

## Disaster Preparedness and Resilience

### Existing Programs and Projects

#### COVID-19 Response

The Heart of Texas region has worked collaboratively to address challenges presented by COVID-19. While the economy was impacted by COVID-19, the Heart of Texas region only accounted for 1.6% of all confirmed cases in the State of Texas as of December, 2020:<sup>207</sup>

Several programs took place during the COVID-19 pandemic that demonstrate the Heart of Texas region's resilience and ability to work together during times of crisis:

- The First Presbyterian Church donated \$10,000 to the Chamber of Commerce to support small business loans in the community.
- The Chamber and Main Street program organized and started a Raising Hill campaign on Facebook, which created a central location for businesses to market to the community and surrounding areas. Local residents were urged to spend money at a local business that remained open at least once a week.
- Two Sisters Ceramics and Makley Rehab put together DIY kits for children to make at home.
- The local coffee shop, Overflow, started offering take-and-bake meals.
- Skips Irish Pub offered patrons the opportunity to fill their own growler and family style meals to go.
- Drift Away Day Spa offered yoga classes online via Zoom.
- Producer's Co-op and Fleming's Ace Hardware both developed a contactless pickup system.
- One of the local industrial plants, Gate Precast, purchased some gift certificates from local restaurants to give as employee appreciation gifts since they were considered essential and continued working the entire time.

### 2020 NADO Impact award<sup>208</sup>

- The Area Agency on Aging of the Heart of Texas (AAAHOT), a program in the Health & Human Services Division of the Heart of Texas Council of Governments (HOTCOG):
  - Funded the purchase of non-perishable groceries for financially disadvantaged individuals age 60 and older living in the rural areas of the HOTCOG six-county service area during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - Approximately 800 families had boxes of non-perishable groceries valued at \$100 delivered to their homes at no cost through the efforts of a network of staff, administrators, elected officials, and volunteers .
  - Originally, \$80,000 was committed to the program, but local suppliers (HEB Grocery, Brookshire Grocery, Sam's Club and Packless Corporation of America) partnered to extend the value of the contribution during this time of food shortage.
  - The program ended up delivering approximately 75 tons of food to families in need.

#### Organizations:

- Heart of Texas Council of Governments;
- County Judges from Bosque, Falls, Freestone, Hill, Limestone, and McLennan Counties;
- Flat Rock Trailers;
- HEB Grocery;
- Brookshire Grocery;
- Sam's Club;
- Packless Corporation of America;
- Hill County Community Coalition and
- other volunteers

## Preparing for a Future Pandemic Response

To better prepare for future pandemics, the Heart of Texas COG should work with local jurisdictions to create a pandemic response action plan that includes methods of communicating internally, sharing information with the public and establishing a coordinated response to containing the pandemic, treating it and preventing it. These plans need to include the following:

- How to serve the elderly, disabled, and those at-risk for hunger or displacement
- Sheltering those impacted (or infected) by the pandemic
- Feeding the population
- Care of pets, service and support animals
- Distribution of emergency supplies
- Mass evacuee support
- Mass emergency assistance support
- Support for the homeless
- Non-traditional means of supporting 911 callers in times of greater need
- Continuity of operations and services

Resources that used to guide the creation of this action plan include:

- Mass Care/Emergency Assistance Pandemic Planning Considerations by FEMA
- COVID-19 Response and Homelessness: An Action and Resource Guide by HUD
- COVID-19 Best Practices Information Considerations for People with Disabilities by FEMA

Heart of Texas COGs should also facilitate training at the local level by providing access to training programs and webinars offered by emergency management experts and universities. This could include the following:

- Demobilization in a Pandemic webinar hosted by Louisiana State University, Academy of Counter-Terrorist Education
- Breaking the Chain: Preventing the Spread of Surface Contamination webinar hosted by Louisiana State University, Academy of Counter-Terrorist Education
- Emergency Preparedness for Small Businesses During COVID-19 a webinar delivered by the New Jersey Business and Industry Association and FEMA
- First Responder PPE Guidelines webinar hosted by Louisiana State University, Academy of Counter-Terrorist Education
- EOC Operations During Social Distancing webinar hosted by Louisiana State University, Academy of Counter-Terrorist Education
- Continuity: Why You Should Care and How We Can Help webinar hosted by FEMA

### Diversification of the Energy Sector

Historically, the Heart of Texas region was heavily dependent on jobs and revenue from coal, oil, and gas. Recently, however, there has been a shift away from fossil fuels, and the closure of Big Brown Coal plant left the region with an economic gap. Heart of Texas has shown its resilience by swiftly capitalizing on its abundant source of renewable energy from Solar and Wind Farms. There is land to build these farms, and the result will be a smaller carbon footprint and better air quality for the residents. Additionally, jobs will be created, the farms will provide a less expensive alternate source of energy, and tax revenue will help fund schools in the region, creating a better quality of life for growing families in the region.

Current additions include:

- **Wind**
  - Engie, in Limestone and McLennan<sup>209</sup>
  - Prairie Hill Wind Farm project<sup>210</sup> in McLennan and Limestone
- **Solar**
  - Cypress Creek Renewables in Robinson<sup>211</sup>
  - Hecate Energy LLC in Falls<sup>212</sup>
  - Eddy II in Bruceville-Eddy<sup>213</sup>
  - OCI Solar Power in Falls<sup>214</sup>
  - Glory Leasing in McLennan and Bosque<sup>215</sup>

### Strategies to Enhance Resiliency

Economic resilience is the ability to prevent, withstand, and quickly recover from disruptions to the economy. The most common types of disruptions include downturns in economy or in a key industry; the closure or exit of a major employer; and natural or man-made disasters. Creating a resilient economy requires the ability to anticipate risk, evaluate how risk can impact economic assets, and building the capacity respond to disruptions.<sup>216</sup>

Too heavy a reliance on one industry or employer puts a region at risk of economic downturn in the event of the exodus of an industry or employer. This is evident with the exodus of coal, oil and gas from the Heart of Texas region, which left the area with high unemployment and no immediate solution for replacement of jobs and revenue. Economic diversity is necessary to not only provide innovative and new opportunities to the region, but to safeguard against economic downturn.

Innovation is linked with business and economic growth. According to the StatsAmerica Innovation 2.0 Comparison,<sup>217</sup> The Heart of Texas Council of Governments region under indexes in terms of innovation, with an index score of 95.7. Compare this with the Permian Basin Regional Planning Commission, with an index score of 128.8. In 2017, The Midland Development Corporation<sup>218</sup> in Texas stimulated their economy and expanded the diversity of the business landscape by creating the Midland Entrepreneurial Challenge, in partnership with the local University, University of Texas Permian Basin. By investing in their own citizens and encouraging entrepreneurs to open their businesses in Odessa, they were able to award \$600,000 to ten businesses. Those ten businesses have grossed over \$7.4 million

in taxable revenue and created or retained 53 full-time jobs and 12 part-time jobs. Of the participants of this initiative that were not awarded winning funds, 21% went on to start or expand their business by acquiring other capital funding. The Permian Basin region now attracts venture capital, which continues to reap economic benefits throughout the region.

Heart of Texas has an opportunity to partner with Baylor University and other regional institutions, not only to offer workshops and seminars to give business owners the tools they need to build a successful enterprise, but to tap into the wealth of knowledge from students and recent graduates. Additionally, the large amount of STEM degrees awarded through the local colleges and universities already provide a knowledge base ripe for innovation.

Below are some economic resilience strategies based on investment in entrepreneurs and small businesses, which will diversify the economy and bring jobs and revenue to the region.

## Entrepreneurial Pursuits

### Economic<sup>219</sup>

- Invest in entrepreneurs and small businesses, by creating an entrepreneurial challenge, in partnership with Baylor University, to attract recent graduates to remain and invest in the region.
- Attract venture capital through Angel Investors to fund entrepreneurial aspirations.
- Invest and create more Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs).
  - SBDCs enhances economic development by providing small businesses with management and technical assistance. Currently, the Heart of Texas region has three SBDCs, in association with McLennan Community College and Navarro College.
- Create business incubators that can be used by community members<sup>220</sup>
  - Business incubators, as economic tools, have been increasingly common in the last decade and a half for stimulating local development. Incubators provide facilities and services (for example, business planning and legal, accounting, and marketing support) to catalyze small-business growth. In fact, incubated companies have a dramatically higher rate of survival than an average startup does.

### Infrastructure Systems<sup>221</sup>

- Ensure residents have access to high-speed internet connections. Much of business, and most current innovations rely in the internet to function, and currently the Heart of Texas region lags behind access to this resource with an index of 63.7.<sup>222</sup>

### Natural and Cultural Resources<sup>223</sup>

- Invest in Diversity. Attracting a diverse demographic population allows a region to tap into a variety of skills, knowledge, and services that expand economic diversity. Increased creativity, better ideas and better overall productivity are among the commonly cited performance benefits of a diverse workforce. Employees from different backgrounds usually have different perspectives on dealing with problems or confronting creative opportunities, enhancing the quantity and quality of ideas presented.<sup>224</sup>

Two significant disruptions to the Heart of Texas region were the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift from energy sources like coal, oil, and gas, resulting in the loss of an industry and jobs. The following explains specific interventions regarding community planning and capacity building, economic, health and social services, infrastructure systems, and natural and cultural resource factors that can make the Heart of Texas region more economically resilient.

## COVID-19

### Community Planning and Capacity Building<sup>225</sup>

- Enhance access to broadband to ensure that residents can work from home and go to school from home
- Identify the aged, immune compromised, or those with underlying health conditions
- Identify, gather, and communicate resources for help to those affected
- Identify stakeholders and resources they can offer to the community
- Pool resources to provide planning technical assistance, staffing resources and funding
- What funds, supplies, and supplemental resources are available?
- What skillsets can we tap into to mitigate or address disaster? This includes healthcare workers, and job placement services.
- Define local capacity building needs and identify post-disaster resources to fill those needs.
- Create guidance, training, and other materials, and make available to all stakeholders.<sup>226</sup>

### Economic

- Identify individuals impacted financially and offer economic guidance, resources and support, including, but not limited to, where to file for unemployment, temporary employment options, access to food.
- Explore alternative means for businesses to remain open, for instance curbside pick-up and to-go options for food.
- Attract e-commerce distribution and fulfillment facilities. E-commerce has grown since the pandemic began and sees no signs of diminishing, even after the pandemic is over. Capitalize on this moment and advertise the central location of Heart of Texas as a selling factor.

### Health and Social Services<sup>227</sup>

- Identify cohort in need of health services, and determine capacity for providing care and services.
- Partner with regional services to supplement deficiencies.
- Develop a marketing and communication plan to inform residents how to stay safe and avoid contracting the virus, enforce these policies.

### Housing<sup>228</sup>

- Ensure those who are at risk of eviction due to unemployment or sustained illness have resources to avoid or stave off losing their home.
- Build close knit communities who are able to support those impacted by COVID, including providing grocery delivery for those in quarantine.

### Infrastructure Systems<sup>229</sup>

- Create a digital contact tracing system to notify residents of potential exposure.

## Energy Sector

### Community Planning and Capacity Building<sup>230</sup>

- Identify those who would be impacted by the exodus of an industry.
- Identify ways to combat the exit of an industry or comparable substitutions to replace those industries.
- Involve all stakeholders, from government organizations to private sector in recovery planning.
- Ensure that the prominent industries attracted to the region are resilient and adaptable sectors, not subject to extinction.
- Know what incentives a community can feasibly offer to replace the loss of jobs.
- Pool resources to provide planning technical assistance, staffing resources and funding.
  - What funds are available?
  - What skillsets can we tap into to mitigate the damage of significant job loss?
- Define local capacity building needs and identify post-disaster resources to fill those needs.
- Create guidance, training, and other materials, and make available to all stakeholders.

### Economic<sup>231</sup>

- Identify individuals impacted financially and offer economic guidance, resources and support, including, but not limited to, where to file for unemployment, temporary employment options, access to food.
- Create partnerships to skill up or cross train the labor force to meet future workforce needs for those impacted by job loss.
- Provide financial resources to aid in securing grants, loans, or other financial help.
- Provide financial incentives to attract businesses to the region, and recruit those businesses.

### Health and Social Services<sup>232</sup>

- Identify impacted cohort and disseminate guidance, resources and support, including, but not limited to, access to food and other supplemental help, access to healthcare.

### Housing<sup>233</sup>

- Ensure those who are at risk of eviction due to unemployment have resources to avoid or stave off losing their home.
- Create or rehabilitate housing to attract new workers to the new jobs.

### Infrastructure Systems<sup>234</sup>

- Ensure that the region has the infrastructure necessary to attract, accommodate, and retain new energy sources, for instance, substations should be kept in good working order.
- Ensure taxes and regulations aren't prohibitory for companies to enter the region.
- Identify undeveloped land that currently has access to utilities needed for manufacturing, production, or distribution facilities.
- Invest in initiatives to enhance freight mobility in the region.
- Invest in public transportation so workers can access their new jobs without reliance on a car.

### Natural and Cultural Resources<sup>235</sup>

- Ensure that new energy farms don't deplete natural and resources.

### Evaluation Framework

This CEDS report utilized government data from various sources including U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Energy, StatsAmerica, and the Internal Revenue Service, as well as local data sources including Texas Demographic Center, Texas Department of State Health Services, Texas Workforce Commission, and Texas Labor Market Information. Additional information was retrieved from various news sources and local Economic Development websites, including Heart of Texas Economic Development District, Fairfield Texas Economic Development the Greater Waco Chamber. The report used the most up-to-date data available, and to the best ability, ensured that parameters of different metrics coincided to ensure the best possible comparisons.

Data that described the current state of the Heart of Texas region were chosen focusing on demographic and socioeconomic data, population, age, race/ethnicity, sex, and special groups, workforce, employment and unemployment, industries, environmental, geographic, climatic, and cultural resources, infrastructure assets and other factors affecting economic performance, including housing metrics and educational attainment. The goal is to compare the metrics listed above that describe the current state of the Heart of Texas region, with metrics in 2025, to determine the success of the 2020-2025 CEDS.

### Performance Measures Include:

- Number of jobs created or retained in the region
- Population changes
- Attraction of a younger workforce
- Lower unemployment rates and higher labor force participation
- Increased levels of educational attainment
- Introduction of new, sustainable industries
- Environmental impact
- Infrastructure investments
- Amount of private investment in the region
- Number of business formations and expansions in the region
- Regional median income change
- Number of people receiving job training in the region
- Business starts