

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 Caillavet 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

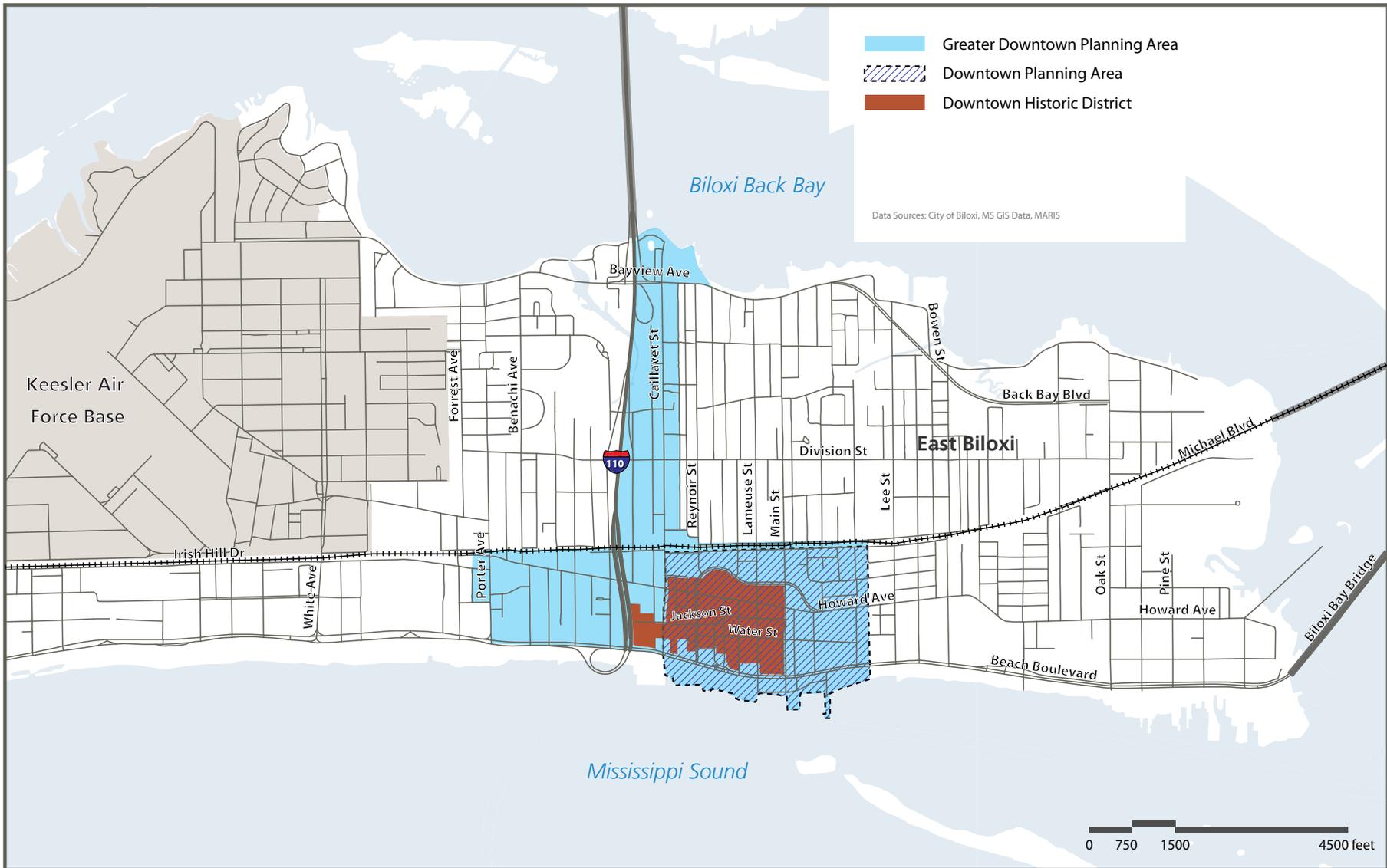


FIGURE 10.1/DOWNTOWN PLANNING AREAS

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."

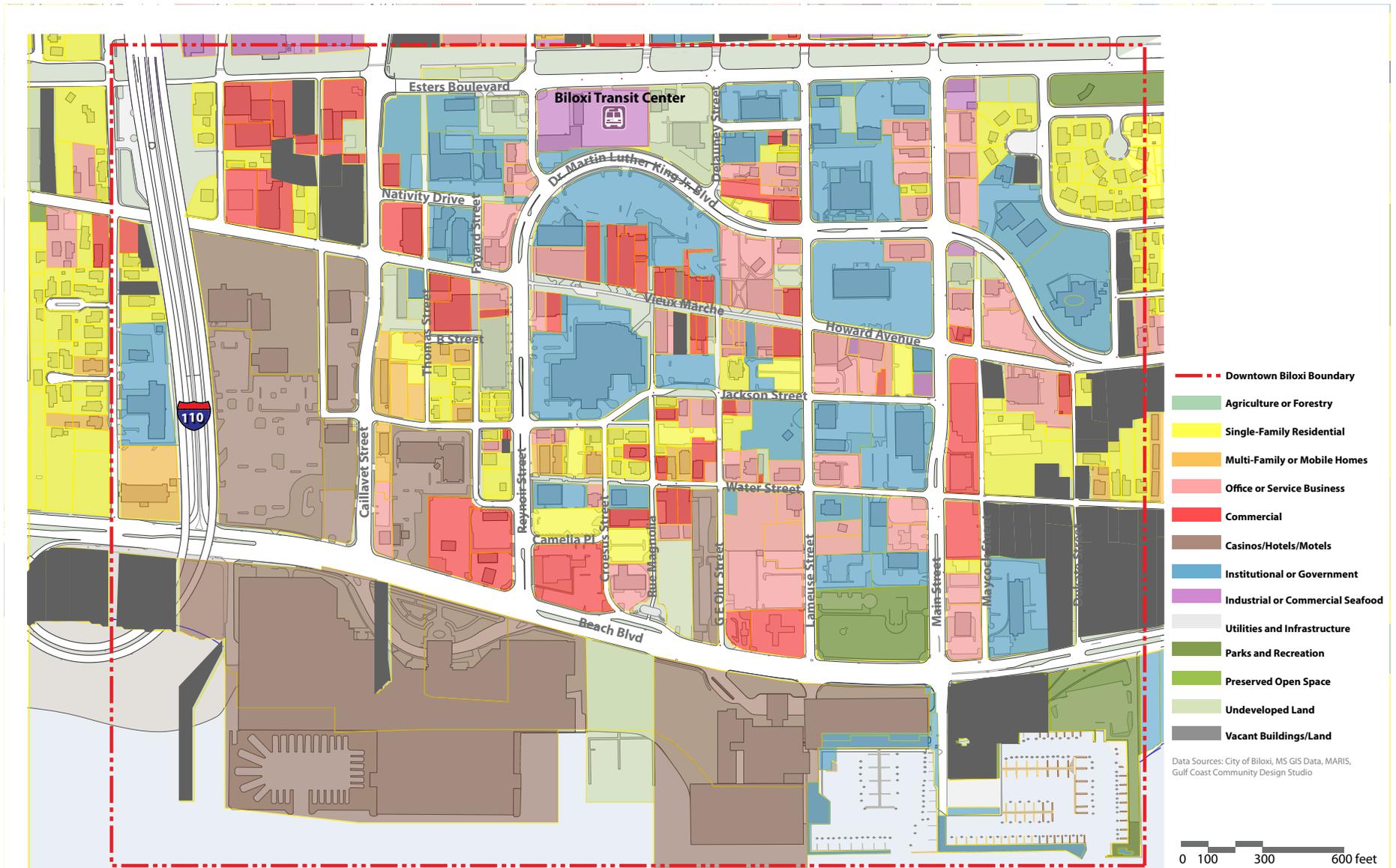


FIGURE 10.2/DOWNTOWN BILOXI EXISTING LAND USE

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.

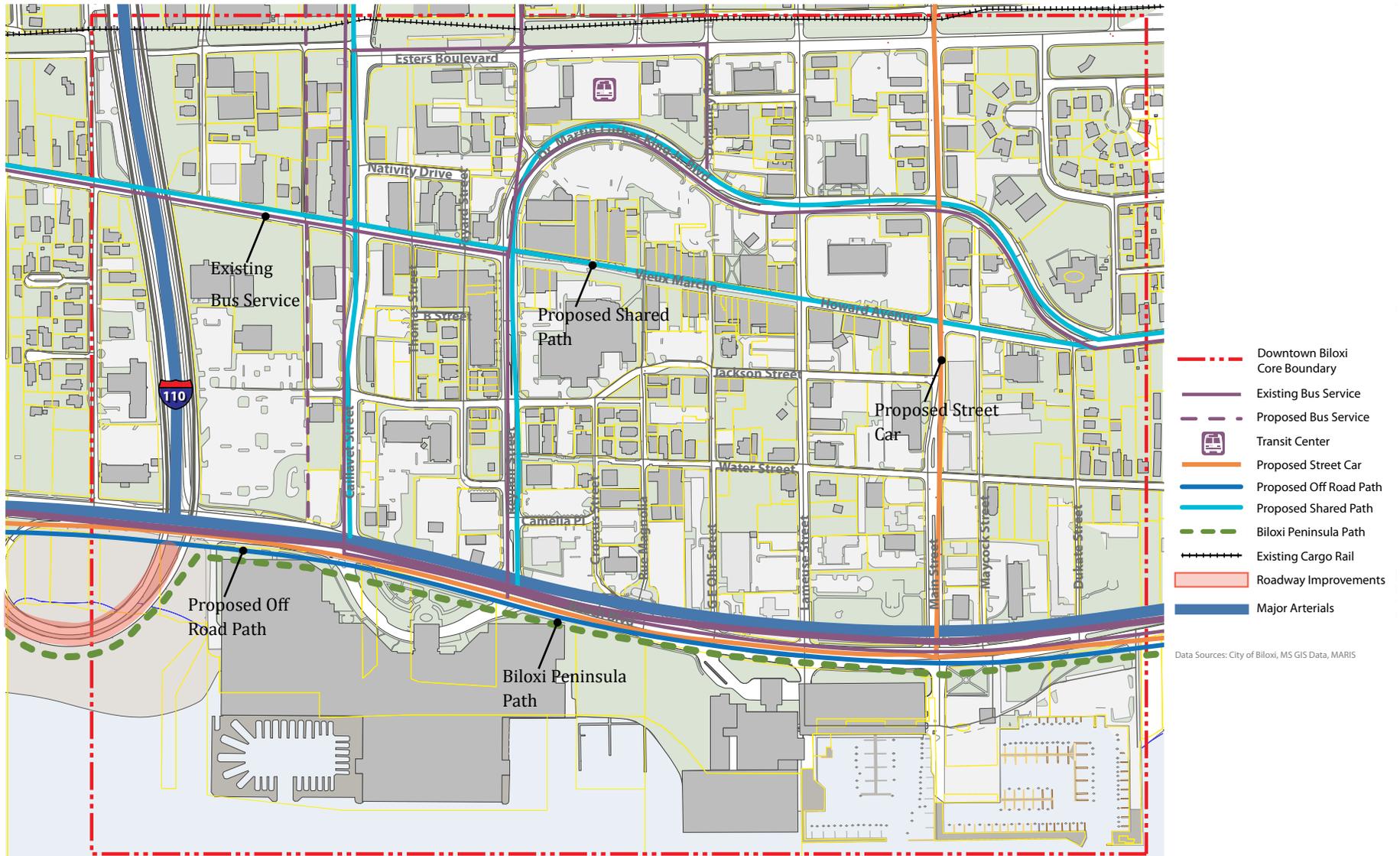


FIGURE 10.3/DOWNTOWN BILOXI EXISTING TRANSPORTATION NETWORK WITH PLANNED/PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

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.



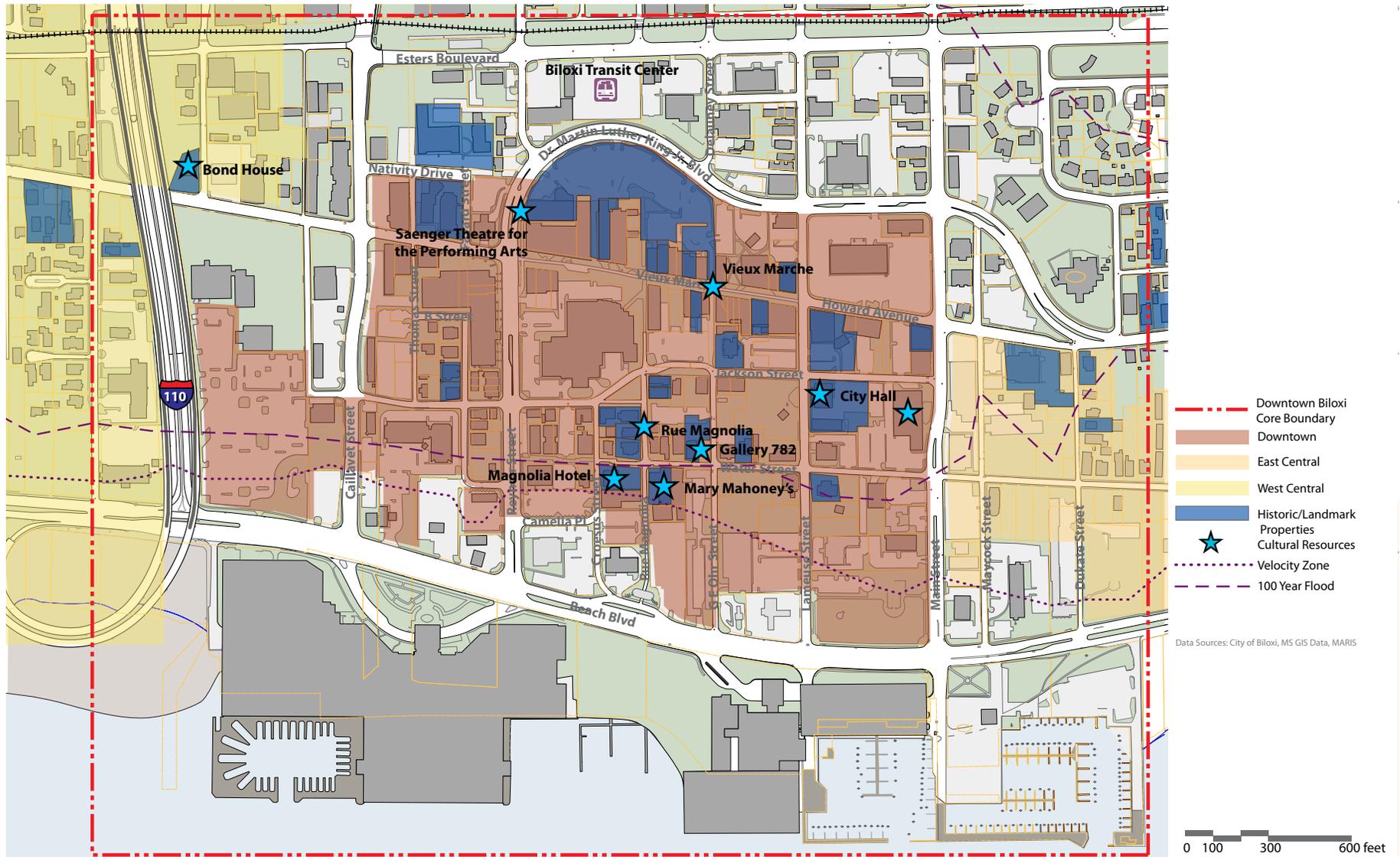


FIGURE 10.4/DOWNTOWN NATURAL, HISTORIC, AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



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 (Margaret Tremmel Peresich 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.

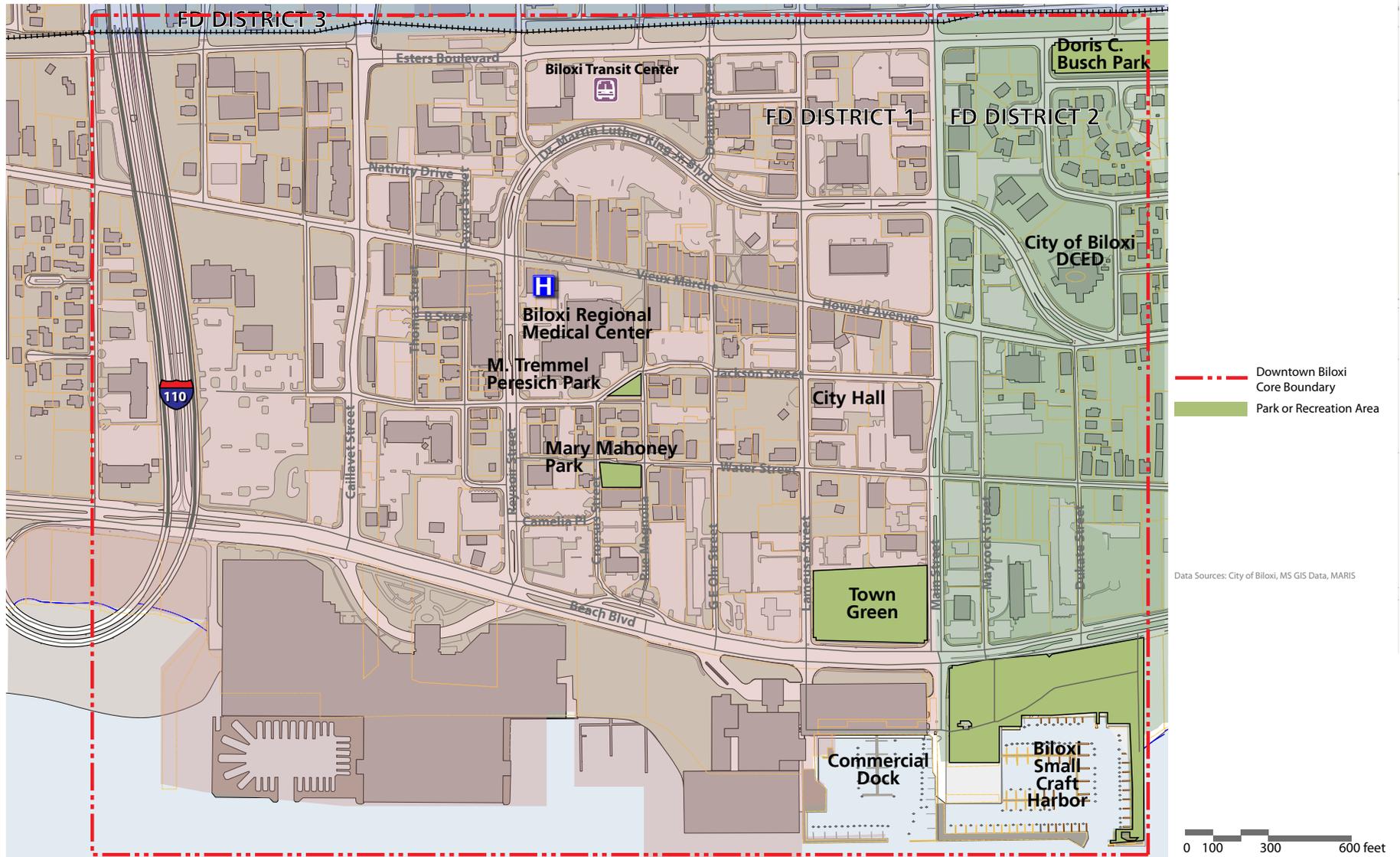


FIGURE 10.5/DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY FACILITIES

Housing

Downtown housing can activate a city during the “off” hours of evenings and weekends. It can also help address the problem of workers needing to drive long distances to reach their jobs by providing housing near major employers. Finally, housing can introduce a residential component to the Downtown community, carrying with it a deeper vested interest in its success. Apart from a few small pockets of residential development, Downtown Biloxi currently lacks housing.

Key Issues

- Lack of a residential community in the Downtown limits activity in the area to weekdays and daytime only.
- There is a large imbalance between jobs and housing in the Downtown area.
- New housing development must be mindful of storm vulnerability and emergency evacuation issues.

Economic Development

The Downtown area is home to some of the largest employers in the City of Biloxi. In 2007 Beau Rivage Casino and Resort had over 2,800 employees; Hard Rock Hotel and Casino had over 1,300 employees; the Biloxi Regional Medical Center had over 840 employees; and the City of Biloxi had over 680 employees. Additionally, Downtown Biloxi is home to retail and office businesses along Highway 90 and surrounding the former Federal Courthouse building.

Enhancing and maintaining Downtown Biloxi’s image as a premiere destination is closely tied to positive economic development in the area. The Downtown epitomizes the heritage of “Old Biloxi.” New residential, retail, and office development should be compatible with the Downtown’s historic

architectural character and maintain its pedestrian-friendly ambiance.

Key Issues

- Several large employers and visitor-oriented businesses form the “engine” of the Downtown area’s economy. Currently few Downtown uses capitalize on this potential market (e.g., shopping and restaurant districts to complement the casinos; mixed-use development to complement the governmental and institutional buildings.)
- There is great potential to increase the number and concentration of retail and other commercial establishments. Vacant buildings and sites provide land for new businesses, while employees and visitors to the area are potential customers.
- While there are good architectural design standards in place for renovations to existing buildings within the Downtown Historic District, standards to ensure compatibility of new commercial or mixed-use development with the existing fabric of Downtown Biloxi need strengthening.
- There is an opportunity to position the Downtown as a center of business incubation and workforce development for the surrounding East Biloxi community.

10.3 / DOWNTOWN VISION, CONCEPT, AND STRATEGIES

Downtown Vision

Create a vibrant 24-hour, mixed-use, walkable, economically sustainable, and environmentally resilient Downtown that celebrates Biloxi's rich heritage while embracing architecturally compatible new development.

Downtown Concept

The revitalization concept for Downtown Biloxi seeks to restore its position as a vibrant activity center for the city and the region through a phased revitalization action program. In the short term (3-5 years), revitalization can be catalyzed by focusing on a core area encompassing the two casinos, the Rue Magnolia pedestrian corridor, the Lameuse Street Site, and the Old Library Site. Rue Magnolia can be transformed into a pedestrian-oriented shopping and restaurant district that complements the shopping and restaurants in the casinos. The positive momentum of development along Rue Magnolia can extend northward and ultimately connect Vieux Marche to the casinos. The Lameuse Street Site is an ideal location for mixed-use / entertainment-focused development as it is a large site with great access and visibility. The Former Library Site can be developed into a new Biloxi Town Square with mixed-use buildings surrounding a central open space. New development on these sites north of Highway 90 can serve as amenities that, together with streetscape improvements along Highway 90, will draw pedestrian traffic to and from the casinos, activating the Downtown area. A wide range of amenities (shopping, restaurants, family-oriented attractions) will also result in longer stays of casino patrons.

Long-term revitalization strategies include architecturally compatible and moderately scaled development of other opportunity sites, including: revitalization projects on segments of the Howard Avenue and Caillavet Street corridors; "gateway" development on the north side of Beach Boulevard at Caillavet Street on the north side of Beach Boulevard across from Beau Rivage; the Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard Site; the Federal Courthouse Site; and infill development along Reynoir, Lameuse, and Main Streets. New mixed-use development with residential components located outside of designated flood hazard areas will bring much needed pedestrian activity to the Downtown in the evenings and weekends, creating momentum for additional positive development. To attract both visitors and residents, Downtown is in need of more businesses with evening hours, second-floor residential units, outdoor cafes, coffee shops, gift shops, neighborhood-sized groceries, ice cream parlors, and other similar retailers.

The image of Downtown should include attractive, well-lit, and walkable streets. Architectural, parking, and street design guidelines should direct the design of new development so that priority is given to the pedestrian realm, reinforcing the identity of "Old Biloxi."

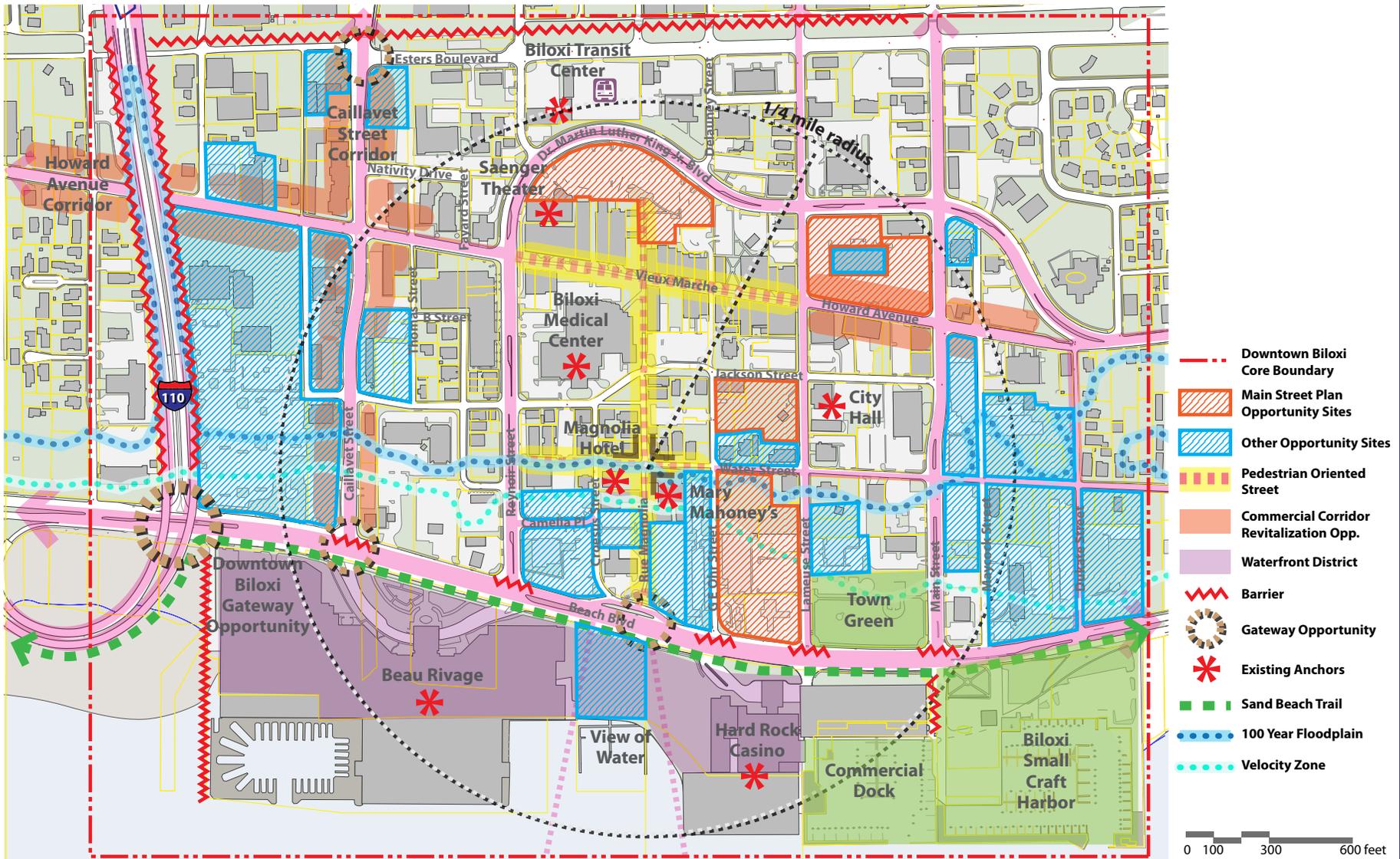


FIGURE 10.6/DOWNTOWN OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

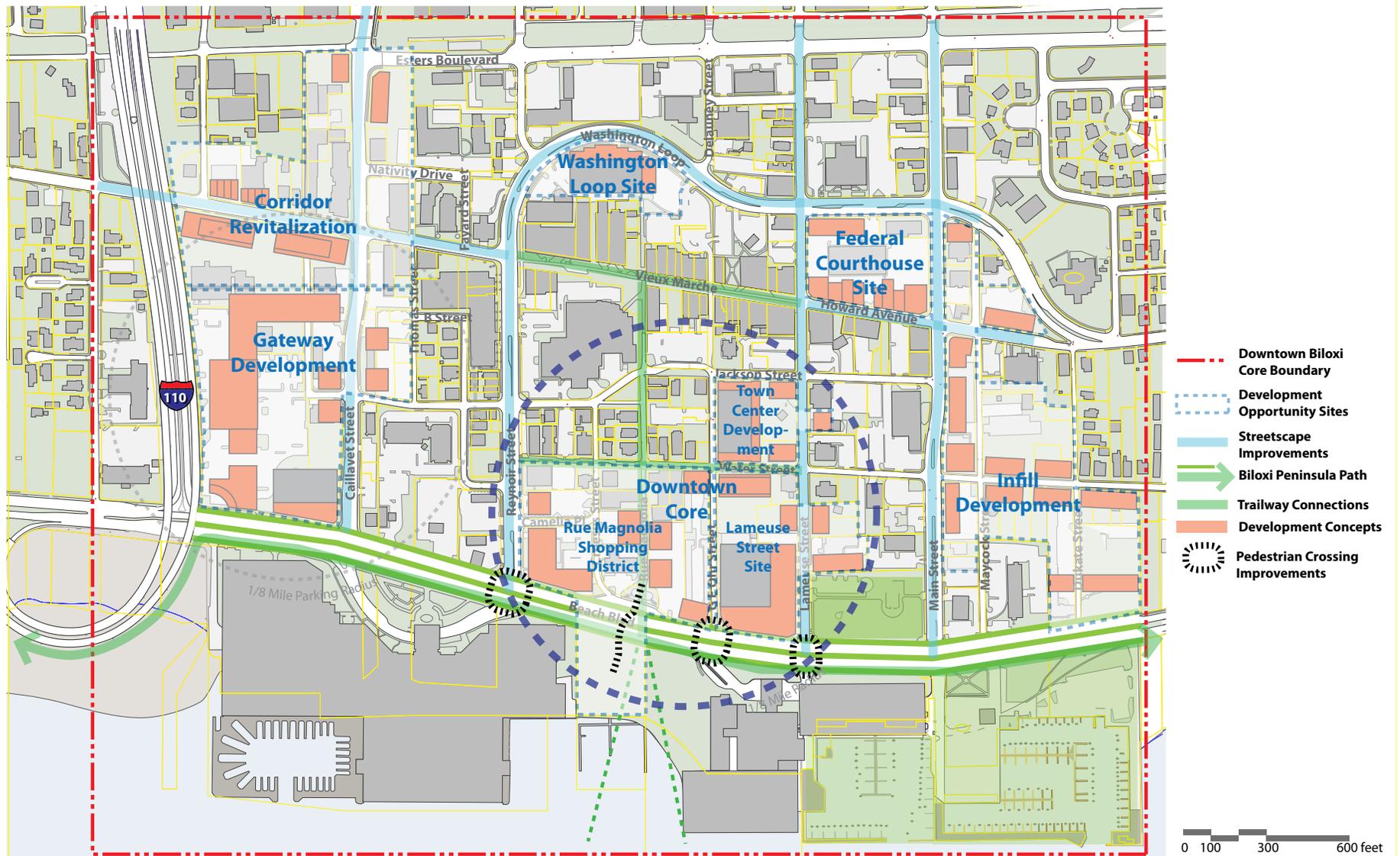


FIGURE 10.7/DOWNTOWN CONCEPT MAP

Downtown Strategies

Strategy 1

Establish stronger pedestrian connections across Beach Boulevard, linking casinos to the rest of Downtown. Drawing pedestrian traffic from the casinos into Downtown amenities will bring a wide range of activity to the Downtown area and benefit the casinos by encouraging longer patron stays.

Priority Actions

- Retime and coordinate traffic signals so that pedestrians have ample time to cross the road.
- Restripe and “texture” intersections so that pedestrian realms are more clearly defined.
- Implement streetscape improvements along Beach Boulevard.

Strategy 2

Focus short-term investment in the central core of Downtown Biloxi with clear visibility along Beach Boulevard, in order to draw pedestrian traffic from the casinos north along Rue Magnolia toward Vieux Marche.

Priority Actions

- Redevelop “catalytic sites” on Lameuse Street through public-private partnerships in which public infrastructure investments (e.g., a parking garage, public open spaces, streetscape improvements) incentivize private investment (e.g., mixed-use residential, retail, and office development).
- Promote a “Rue Magnolia” shopping district / “Restaurant Row” centered along a pedestrian walkway

with Mary Mahoney’s Restaurant as a major anchor. Provide parking behind buildings with access from adjacent streets.

Strategy 3

Rehabilitate existing buildings in the Downtown and develop new ones in a manner that responds to Biloxi’s unique context and character.

Priority Actions

- Develop architectural design guidelines for new mixed-use buildings in the Downtown that captures the visual character of “Old Biloxi.” Design guidelines should address building scale, orientation, height, massing, composition, façade treatment, and details.
- Implement a façade improvement program through the Biloxi Main Street District that allocates grants for building owners or tenants to improve their storefronts. The Gulfport Main Street District Façade Master Plan Grant Program is a possible model.

Strategy 4

Develop Downtown housing above commercial space in mixed-use buildings. Wherever possible, locate mixed-use buildings with residential uses outside the 100-year floodplain. For buildings located within the 100-year floodplain, ensure that ground floors with commercial uses are flood-proofed or utilize them for parking. Develop new Downtown office space at ground level or above retail space in mixed-use buildings.

Priority Actions

- Change the existing CBD zoning to allow mixed-use development by right rather than as a conditional use.

Gulfport Main Street District Façade Master Plan Grant Program

The Gulfport Main Street District Façade Master Plan Grant Program was developed to encourage existing and future Downtown property owners and long-term tenants to upgrade the public facing facades of their buildings. The goal is to improve the appearance of the Gulfport Main Street District in an effort to make it more appealing to consumers and potential new business operators. Nationwide, similar programs have resulted in significantly increased business revenues, increased property values, and renewed civic pride.

The goal of the program is a comprehensive rehabilitation of many Downtown buildings at once on a block-by-block basis. The property owner gives the City a temporary easement (usually 5–7 years) on the facade of the building, allowing the local government to spend funds on its improvement. In exchange for this temporary easement, the grant funds pay for a facade improvement program. This type of program allows for a single source of project management, design, and construction. Moreover, when used in conjunction with a grant source like the Mississippi Development Authority’s Community Development Block Grant Program, the facade enhancements can be realized at no cost to the building owner or tenant.



- Consider including incentives (e.g. increased intensity, increased building height, reduced or alternative landscaping and open space requirements) in the LDO to further encourage mixed-use development.
- Enforce and enhance the Architectural and Historical Review Commission (AHRC) Design Review Guidelines to ensure that new development complements Biloxi’s historic character.

Strategy 5

Strengthen the Howard Avenue and Caillavet Street commercial corridors through design guidelines and streetscape improvements. Howard Avenue is envisioned as an east-west spine across the Downtown, linking many of Downtown Biloxi’s key anchors (i.e., the Biloxi Regional Medical Center, Vieux Marche, and municipal buildings) to the rest of East Biloxi. Caillavet Street (part of the Greater Downtown Planning Area) is envisioned as its north-south counterpart, connecting Downtown Biloxi to redeveloped uses along the corridor and the IP casino to the north. Improve the visual image of I-110 as it approaches Highway 90 as a major Downtown gateway.

Priority Actions

- Enact a Corridor Overlay Redevelopment “framework district” that provides redevelopment incentives on segments of Howard Avenue and Caillavet Street to promote redevelopment in appropriate locations while establishing basic design standards for buildings, parking and open space.
- Improve the image and visibility of Highway 90 and the Downtown area with generous landscaping (e.g., palm trees), public art, and signage in the I-110 gateway area.

Strategy 6

Encourage redevelopment of the 12-acre Beau Rivage property at the northwest corner of the Caillavet Street/Beach Boulevard intersection, creating an opportunity for a Downtown gateway and anchor for Howard Avenue and Caillavet Street.

Priority Actions

- Initiate a dialogue with Beau Rivage representatives on future plans for the property.
- Through enhancements to the Downtown Architectural Design Guidelines, apply urban design standards to ensure that future development of this property is appropriately scaled and transitions smoothly to the historic Downtown core.

Strategy 7

Develop an open space preservation and enhancement strategy for Downtown Biloxi that incorporates:

- Public open space in front of City Hall
- Green parking lots
- “Complete Streets” with green infrastructure
- Micro-parks
- Streetscape improvements along major roads
- Connection to an enhanced Sand Beach Trail and public walkway zone around East Biloxi
- Preservation of view of Mississippi Sound from Rue Magnolia
- Enhanced landscaping and tree protection standards, especially preservation of live oaks
- A Town Green with a small outdoor amphitheater
- Redevelopment of the former federal courthouse

Priority Actions

- Incorporate open space into catalytic development projects, starting with a public square as part of redevelopment of the Former Library Site.
- Pursue partnerships with Downtown businesses to “green” the Downtown pedestrian environment.
- Enhance Town Green with an outdoor amphitheater.

Strategy 8

Promote alternative modes of transportation, such as bicycles and public transit, to reduce vehicular traffic and create a more walkable Downtown. Minimize the impact of parking lots on the pedestrian realm.

Priority Actions

- Establish the Biloxi Transit Center (on Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard) as a multimodal transportation hub for buses and a future regional transit service along the east-west corridor (existing CSX rail line).
- Work with CTA to fully implement the Gulf Coast Transit Development Plan proposal to develop a streetcar trolley system serving the tourism industry in Biloxi. This system can have expanded stops as the Downtown develops.
- Develop Howard Avenue, Caillavet, Reynoir, Lameuse, and Main Streets into “Complete Streets” that accommodate all modes of transportation.
- Conduct a Downtown sidewalk inventory, verifying sidewalk locations, conformance to ADAAG, condition and access to parking lots.

Strategy 9

Develop and implement a strategy to meet Downtown parking needs as revitalization efforts move forward.

Priority Actions

- Update the 1999 parking study by 1) evaluating the available capacity of public parking in relation to potential demand and 2) creating a strategy to provide sufficient parking as sites in the Downtown area are developed.
- Improve parking lot lighting in the CBD
- Consider incorporating new CBD off-street parking requirements (e.g., demonstration of adequate parking within a 1/8 mile radius of the proposed development, trash dumpster screening/enclosures) into the LDO.

Strategy 10

Market and develop other “Opportunity” infill sites over the long term in response to increased demand in Downtown Biloxi’s real estate market sparked by earlier revitalization activities. Key sites include:

- Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard Site
- Federal Courthouse Site
- Downtown Biloxi Gateway Site
- Infill sites on Reynoir Street
- Infill sites on Lameuse Street
- Infill sites on Main Street

Priority Actions

- Institute more flexible standards to facilitate appropriate development of existing lots, providing incentives for minimizing building footprints and maximizing open

space in floodplain areas.

- Enact a new Planned Development – Infill District with flexibility and incentives to enable high quality development on small fragmented lots.
- Develop a site for a small business incubator in the Downtown area where its central location and access to nearby resources will benefit future entrepreneurs and the East Biloxi community.