

DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION STRATEGY / 10

10.1/OVERVIEW

Located in the heart of the Biloxi peninsula, Downtown is the historic core of the City of Biloxi. It is a place filled with remarkable history, character, and meaning for Biloxians—as exemplified by anchors such as City Hall and Mary Mahoney’s Restaurant, and community venues and events such as the Saenger Theatre, Mardi Gras parades, and the Biloxi Farmers Market. It is also a place of great contrasts – where newly built multi-story casinos stand blocks away from Mississippi cottages, and new development is located alongside empty, hurricane-damaged lots.

Downtown Biloxi can be defined as several overlapping geographic areas (Figure 10.1). The largest area, referred to as the Greater Downtown Planning Area, is bounded by Porter Avenue to the west, Esters Boulevard to the north, Lee Street to the east, and the Mississippi Sound to the south, with an extension north to the Back Bay of Biloxi and IP Casino along the Caillavet Street corridor. The historic core, which is what is generally perceived by residents and visitors as Downtown Biloxi, is defined by the Downtown Historic District. This district is generally bounded by Cavaillet Street and I-110 to the west, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to the north, Main Street to the east, and Highway 90 to the south, with “gaps” along the Highway 90 frontage.

For the purposes of the Biloxi Comprehensive Plan, the Downtown Planning Area (hereafter referred to as the Downtown area) is defined as the area bounded by Hopkins Boulevard to the west, Esters Boulevard to the north, Dukate Street to the east, and the Mississippi Sound to the south. This definition encompasses the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock casinos on the south side of Highway 90, which are not normally perceived as part of Downtown but are a potentially enormous resource to

support revitalization. There are vacant/underutilized properties and highway-oriented commercial uses on the north side of Highway 90 (which are not part of the Downtown Historic District) that reinforce the separation between the casinos and the Downtown core.

Downtown Biloxi, like many historic American cities, suffered a period of decline during the 1960’s and 1970’s as suburban competition drew residential and commercial activity out of the center city. Vieux Marche, a pedestrian-oriented commercial corridor in Downtown Biloxi, was an attempt to remedy this decline. Downtown Biloxi was in the process of recovery when it was struck by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Most of Downtown is located outside the 100-year floodplain. As a result, unlike the surrounding neighborhood of East Biloxi, it was largely spared severe devastation from Hurricane Katrina. Storm damage to Downtown occurred mainly on sites along Highway 90 (within the Velocity Zone) and to casinos that were built on barges. Other Downtown buildings suffered water damage from Katrina’s storm surge, which extended into the FEMA-designated 500-year floodplain.

Downtown is well along in its recovery from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. Allowed to relocate their casino facilities on land by the State, the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock rebuilt early along Highway 90. New businesses, restaurants, and a recently opened art gallery are additional signs of progress. In 2008, the Mississippi Main Street Association (MMSA), together with the Biloxi Main Street District and the City of Biloxi, conducted a planning study of the Downtown area with a focus on economic development.¹

¹ Biloxi Gulf Coast Program Planning Activities, Mississippi Main Street Association (MMSA) Resource Team (Community Design Solutions, Arnett Muldrow Associates, LandPlan Group, Mahan Rykiel Associates, and MMSA Staff), 2008

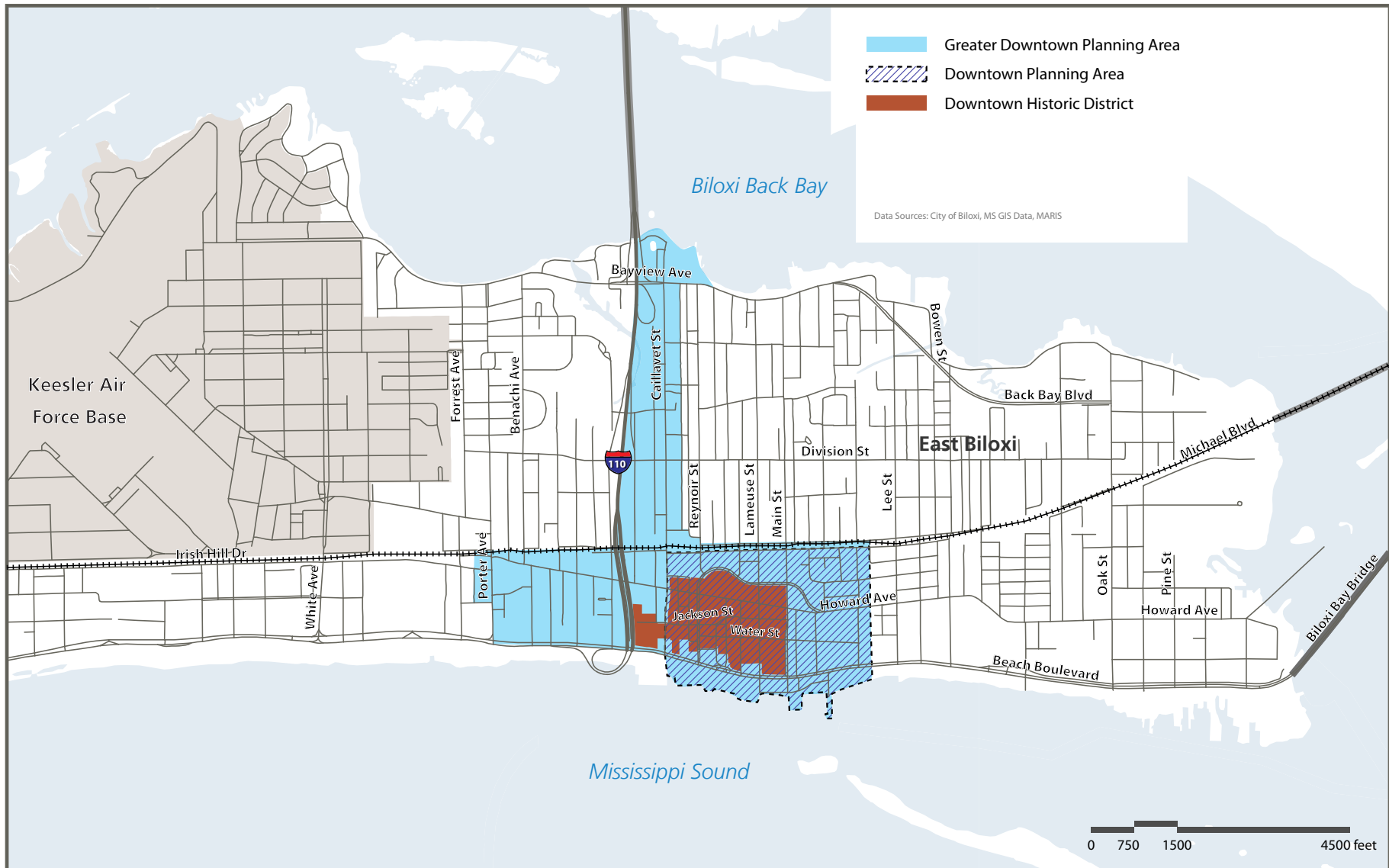


FIGURE 10.1/DOWNTOWN PLANNING AREAS

The study outlined the following key steps to initiate a “Downtown Renaissance” in Biloxi:

- 1/ Adopt a plan, establish annual goals, report progress, and keep the community involved
- 2/ Build economic development capacity (human and fiscal resources, incentives, development regulations, etc.)
- 3/ Plan for and invest in public infrastructure (particularly shared public parking)
- 4/ Take full advantage of Biloxi’s tourism market (by creating a dining, entertainment, and special events district)
- 5/ Carefully control design between US 90 and Vieux Marche (to connect the casinos with the historic Downtown core)
- 6/ Create a Downtown housing strategy (to attract residents such as casino employees, young professionals, regular casino customers, active older adults, and retirees)
- 7/ Create and market a distinctive identity for Downtown Biloxi

8/ Additionally, the study identified a number of key projects to catalyze Downtown revitalization:

- Catalytic Development Sites
 - Former Library
 - Lameuse Street (across Highway 90 from Hard Rock Casino)
 - Former Federal Courthouse
 - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard
- Howard Avenue Streetscape
- Rue Magnolia Link
- Downtown Façade Enhancements

This Downtown Revitalization Strategy integrates and builds on the recommendations and key projects identified in the MMSA Study. Downtown Biloxi has tremendous potential. Its blocks are laid out in a pattern that is conducive to walking, especially in areas such as Vieux Marche and Rue Magnolia. There are great views and easy access to a scenic waterfront on the Mississippi Sound. The historic Downtown and its surrounding area contain large economic anchors such as the Biloxi Regional Medical Center, Beau Rivage, Hard Rock, and municipal buildings. Additionally, the large number of vacant lots provides opportunities for developers to assemble contiguous properties for larger scale redevelopment. However, it is critically important that such development activity reinforce rather than detract from the unique historic character of Old Biloxi (e.g., through sensitive architectural treatment).



Source: *A Pattern Book for Gulf Coast Neighborhoods*, Mississippi Renewal Forum



Restored Bond House, Biloxi

10.2/EXISTING CONDITIONS

Land Use

Land use in the Downtown area is predominantly nonresidential, including commercial, institutional / governmental, and casino / hotel uses. Notable anchors include the Biloxi Regional Medical Center, Vieux Marche, and municipal buildings such as City Hall. There are scattered pockets of residential use, but housing is at present a small component of the land use pattern. North of Highway 90, the Downtown area is zoned Central Business District (CBD), which permits a variety of commercial, institutional, and residential uses. With the exception of the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor (zoned CBD), the area south of Highway 90 is zoned Waterfront (WF), which allows for gaming facilities. It is technically possible to rezone property within 800 feet of the mean high tide line to Waterfront zoning, potentially affecting an area extending north of Highway 90 to Water Street.



There are a number of vacant and underutilized sites along Highway 90 and in the historic Downtown core, many of which were impacted by Katrina, that are opportunities for redevelopment. Examples include the former library site (which has been cleared for development) and the Lameuse Street site identified in the MMSA study.

Key Issues

- The Downtown is Biloxi's traditional core and epitomizes "Old Biloxi." However, the current image of Downtown is inconsistent with this heritage. Many of Downtown's major streets are lined with vacant lots, buildings, and surface parking, and are devoid of pedestrian-oriented streetscape, crossings, and gateways. These conditions contribute a lack of identifiable and memorable character.
- Activity during the day is scattered throughout Downtown Biloxi without any clear linkages. There is very little activity at night, related in large part to the lack of residential uses.
- Future land use and urban design decisions north of Highway 90 and south of Water Street must be carefully monitored to maintain the character of the historic Downtown if casino or other large-scale commercial development occurs on the north side of Highway 90.
- There are few Downtown uses to complement the two casinos (e.g., shopping, restaurants, family-oriented establishments, etc.).
- The present CBD zoning does not permit mixed-use development "as-of-right."

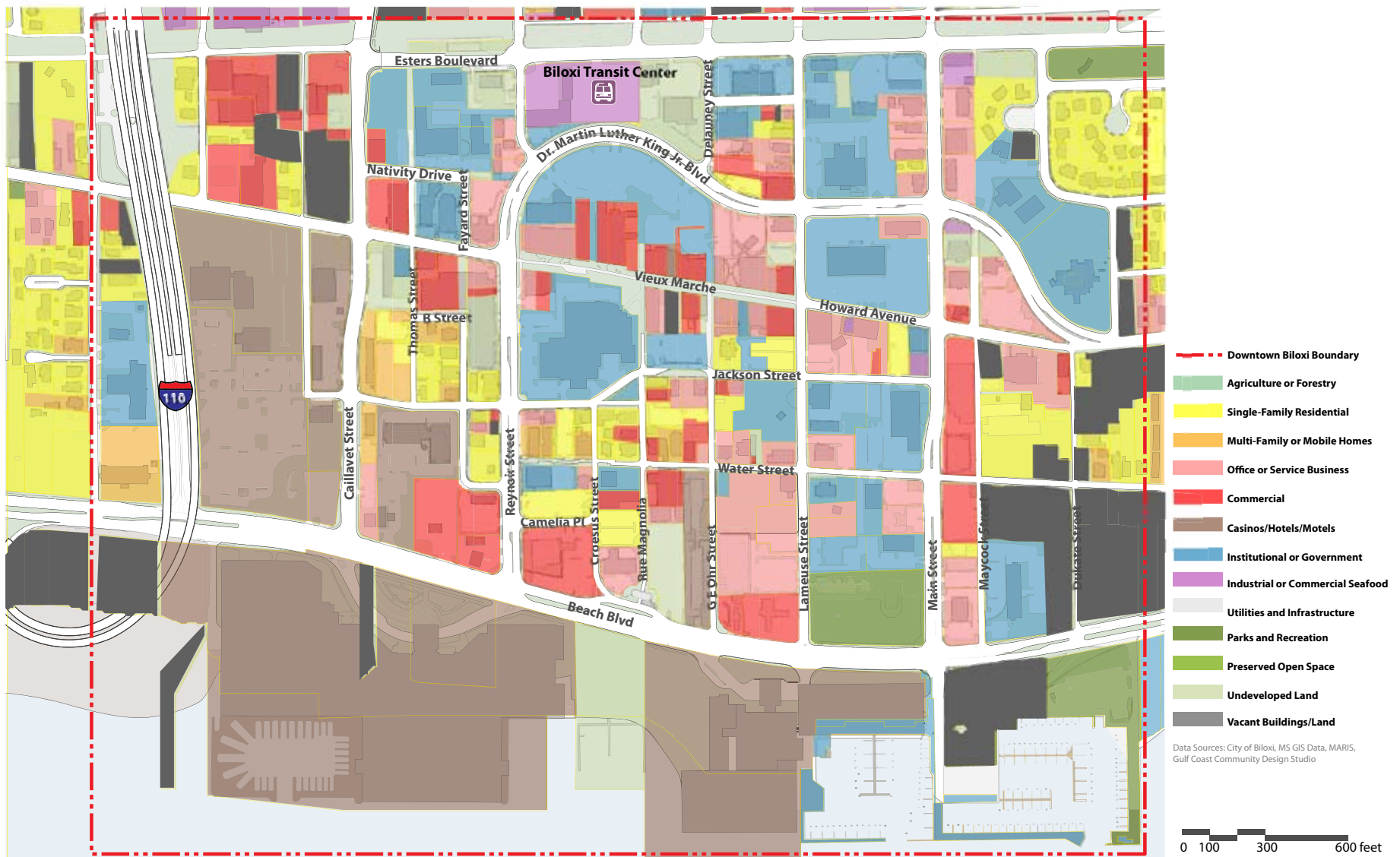


FIGURE 10.2/DOWNTOWN BILOXI EXISTING LAND USE

Transportation

The Downtown area's key east-west roadways are Highway 90 and Howard Avenue. Key north-south transportation corridors are I-110, Caillavet Street, Reynoir Street, Lameuse Street, and Main Street. An active CSX rail line runs east-west next to the Downtown area's north boundary. Off-street parking is scattered throughout the Downtown with a concentration of multi-level garage parking spaces at the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock Casinos. Sand Beach Trail, which circumnavigates the I-110 off-ramp and stretches along Beach Boulevard in front of the casinos, is the only pedestrian / bicycle facility in the Downtown area aside from street sidewalks. Coast



Transit Authority provides two bus routes that traverse the Downtown (Route 31 Blue and Route 31 Red), as well as a Casino Hopper route that connects all of the casinos in East Biloxi. The Biloxi Small Craft Harbor provides public boat slips for personal water vehicles.

Adequate, conveniently located, and clearly demarcated parking is a key requirement for a successful Downtown. A survey of existing parking in Biloxi's Central Business District was conducted in 1999 but is in need of updating.

Key Issues

- Due to poor pedestrian connections across Highway 90 and lack of Downtown amenities that would appeal to visitors, very few patrons leave the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock casinos to explore the historic Downtown.
- Large, underutilized surface parking lots are located throughout the Downtown, contributing to an unpleasant pedestrian experience but also providing redevelopment opportunities. New development requires a minimum parking ratio of 1 space/400 SF and 1 space/1 housing unit or hotel room.
- There is no pedestrian / bicycle network in Downtown apart from the Sand Beach Trail.
- Off-street parking is not required within the Central Business District zone, making it imperative that the Downtown be planned to provide sufficient and convenient on-street and public parking areas. Several Downtown properties have yet to be redeveloped following Hurricane Katrina. Redevelopment of these properties with higher densities and mixed uses as part of a Downtown revitalization strategy will potentially put a burden on the current supply of public parking.

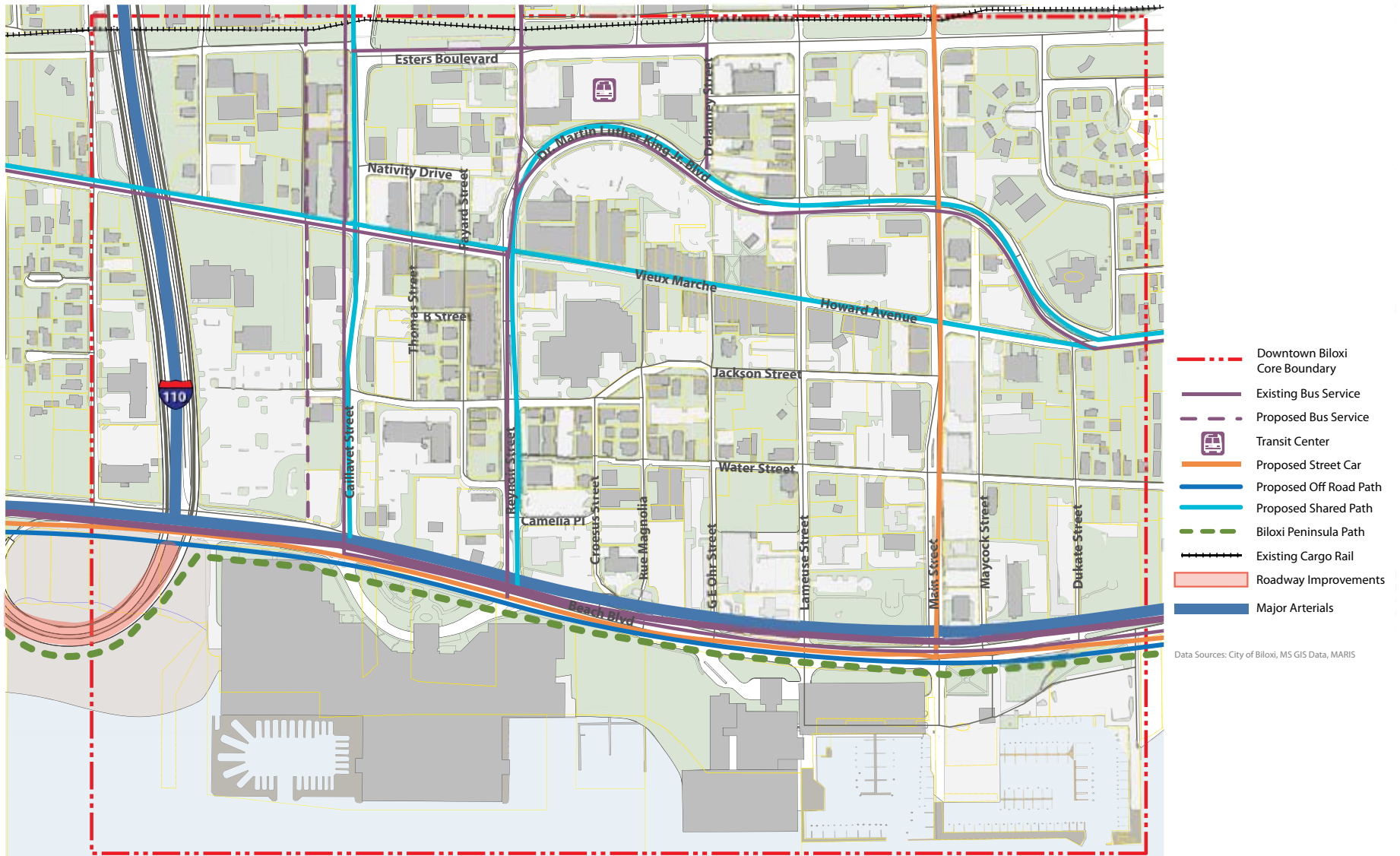


FIGURE 10.3/DOWNTOWN BILOXI EXISTING TRANSPORTATION NETWORK WITH PLANNED/PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

Natural, Historic, and Cultural Resources

The Downtown area's largest natural resource is the Mississippi Sound. The water serves as a visual and recreational amenity for the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock casinos / hotels. Harrison County's Sand Beach and the City's Biloxi Small Craft Harbor are important amenities for Downtown visitors and businesses. The Downtown's location next to the Mississippi Sound, particularly lands along Beach Boulevard that are located within the Velocity or 100-Year Flood Zones, makes it vulnerable to future storm threats.

The Downtown is rich in history and tradition as exemplified by some of its key anchors and events – the Brunet-Fourchey House (Mary Mahoney's Restaurant), Magnolia Hotel, Rue Magnolia, Vieux Marche, Saenger Theater, City Hall, Farmers Market, Mardi Gras, a recently opened art gallery, and the historic Scherer House. As previously noted, the historic Downtown core falls within the Architectural / Historic Overlay District zoning (see Figure 10.1). A portion of this district is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Key Issues

- The Downtown area's natural, cultural and historic resources are important components of its "Old Biloxi" character and charm. These resources provide opportunities to expand the Downtown area's tourism draw, attract residents, strengthen the economy, and improve quality of life. New development should be designed to perpetuate this character.
- Although much of the Downtown area is located outside of the designated 100-year floodplain, the Katrina storm surge demonstrated the impacts that can result from major storms, in terms of both damage from flooding during the storm and lost economic activity in its aftermath.
- Biloxi's live oak are symbols of the City's resilience and important natural resources as they cool buildings, provide shade, prevent erosion, and absorb stormwater runoff.



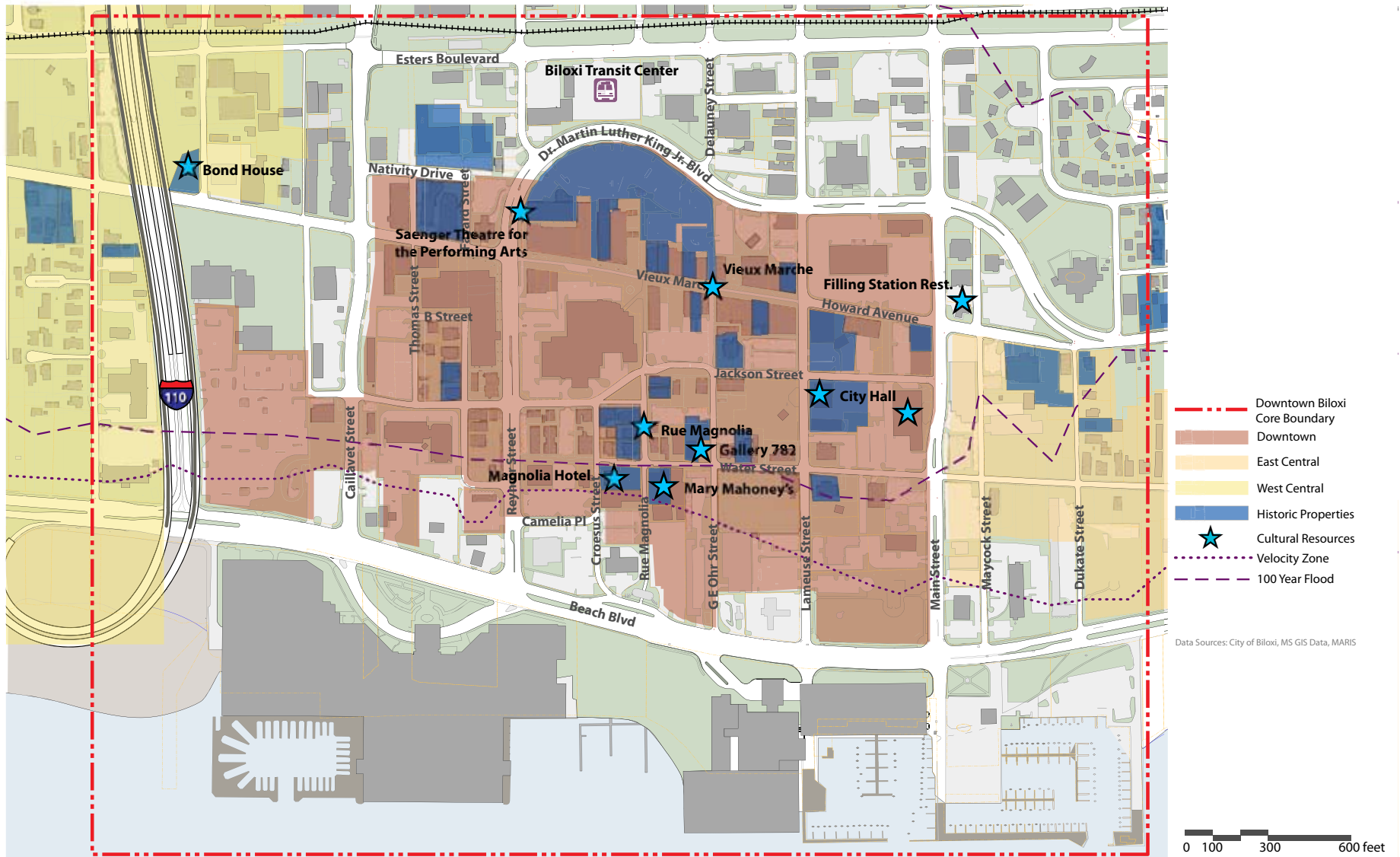


FIGURE 10.4/DOWNTOWN NATURAL, HISTORIC, AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



Community Facilities and Services

The Downtown area falls within Biloxi Fire District 1 and is covered by the Biloxi Police Department, whose main headquarters is located on Porter Avenue approximately ½ mile west of I-110. Downtown Biloxi is also home to the Biloxi Regional Medical Center – a 24-hour emergency services and 153-bed acute care facility on Howard Avenue.

Biloxi's Department of Parks and Recreation and Ports Division oversees the maintenance of Town Green (located on Beach Boulevard at Lameuse Street), and the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor (a public marina located across Beach Boulevard from Town Green).

The East Biloxi library was located in Downtown Biloxi, but suffered irreparable damage by Hurricane Katrina and is being rebuilt as a combined library / civic center located just outside the Downtown area on Howard Avenue. Until the new library complex is complete, the Local History and Genealogy Division of the Library is operating from offices on the third floor of the Downtown post office. City Hall and other municipal buildings are located in the Downtown.

Key Issues

- Apart from Town Green and two pocket parks (Mary Tremmel Park and Mary Mahoney Park), there is a lack of public open space in Downtown Biloxi.
- Some municipal buildings, including City Hall, are in need of upgrades and renovations to address deferred maintenance.