Memorandum:

Date: August 11, 2014

To: Roger Millar, Elizabeth Schilling – Smart Growth America

From: Margie Jacobs, City of Port Isabel

Subject: City of Port Isabel, 12-Month Progress Report

The City of Port Isabel is pleased to present their 12-Month Progress Report for the Smart Growth Implementation 101 Workshop which took place on May 21 and 22, 2013. Continuing on from the first six months, progress continues to be made in the renovation and redevelopment of the Garcia Street and the South Shore Drive Districts of the city.

- In April, the Marketing Director created a documented marketing plan for the city. This will be used for promotion of the area when meeting new business prospects, both here and at other marketing opportunities.

- A contingency from Port Isabel went to Austin in May. While there, the representatives met with several State agencies, and also the Texas Downtown Association. We learned about various ways to fund new projects and how to utilize State assistance.

- As a result of these meetings, the Governor’s Office of Economic Development and Tourism is planning a Tourism Assessment in October, and will also be bringing representatives from the Texas Department of Transportation, the Texas Historic Commission, and other related State partners along to assist in this process.

- A Community & Downtown Assessment Strategy Meeting was held on July 1 for the Downtown Merchants and members of the Chamber of Commerce. This was scheduled to inform them of this assessment, and was also in advance of another assessment that the contingency arranged. Prior to this meeting the Marketing Director and the EDC Administrator compiled a list of all the existing companies in the Downtown area. They then “Liked” each one that had its own Facebook page so that these companies would be linked to the EDC Facebook page.
Three representatives from the Texas Downtown Association (TDA) came to Port Isabel on July 28, met with the merchants in the morning, did an assessment of Port Isabel’s Downtown area which includes Garcia Street up to Hickman Street, and then met again with the merchants to talk about their findings. Connectivity of the North and South sides of State Route 100 is still an issue that was focused on and the City is still working to improve. As a result, the City has decided to submit a grant request to the TDA Anise Read Fund for money to use to make the crosswalks safer by adding crosswalk warning lights.

Other issues such as adding shade trees over the walkway on the median and getting businesses to do away with the many flags now out in front of them were discussed at the follow-up meeting and are being addressed. The City is currently waiting for a detailed written report from the TDA.

Also when in Austin, we spoke with a representative from the Texas Commission on the Arts concerning our application for a Cultural District Designation. He shared several other applications with us, and we determined that ours was not complete enough. We decided not to submit an application until the January, 2015 grant cycle.

On July 26 the Port Isabel Event and Cultural Center held its Grand Opening. An opening ceremony, display of caterers and decorators, food samplings, and a dance (open to the public free of charge) took place. The facility is now drawing a wide variety of events and many interested parties are making inquiries about its use. Also, a large parking area was created which can not only be used for the Event Center, but also for those visiting Lighthouse Square, and other parts of the Downtown area.

Also in July, the City Manager, EDC Administrator, and EDC Administrative Assistant met with the President and the Vice President of Instruction of a nearby college. It was determined that there is major interest in creating a satellite campus for a two-year program in Hospitality Management and Restaurant Management.

Building a hotel across from the Event Center was discussed, and it was decided that this could be a joint effort between the college, the City, and possibly a hotel chain, with the college using the hotel as a “classroom” for its students in the college’s Technical Education field of study, i.e. they could actually build some or all of the hotel. As the college currently has other issues at the forefront, both of these projects are going to be revisited in 2015, at which time the college can be named.

In August, as a result of the contingency’s meeting with the Texas Historic Commission, the City sent in an application to become a Certified Local Government. This will assist
the City to develop and maintain a successful preservation program and to obtain grant funds for this purpose.

- The City has contracted with an outside consulting firm, Reyna and Associates. They are helping with various City projects, and one of the gentlemen is now meeting with potential loan applicants for EDC loans on the first and third Tuesdays of each month.

- Through membership in a Community Wide Campaign initiative started by the University of Texas Brownsville, the city is receiving funds which are to be used to build new sidewalks on Highway 100 where there are none. This will help connect the Downtown area to a residential area to the west.

- The City is still in talks with Mrs. Yao, owner of the Lotus Café, to convince her to add a branch in Port Isabel. We are also still in talks with Chick-fil-A about adding a branch.

- During the past six months a landscaping company and nursery moved away from Garcia Street. The building was then rented by an Event Planner, however, which will be advantageous as it is one block from the Event Center.

- After reviewing zoning maps it was learned that all of Hickman Street is zoned Commercial. Therefore, the EDC is going to encourage owners to consider repurposing their properties with small shops, restaurants, bed and breakfast homes, and other types of businesses.

As you can see, the City staff have been extremely busy, and working hard to follow Smart Growth principles. We truly appreciate being pointed in the right direction by the SGA representatives that took their time to assist us.
ADDENDUM

There are numerous projects ongoing in other parts of the City that relate to Smart Growth. Here is a synopsis:

• Arturo Galvan Coastal Park – Work on the Living Shoreline has gone much slower than hoped for, but a request for bids is now out to the public.

• The City received the grant for Recreational Trails which was submitted in January. This will build a Hike and Bike trail which will connect Port Isabel with Laguna Heights. A new housing development is being built in this same area, so more people will be able to take advantage of it.

• In May, the Austin contingency went there in order to receive a designation for the Port Isabel Yacht Club Hotel as one of twelve Most Endangered Places in Texas. Our submission was the only one chosen in the Rio Grande Valley, even though several were submitted. (The building is located down the street from the city’s public library, within walking distance of the Lighthouse Square.)

  The designation helped the City to obtain a U.S. EDA grant for $1.2 million. We will be combining this with a Texas Leverage Fund Loan and other grants to purchase, renovate, and repurpose the building as a Culinary Arts Institute and Restaurant, a business incubator, a small hotel for visiting chefs, and a small museum which will showcase the history of the Yacht Club.

• Talks with a representative of the University of Texas Brownsville are continuing about the City about finding land to build a World-Class Marine Biology Campus. A site next to Arturo Galvan Park is now being looked at.

• It was announced last week that Elon Musk is bringing his SpaceX Company to Brownsville. He plans to create at least 300 new jobs. Port Isabel plans to help his employees find our community as a great place to live.