

6.1 Introduction

The City has a direct interest in the appearance of its roadways, buildings, and parks. This chapter of the Comprehensive Plan focuses on visually improving the City of Webster by identifying areas for improvement, articulating a vision to improve those areas, and determining a process or methodology that will guide implementation.

As the built environment is critical for the branding of a community, a city has the opportunity to shape certain aspects in its favor, a process known as community enhancement. Those traveling within Webster make conclusions about the municipality based on elements like the quality of streets, landscaping, types of businesses, buildings, and residences. The significance of community enhancement cannot be overstated since the built environment influences the daily lives of constituents, plays a significant role in business attraction, expansion, and retention, and impacts the City’s property tax base, sales tax base, and ability to attract visitors.

6.2 Elements of a Streetscape

The streetscape encompasses the visual elements of a corridor, such as pavement treatments, sidewalks, landscaping, street-lights, signage, street furniture, benches, public art, sculptures, bike racks, special lighting, building setbacks, buildings, fountains, waterways, rest areas, and more. In establishing and promoting Webster’s brand, the streetscape is one of the essential elements as it “frames” the environment by indicating the character and condition of the area. Smart Growth America defines “complete streets” as impeccable, attractive, unique roadways designed for all possible users. Additionally, “complete streets” enable safe access for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transportation, and encourage healthy lifestyles as well as a reduction in transportation costs. The American Planning Association lists 12 characteristics of a “Great Street” (Table 6.1).

<i>"GREAT STREETS" as defined by the AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION</i>
<i>1. Provides orientation and connectivity or location, accessibility, and mobility-- the street design accords with the street users and flows or connects to other streets or areas.</i>
<i>2. Balances competing needs of the street--driving, transit, walking, cycling, servicing, parking, and drop-offs.</i>
<i>3. Uses topography and natural features for aesthetic purposes or artificially creates those features.</i>
<i>4. Contains unique or interesting activities or elements that are appealing and memorable.</i>
<i>5. Incorporates urban design or architectural features that are exemplary in design.</i>
<i>6. Correlates with bordering uses and allows for continuous flow and activity.</i>
<i>7. Encourages frequent and longer visits; fosters vibrant, sustainable business and social activity.</i>
<i>8. Utilizes hardscape and landscape to great effect.</i>
<i>9. Promotes safety of pedestrians and vehicles around the clock.</i>
<i>10. Promotes sustainability through "green" practices--regarding irrigation, energy, impervious surfaces, and heat islands.</i>
<i>11. Ensures excellent maintenance without high operation costs.</i>
<i>12. Brands or promotes area as memorable, unique, innovative, and novel.</i>

Table 6.1 - 12 Characteristics of a “Great Street”

6.2.1: Webster’s Best Streetscapes

The City of Webster has several great streetscapes, some of which have been recently constructed. Genesis Boulevard, Jasmine Avenue, Rice Creek Lane, and Carnaby Place all have incorporated sidewalks, landscaping, and aesthetic elements to complement the new development they anticipate. These roadways are exemplary examples of roadways that incorporate the visual elements to further reinforce the brand of the City (see Figure 6.1, p. 38).

The City cannot solely focus on new roadways as improvements to older roadways often present themselves. The City operated as a partner with TxDOT with the redesign of Highway 3 to improve the roadway. This collaboration enabled the creation of medians, sidewalks, a shared-use path, and landscaped islands. Collaboration has worked



Figure 6.1 - Great streetscapes - Jasmine Avenue and Genesis Boulevard

well on other roadway projects such as Bay Area Boulevard and Medical Center Boulevard through our partnership with Harris County. These corridors feature landscaped medians, stately palms and oaks, sidewalks, streetlights, and vibrant businesses. Bay Area Boulevard is a vibrant retail district with its array of top-notch full-service, fast-casual, and quick-serve restaurants, successful retailers, hotels, and office buildings. Bay Area Boulevard is both pedestrian and automobile friendly, accommodating over 100,000 vehicles daily. Medical Center Boulevard is the premier corridor for Webster’s substantial medical center. This corridor, both pedestrian and automobile friendly, features an elevated walkway over Medical Center Boulevard connecting HCA Houston Healthcare Clear Lake with The Heart Hospital at HCA.

6.3 Complete Street Policy

The goal of the “Complete Streets” movement is to ensure that all users of a transportation network are accounted for during the construction of roadway improvements. Although safety is a major component of this plan, roadways must also be designed for social, economic, and environmental practices to create an amenity for the community. NASA Parkway would benefit from a complete redesign incorporating “Complete Streets” principles. (Table 6.2).

Complete Streets Principles
• Provide for sidewalks and design for bikes.
• When possible have convenient street parking.
• Incorporate street trees and landscaping.
• Ensure safety of all users.
• Create a connection to businesses and pedestrians.
• Provide context for street design.
• Consider street lighting, artistic elements and pedestrian amenities.

Table 6.2 - Complete Streets Principles

6.4 NASA Parkway

Elected and appointed officials, constituents, and staff have attempted through the years to enhance NASA Parkway from an older, less attractive, disjointed corridor into a vibrant, upscale, attractive, thematically unified roadway. This effort to improve NASA Parkway is reinforced by the completion of the NASA Parkway Revitalization Plan, a mixed-use development plan. The goal of achieving redevelopment on NASA Parkway, one of the oldest corridors of the City, remains a substantial challenge. Though the goal is attainable, it will be both costly and time intensive. (Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2 - NASA Parkway, circa 2000 and today

6.4.1: NASA Parkway Enhancement Priorities

1. Perform a capital improvement project that designs a visually appealing corridor with pedestrian amenities, pavement enhancements, and a median.
2. Consider innovative ideas, such as a road diet, which utilizes existing rights-of-way to maximize multi-modal activities, or widening the street, thereby adding more options to accommodate an esplanade, turn lanes, wider sidewalks, and enhancements.
3. Increase pedestrian walkways, accommodate public gathering areas, and incorporate public parking lots on side streets.
4. Continue to work with TxDOT, HGAC, and other organizations.
5. Consider a management district that can assess properties within a defined area for the sole purpose of improving the district for economic and community development.
6. Provide an event on NASA Parkway that brings people to the street and shows the potential for gathering.

6.5 Regional Projects Incorporating Streetscape Improvements

The future of Webster’s major roadways is tied to economic and community development, as corridor enhancements require capital investment. Regional examples for transforming focused areas or districts, including their corridors, are prevalent within the Greater Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area. In the case of Nassau Bay Town Center and Greater East End, the roadways were revitalized, modernized, and transformed in concert with new development.

6.5.1: Nassau Bay Town Square

The City of Nassau Bay initiated an economic development project called Nassau Bay Town Square, a 31-acre mixed-use development. Started in 2008 with the creation of a management district, the area features a 313-unit luxury apartment complex, a 176-room Marriott Hotel, the Saturn One Office Building, extensive retail-commercial venues, and new city hall facilities. Future projects planned within the district include 600,000 square feet of office space, 73,000 square feet of retail, and a 27,000 square foot conference center.

A project of this caliber, totaling \$150 million in new investment, requires a substantial amount of infrastructure improvements, including the design of streets, utilities, landscaping, and other relevant site work. In particular, Saturn Lane features a 210-foot long linear park that is within the 60-foot right-of-way. The linear park includes water features, aerospace themed public art, sidewalks with quality pavers, and superior landscaping. This public/private partnership project, with its elevated design standards, constitutes a high-quality master plan development. This project represents a significant improvement for the Nassau Bay community, revitalizing a stagnant commercial and office area in the city. The primary piece to the success of this project was the establishment of the NASA Area Management District. This management district assesses properties within a defined area for the purpose of improving and fostering economic development. The Nassau Bay Town Square is vigorously filling up its retail space with new restaurants, leasing office space, and generating additional traffic and sales tax in the City of Nassau Bay (Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3 - Nassau Bay Town Square

6.5.2: Greater East End Navigation Street Improvements

The Greater East End, located east of downtown Houston with major corridors such as Navigation Boulevard and Harrisburg, initiated a revitalization project through a management district created in 1999. Although this warehouse and commercial district flourished before the 1980s, it was in dire need of investment and transformation. The Greater East End Management District has been instrumental in leveraging a \$5 million grant to transform Navigation Boulevard, which is the primary corridor for business.

Components of the Navigation Boulevard transformation include artistic enhancements, including decorative benches, public art, bike racks, special pavers, thematic trash receptacles, solar lighting, a linear park, and attractive landscaping. Effects of the management district improvements include increased private investment, business recruitment, and creation of a community gathering place. New businesses such as El Tiempo Cantina, Walmart, CVS, and Tout Suite Coffee House bring a significant return on investment to an area that was formerly distressed, resulting in nearly 100,000 people residing in this area now. The Greater East End, with its historical ties to the port, railroad, and oil industry, retained vestiges of its remarkable past through the various design elements of their streetscape and revitalized the defunct warehouse and commercial district into a unified, vibrant, attractive, and safe district. Without the proactive creation of the management district, it is unlikely that the transformation of the Greater East End would have happened (Figure 6.4).

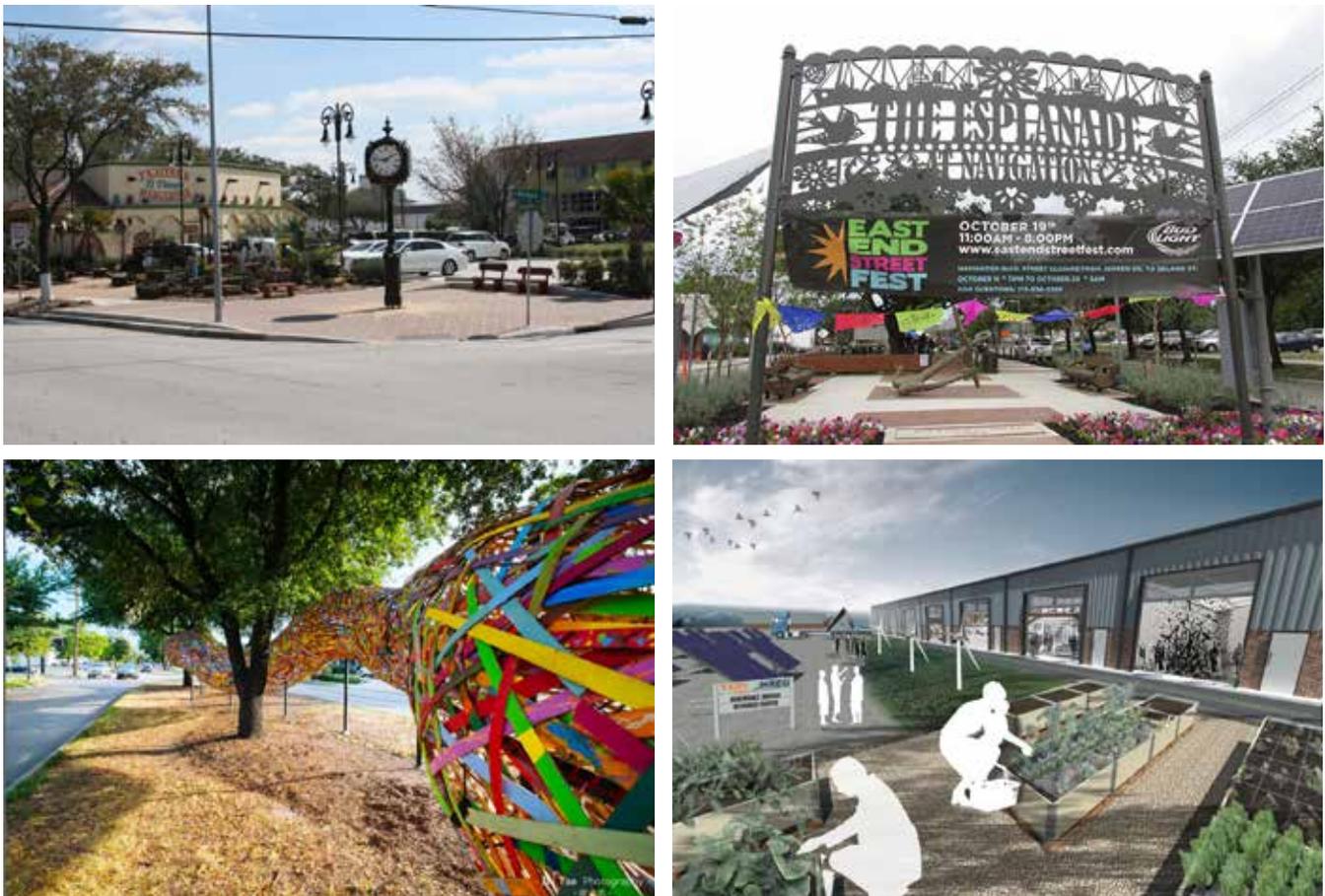


Figure 6.4 - Houston East End, Navigation Boulevard

6.6 Gateway Signage

While there are many methods of branding a municipality, one of the more compelling methods is through the use of gateway signage. When gateway signage is installed on major corridors (entrances and exits of the City), identifying community themes are reinforced for residents, commuters, and visitors. Webster features gateway monuments on Bay Area Boulevard, Egret Bay Boulevard, Highway 3, and NASA Parkway (Figure 6.5, p. 41).



Figure 6.5 - Gateway Signage at entrances to Webster

Opportunities exist, however, to augment gateway signage to achieve thematic unity and create a more impactful statement capitalizing on Webster’s identity and image. Cities frequently utilize gateway signage on major arterials to promote their “brand.” One example on the Katy Freeway (Interstate 10) is located at the Bunker Hill exit, where a Texas star and memorable highway monuments are located. This highway monument serves as a landmark, way-finder, and branding tool (Figure 6.6).



Figure 6.6 - Highway Monuments

6.7 Single Family Residential Enhancement

Each of Webster’s single-family neighborhoods is unique based on the era of construction, density, location, and lot size. The oldest subdivision in Webster is Webdale/Old Townsite. Dating to its origins in the 1930s, it has continued to develop with small infill lots today. The City’s newest subdivision, Edgewater, a master-planned community built on a former brownfield site, began construction in 2005 and continues to develop today. Other neighborhoods, like Green Acres, feature homes that were constructed from the 1960s to present time. Due to the varying times of construction and development, the style and age of homes vary markedly. Walnut Place, built in 2003, is both a commercial and residential planned development that includes an office park on Texas Avenue as well as townhomes and single-family detached residences on Travis and Brad Court.

An analysis of single-family developments within the City illustrates that most residential homes are constructed with durable materials, such as brick, cement board, or stucco. Additionally, all of these subdivisions have a neighborhood park within their subdivision boundaries allowing quality outdoor space for children, family, and friends to enjoy. While most of the City's neighborhoods do not look homogeneous, most of the homes constructed with masonry requirements fit current standards. There are challenges and opportunities for enhancing the municipality's single-family residential neighborhoods. Infill development, property maintenance, and continued construction are crucial to improving the City's residential sector. Webdale/Old Townsite and Green Acres feature some vacant lots that are opportune for quality infill development.

6.7.1: Residential Enhancement Priorities

1. Ensure that park equipment is adequately maintained and updated as needed within residential communities.
2. Provide incentives for durable, time-tested, lasting building materials in the construction of single-family residences.
3. Continue to foster the completion of the Edgewater Development.
4. Utilize relevant City ordinances to mitigate and resolve maintenance issues.

6.8 Commercial Enhancements

The appearance and occupancy of commercial properties influence the City's commercial appearance. Upscale nationally or regionally recognized business enterprises are usually located in appealing buildings, complemented by attractive landscaping, lighting, and signage, whereas underperforming businesses tend to be located in less attractive shopping centers and buildings. The City features some commercial areas along major arteries, like NASA Parkway, that appear less appealing due to their age and use. In many instances, the buildings do not conform to the City's masonry standards, landscaping, signage, or setback requirements. This issue of enhancing nonconforming businesses along key corridors is a concern in the Comprehensive Plan (Figure 6.8, pg. 43). Ideas for redevelopment or transformation include the following:

1. Secure an investor who seeks to partner with the City in redevelopment initiatives.
2. Consider a management district as a tool for redevelopment.
3. Incorporate design elements, such as water features and architectural accoutrements.
4. Promote the use of durable materials for all commercial buildings.
5. Provide minimum standards for parking lot lighting.
6. Continue to work with existing shopping centers to improve parking lot landscaping.

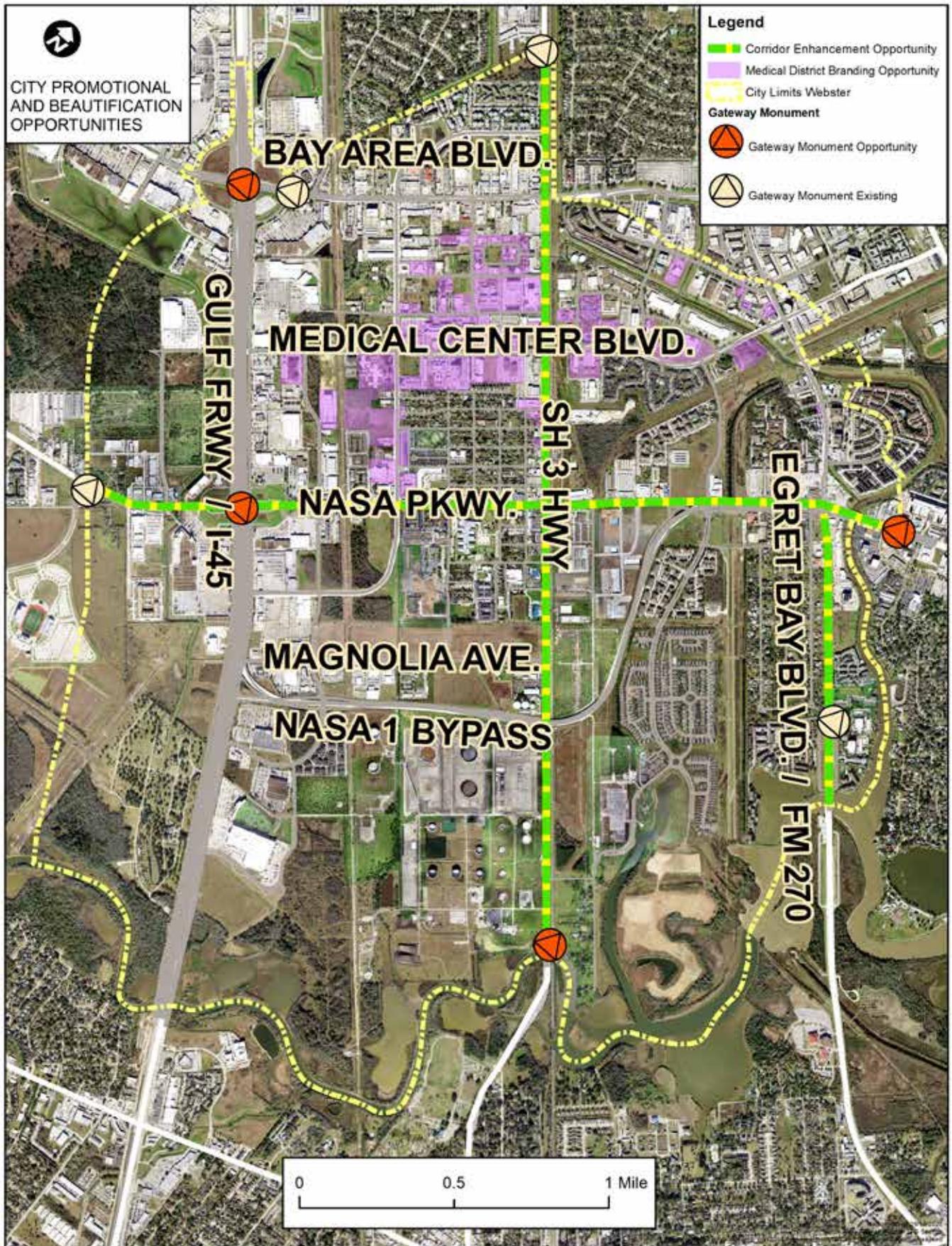
6.8.1: District Themes

Districts, or areas regarded as distinct units based on particular characteristics, can be viewed as opportunities to capitalize on positioning, branding, and marketing essential assets of the community. Frequently, districts can be further defined and promoted with unique enhancements to the district, such as design, signage, artwork, and landscape amenities. Some regional examples of well defined, compelling, vibrant districts in the region include Houston's Museum District, which consists of 20 museums within a 1.5 mile radius with 8 million visitors annually. This district is outlined in marketing materials as well as by its thematic street and directional signage, architectural standards, landscaping, and parking. Another Houston-area district,



Figure 6.7 - District Themes

Figure 6.8 - Promotional and Beautification Opportunities



Upper Kirby, is readily identifiable by its vibrant red color scheme, British-style artifacts, thriving businesses, and attractive residences (Figure 6.7, pg. 42). Like Houston, Webster has defined districts that could benefit from focused, thematic enhancements. The NASA Parkway District is established geographically but not thematically. Opportunities exist to revitalize and brand this iconic corridor with signage, art, and landscaping.

Webster’s medical sector constitutes one of the City’s most vibrant economic engines, therefore, needs enhancements within the two-mile area that further define and promote the City’s invaluable, thriving healthcare industry. As Webster’s medical sector accommodates 1.8 million visitors, this district offers an extraordinary opportunity to capitalize on its world-class healthcare offerings.

6.9 Utility Enhancement

While Webster has required underground utilities for commercial development since 1998, the City features an extensive, unsightly array of overhead utility lines that contribute to visual blight. These utility corridors can be overgrown with weeds and debris, which add to the overall unsightly view. As the Houston-Galveston region experiences weather events such as hurricanes, buried lines would provide better protection from power failure and greatly enhance the visual appeal of the City.

Options to ameliorate utility corridors and overhead utility structures:

1. Work with CenterPoint Energy to establish a cost for these improvements. While CenterPoint Energy will not pay to bury lines, the company will provide cost estimates to facilitate planning. The City can then determine which areas will result in the best return on investment. In the case of an area suitable for a management district, the management district could provide funding for removing unsightly overhead power lines.
2. Relocate overhead utility lines to alleys and rear of properties whenever possible.

6.10 Promotion of Building Materials

The State of Texas has limited the ability of cities to regulate building materials under House Bill 2439. This law has changed the way that cities are able to restrict building materials utilized for construction within the city. The City of Webster is properly positioned due to its utilization of Planned Development Districts for large portions of the City. All Planned Development Districts that have masonry requirements approved still must abide by those requirements. To overcome the limitations of House Bill 2439, the City of Webster should transition from a regulatory based code to requirements based on incentives to ensure desired building aesthetics (Table 6.2).

Possible Incentives for Masonry Compliance	
<i>Increased height allowance</i>	50% or more masonry
<i>Less setback requirements, setbacks increased if less than 50% masonry</i>	
<i>Reduction in landscaping requirements (smaller tree sizes, less % of landscaping required)</i>	
<i>Economic Development incentives for voluntary masonry compliance</i>	

Table 6.2 - Promotion of Building Materials

6.11 Community Building

The process of enhancing a community is not solely about buildings, streets, parks, and visual appeal but also about relationships, partnerships, events, and activities that propel a city in positive directions. Webster provides a range of community events including a City-wide cleanup, an annual fireworks show, summer youth camps, holiday promotions, After School Programs, fitness classes, and senior activities. These activities help create a sense of community and encourage a stronger and more vibrant Webster.

6.12 Vision, Goals, and Actions

The Comprehensive Plan stakeholders formulated a vision, series of goals, and actions to serve as a framework for implementation of the community enhancement chapter. The vision statement below was prepared as the foundation for the goals and actions that follow. These goals and actions are numbered for reference purposes only and do not suggest a priority.

Vision: Facilitate an active community that is attractive and desirable for residents, businesses, and visitors to the City.

Goal 6.1: - Enhance the visual and aesthetic character of the community through the establishment of programs, standards, and guidelines.

- Action 1. Develop and implement incentives and right-of-way projects to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the community.
- Action 2. Create a program to organize and promote the maintenance and upkeep of neighborhoods and business districts.
- Action 3. Continue to cite and enforce code violations.
- Action 4. Enhance or maintain public infrastructure, such as streets, traffic signals, signage, sidewalks, crosswalks, and parks, especially in highly visible areas of the community.

Goal 6.2: - Improve corridors and gateways into and throughout the community to promote strong branding and first impressions.

- Action 1. Generate specific gateway and corridor plans for public improvements, such as traffic signals, landscaping, and entrance signage.
- Action 2. Design, fund, and construct appealing monument signage and install them at unmarked gateways.
- Action 3. Utilize plant materials that are proven performers in the region. Install low maintenance, hardy, drought-resistant plant materials in public rights-of-way.
- Action 4. Determine and pursue additional funding sources for enhancement projects and develop a timeline for submitting applications to necessary agencies.

Goal 6.3: - Improve the visual environment in high priority areas of the City by relocating or burying overhead power and utility lines where practical and feasible.

- Action 1. Identify and consider alternative solutions for overhead power lines. Partner with local providers to determine the cost, timing, and feasibility of relocating overhead lines underground throughout the City or in targeted locations such as defined enhancement corridors and nodes. Incorporate costs to bury overhead power lines along enhancement corridors into the Capital Improvement Program and Annual Budget.
- Action 2. Amend applicable ordinances, whenever possible, to require utility lines to be buried or utility easements to be located at the rear of lots or along the perimeter of new subdivisions.

Goal 6.4. - Revitalize antiquated commercial areas of the City.

- Action 1. Research funding opportunities for enhancing business corridors.
- Action 2. Consider the creation of a management district within Webster which has the authority to levy an assessment apportionment.