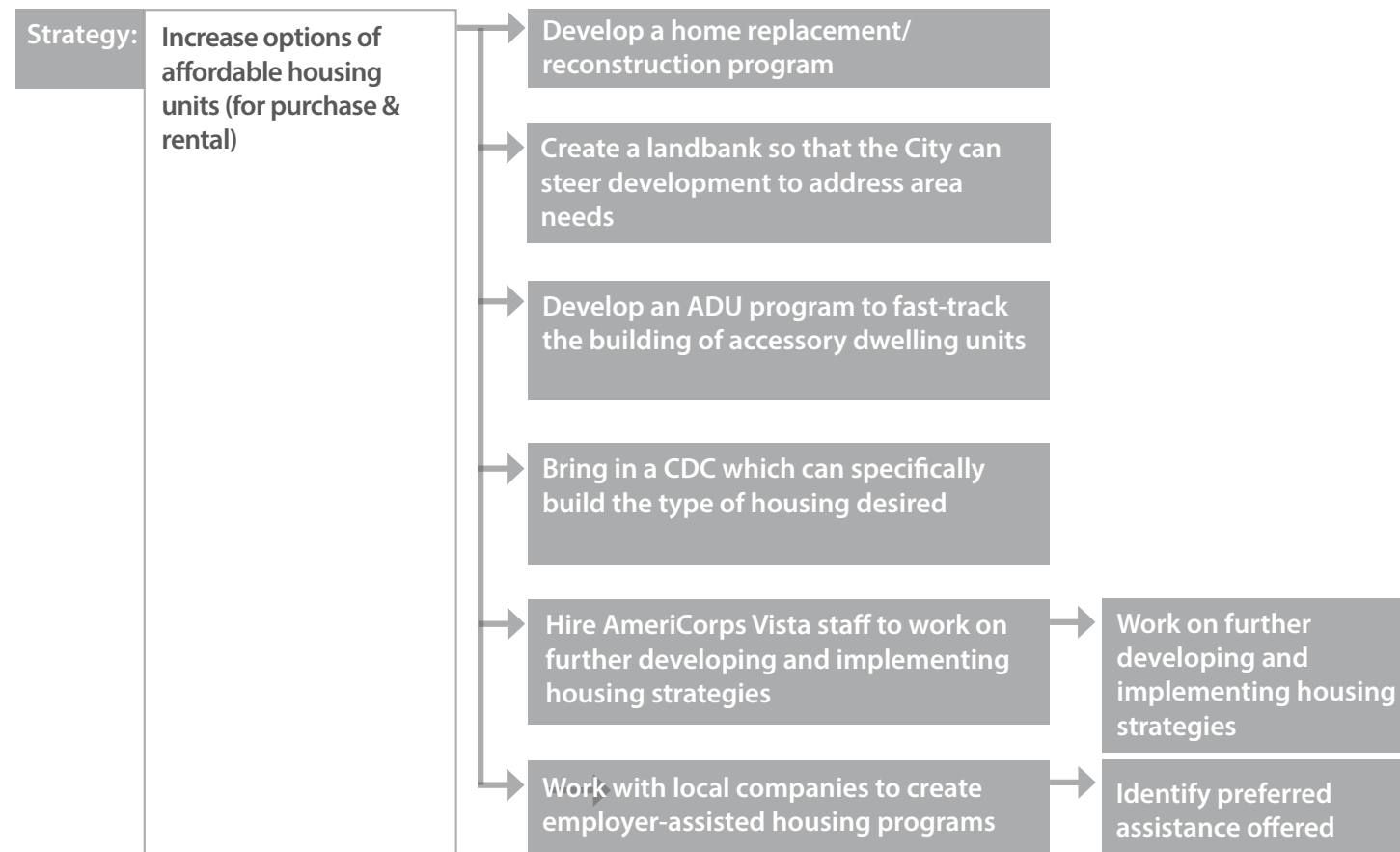
There are many benefits to hiring local talent. Hiring local residents can help build relationships between the business or organization and others in the community. It also sends a clear signal that the organization wants to support the local community.

COMMON CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND TACTICS

Below are select challenges shared across geographies with accompanying strategies and tactics. The full collection can be found in the Neighborhood Tools section of the published report.

HOUSING

Challenge: Lack of quality housing options

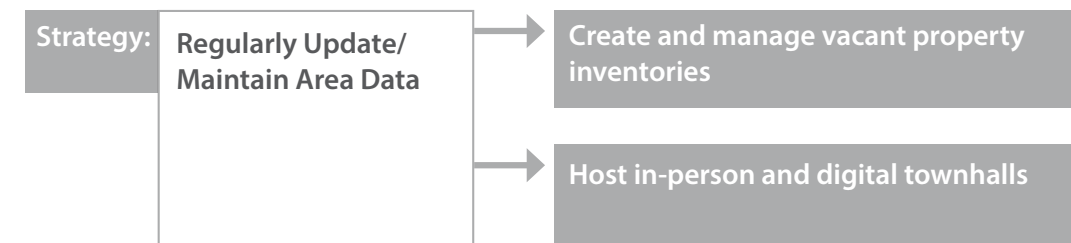


Challenge: Homes are Falling into Disrepair



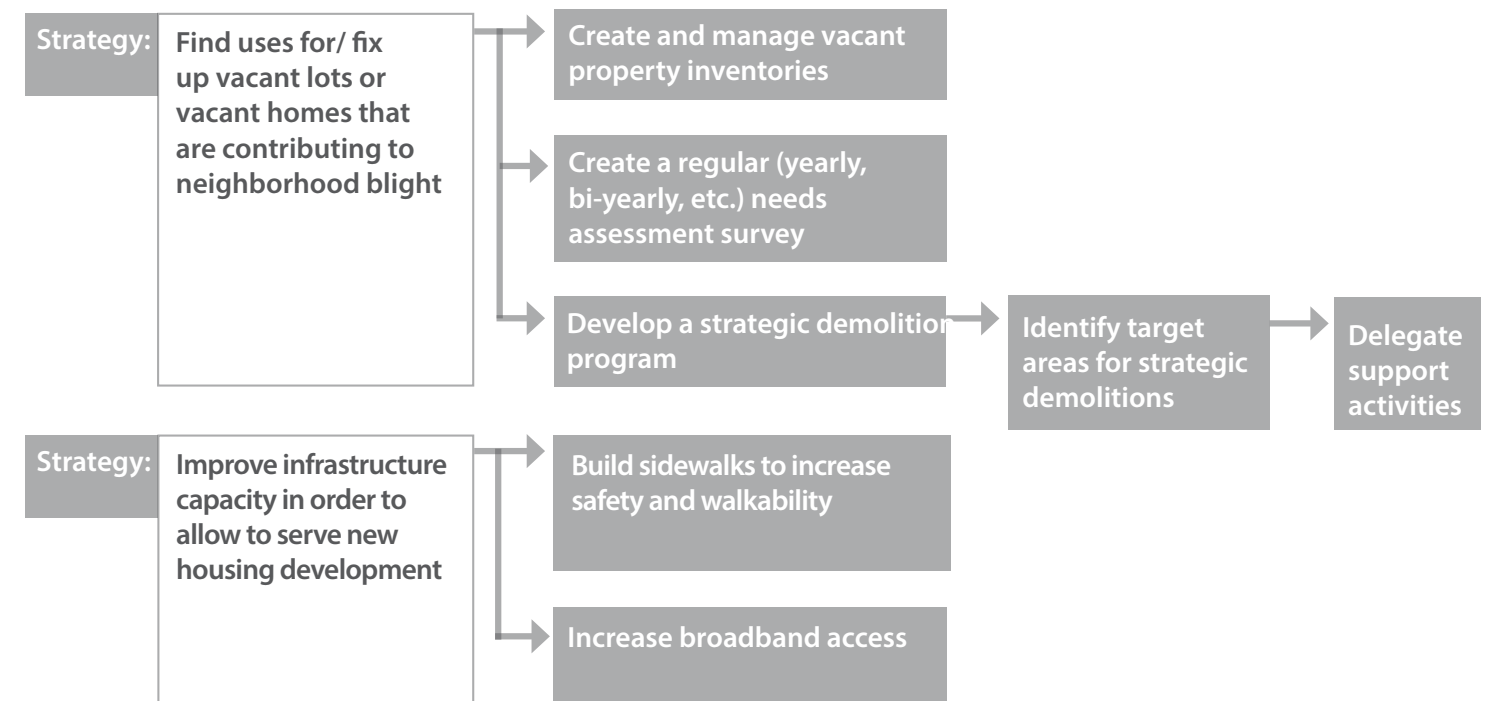
DECISION MAKING

Challenge: City or Region Lacks Clear Decision Making Processes



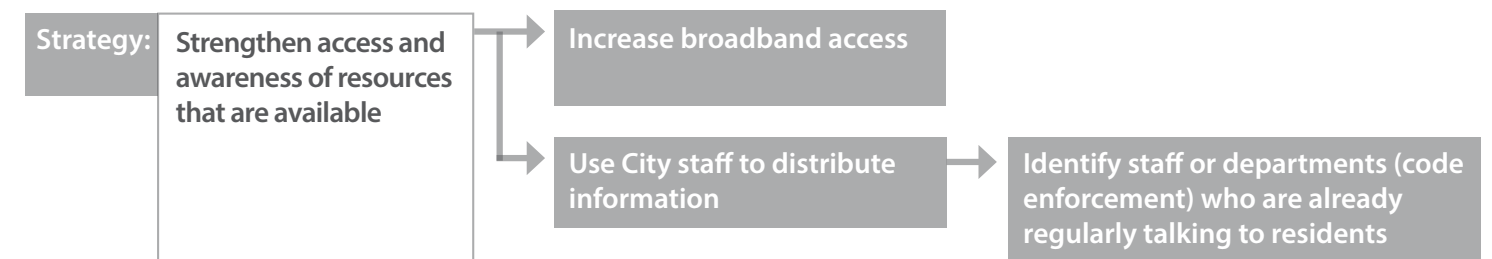
PLACE/NEIGHBORHOOD

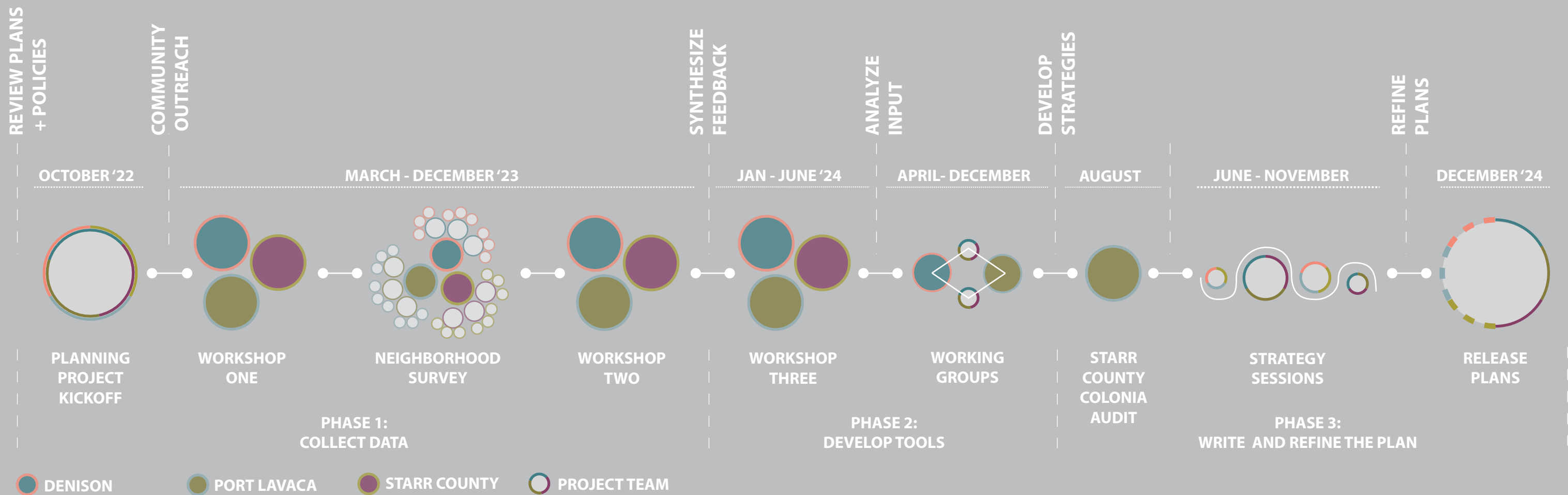
Challenge: Age, neglect, and/or natural disasters have caused vacant land and buildings and infrastructure



ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Challenge: Lack of easy to access useful information about programs and services





PROCESS & REFLECTIONS

What have been the most challenging or unexpected aspects of this project?

We were continually challenged by the lack of capacity in Starr County. We knew, based on our history in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), that there would be challenges working in this area given its lack of connection and entrenched poverty, but they were greater than we had accounted for. We were unable to find area organizations that had the capacity to be a reliable partner for on-the-ground efforts. [bc] has a strong partner in cdc, the CDC working across the RGV, and we were able to lean on them for outreach to churches and organizations in Starr County. Unfortunately, cdc had similar challenges gaining traction in the area.

We also faced political challenges in Starr County and Denison. In Starr County, the active nonprofits were funded by the County with heavy influence from commissioners. In Denison, the election cycle challenged us in terms of what people were willing to start doing now – no one wanted to take any steps forward that would impact the election one way or the other.

A positive note that we did not expect was how well our partner groups worked together in Port Lavaca. The City Manager appeared to have a great working relationship with this group and this benefited the aims of this project.

What advice would you give to other organizations planning a similar project? Speak to strengths/weaknesses in the program and any innovative approaches that were taken.

Focus on an area you're located in or partner with a group that is geographically present in the community. It is difficult to instigate change and innovation while simultaneously needing to build local capacity. Even though Denison had political challenges, everyone we were talking to was either working in or living in Denison, which meant they had the ability to actually implement the things we were talking about. cdc was a great partner in Starr County, but because of their lack of strong presence in the geography, engagement was challenging.

In regards to strengths and limitations of the program, we were challenged by the requirement for USDA involvement, and faced distrust in residents following

recent corruption charges by USDA loan specialists and contractors in Rio Grande City. Other local USDA staff were unaware of the program and its desire for strong local USDA involvement.

One key takeaway was in the power of combining public and nonprofit sectors. This worked well in Port Lavaca, where housing has been handled by the City and less so the other partner, which was focused primarily on improvements to a community space. Having two partners focusing on different arenas offers more overall benefits.

Regarding innovation, we noticed in rural areas that connection is one of the most challenging pieces. Residents are physically and sometimes culturally and socially disconnected. Many of the strategies identified were tried-and-true ideas – like block parties, neighborhood associations, coalitions, things that physically get people in the same space to forge connections that had been severed or never created in the first place. We believe funding and policy need to invest in those activities, particularly in rural areas where technology isn't as helpful, either due to a lack of Broadband, for instance, or lack of knowledge in how to use technology.

If you had the opportunity, what would you have done differently?

Based on our experience throughout this project, we feel we would have benefitted from narrowing the scope to one geography with more partners. Given the chance to redesign the scope, we would have chosen three places in one county (as opposed to three places across Texas) and connected those places to each other. Counties in Texas are quite large and often disconnected – for instance, in Starr County we were not able to reach all corners of the area to understand different challenges and strengths. By narrowing the focus, the different places could actually support each other rather than just sharing information across Texas. We would have also asked for the national USDA to play a stronger role in onboarding their local staff on the overall aims and importance of the project in addition to the expectation of their involvement.