



COMPETITIVE ASSESSMENT



Falls Future 2.0
Wichita Falls, TX | March, 2022



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INTRODUCTION

Wichita Falls' leaders took bold action to embrace a strategic approach to community and economic development with the 2018 plan "Falls Future." In recent years, Wichita Falls has made tremendous progress activating this strategy. While this early progress has been impressive, stakeholders in Wichita Falls understand their work is only just beginning. Successful communities never stop planning. Wins that seem sudden or progress that feels inevitable are often the product of thoughtful planning, implementation, and evaluation carried out over many years.

Wichita Falls must maintain the momentum of the first Falls Future plan but also update this 1.0 strategy with an even more ambitious agenda that can inspire the community, attract new investment, and take the community to the next level of success. Falls Future 2.0 will be a bold yet attainable five-year community and economic development strategy driven by data and community feedback.

This Competitive Assessment represents an important early step in the strategic planning process. It is the culmination of extensive quantitative research and qualitative feedback from local stakeholders collected through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and an online survey (available in both English and Spanish) that received 3,261 responses. Key findings from research and input are incorporated into seven "chapters" that discuss Wichita Falls' competitive position, opportunities, and challenges.

Many of the themes in this Assessment will be familiar to Wichita Falls residents, particularly those who are familiar with the foundational research document from the first Falls Future process: the 2017 Regional Assessment. This Assessment builds on these earlier findings, providing insights into the latest data, highlighting major developments in recent years, and offering fresh perspectives from individuals who live and work in Wichita Falls.

ABOUT BROAD RIPPLE STRATEGIES

Broad Ripple Strategies has been selected as Wichita Falls' partner to develop Falls Future 2.0. BRS represents nearly 30 years of experience crafting community, workforce, and economic development strategies that build consensus, drive investment, and get results. Our team has helped more than 60 clients develop 90+ strategies for community and economic development, talent and workforce sustainability, and quality of place. Our team partnered with Wichita Falls on the development of the first Falls Future strategy and has previous experience in Arlington, Austin, Pearland, San Marcos, and Waco in Texas.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Falls Future 2.0 will be developed through a four-phase process that began in January 2022 and will conclude in June 2022. It is led by a dynamic Steering Committee of key community leaders. This group is tasked with sharing their perspectives and insights, reviewing research and input findings, considering the guidance the BRS team provides, and making key decisions about the priorities and strategies that will define the new strategy. The 24 leaders selected for the Steering Committee reflect the diverse opinions, perspectives, and backgrounds of Wichita Falls and its residents.

Phase 1: Stakeholder Engagement

Input from the people who live and work in a community is an essential component of a strategic planning process. The BRS team worked with the Wichita Falls Chamber to develop a robust engagement process consisting of interviews, focus groups, and an online survey (available in both English and Spanish) that garnered 3,261 responses.

Phase 2: Competitive Assessment and Implementation Evaluation

This phase provides key insights into Wichita Falls' competitive position and helps the Steering Committee make informed decisions on the key issues and opportunities that will shape Falls Future 2.0. The Competitive Assessment synthesizes existing research, quantitative data, and qualitative input to evaluate Wichita Falls as a place to live, work, and do business. It is complemented by a concise Implementation Evaluation that identifies key "lessons learned" from the activation of the first strategy.

Phase 3: Falls Future 2.0

This phase will result in the development of a next-level strategy for Wichita Falls that blends ongoing initiatives that warrant continuation with new priority programs and investment. Falls Future 2.0 will establish strategic priorities for the next five years for partners in Wichita Falls. Creation of the strategy occurs in three phases: a high-level outline or framework of goals and objectives; a draft strategy; and final plan. Each phase will incorporate review and comment from the Steering Committee, whose work will be completed with the final approval of Falls Future 2.0

Phase 4: Implementation Guidelines

While Falls Future 2.0 will determine "what" Wichita Falls will do strategically for the next five years, the Implementation Guidelines will prescribe "how" that will be accomplished. It will analyze and establish implementation costs and resources, lead and support entities for priority strategies, launch dates and project phasing, and performance measures to track progress toward goal attainment. The Guidelines will be developed in consultation with the Wichita Falls Chamber and other partners that will play a direct role in activating the strategy.

METHODOLOGY

Building on existing research and qualitative input, BRS evaluated a wide range of economic, socioeconomic, demographic, and quality of life indicators from various public and proprietary sources that are cited throughout the Assessment. The Wichita Falls Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) – consisting of Archer, Clay, and Wichita counties – was used as the primary research geography.

To provide necessary context to the trends and issues discussed, Wichita Falls' performance was analyzed relative to state and national trends, as well as three communities in Texas with which it competes for jobs and talent. These comparison counties were selected in consultation with Wichita Falls Chamber staff. They are the Abilene, Amarillo, and San Angelo MSAs. Collectively, these regions, Texas, and the United States are referred to in the report as the “comparison geographies” or the “comparison communities.” Additionally, all uses of “Wichita Falls” or the names of the other regions reference the MSA unless otherwise noted.

MSAs are defined by the Office of Management and Budget based on commuting characteristics. In the past 10 years, the OMB revised the definition of two comparison MSAs. Oldham County was added to the Amarillo MSA in September 2013, while Sterling County was added to the San Angelo MSA in September 2018. In many cases, changes to MSA boundaries over time can present challenges when evaluating data trends over time. In this instance, however, the small population of Oldham and Sterling counties (fewer than 1,800 residents each as of the 2020 Census) presents both a technical limitation and a mitigating factor.

One-year estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS) are not available for geographies with fewer than 65,000 residents. Accordingly, it is not possible to aggregate historical trends for some data indicators. Additionally, Sterling County comprises only about 1.1 percent of the San Angelo MSA's population, with Oldham constituting an even smaller share of the Amarillo MSA. As such, the addition of these counties will not have a substantial impact on time series data. Given these factors, BRS has utilized the following approach for presenting historical data for the Amarillo and San Angelo MSAs:

- Population counts from the Decennial Census and Census Population Estimates programs have been aggregated from county data, meaning the population trends over time conform to the present-day MSA boundaries.
- Data from the ACS utilizes the MSA definitions at the time of the survey, meaning ACS data from 2016 uses the definition of San Angelo that does not include Sterling County.
- Historical and time series data for all other data indicators has not been modified by BRS. Individual data providers may have differing methodologies for revising historical data after the fact to conform to updated boundaries, but given the small size of the counties in question, any differences will likely have a minimal impact on trend analysis.

1. Signs of Stability Amid Population Decline

Population growth – or lack thereof – was among the most consistent themes to emerge from the stakeholder engagement process. Wichita Falls’ population has been relatively flat for decades, and these trends were a key theme during the first Falls Future process. Discussions of the community’s population became more prominent in recent months, however, as the U.S. Census Bureau began releasing results from the 2020 Census.

As shown in Figure 1, the official population of the Wichita Falls MSA declined by nearly 3,200 residents between 2010 and 2020. This works out to a decline of roughly 2.1 percent during a decade in which all other comparison geographies experienced population growth of at least 6.7 percent.

FIGURE 1: POPULATION CHANGE, 2000 TO 2020

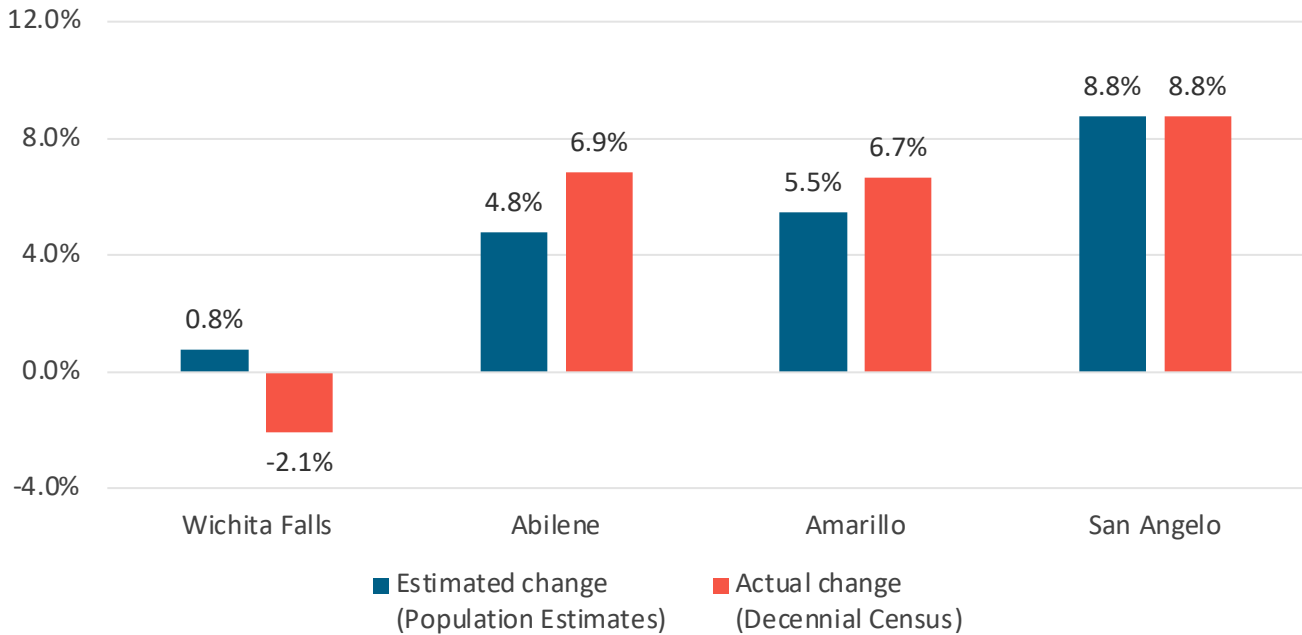
Geography	2000	2010	2020	% Change	
				2010-20	2000-20
Wichita Falls	151,524	151,306	148,128	-2.1%	-2.2%
Abilene	160,245	165,252	176,579	6.9%	10.2%
Amarillo	228,707	251,933	268,691	6.7%	17.5%
San Angelo	107,174	112,966	122,888	8.8%	14.7%
Texas	20,851,820	25,145,561	29,145,505	15.9%	39.8%
United States	281,421,906	308,745,538	331,449,281	7.4%	17.8%

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DECENNIAL CENSUS; BRS

Some input participants said they were surprised by these results, and with good reason. In addition to official counts that occur every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau’s Population Estimates program produces annual population estimates for the nation, states, counties, cities, and towns. These estimates are derived from a relatively complex methodology that inputs a variety of administrative records that can help determine the number of births and deaths that occur in a community each year and estimate the net migration from community to community.

As shown in the preceding figure, Wichita Falls had a population of 151,306 as of the 2010 Census. The Population Estimates program estimated the region’s population at 152,485. This would have worked out to a gain of nearly 1,200 residents or a 0.8 percentage increase relative to 2010. But the 2020 Census established Wichita Falls’ population at 148,128. Compared to the 2010 Census, this represents a *decrease* of nearly 3,200 residents or a 2.1 percent decline. The relationship between estimated and actual growth rates for each of the comparison metros is shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: ESTIMATED POPULATION CHANGE COMPARED TO ACTUAL POPULATION CHANGE. 2010 TO 2020



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DECENNIAL CENSUS AND POPULATION ESTIMATES; BRS

Note: The population estimates shown above are from the Vintage 2020 Population Estimates for the United States and States. The Vintage 2020 estimates are based on the 2010 Census and were created without incorporation or consideration of the 2020 Census results. The estimates are used primarily for comparisons with the 2020 Census to evaluate the accuracy of the estimates.

Examining why Wichita Falls’ population count fell below the expectations of the Population Estimates program is beyond the scope of this Assessment. The question is also largely academic: the 2020 Census count represents the community’s official population total that will be utilized by various levels of government, businesses, economic developers, and others.

In the context of evaluating Wichita Falls’ economic competitiveness, however, it is useful to examine whether there is additional evidence of ongoing population decline in the community or if other factors may help explain a loss of population between 2010 and 2020. Some input participants said they believed that Wichita Falls may have lost population in the 2010s but that this decline was largely “baked in” by events that occurred in the first half of the decade, namely a reduction of population at Sheppard Air Force base and the severe drought that the community experienced between 2010 and 2014.¹

¹ The decision to move the 882nd Training Group out of SAFB was made in the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, but according to stakeholders in Wichita Falls, the actual movement of military personnel and families did not commence until after 2010.

Several data indicators lend support to this theory. One example is Wichita Falls' labor force, which consists of civilians who reside in the MSA and are working or actively looking for work. Between February 2010 and 2015, the community's labor force contracted by 6.2 percent as more than 4,300 individuals left the workforce for one reason or another.

But between February 2015 and 2020 (the last month before the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic), the local workforce grew by 1.0 percent. The size of Wichita Falls' economy follows a similar pattern. Throughout the early 2010s, the total number of jobs based in the community declined steadily, reaching a nadir in the fourth quarter of 2016 (based on a four-quarter rolling average). Between the fourth quarter of 2016 and the fourth quarter of 2019, however, the region added nearly 1,700 jobs.

Enrollment in the region's public schools also stabilized after a decline early in the 2010s. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the enrollment in public school districts in the Wichita Falls MSA decreased by 2.0 percent between the 2011-12 school year (the first for which data is available) and the 2015-16 school year. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, however, enrollment increased by 0.3 percent.

Wichita Falls still faces multiple threats to its near- and long-term prospects for success that will be discussed throughout this Assessment. Addressing these challenges will require a bold strategic approach and a commitment to positive change. But the trends in this opening chapter are notable given one of the central findings to emerge from the 2017 Regional Assessment – that Wichita Falls was exhibiting early signs of decline.

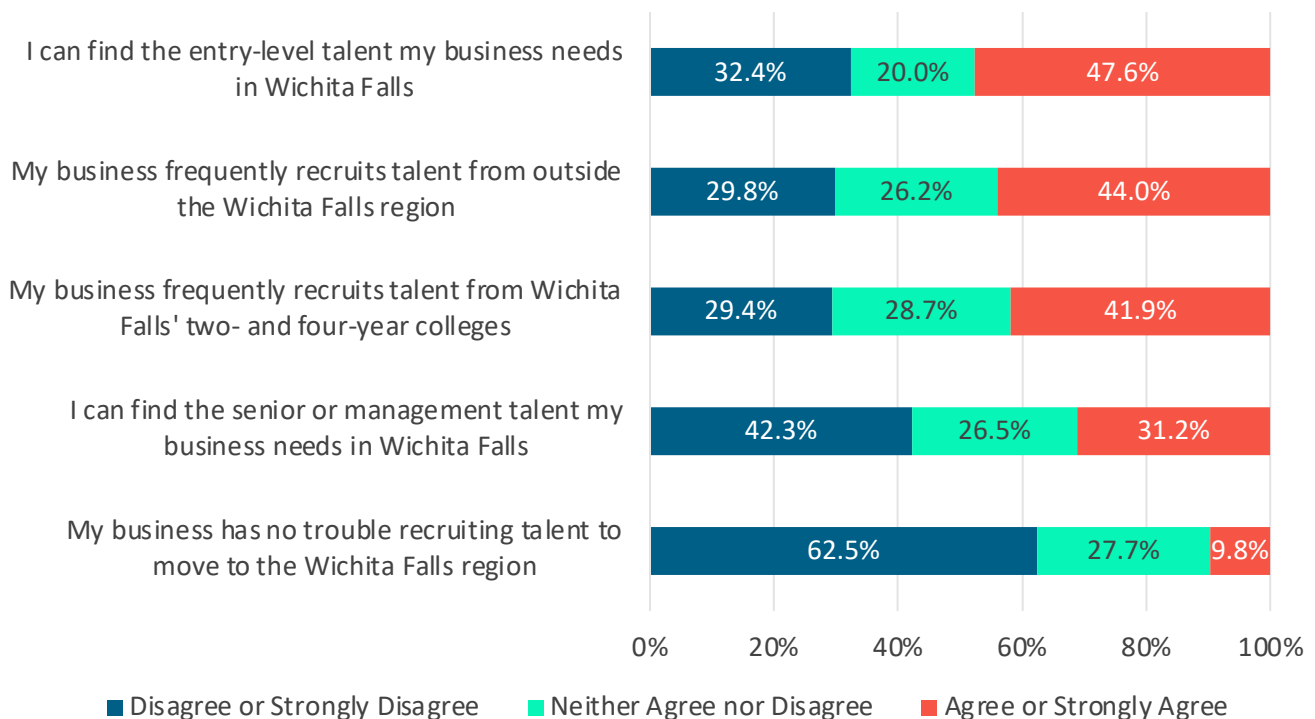
Growth – however modest – in a community's resident workforce, employment base, and PK-12 schools is typically not associated with ongoing population decline. While it is not possible to say definitively given the available evidence, it stands to reason that Wichita Falls experienced relative stability in the second half of the 2010s following disruptive events earlier in the decade.

2. Talent Remains a Top Competitive Priority

As discussed in the 2017 Regional Assessment, population change is not by itself a definitive measure of success. Many communities with low or even negative population growth are economically prosperous while some fast-growing places face serious troubles. But low or net negative population growth does place inherent limits on the size of a community's workforce. **Simply put, talent is the most important factor influencing a community's success and prosperity, and low-growth regions may have a difficult time matching high-growth counterparts in terms of workforce depth.** Issues related to talent and workforce have also taken on added importance in recent times, as the Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented disruptions to lives and economies around the world.

During the input process, Wichita Falls' employers – from executives of major companies to small business owners – identified workforce as the business community's top challenge. **Said one executive of a major employer, "My top three issues are workforce, workforce, and workforce."** Figure 3 displays responses to questions about Wichita Falls' workforce that were asked of the approximately 750 online survey respondents who said they were an executive, vice president, manager, or entrepreneur.

FIGURE 3: "PLEASE EVALUATE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT WICHITA FALLS' WORKFORCE"



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

While a near-majority of respondents said their business can find needed entry-level talent, almost a third disagreed with this statement. Additionally, a plurality of respondents indicated that their business has trouble finding executive and management-level talent. Input participants contacted through interviews and focus groups said finding “mid-level” talent is a challenge.

One employer said, “Getting certified employees here is a challenge. There are lots of people who can do day-to-day jobs but not as many people with high-level skillsets.” A representative from a manufacturing firm said, “We don’t have any trouble finding engineers. MSU is a great resource. It’s the step down from that: automation technicians, maintenance mechanics, maintenance electricians.”

Local employers also said that employee retention has been a challenge – both before and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, which some employers said has brought about “record high” turnover. Said one representative from a manufacturing firm, “(My colleague) said you need to hire 10 people and there’s no way you’re going to get them. Well, we did end up getting them but then we had another 10 people quit.”

Multiple employers said they have significantly improved wages and employee benefits but that challenges with retention persist. **This input from local employers points to a tight labor market, and several data indicators lend support to this idea.** On the eve of the pandemic, Wichita Falls’ unemployment rate was near historic lows according to data from JobsEQ and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In December 2019, the non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for the region stood at 2.8 percent, the third-lowest monthly total since 1990.

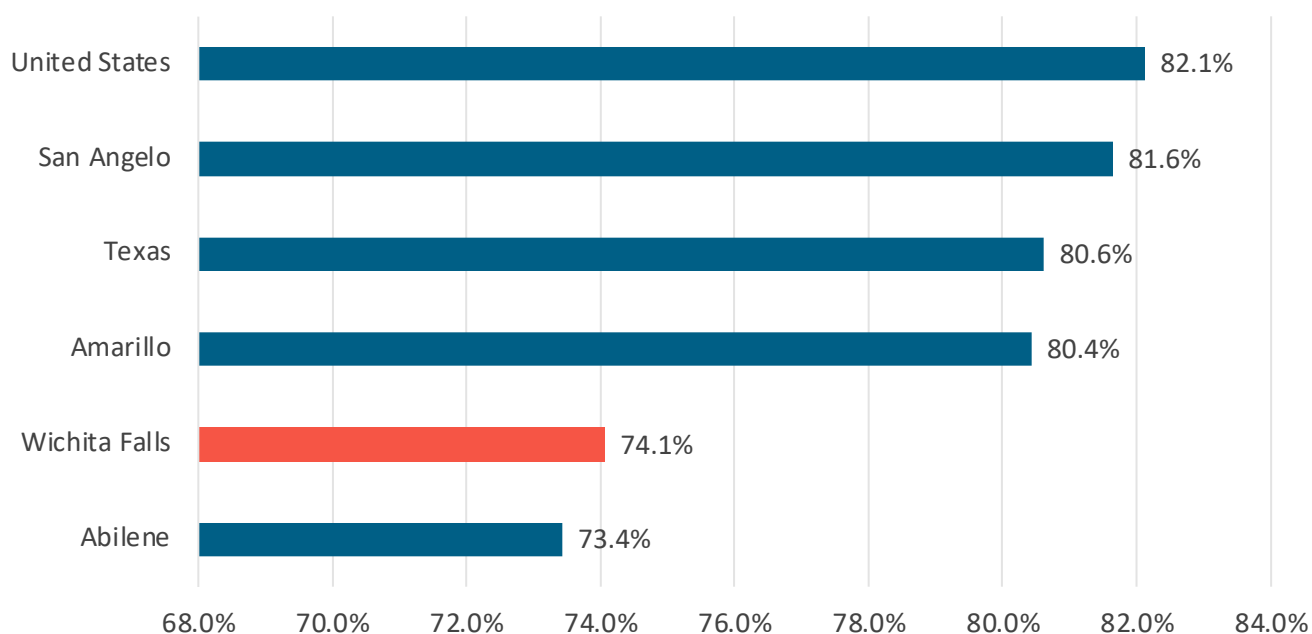
Unemployment surged during the pandemic, peaking at 10.6 percent in April 2020, but has since fallen dramatically. The region’s preliminary unemployment rate for December 2021 was 3.8 percent. This decline in unemployment cannot be attributed to fewer people engaged in the workforce. Wichita Falls’ civilian labor force in December 2021 was 99.8 percent the size of the labor force in December 2019.

That said, Wichita Falls’ labor force participation was relatively weak prior to the pandemic. As previously discussed, a labor force consists of civilians who are working or actively looking for work. Individuals who are not working and not looking for work for whatever reason are considered to be out of the labor force. A community’s prime-age labor force participation rate (LFPR) provides further insights into the proportion of a community’s residents aged 25 to 54 who are engaged in the labor force.

According to JobsEQ, Wichita Falls’ prime-age LFPR was 74.1 percent, the second-lowest figure among comparison geographies (Abilene, 73.4 percent) and a full 8.0 percentage points below the national average of 82.1 percent. If Wichita Falls’ prime-age LFPR was equivalent to the national average, there would have been nearly 4,500 additional workers in the community’s labor force in 2019.²

² It is possible that Wichita Falls’ large active-duty military population applies downward pressure on the region’s prime-age LFPR. But San Angelo, a relatively small region with a large military presence, had a prime-age LFPR of 81.6 percent in 2019, 7.5 percentage points higher than Wichita Falls.

FIGURE 4: PRIME-AGE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE (AGES 25 TO 54), 2019

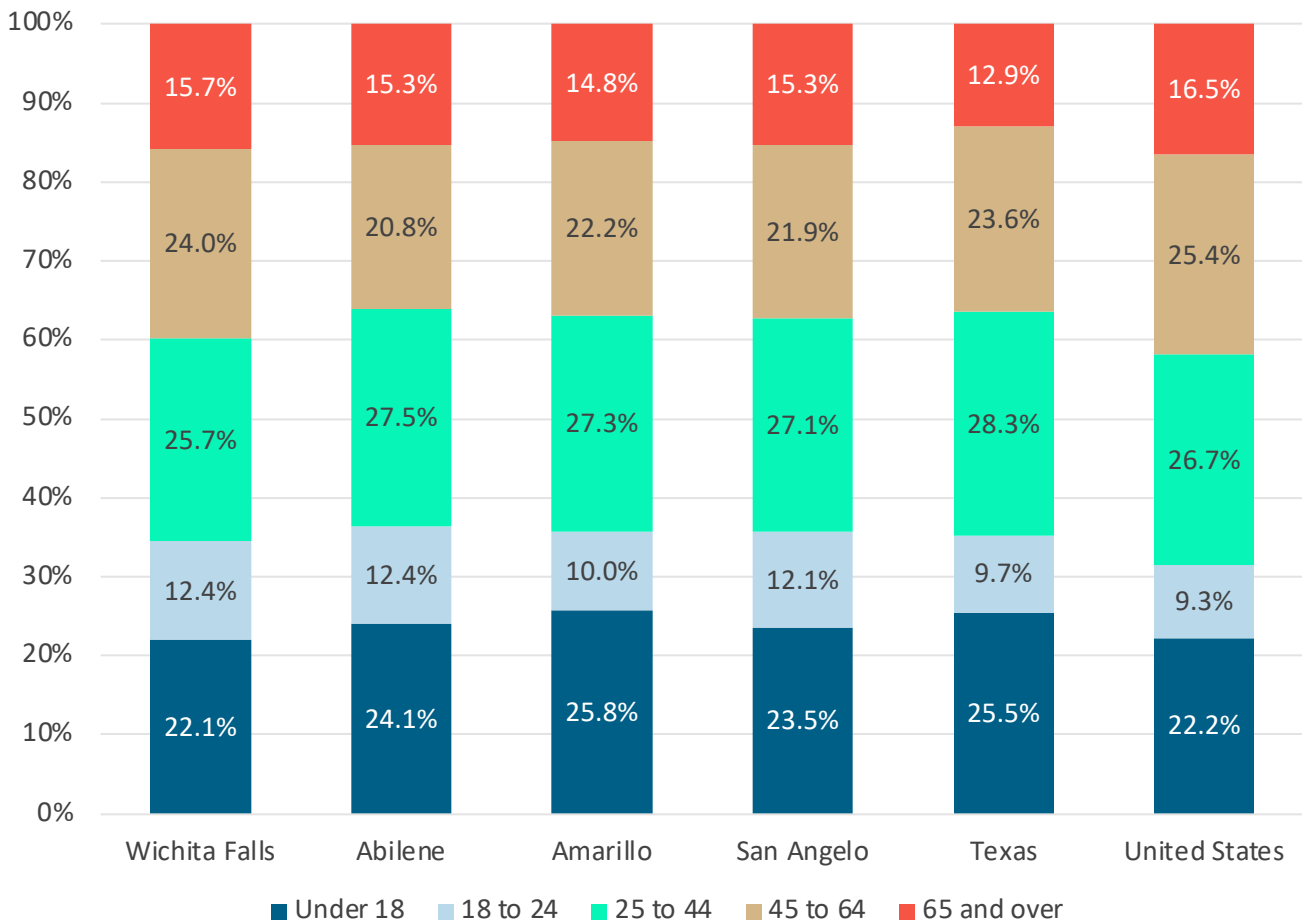


SOURCE: JOBSEQ; BRS

Another potential challenge to Wichita Falls' labor force is "leakage." The U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics (LEHD) program provides estimates on where people live and work, which can provide insights into commuting dynamics among other things. According to 2019 estimates from LEHD, there were 4,600 more employed people living in the Wichita Falls MSA than there were jobs in the region. That is, there was a net outflow of 4,600 individuals who live in the Wichita Falls region but work elsewhere. This number has also been increasing; in 2010, the net outflow from the Wichita Falls region was approximately 1,900. While not conclusive evidence, the LEHD data supports anecdotes shared by many input participants of people who live in Wichita Falls but are employed elsewhere, typically somewhere in the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

Looking ahead, Wichita Falls could face additional challenges from impending retirements. Overall, Wichita Falls' age dynamics are relatively favorable. As shown in Figure 5, the proportion of the local population between the ages of 25 and 44 is 1.7 percentage points larger than the proportion between the ages of 45 and 64. This means that, in theory, there should be more workers in the younger cohort to replace those who will reach retirement age over the course of the next two decades. Additionally, the proportion of individuals aged 25 to 44 increased by 0.6 percentage points between 2014 and 2019 compared to a national shift of just 0.4 percentage points.

FIGURE 5: AGE DYNAMICS, 2019



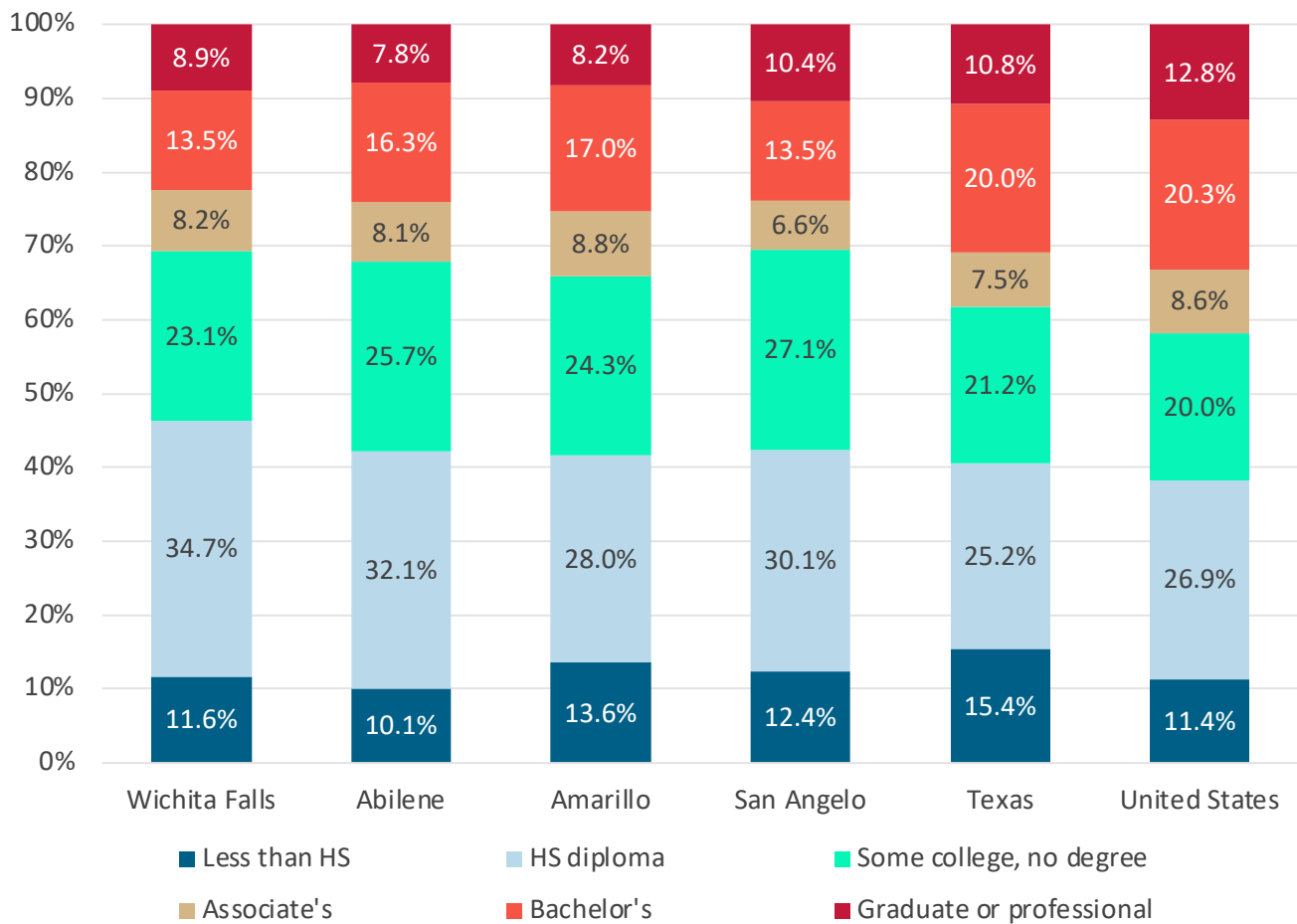
SOURCE: ACS 1-YEAR ESTIMATES; BRS

But according to JobsEQ, 24.6 percent of the workers who live in the Wichita Falls region are aged 55 or over. This is the highest percentage among all comparison geographies by nearly two percentage points and 4.5 percentage points higher than the Texas average. It is also consistent with feedback from local employers, who said retirements pose a near-term threat, especially in certain critical occupations. Said one manufacturing representative of their company’s aging workforce, “My entire manufacturing maintenance staff could leave at any point. I don’t know where I’m going to get replacements” if that happens.

In addition to pressures on Wichita Falls’ workforce from a numeric perspective, the community’s adult educational attainment also presents a major challenge. Businesses across all sectors of the economy consider educational attainment rates among their top site selection factors, even in traditionally “blue collar” fields such as manufacturing. Additionally, there is a strong link between educational attainment and earning potential, along with a host of other individual and population-level measures of well-being.

As shown in Figure 6, 22.4 percent of adults in Wichita Falls had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, lowest among comparison geographies and 10.8 percentage points behind the national average. Wichita Falls fared slightly better relative to most comparison geographies when taking associate’s degrees into account, but more than 46 percent of the region’s residents aged 25 and over have never attended college, the highest among all comparisons.

FIGURE 6: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR AGES 25+, 2019



SOURCE: ACS 1-YEAR ESTIMATES; BRS

Wichita Falls’ educational attainment rates improved slightly between 2015 and 2019, with the proportion of individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher growing by 0.6 percentage points. But bachelor’s degree attainment grew even faster in the United States and Texas during this time period, and there is evidence to suggest that this gap could continue to grow.

Census estimates for the five-year period between 2015 and 2019 show that bachelor’s degree attainment for residents aged 25 to 44 is far higher in the United States and Texas than it is in any of the comparison

metros. Additionally, in-migrants to Texas as a whole are far more educated on average than in-migrants to Abilene, Amarillo, and Wichita Falls.

These figures are consistent with a trend that has unfolded in recent decades of highly educated younger residents concentrating in large “talent magnet” regions such as Austin and Dallas-Fort Worth that can offer plentiful economic opportunities and quality of life amenities. Communities such as Wichita Falls and the comparison metros should not be expected to compete with the nation’s top regions for talent. But data and input clearly indicate that Wichita Falls must seek to improve both the size and skill/education levels of its workforce in order to better compete in the coming years.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WICHITA FALLS CHAMBER

3. Opportunities to Build a Stronger Workforce

There are two ways that a community can grow a stronger workforce: attracting talented individuals from other places and producing “homegrown” talent. The chapter focuses on trends and opportunities related to these two pathways.

For a region with slow or net negative population growth such as Wichita Falls, supporting a strong homegrown “talent pipeline” is particularly important. A talent pipeline represents the continuum of a community’s education and training systems. This includes everything from early childhood programs and PK-12 schools to higher education and workforce development services.

Examining the totality of the local talent pipeline is beyond the scope of this Assessment, but it is useful to focus on the points at which the talent pipeline feeds into the region’s workforce and economy. One of these is at high school graduation. Graduation rates at the Wichita Falls Independent School District (WFISD) – by far the largest public PK-12 district in the region – are very strong. As shown in Figure 7, the four-year federal graduation rate for WFISD hovered in the high 90s for the classes of 2018, 2019, and 2020, well above the statewide average in each instance.

FIGURE 7: GRADUATION RATES, COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS, AND COLLEGE MATRICULATION, 2018 TO 2020

Metric	WFISD	Texas	Difference
4-year federal graduation rate, 2020	97.0%	90.3%	6.7%
% of graduates college, career, or military ready, 2019	60.1%	72.9%	-12.8%
% of enrolled in Texas Institution of Higher Education, 2019	44.2%	52.6%	-8.4%

SOURCE: TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY; BRS

As shown in the preceding table, however, the proportion of WFISD graduates considered by TEA to be “College, Career, or Military Ready” fell far below the statewide average. Additionally, just 44.2 percent of graduates from the WFISD class of 2019 enrolled in a public two- or four-year college in Texas for the school year following graduation, compared to a statewide average of 52.6 percent. The gap was even wider for economically disadvantaged students going on to college: 32.6 percent in the WFISD class of 2019 compared to 46.1 percent statewide. “Economically disadvantaged” students are those who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or other public assistance; students are eligible to receive reduced price lunches when their household income is 185 percent of the federal poverty level or lower.

The proportion of economically disadvantaged students in WFISD reached at least a 10-year low in 2020-2021 following three consecutive years of decline.³ In 2020-21, 59.8 percent of WFISD students were from economically disadvantaged households, roughly equivalent to the state average of 60.2 percent. That said, input participants familiar with trends in WFISD said that economically disadvantaged enrollment has increased at many schools around the district, including some that have not historically served large numbers of students in this demographic.⁴ Overall, these findings are consistent with themes from the 2017 Regional Assessment and suggest that Wichita Falls still has significant work to do in terms of helping students prepare for and connect to college and career opportunities.

Wichita Falls has made significant progress with another key issue impacting WFISD, however: the quality of its high school facilities. As stated in the 2017 Regional Assessment, “the district’s facilities – especially its high schools – are outdated and potentially constitute a significant competitive disadvantage for the community.” One of the seven catalysts of the first Falls Future plan was “Modern School Facilities,” which focused on building support for and raising the necessary revenue to construct new high schools in WFISD. In November 2020, voters approved a bond referendum that will fund the replacement of WFISD’s three aging high schools with two new high school facilities. The new facilities are expected to open in 2024 and will complement the WFISD Career Education Center (CEC), which was completed in 2017.

Input participants expressed optimism that the new high schools will be a significant asset for WFISD’s students. Stakeholders also said they expected the facilities to have a positive impact on talent attraction, talent retention and economic development. Said one individual, “Once they’re open and we’re recruiting companies it’s going to pay a lot of dividends.” Input participants noted that there is still some lingering tension in the community surrounding the naming and athletics identities of the two new high schools; these stakeholders said that while they understood the attachment to traditions, these disagreements must not be allowed to dampen the momentum the community will enjoy from the new facilities coming online.

Another key aspect of the talent pipeline with respect to economic development is postsecondary education. Wichita Falls is served by two strong public higher education institutions: Midwestern State University (MSU) and Vernon College. In the 2019-20 academic year, these institutions had a combined enrollment of nearly 8,900 students. The community is also home to two branch campuses of Wayland Baptist University, which serves SAFB personnel and others. (As will be discussed later in the Assessment, there is an opportunity to create more of a “college town feel” in Wichita Falls given this student population.)

And as shown in Figure 8 on the following page, these institutions awarded 2,071 certificates and degrees – a major potential strength for Wichita Falls. Input participants also expressed excitement about another significant development in recent years: the incorporation of MSU into the Texas Tech University System

³ Data are not available prior to the 2011-2012 school year.

⁴ The proportion of economically disadvantaged students in WFISD declined sharply between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, from 64.2 percent to 59.8 percent. It is possible that this drop was influenced by pandemic-related enrollment dynamics and/or federal fiscal stimulus to families with children, though it is notable that a similar decline was not seen throughout Texas.

that was formalized in late 2021. In addition to MSU, the TTU System consists of four universities (including the TTU flagship in Lubbock and Angelo State University in San Angelo) with 57,000 students and an endowment of more than \$1.3 billion.⁵ Stakeholders said that while the exact opportunities are still taking shape, they are optimistic that the move to the TTU System could open opportunities for new academic programs, research opportunities, and public-private partnerships in Wichita Falls.

FIGURE 8: POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND AWARDS, 2019-20

Geography	Enrollment		Postsecondary Awards					
	#	Per 1K	Total	Certs.	AA	BA	Master's	Doctorate
Wichita Falls	8,899	60.1	2,071	358	286	1,215	212	---
Abilene	12,354	70.0	2,920	366	453	1,417	587	97
Amarillo	19,709	73.4	4,769	876	1,252	1,812	827	2
San Angelo	10,568	86.0	1,902	107	---	1,195	575	25

SOURCE: JOBSEQ; BRS

Note: Figures represent institution-wide totals for non-profit colleges that have a significant presence in each region. Because data cannot be disaggregated by branch campus, totals for Wichita Falls include all of Vernon College and none of WBU.

Stakeholders said there is still room for improvement when it comes to connecting the region’s talent pipeline – WFISD, Vernon College, and MSU in particular – to the business community. Input participants said that the creation of the Talent Partnership staff position at the Wichita Falls Chamber has been a positive development. But representatives from employers said they would like to see a more formal structure for collaboration between businesses and education partners for training and recruitment. Said one employer, “Who do you call? Who do you talk to? That goes for everyone. Midwestern, Vernon. I wish there was something centralized that could help us with recruitment.”

SAFB is another major asset when it comes to workforce. Wichita Falls has a large veteran population. According to JobsEQ, 9.0 percent of residents aged 18 to 64 are veterans, nearly double the national average. According to data provided by the Wichita Falls Chamber, there are 234 “exits” from SAFB every year. SAFB is also a significant source of “trailing spouses and partners.” While these individuals may be in Wichita Falls for a short time, they can be a tremendous asset. Input participants praised the efforts of the Wichita Falls Chamber and its Talent Partnership in expanding efforts to assist military spouses and partners.

Simply put, retaining talented individuals from institutions such as MSU and SAFB represent the most promising assets for strengthening Wichita Falls’ workforce. Retaining even a slightly larger share of college graduates and military retirees in Wichita Falls each year would have significant benefits for the community

⁵ Gaynor, Julie. “Gov. Abbott signs HB 1522 designating membership effective Sept. 1.” Midwestern State University. June 8, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://news.msutexas.edu/2021/05/governor-signs-bill-making-midwestern-state-5th-member-of-ttu-system.php>

over the long run. Said one input participant, “Our best opportunity for growth is keeping the folks we already have. We need some ability to hook them here.”

Doing so will require forging strong connections between the local talent pipeline and business community. **Stakeholders were clear that it will also require creating more desirable career opportunities for younger residents**, an issue that will be discussed in the next chapter of this Assessment. Said one input participant, “Kids don’t see the opportunity to move to the next level here.” Another stakeholder related an anecdote of a promising young student moving away because, in their words, “In Houston I have a better shot.”

Data suggest Wichita Falls has had difficulty retaining talent in recent years. According to the Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program, the Wichita Falls region experienced a net loss of more than 6,000 residents to other communities in the United States between 2010 and 2019.⁶ Migration data from the Internal Revenue Service’s Statistics of Income program shown in Figure 9 details the net top sources and destinations of migrants to and from Wichita County. Between 2014 and 2019, the IRS tracked a net flow of 510 exemptions (used as a proxy for the number of people attached to each tax return) that moved from Wichita County to Tarrant County (Fort Worth). Other counties in the Dallas-Fort Worth area show up prominently in the “destinations” column along with other counties with major Air Force bases.⁷

FIGURE 9: TOP SOURCES AND DESTINATIONS TO/FROM WICHITA COUNTY, 2014 TO 2019

Top Source Counties	Exemptions	Top Destination Counties	Exemptions
Wilbarger, TX	222	Tarrant, TX	-510
Montague, TX	174	Pima, AZ	-347
Young, TX	145	Archer, TX	-297
El Paso, TX	132	Collin, TX	-271
Baylor, TX	88	Denton, TX	-243
Los Angeles, CA	85	Dallas, TX	-230
Cotton, OK	47	Bexar, TX	-226
Ector, TX	39	Wayne, NC	-207
Comanche, OK	30	Maricopa, AZ	-201
Wise, TX	14	Otero, NM	-196

SOURCE: INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE; BRS

⁶ Given the Population Estimates Program’s overestimate of Wichita Falls’ population relative to the 2020 Census count, it is possible that the net domestic migration away from Wichita Falls was greater.

⁷ The relatively large net outflows to other counties with Air Force bases are likely the product of data suppression issues and limitations of the IRS data program, which only counts filers who complete a tax return in consecutive years.

There is evidence to suggest, however that out-migration from Wichita Falls may have slowed in recent years. As discussed in the 2017 Regional Assessment, the Wichita Falls lost a net average of roughly 400 residents per year to the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area between 2004 and 2014. Between 2014 and 2019, however, Wichita Falls lost a net total of approximately 1,000 residents to the Metroplex, which works out to just 200 per year.

Input participants recognize that Wichita Falls also faces challenges with respect to talent attraction. The community is located outside the “Texas Triangle” and the key Interstate highway corridors that connect its anchor regions that have driven much of the state’s growth in recent decades. The same can be said, however, for the three comparison metros, all of which experienced strong population growth relative to Wichita Falls in the past two decades.

Stakeholders viewed attracting “boomerang” talent to Wichita Falls as a primary opportunity. Input participants recounted numerous examples of individuals who grew up and/or attended college in Wichita Falls, moved away for a time, and returned to the community at a different stage of life. Some input participants described a similar pattern for military families that had previously spent time at SAFB.

Focusing on individuals who already have local roots and/or affinity for a community is a promising strategy for regions struggling with low growth. Input participants in Wichita Falls, however, said **the community must work on changing external perceptions to convince more individuals and families to return to Wichita Falls.**

One input participant said external perceptions of Wichita Falls are “stuck 20 years in the past” and do not match the present-day reality. Said another individual who moved to Wichita Falls from another major market in Texas approximately five years ago: “When I first got here thought it was like the Walking Dead, but now think it’s a cool place to be – how do we get (that message) out there because we have things here for people to do.” Discussions on how to improve Wichita Falls’ “value proposition” as a place to live will be addressed in Chapter 5.

4. Diversifying an Economy Concentrated in Government and Services

A key finding from the 2017 Regional Assessment was that Wichita Falls' economy was heavily concentrated in government and services. The latest industry sector data confirms that this remains the case. **Nearly one in five jobs based in the Wichita Falls region (19.7 percent) is in local, state, or federal government according to JobsEQ.** This percentage is the highest among comparison geographies. Public sector jobs account for roughly 14 percent of jobs in Texas and the United States, while San Angelo (17.1 percent) had the largest share of government employment among comparison metros.

This concentration of government employment is not surprising given the region's top employers. In addition to the local government services present in every community, Wichita Falls is home to major state and federal institutions including Sheppard Air Force Base, Midwestern State University, North Texas State Hospital, and the James V. Allred Unit Prison.

Figure 10 on the following page shows the region's economic composition broken out by industry sector. The table is sorted with the largest sectors by total employment at the top of the table. The Public Administration sector – which as its name suggests covers the administrative functions of government – accounts for slightly more than a third of the government jobs in Wichita Falls. The remainder of the region's government jobs are grouped into the sector that best represents the activities of the institution in which they are based (e.g., Educational Services for MSU).






















The four largest industry sectors by total employment in Wichita Falls are health care, retail, and accommodation and food service. Health care in particular stands out. By itself it accounts for more than one in five jobs in the region and was one of just a handful of local industry sectors that grew between the second quarters of 2016 and 2021. (It is important to note that most industry sectors in the United States also experienced declines during this time period, as the economy was in recovery from pandemic-induced job losses in the second quarter of 2021.)

These service sectors tend to cater to local populations, as people prefer to shop, dine, and seek health care close to home. In Wichita Falls, however, these sectors all have location quotients well above 1.0, indicating that they are more concentrated locally relative to the national average. **This supports the idea that Wichita Falls is a regional hub for residents from surrounding rural communities.** (In the case of health care, it is also indicative of the presence of government-run facilities.)

Wichita Falls has low concentrations of employment in “export-oriented” sectors including manufacturing, wholesale trade, transportation and warehousing, information, finance, professional services, and headquarter operations (shown in the table as “Management of Companies and Enterprises”). These sectors

are highly valued because they sell goods and services to other markets both in the United States and beyond, thereby bringing new wealth into a community. As shown in Figure 10 of these export-oriented sectors have location quotients below 1.0, meaning they are less concentrated in the Wichita Falls region relative to the national economy.

FIGURE 10: WICHITA FALLS MSA INDUSTRY SECTOR COMPOSITION, Q2 2021

Sector	Location Quotient	Employment	# Chg.	% Chg.	US % Chg.
Health Care and Social Assistance	 1.35	12,137	1,228	11.3%	4.9%
Retail Trade	 1.22	7,733	-855	-10.0%	-4.1%
Accommodation and Food Services	 1.32	6,059	-73	-1.2%	-14.6%
Educational Services	 1.10	5,361	219	4.3%	-3.4%
Manufacturing	 0.91	4,530	-465	-9.3%	-1.6%
Public Administration	 1.35	4,015	-188	-4.5%	2.6%
Administrative / Support / Waste Management Svcs.	 0.83	3,182	329	11.5%	-1.9%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	 1.15	3,020	-375	-11.0%	-5.0%
Construction	 0.78	2,804	-30	-1.1%	8.1%
Transportation and Warehousing	 0.70	2,088	-25	-1.2%	17.8%
Finance and Insurance	 0.77	1,942	-1	-0.1%	4.7%
Wholesale Trade	 0.70	1,602	-172	-9.7%	-4.8%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	 0.33	1,410	-230	-14.0%	8.5%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	 1.27	1,081	-113	-9.4%	-4.4%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	 4.96	1,034	-366	-26.1%	-23.8%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	 0.73	773	-103	-11.7%	1.9%
Information	 0.52	622	-150	-19.4%	-2.7%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	 0.60	579	-95	-14.1%	-19.4%
Utilities	 1.16	373	32	9.4%	-1.8%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	 0.07	62	8	15.1%	4.1%
Unclassified	 0.42	33	31	1234.3%	-22.6%
Total - All Industries	1.00	60,438	-1,394	-2.3%	-0.5%

SOURCE: JOBSEQ; BRS

Note: Figures represent a four-quarter moving average and may not sum due to rounding. Location quotient (LQ) is a calculation that compares local versus national employment for a particular sector. An LQ of 1.0 means an equivalent local versus national share but anything above 1.0 may indicate a local advantage. The higher the LQ the greater the local specialization in that sector.

A deeper look into industry sector data shows that Wichita Falls does have some clear strength in export-oriented industries. Figure 11 shows the industry groups that are most concentrated in Wichita Falls relative to the nation.⁸ It reveals that **Wichita Falls has strong concentrations of employment in a diverse range of manufacturing operations**, including materials, fabricated metal products, and certain types of machinery and equipment. The community’s ties to the aviation and aerospace industries are also evident.

FIGURE 11: WICHITA FALLS MSA TOP INDUSTRY GROUPS BY CONCENTRATION, Q2 2021

NAICS	Industry	Employment	Location Quotient
2111	Oil and Gas Extraction	517	9.92
3272	Glass and Glass Product Manufacturing	314	9.62
6222	Psychiatric and Substance Abuse Hospitals	778	8.01
3324	Boiler, Tank, and Shipping Container Manufacturing	230	6.74
6243	Vocational Rehabilitation Services	772	6.54
2131	Support Activities for Mining	516	5.96
3334	Ventilation, Heating, AC, and Commercial Refrigeration Equipment Mfg.	289	5.38
3149	Other Textile Product Mills	127	5.32
3364	Aerospace Product and Parts Manufacturing	983	5.01
4881	Support Activities for Air Transportation	487	5.00
9281	National Security and International Affairs	1,138	4.59
3261	Plastics Product Manufacturing	887	3.84

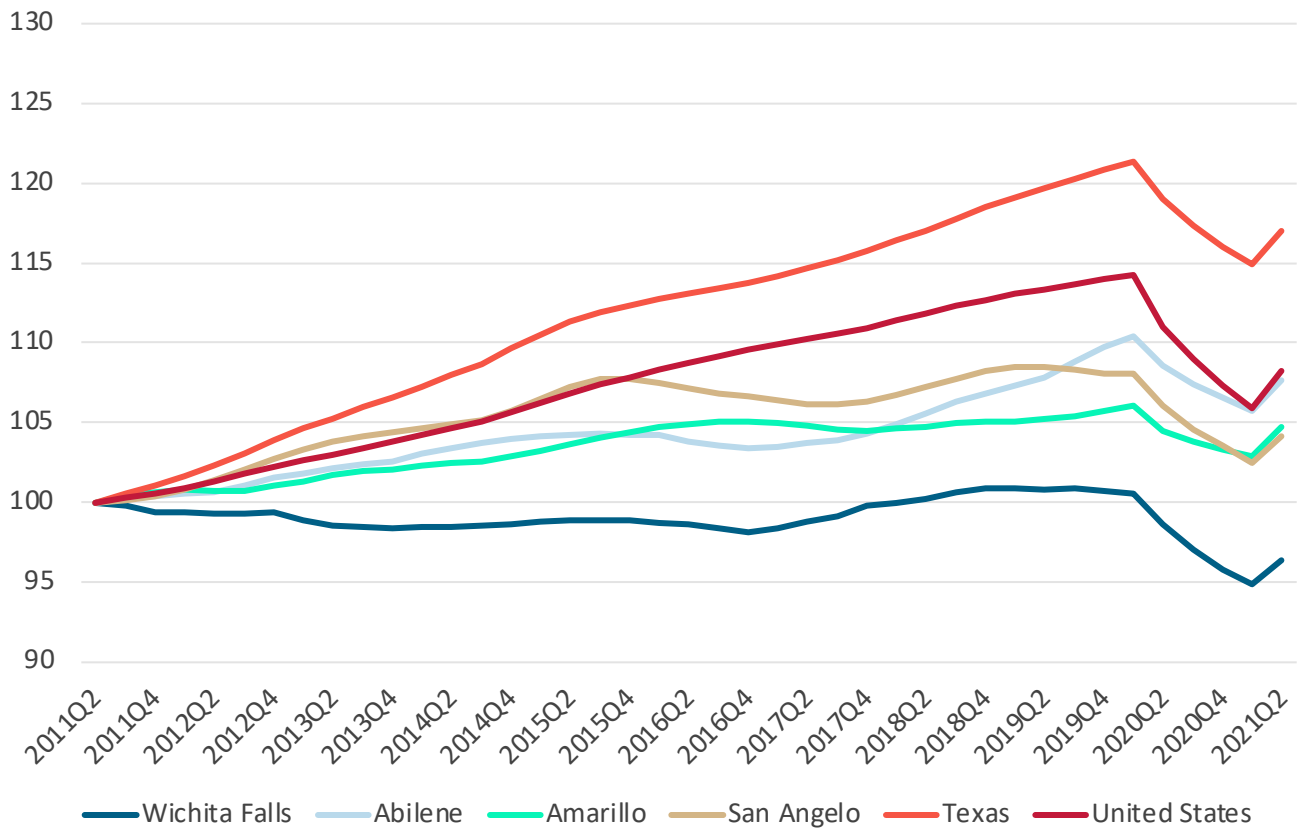
SOURCE: JOBSEQ; BRS

Note: Figures represent a four-quarter moving average and may not sum due to rounding. Location quotient (LQ) is a calculation that compares local versus national employment for a particular sector. An LQ of 1.0 means an equivalent local versus national share but anything above 1.0 may indicate a local advantage. The higher the LQ the greater the local specialization in that sector.

Any examination of recent growth trends in a regional economy must be viewed in the context of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on economies throughout the world. Between the fourth quarter of 2016 and the fourth quarter of 2019, the Wichita Falls’ employment base grew by 2.7 percent. While this growth rate trailed state and national averages, it exceeded the employment growth seen in both Amarillo and San Angelo during the same timeframe. Unfortunately, these gains were wiped out (and then some) by the economic disruption of the pandemic. This dynamic is shown in Figure 12 on the following page, which displays an index of total employment by quarter.

⁸ “Industry groups” are the four-digit level of the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS).

FIGURE 12: QUARTERLY INDEX OF EMPLOYMENT, NOT SEASONALLY ADJUSTED (Q1 2011 =100)



SOURCE: JOBSEQ; BRS

Figure 13 on the following page takes a monthly look at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment in Wichita Falls and the comparison geographies. It shows that Wichita Falls experienced both a smaller decline in employment in the early months of the pandemic and a relatively slower recovery since the bottom of pandemic recession in April 2020. According to preliminary estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Wichita Falls' employment level in June 2021 was still just 96.9 percent of its pre-pandemic level on a non-seasonally adjusted basis, the second-lowest percentage among the comparison geographies.

FIGURE 13: PANDEMIC IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT AND RECOVERY, NOT SEASONALLY ADJUSTED

Geography	Pandemic Job Losses February to April 2020		Economic Recovery April 2020 to June 2021		June 2021 employment as % of Feb. 2020
	#	%	#	%	
Wichita Falls	-4,942	-8.6%	3,185	6.1%	96.9%
Abilene	-7,035	-9.9%	5,206	8.2%	97.4%
Amarillo	-11,524	-9.9%	11,777	11.2%	100.2%
San Angelo	-4,652	-9.5%	2,863	6.4%	96.4%
Texas	-1,378,836	-10.9%	1,150,126	10.2%	98.2%
United States	-20,569,617	-13.9%	16,802,669	13.2%	97.5%

SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS; BRS

Stakeholders in Wichita Falls are aware of the local economic composition. Input participants emphasized that services such as health care and education provide many high-quality jobs. Input participants also noted that virtually all levels of government are in a more advantageous position now relative to a decade ago as a result of various federal aid packages developed in response to the pandemic.

But stakeholders also understand that if Wichita Falls must balance its large government and service sectors with more private, export-oriented jobs that can bring new wealth into the community and provide the kind of job opportunities that will be needed to retain (and potentially attract) talent. The remainder of this chapter focuses on considerations for Wichita Falls as it seeks to grow and diversify its economy.

BUSINESS ATTRACTION AND EXISTING BUSINESS

In Wichita Falls, traditional economic development activities of business attraction and business retention and expansion (BRE) are carried out by the Chamber on behalf of its community partners. The Chamber’s efforts have yielded some success in recent years, most notably the locations of Clayton Homes and Pamlico Air, which together could lead to \$50 million in investment and more than 550 new jobs.

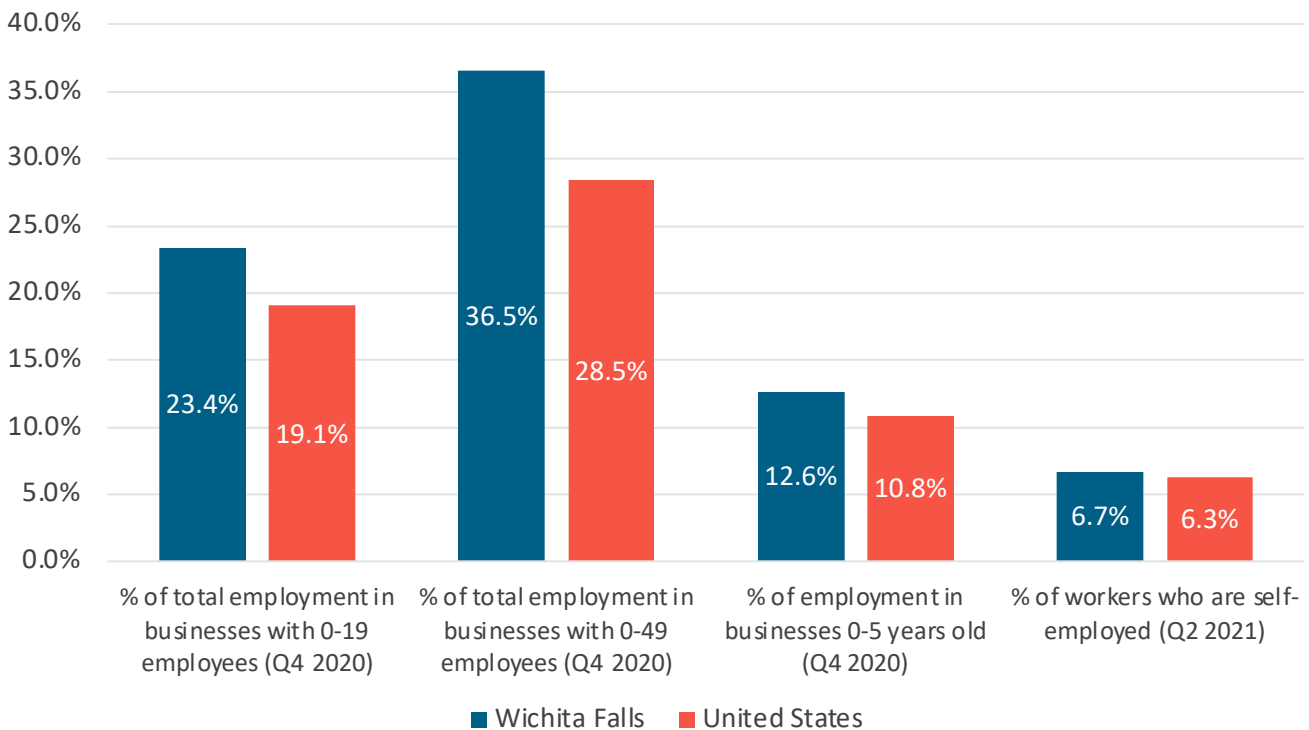
Input participants said they would like to see the community continue to attract and retain export-oriented employers. Ongoing and planned improvements to the Wichita Falls Business Park will help in this regard. The community’s Type 4A entity, the Wichita Falls Economic Development Corporation (WFEDC), is funding approximately \$10 million of infrastructure improvements in the area, including road widening and upgrades, water and sewer improvements, and landscaping. Some input participants said they would also like to take a fresh look at the community’s economic development incentive structure to ensure that they are competitive and delivering the best possible return on investment for Wichita Falls.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMALL BUSINESS

Business attraction and BRE represent two pathways to growing jobs in a local economy. The third is providing support and assistance to entrepreneurs and small businesses. As shown in Figure 14, **small businesses already account for a relatively large percentage of Wichita Falls' private employment.** Nearly 37 percent of the community's private jobs are in firms with fewer than 50 employees, the highest among all comparison geographies. Wichita Falls also had the second-highest share of employment in firms with fewer than 20 employees.

There is also evidence to suggest that **Wichita Falls has a relatively strong level of new business startups.** As shown in the table, 12.6 percent of the community's private jobs are in firms that are 5 years old or newer. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) program, Wichita Falls also had the largest increase in employment in new firms between the first quarters of 2016 and 2020. Workers in Wichita Falls are also more likely to be self-employed than the national average. Self-employed individuals are typically sole proprietors, independent contractors, and individuals with part-time businesses who, if successful, may eventually incorporate their operations and hire employees.

FIGURE 14: SELECTED ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMALL BUSINESS INDICATORS



SOURCE: QUARTERLY WORKFORCE INDICATORS; JOBSEQ; BRS

On the online survey, respondents who said they were executives, vice presidents, entrepreneurs, or sole proprietors were asked to assess Wichita Falls' entrepreneurial climate. Nearly 72 percent of respondents gave a rating of average or better.

The Midwestern State Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is one of the community's primary assets for entrepreneurs and small businesses. The SBDC assists both startups and established small businesses with a variety of offerings including business consulting, training, and research. Input participants said MSU's Dillard College of Business and Munir Abdul Lalani Center for Entrepreneurship and Free Enterprise are also potential assets that could be further leveraged to support startup activity in the community. Other potential enhancements to the community's entrepreneurial ecosystem and business support network proposed by stakeholders include:

Pursuing options to expand access to capital: input participants described the community's lending environment as "tight" and noted that the community no longer has an active angel investment group or similar pool of investors.

Increasing mentorship opportunities: stakeholders said The Circuit has begun a program that pairs younger entrepreneurs and managers with more experienced members of the business community, but the program would benefit from additional direction and refinement

Creating a physical space for entrepreneurship: while input participants said it is unclear if the community could support a business incubator or similar model, there is, at a minimum, an opportunity to develop co-working spaces in Wichita Falls, with Downtown or the MSU area likely destinations.

Enhancing technical assistance for minority businesses and entrepreneurs: stakeholders said they would like to see additional offerings in this area including establishing stronger networks connecting buyers and suppliers and customizing services to "meet people where they are."

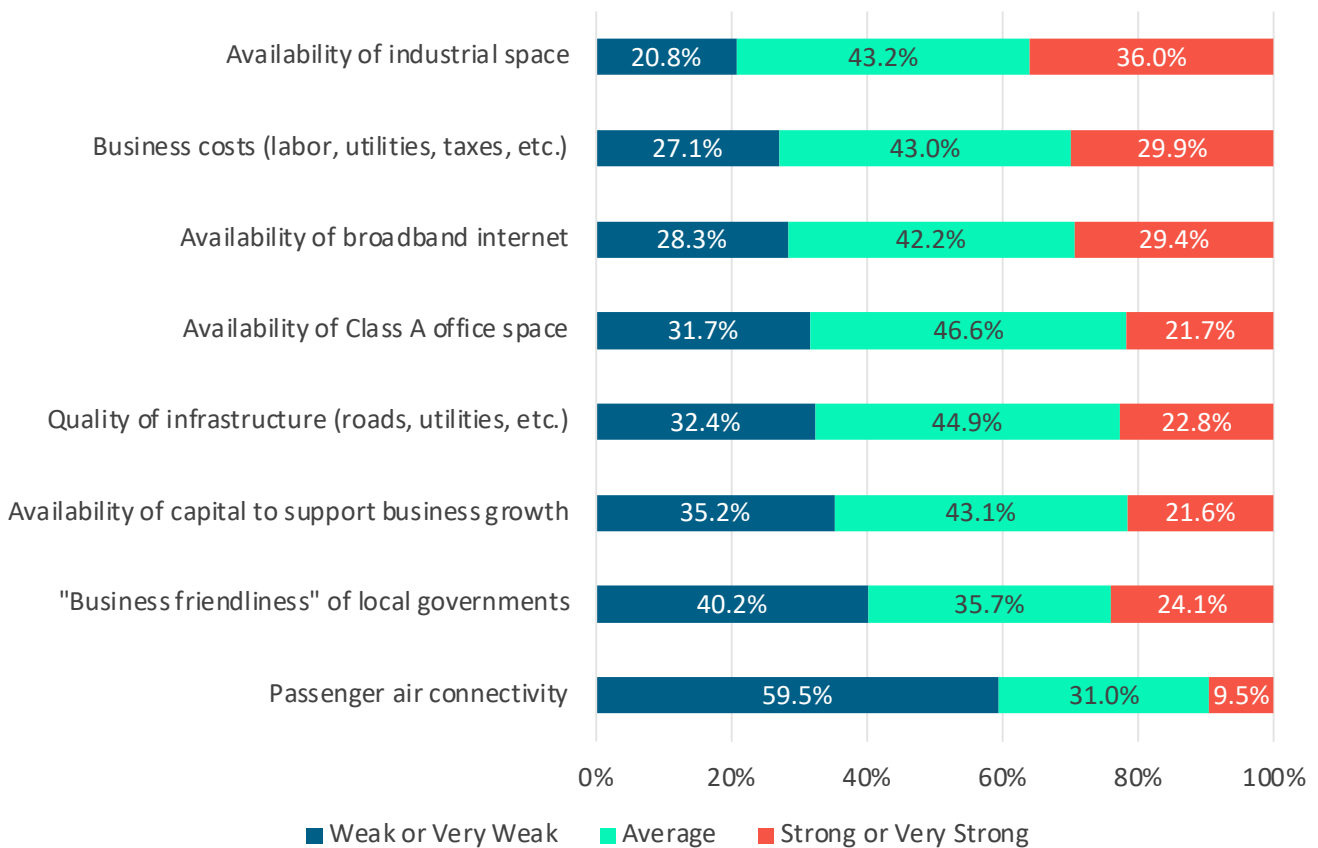
BUSINESS CLIMATE

Online survey respondents who said they were an executive, vice president, manager, entrepreneur, or sole proprietor were posed a series of questions about Wichita Falls' business climate. As shown in Figure 15 on the following page, respondents gave relatively favorable ratings to the availability of industrial space, business costs, and the availability of broadband internet.

The two lowest-polling factors were passenger air connectivity and the "business friendliness" of local governments. The latter topic was a frequent theme throughout the input process. In short, some business owners and entrepreneurs expressed frustration with the permitting process in the City of Wichita Falls. These individuals said they would like to see improved opportunities for communication between the private sector and the City at the outset of construction projects to help avoid delays or surprises down the line.

Other stakeholders pushed back against this viewpoint, saying that the City has improved its staff capacity and permitting procedures. In any case, presenting a unified positive image to prospective businesses and outside investors will require working together to resolve this source of tension.

FIGURE 15: "PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING FEATURES OF WICHITA FALLS' BUSINESS CLIMATE"



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

LEVERAGING PUBLIC-SECTOR INSTITUTIONS

Wichita Falls also has an opportunity to leverage its public-sector institutions to fuel private job growth. Input participants said the community should explore opportunities to pursue additional research activity and/or public-private partnerships at MSU now that the institution is part of the TTU System. SAFB is also a clear economic driver for the community, both in terms of its facilities and the talented veterans it produces. Input participants said there is a further opportunity to activate underutilized areas of the base through partnerships with private-sector firms and/or higher education institutions.

Stakeholders expressed confidence that the current mission at SAFB has a strong future. Some input participants suggested that Wichita Falls would be well-served to seek opportunities to expand the SAFB mission through advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WICHITA FALLS CHAMBER

5. Establishing Wichita Falls as a Standout Place to Live

Quality of life and quality of place are increasingly important considerations in community and economic development. Business and individuals value communities that are aesthetically pleasing, offer an abundance of opportunities to socialize, allow all types of people to thrive and advance, and so on.

During both the first Falls Future process and the most recent round of stakeholder engagement, local residents were relatively consistent on what they viewed as Wichita Falls’ “value proposition” as a place to live. Input participants cited the community’s affordability, sense of public safety, and lack of traffic exemplified by the common refrain: “You can get to anything within the city in 15 minutes.” Residents acknowledged that Wichita Falls cannot match the amenities and depth of job opportunities of larger regions but generally did not mind this tradeoff in exchange for what they described as an easy, low-stress life.

But while minimal traffic and low cost of living are undeniable advantages relative to larger metros, they are qualities shared by many other small and mid-sized regions. For instance, Figure 16 shows commute times in 2015 and 2019 for all comparison geographies. It reveals that while the average commute time in Wichita Falls is far below the national average, residents of the comparison metros enjoy even shorter trips to work. The same pattern holds for the proportion of workers with at least a 30-minute journey to work. Both of these data indicators also grew faster than any comparison geography between 2015 and 2019.⁹

FIGURE 16: CHANGE IN COMMUTE TIMES. 2015 TO 2019

Geography	Mean Commute Time in Minutes			% of Commuters with at least a 30-minute trip to work		
	2015	2019	% chg.	2015	2019	% pt. chg.
Wichita Falls	17.8	21.1	3.3%	15.5%	20.2%	4.7%
Abilene	15.2	16.2	1.0%	7.4%	7.5%	0.1%
Amarillo	14.5	14.6	0.1%	5.6%	5.7%	0.1%
San Angelo	15.6	17.1	1.5%	12.0%	12.9%	0.9%
Texas	26.3	27.2	0.9%	38.6%	39.9%	1.3%
United States	26.4	27.6	1.2%	37.5%	39.5%	2.0%

SOURCE: ACS 1-YEAR ESTIMATES; BRS

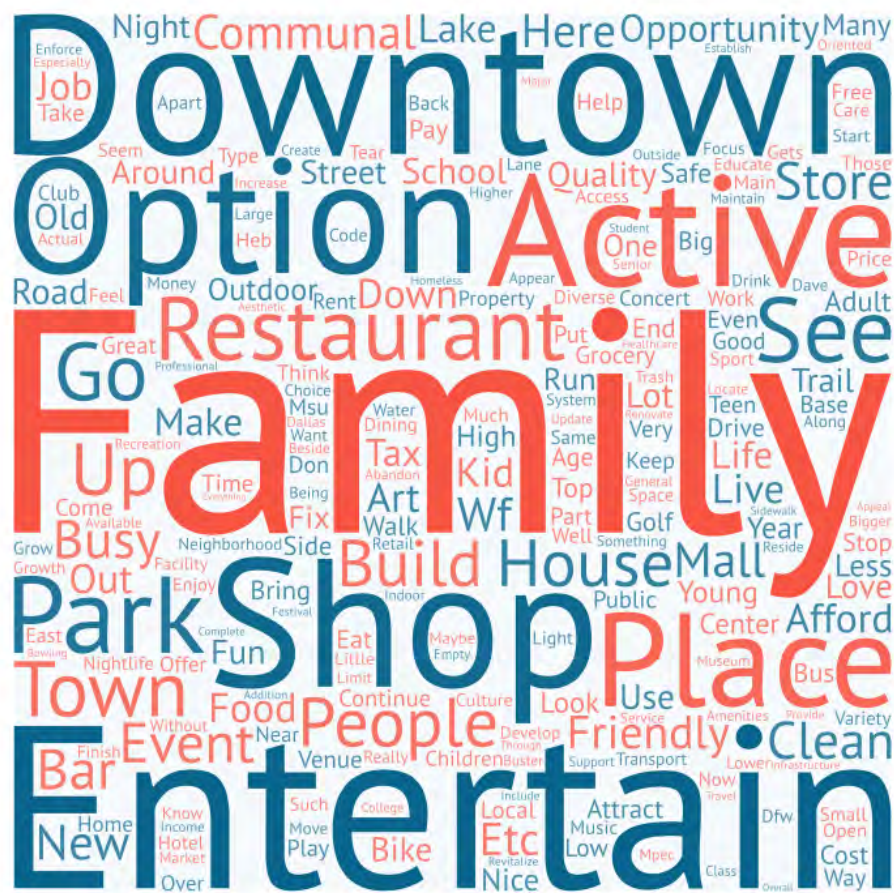
⁹ Increasing commute times may be influenced by the finding in Chapter 2 that many Wichita Falls workers are travelling outside the MSA for work, as the ACS data include estimates for all workers who reside in a community regardless of where they work.

Commute times are just one aspect of transportation within a region, and Wichita Falls is unquestionably easy to navigate by private vehicle. But the preceding comparison helps to illustrate that if Wichita Falls is to stand out as a destination for jobs and talent, it must offer more than the advantages inherent to small and mid-sized regions. This chapter focuses on key themes related to quality of life and quality of place that emerged from research and input. It begins with a set of assets or attributes that emerged from the research and input process as potential quality of life and quality of place “differentiators” for Wichita Falls.

DOWNTOWN WICHITA FALLS

Figure 17 displays a word cloud of the most common responses to the question: “What quality of place or quality of life improvements would you like to see in Wichita Falls?” “Downtown” was frequently cited along with several other words such as *entertain*, *shop*, and *restaurant* that describe concepts that can be found in a downtown area.

FIGURE 17: “WHAT QUALITY OF PLACE OR QUALITY OF LIFE IMPROVEMENTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN WICHITA FALLS?”



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

Input participants said that on the eve of the pandemic, Downtown was “smoking hot” and had made significant progress from even just a few years prior. Said one individual, “There was a ‘Where am I?’ vibe right before the pandemic and it was clear we had come a long way and where we were headed. Covid set us back on our heels.”

Stakeholders said that the challenge now is to “reignite” the momentum of Downtown Wichita Falls. Input participants noted that as the region’s historic center capable of accommodating a higher density of residents, jobs, and amenities, Downtown has the potential to help address many of the region’s quality of place challenges. Specific ideas for improvement identified by stakeholders include but are not limited to:

- Enhancing infrastructure, including streetscapes that favor walkability, bikeability, and accessibility along with vehicle traffic
- Improving aesthetics, ranging from upgraded signage to activating vacant storefronts and buildings
- Continuing to seek opportunities (and leveraging Type 4B funds when appropriate) to repurpose upper floors of historic buildings for residential uses to increase the area’s population
- Creating a “focal point” or a “signature place” within downtown that can serve as a vibrant catalyst from which redevelopment and investment can spread
- Broadening the appeal and programming of downtown to cater to all residents of Wichita Falls, including families with children and the community’s large population of young adults

Downtown stakeholders noted that many of these proposed improvements will require raising new revenue. Input participants said they were disappointed at the failure of a 2018 bond initiative that would have funded improvements to the public right of way in Downtown. Some stakeholders said the community should revisit the issue when the time is right. Input participants also noted that Downtown may need “additional tools in the toolbox” to support new development. This could include a public improvement district (PID) – a self-taxing district that, if approved by property owners, could help fund improvements.

The input process also revealed that the community must overcome a potential threat to Downtown Wichita Falls: divisiveness among its stakeholders. Input participants said some disagreements have arisen among Downtown business and property owners regarding how the district is programmed and marketed for visitors and economic development. Some Downtown stakeholders said they have begun the process of starting a new nonprofit organization (in addition to the existing Downtown Wichita Falls Development) that would be focused on marketing downtown properties and other economic development issues. **Many input participants expressed concerns about these emerging divisions, noting that the continued growth and success of Downtown Wichita Falls will rely upon a wide range of property owners, businesses, and public and private partners working together.**

A “BICYCLE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY”

Wichita Falls has long had an association with bicycling due to the Hotter’N Hell Hundred bicycle ride, MSU’s nationally competitive varsity cycling program, and the nearly completed Circle Trail. “A Bicycle-Friendly Community” was one of the seven catalysts in the first Falls Future strategy, and stakeholders said its implementation was highly successful.

Various community partners came together to form the Bike Wichita Falls volunteer group, which one individual said “has done more than ever was done before in terms of coalescing the biking community.” Along with the City of Wichita Falls and other key partners, the group helped the community receive a Bronze-level Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC) award from the League of American Bicyclists in 2019.

Input participants said they would like to see the community continue to establish bicycling as part of Wichita Falls’ identity. This could include making progress toward a Silver-level award from the League of American Bicyclists. Input participants with knowledge of the criteria said this will likely require infrastructure investment above and beyond what is already planned in the community. In addition to the completion of the Circle Trail, stakeholders said they would like to see a more extensive trail and path system that better integrates community assets and major employment and residential centers such as MSU and SAFB.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WICHITA FALLS CHAMBER

Some input participants also said the time has come to consider opportunities for developing safe bicycle infrastructure on some of Wichita Falls' streets and roads. These individuals said that while painted markings have helped raise awareness about bicycling in the community, dedicated, protected bicycle infrastructure will be required in order to make riding safe and comfortable for residents of most ages and ability levels.

A “COLLEGE TOWN FEEL”

A prominent theme from the stakeholder engagement process is that Wichita Falls should seek to strengthen the relationship between MSU and the community. As previously discussed, MSU enrolled nearly 6,000 students as of the 2019-20 academic year.

But many input participants said that despite this large population of students, Wichita Falls lacks a “college town feel.” Said one individual, “You see that in Denton with UNT – with the green – it’s in your face. You can’t drive through Lubbock without seeing Raider Red on everything.” The input participant added that this feeling is largely absent in Wichita Falls.

Input participants said that fostering a college town atmosphere would have multiple benefits, including boosting community pride, creating a stronger sense of vibrancy, and making it more likely that MSU students from outside the region will consider staying in Wichita Falls. Input participants frequently suggested athletics as a means to this end. Stakeholders said they would like to see MSU develop a football stadium on or adjacent to campus to improve the gameday experience for students and community members. Other input participants suggested exploring the viability of moving MSU athletics to Division I to increase interest and reunite with former rivals from the Lone Star Conference.

EMBRACING WICHITA FALLS’ INTERNATIONAL POPULATION

Wichita Falls is home to two large populations of international residents that are not found in most other communities. One is the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program (ENJJPT) at SAFB, which at any given time hosts hundreds of pilots in training from 14 countries. While these individuals and their families are stationed in Wichita Falls only temporarily, stakeholders said they contribute greatly to the vibrancy of the community. One input participant described having friends from many countries around the world thanks to ENJJPT, an uncommon occurrence in a region the size of Wichita Falls.

The other is MSU’s significant population of international students, particularly from Caribbean countries. Input participants said MSU’s Caribbean population could be a much greater asset to the community than it currently is. Unlike pilots from ENJJPT, these students could remain in Wichita Falls after graduation. Input participants said few do, however, because of the difficulty of obtaining work visas to stay in Wichita Falls and the abundance of economic opportunities elsewhere. One stakeholder said these students “have big ideas and are in great fields but want to go to Dallas. We need to find a way to keep them here.”

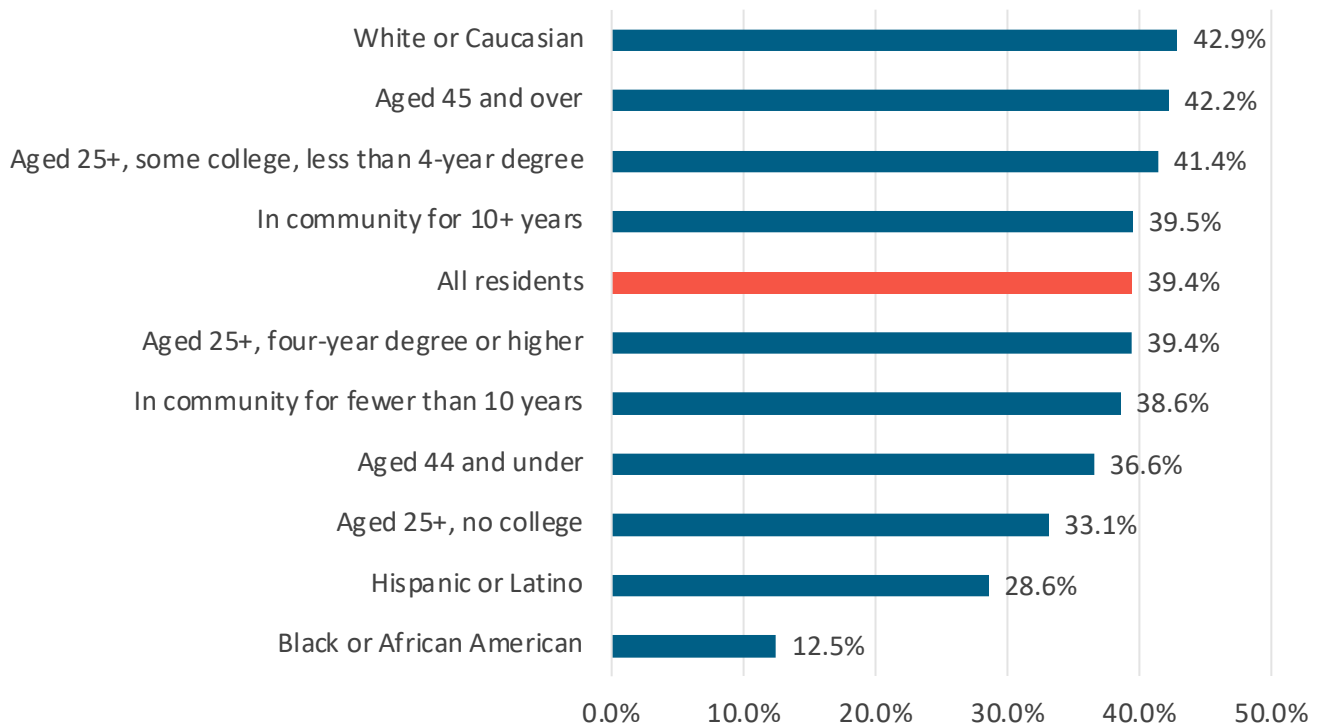
OPENNESS AND INCLUSION

Talented individuals (and the companies that wish to hire them) value communities that are open and inclusive – where all types of residents have the opportunity to thrive. Unfortunately, a prominent theme to emerge from the stakeholder engagement process is that Wichita Falls is struggling with these issues.

This is illustrated by online survey respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “Wichita Falls seeks to include its diverse residents in civic, social, political, and business networks.” Overall, slightly less than 40 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement compared to roughly 31 percent who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 18 shows responses to this question cross-tabulated by individual respondents’ race and ethnicity, age, educational attainment level, and longevity in the community. (Note that most respondents are likely represented in multiple categories.) The figure reveals that the largest differences in viewpoint broke down along racial and ethnic lines. Nearly 43 percent of White or Caucasian respondents agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 28.6 percent of Hispanic or Latino respondents and just 12.5 percent of Black or African American respondents.

FIGURE 18: PERCENT AGREEING OR STRONGLY AGREEING – “WICHITA FALLS SEEKS TO INCLUDE ITS DIVERSE RESIDENTS IN CIVIC, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND BUSINESS NETWORKS”



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

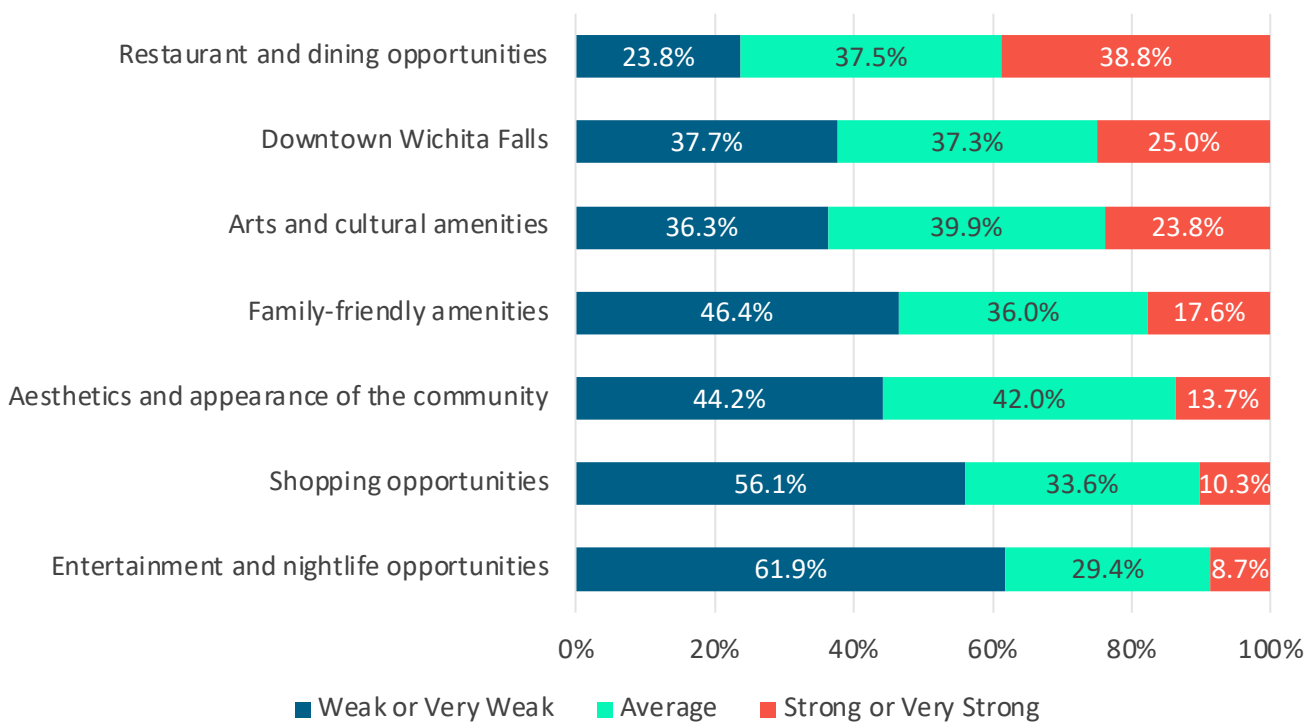
In addition to the survey results, many people of color who participated in the stakeholder engagement process recounted examples where they felt they had been mistreated because of their race. Some of these incidents have been subtle. Said one input participant, “It’s the looks ... or we’ll get talked down to in terms of basic communication and respect.” Multiple input participants described overt instances of abuse, such as being the subject of racial slurs in public settings such as a grocery store.

The individuals who shared these accounts were virtually unanimous in stating that these issues are not unique to Wichita Falls. But some people of color who have lived elsewhere said that they have not experienced this degree of difficulty in other regions, which they found to be more inclusive and tolerant. Input participants acknowledged that individual prejudices and beliefs are not easily changed. But stakeholders said they would like to see the community make a concerted effort to value and include its diverse residents. Stakeholders noted that doing so will be important for welcoming MSU’s Caribbean population, ENJJPT families, and military personnel who come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

ADDITIONAL PROMINENT THEMES FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT

Online survey respondents were asked to rate various aspects of life in Wichita Falls. Some of these responses related to the community’s amenities and aesthetics shown in Figure 19.

FIGURE 19: “PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING FEATURES OF WICHITA FALLS’ QUALITY OF LIFE”



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

Five of the seven features shown in Figure 18 were rated average or better by a majority of respondents. But on six of seven features, the number of “weak or very weak” responses exceeded the number of “strong or very strong” answers. Some of these issues are discussed in the remainder of this chapter along with other prominent themes from input.

Aesthetics: Online survey respondents provided relatively negative feedback when asked to rate the “aesthetics and appearance of the community.” Fewer than 14 percent of respondents described this feature as “strong or very strong” compared to more than 44 percent who rated it “weak or very weak.” Input participants said they would like to see the community continue to make investments in landscaping, code enforcement, and other beautification efforts such as activating vacant or underutilized buildings.

Amenities for young adults: Wichita Falls is home to another large contingent of young adults in addition to its civilian student population – Airmen in Training at SAFB. Stakeholders said the community would benefit from adding amenities that could appeal to both college students, AiTs, and other young adults. Input participants proposed ideas such as a Top Golf or similar facility and more entertainment opportunities available to individuals under the age of 21 (such as all-ages concerts, etc.). Stakeholders also said there are some SAFB-specific enhancements that would help AiTs, including improving walkability in the area around the base and improving communication of community events. Said one input participant, “What can we do to make these Airmen say ‘that was awesome’ when they leave Sheppard?”



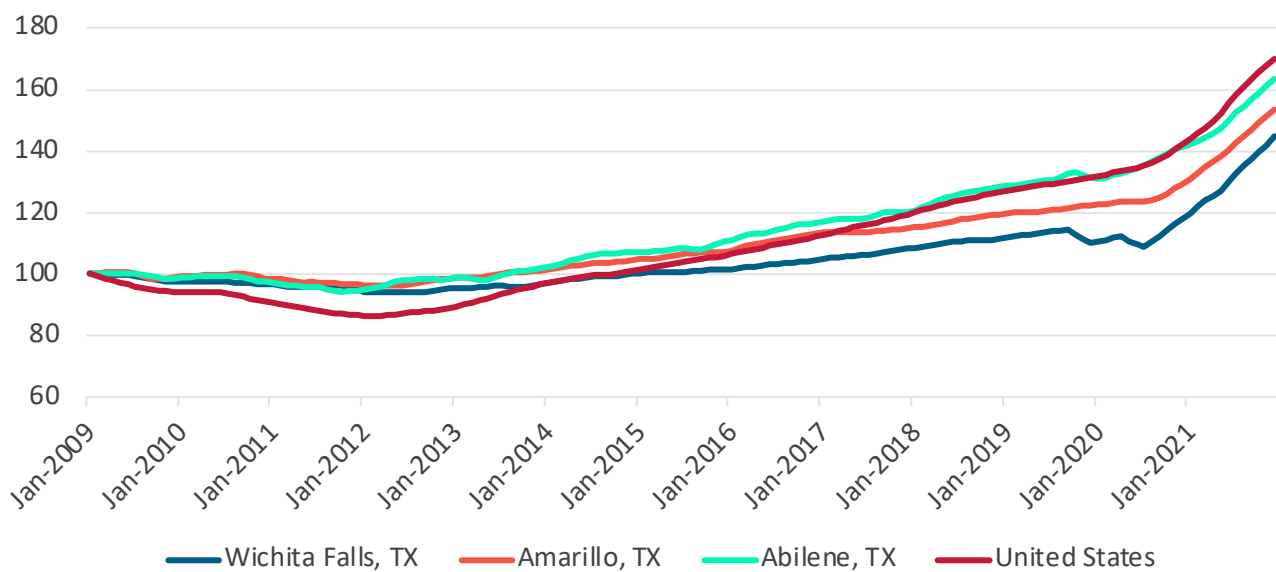
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WICHITA FALLS CHAMBER

Amenities for families: Input participants generally viewed Wichita Falls as an excellent place to raise a family. But stakeholders said the community would benefit from more family-friendly entertainment options. Specific ideas mentioned by multiple input participants included more family-friendly dining options and programming in Downtown Wichita Falls and a free or low-cost indoor play area for the hot summer months.

Public art and the arts: Another opportunity to improve the appearance and vibrancy of Wichita Falls is embracing the arts. Stakeholders said the community has many talented artists but does not have a recent cultural or public arts plan. These individuals said the community would benefit from widespread public art across the community, potentially facilitated through a dedicated public or private fund.

Housing: As shown in Figure 20, housing prices in Wichita Falls have increased rapidly in the past 18 months after very little appreciation in previous years according to the Zillow Home Value Index. Zillow’s data estimates the typical value for all housing types (e.g. single family, condo. etc.) in the 35th to 65th percentile range. According to this data, the price of a typical home in Wichita Falls increased by approximately \$9,100 between January 2009 and June 2020. Between June 2020 and December 2021, however, prices shot up by nearly \$34,000. This recent price increase is consistent with national trends, and housing is still relatively affordable overall compared with many other markets. But Wichita Falls stakeholders expressed concerns that these increases could put pressure on living standards for residents and further challenge the ability of the community to retain younger talent. Input participants said that low inventories and a limited range of residential products create challenges with attracting individuals from larger regions with diverse housing markets. Stakeholders also said that finding quality affordable housing is a top challenge for SAFB families.

FIGURE 20: ZILLOW HOME VALUE INDEX, JANUARY 2009 TO JULY 2021



SOURCE: ZILLOW; BRS

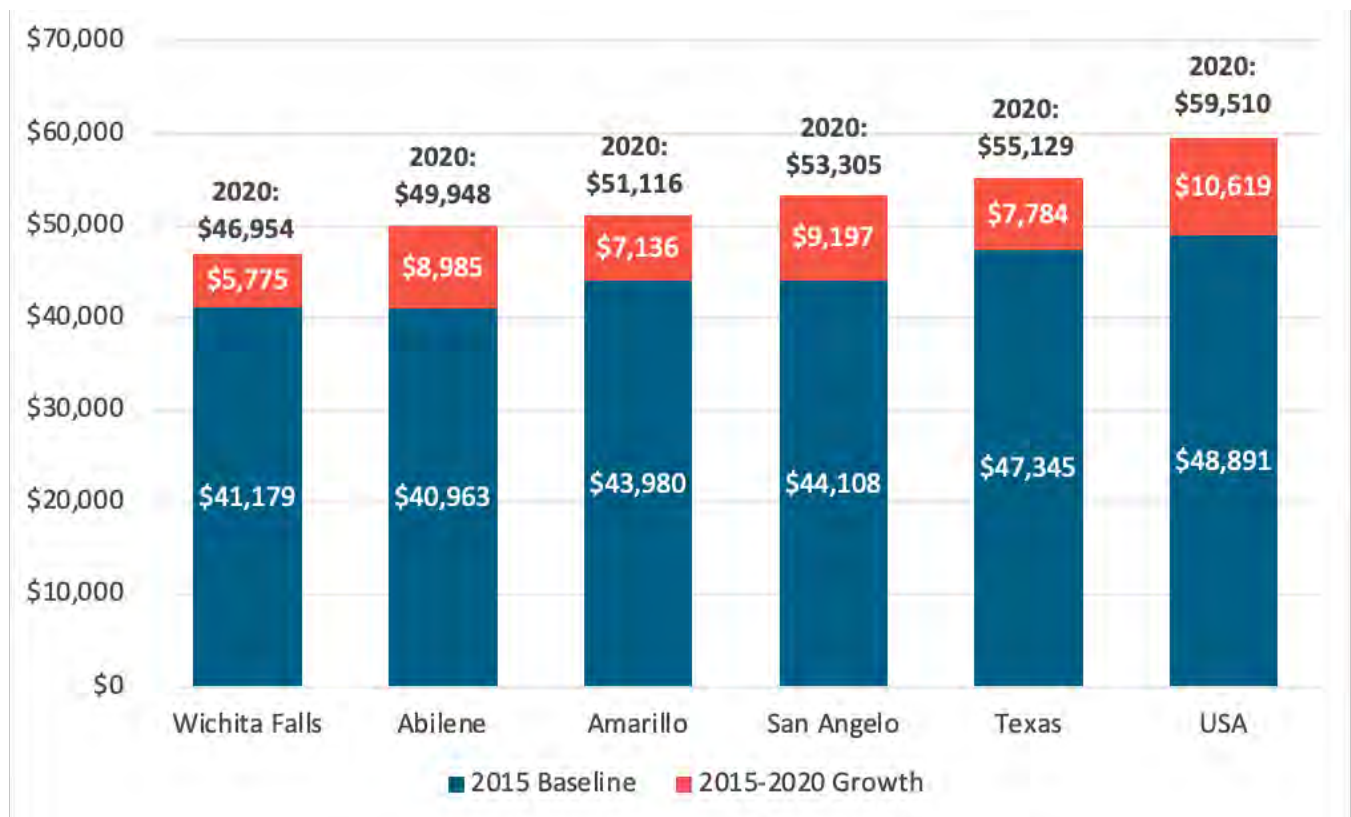
Note: Data were not available for San Angelo or Texas for the full timeframe.

6. A Need to Improve Outcomes for Residents

A holistic economic development strategy may address a wide range of issues that impact a community's competitiveness for jobs, talent, and investment. **But at their core, these activities share a straightforward end goal: raise standards of living and improve quality of life for current and future residents.** While quality of life is difficult to measure with government data, standards of living can be assessed through various measures of individual and community well-being, including per capita and household incomes, poverty rates, health outcomes, and so on.

Figure 21 shows that the per capita income (PCI) in the Wichita Falls region increased by \$5,775 between 2015 and 2020. But PCI growth in Wichita Falls was the lowest among all comparison geographies both in terms of dollar value and percentage increase. A similar trend was observed in the community's average annual wage per job. Between the second quarters of 2016 and 2021, average wages in Wichita Falls grew by 13.6 percent – 3.5 percentage points less than the next-closest comparison geography (San Angelo) and 10 percentage points below the national average.

FIGURE 21: PER CAPITA INCOME, 2015 TO 2020



SOURCE: BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS; BRS

When looking at wages relative to the cost of living, Wichita Falls also fares less well relative to comparisons. The first column in Figure 22, “Cost of Living Index,” is compiled by the Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). The index is based on observed values of a basket of goods and services and is shown in comparison to a national average of 100. Wichita Falls’ index value was 91.7, meaning costs of living are approximately 91.7 percent of the national average.¹⁰ The second column shows the average annual wage for each comparison geography.

As the table shows, as of the second quarter of 2021, Wichita Falls had the lowest average wage among comparison geographies and a cost of living index value in the middle of the comparison metros. Dividing a geography’s average annual wage by its cost of living index value (in hundredths) produces the figure in the third column of Figure 22: the effective “Purchasing Power” relative to the national average. In short, while a single dollar goes a longer way in Wichita Falls than it does in the nation as a whole, this advantage is negated by lower average wages. And while the comparison metros constitute a strong competitive set in terms of their affordability, they also offer purchasing power advantages over Wichita Falls.

FIGURE 22: COST OF LIVING INDEX, AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGE, AND PURCHASING POWER, Q2 2021

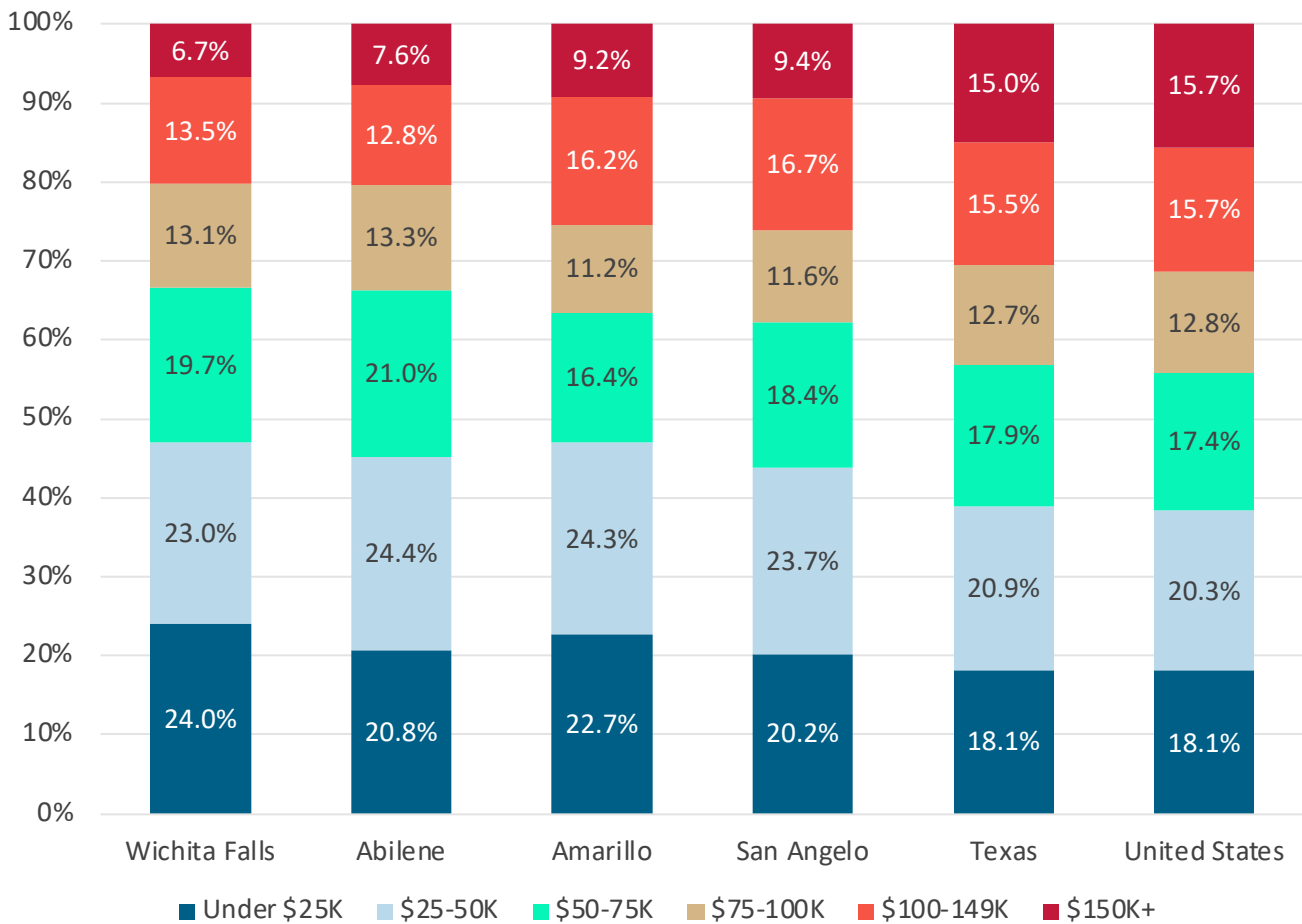
Geography	Cost of Living Index (COLI)	Average Annual Salary	Purchasing Power (relative to nation)
Wichita Falls	91.7	\$42,358	\$46,192
Abilene	90.9	\$44,543	\$49,002
Amarillo	81.1	\$50,699	\$62,514
San Angelo	94.3	\$45,300	\$48,014
Texas	94.9	\$61,816	\$65,166
United States	100	\$64,141	---

SOURCE: C2ER; JOBSEQ; BRS

As of 2019, the most recent year for which data are available, Wichita Falls had a median household income of just over \$52,000. As shown in Figure 23 on the following page, however, Wichita Falls had the highest proportion of households with annual incomes below \$25,000. Nearly one in four households in Wichita Falls – 24.0 percent – fell into this income bracket, the highest among all comparison geographies and 5.9 percentage points higher than the state and national averages.

¹⁰ The Wichita Falls Chamber collects data observations each quarter to submit to C2ER. According to COLI data provided by the Chamber (which differs slightly from the COLI data provided through JobsEQ), the overall COLI index value for Wichita Falls rose sharply between the first quarter of 2020 and the second quarter of 2021, with substantial increases observed in the grocery items, housing, transportation, and miscellaneous goods and services subindices. It is unclear what is driving these trends and a deeper analysis is beyond the scope of this Assessment. The key takeaway, however, is that while Wichita Falls can boast a low cost of living relative to the nation, other communities offer similar costs of living and an advantage in “purchasing power.”

FIGURE 23: HOUSEHOLD INCOME DISTRIBUTION, 2019



SOURCE: ACS 1-YEAR ESTIMATES; BRS

Wichita Falls also had the highest all-ages poverty rate and child poverty rate among all comparison geographies as of 2020. As shown in Figure 24 on the following page, this was not the case in 2019. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program, the all-ages poverty rate in Wichita Falls declined by 4.3 percentage points between 2015 and 2019, best among all comparison geographies.¹¹ But between 2019 and 2020, this rate increased again by 1.6 percentage points. A similar but more pronounced trend was seen for child poverty.¹²

¹¹ SAIPE estimates are modeled from single-year American Community Survey estimates of the number of individuals in poverty, with administrative records and other Census data as predictors. Additional controls are applied so that county-level data sums to state estimates which in turn sum to national estimates. SAIPE provides a confidence interval, which represents uncertainty from both sampling and from modeling, for each estimate.

¹² As of 2022, the federal poverty threshold is \$13,590 for a single individual and \$27,250 for a four-person household.

FIGURE 24: POVERTY RATES IN WICHITA FALLS AND THE UNITED STATES, 2015 TO 2020

Geography	2015	2019	2020	Percentage Point Change	
				2015-19	2019-20
All Ages					
Wichita Falls	17.8%	13.5%	15.1%	-4.3%	1.6%
Abilene	15.3%	14.4%	12.9%	-0.8%	-1.6%
Amarillo	14.9%	13.9%	14.4%	-0.9%	0.4%
San Angelo	15.5%	12.8%	11.9%	-2.6%	-0.9%
Texas	15.9%	13.6%	13.4%	-2.3%	-0.2%
United States	14.7%	12.3%	11.9%	-2.4%	-0.4%
Ages 0-17					
Wichita Falls	25.1%	17.1%	20.0%	-8.0%	2.9%
Abilene	22.0%	19.2%	17.4%	-2.8%	-1.7%
Amarillo	21.9%	18.9%	19.9%	-3.1%	1.0%
San Angelo	21.5%	17.2%	16.5%	-4.3%	-0.8%
Texas	22.9%	19.2%	18.8%	-3.7%	-0.4%
United States	20.7%	16.8%	15.7%	-3.9%	-1.1%

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU SMALL AREA INCOME AND POVERTY ESTIMATES (SAIPE); BRS

It is not clear why poverty rates increased in Wichita Falls between 2019 and 2020 while state and national rates declined. It should be emphasized that the estimates have wide confidence intervals, meaning that the increase could be the product of a sample or modeling error as opposed to an actual increase in poverty in Wichita Falls. **But given that these numbers are moving in the opposite direction of state and national trends, these indicators warrant close monitoring going forward.**

Taken together, the preceding data indicators confirm a key finding from input: too many residents in Wichita Falls are struggling economically. Additionally, it is clear from both the 2017 Regional Assessment and more recent data that these challenges predate the pandemic. While some progress has been made in recent years, the input and data confirm the urgency of expanding economic activity in Wichita Falls and ensuring that all residents have an opportunity to share in the prosperity.

7. Persistence and Pride

Community leaders in Wichita Falls took bold action with the creation of the first Falls Future Strategy in 2018. The launch of the “2.0” process – a year ahead of schedule – demonstrates an ongoing commitment to shaping a more prosperous and successful future.

What is required now is persistence. Some of the challenges that Wichita Falls faces have been decades in the making and will require time to address. The input process also revealed another barrier that must be overcome: a community culture that is frequently resistant to change. Said one stakeholder, “There is a battle anytime you want to make any kind of change – it’s constant – and outsiders perceive this.” Many stakeholders expressed frustration with a mentality that impedes progress in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to public-sector investments needed to upgrade assets and enhance quality of place. One stakeholder said, “Even the most modest change like sidewalks downtown ... people say ‘we don’t want to be like Dallas.’ But new downtown sidewalks are not gonna make us Dallas!”

FIGURE 30: "IN THREE SENTENCES OR LESS, DESCRIBE YOUR IDEAL VISION FOR WICHITA FALLS IN THE YEAR 2030"



SOURCE: FALLS FUTURE 2.0 COMMUNITY SURVEY; BRS

As the word cloud on the preceding page shows, Wichita Falls residents want to see many improvements in their community in the coming years. Many of these words bring to mind key themes from the input process – a desire for more growth, family-friendly amenities, high-quality jobs, downtown development, and so on. Making progress on these opportunities will require change.

Additionally, the change that Wichita Falls needs must be driven by the people who live and work in the community. Put another way, the community's future success will be dependent in large part on the pride and ownership that its residents take in doing the hard work to improve.

Community pride can be a difficult concept to measure, but one innovative approach involves calculating a "Net Promoter Score." A Net Promoter Score is a common research metric where survey respondents are asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 the likelihood that they would recommend something – typically a product, service, or brand – to a friend or colleague. Individuals who respond with a rating of 9 or 10 are categorized as "promoters" while respondents who answer 0 to 6 are rated as "detractors." The Net Promoter Score is then calculated by subtracting the detractors from the promoters and indexing scores on a scale of -100 to +100, with a more positive score being considered good.

Online survey respondents were asked to rate the likelihood on a scale of zero to 10 that they would recommend Wichita Falls to a friend or colleague. **Their responses worked out to a Net Promoter Score of -26.5, indicating that Wichita Falls has significant work to do on boosting community pride. As one input participant said, "We've got to make sure we have people who want to see positive growth and momentum participating and taking things on." This is the charge for leaders in Wichita Falls as they embark on the Falls Future 2.0 process.**

APPENDIX: IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

The Implementation Evaluation in this section provides a high-level overview of the activation of the first Falls Future strategy from its launch in 2018 to the present. It seeks to identify areas where implementation activities have been successful, examples where clear progress remains to be achieved, and challenges and opportunities encountered during implementation.

This Evaluation is not intended as a line-by-line assessment of progress or a recitation of accomplishments. Instead, it focuses on high-level themes for the Steering Committee, the Chamber, and its partners to consider as they determine the structure, content, and activation of Falls Future 2.0. It is based primarily on interviews with staff and volunteers involved with the implementation effort as well as Broad Ripple Strategies' analysis of materials provided by the Chamber.

OVERVIEW

A successful first step. Stakeholders involved with the implementation of Falls Future generally held positive views about the strategy's impact on community and economic development in Wichita Falls. In addition to its tangible impacts, stakeholders said Falls Future helped create a "much more cohesive vibe" and "break down silos" in Wichita Falls. The creation and activation of the strategy helped key organizations and entities coalesce and work together around a shared set of priorities. This work led to several major wins, though stakeholders identified several aspects of the strategy that did not advance as far as hoped. (These successes and challenges will be discussed later in this evaluation.) Overall, leaders in Wichita Falls generally characterized the implementation effort as a "solid B-plus," bringing about major progress but with room for improvement.

The pandemic stalled momentum. Input participants said the Covid-19 pandemic put many aspects of strategic implementation on hold. While this was also the case in virtually every other community, stakeholders said the pandemic struck at a critical point in time for the activation of Falls Future. Input participants said that, after a year and a half, several implementation efforts had gathered significant momentum and a positive energy was taking hold in the community. In particular, Downtown Wichita Falls seemed on the cusp of reaching an entirely new level on its revitalization timeline prior to the pandemic disruptions. Leaders in Wichita Falls understand that they must work to recapture the community's earlier momentum. The initiation of the Falls Future 2.0 is evidence of this commitment.

An early start on round two. Falls Future was initially intended as a five-year strategy ending in mid-2023. But leaders in Wichita Falls realized that the community would benefit from an updated strategy a year earlier. Input participants said many aspects of the first strategy have been completed, while others have struggled to gain traction even after months of concerted efforts. As one stakeholder succinctly put it. "The things that have advanced have gone as far as they can and we need to check them off the list or jump to

the next level. The things that haven't advanced need to be revisited or dropped." The pandemic is also entering a new phase – hopefully one in which there is less risk to public health and economic activity – making it an ideal time to consider strategic next steps. Ultimately, leaders reached consensus that their "time would be best spent looking ahead." This Evaluation can help stakeholders move forward by identifying key lessons from the first round of implementation.

IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE

Volunteer-led implementation produced mixed results. The Implementation Plan from the first Falls Future strategy called for the creation of a multi-tiered volunteer structure to guide strategic implementation. This included keeping the Steering Committee that created the strategy together to serve as an "Implementation Committee" and creating multiple "action teams" under the Committee to advance certain aspects of implementation. Input participants said volunteers were instrumental to success in some areas, around advocacy for the 2020 school bond, bike-friendly initiatives, and certain aspects of military affairs. But stakeholders said that the Steering Committee never effectively transitioned into a more permanent oversight group, and most action teams failed to gain traction and have since gone dormant or disbanded.

Professional staff helped drive results. With the exceptions noted above, much of the progress made on the first Falls Future strategy was driven by professional staff at the Chamber, City of Wichita Falls, and other key implementation partners. Input participants said they would like to see future implementation tasks be assigned primarily to the organizations and entities that have the capacity and ability to act, recognizing that additional resources may be required to accommodate expanded programs of work.

Recalibrating the implementation structure. The findings in the previous two paragraphs point to a need to re-work the implementation structure for Falls Future 2.0. Stakeholders said they would like the "heavy lifting" of implementation to fall to organizations and entities with the staff capacity and resources to advance complex programs of work. But as previously discussed, the first Falls Future strategy helped "break down silos" between various partners in the community. Stakeholders said they would like to see an implementation structure for Falls Future 2.0 that continues to foster cross-sector collaboration. This could include a more limited "advisory board" for ongoing implementation oversight and/or empaneling temporary "task forces" to tackle specific issues and disband once work is complete.

PROGRESS ON THE SEVEN CATALYSTS

This section provides a brief discussion of implementation efforts for each of the seven Catalysts in the Falls Future strategy. It is not intended as a substitute for the formal tracking documents that the Wichita Falls Chamber has regularly updated throughout strategic implementation. Instead, it provides a high-level overview of progress, focusing especially on implications for the Falls Future 2.0 strategy or implementation structure. In short, one Catalyst – Modern School Facilities – was successfully completed in the first 3.5

years of implementation. Another Catalyst, An Entrepreneurial “Maker Hub,” has not gained traction. To varying degrees, the remaining five Catalysts are works in progress that will require identifying an updated set of action steps and “next-level priorities.” A brief overview for each Catalyst is provided as follows.

1. The Wichita Falls Talent Partnership

- With support of the Wichita Falls Economic Development Corporation (WFEDC), the Chamber added a new staff position: the Director of the Wichita Falls Talent Partnership. This new capacity has helped support enhanced programming around military talent, internships, and business-education connections, all of which drew praise from stakeholders.
- Input participants said the Partnership has functioned more as a “workforce development pipeline program” than the collective impact backbone organization envisioned in the first strategy. There are many ways to organize efforts related to talent, and it is a positive that Wichita Falls has identified an approach that fits its needs.
- Feedback from business community representatives indicates that there is a desire for strengthened connections between employers and the local talent pipeline, particularly higher education partners.
- “The Circuit” was a welcome development but input participants said the group is still finding its way in terms of its exact scope and mission, with the pandemic having presented a major challenge.

2. Modern School Facilities

- This Catalyst was effectively completed with the November 2020 passage of a bond initiative that will fund the creation of two new high schools in WFISD.
- Stakeholders credited a strong advocacy campaign for the electoral victory, which while narrow was a marked improvement over a 2014 bond initiative that was voted down decisively.
- Input participants said that while new high schools will soon be a reality, the community must continue to stay on top of a wide range of school facility needs to ensure that similar challenges do not arise in the future.

3. A Best-Practice Economic Development Program

- Input participants said the Chamber has enhanced its staff capacity and programs, which has helped bring about some project wins. Stakeholders are optimistic that additional investments by the WFEDC to upgrade the business park will help bring about additional successes in the near future.
- As discussed in the Competitive Assessment, Wichita Falls has an opportunity to leverage SAFB and institutions such as MSU (newly part of the Texas Tech University System) for economic development opportunities.
- Stakeholders said the community must reduce tension around the permitting process in the City of Wichita Falls to present a unified and harmonious image to prospective investors and companies.

4. A Thriving Sheppard Air Force Base

- Input participants said that the mission at SAFB is strong and sustainable and that the Sheppard Military Affairs Committee (SMAC) has helped support this state of affairs.
- The City of Wichita Falls and its partners made significant upgrades to the primary gateway into the base, and the Chamber has enhanced talent programs for military personnel, retirees, and families.
- Input participants said there are two major opportunities to pursue in the coming years. The first is seeking opportunities to expand the mission at SAFB, potentially with an increased advocacy presence in Washington, D.C. The second is to pursue public-private partnerships that can leverage the base's facilities.
- Additional areas for improvement around SAFB include updated amenities and communications to improve experiences for Airmen-in-Training, permanent party, and international pilots and families.

5. An Entrepreneurial 'Maker Hub'

- This Catalyst was the only one of seven in which little substantial progress was achieved.
- The struggles in this area were not for a lack of effort. Community partners worked for many months seeking to reach an agreement with a private partner who would take on the operations of a new entrepreneurial facility, but the private operator ultimately decided to focus its efforts elsewhere.
- The consensus among stakeholders is that additional progress in this Catalyst is unlikely and that the community should consider other approaches to improve its entrepreneurial and small business support systems.

6. A Live-Work-Play Downtown

- Downtown was "red hot" prior to the pandemic, and the City of Wichita Falls, the WFEDC, and its partners were able to land a convention hotel to enhance the potential of the Wichita Falls Multi-Purpose Events Center, a major victory.
- Downtown Wichita Falls stakeholders are optimistic that private investment will return as public health and economic conditions improve, but that other barriers to progress remain.
- One barrier is financial. Upgrading downtown streetscapes and incentivizing additional private investment will require new resources. Input participants expressed disappointment with the defeat of a 2018 bond initiative that would have funded downtown infrastructure upgrades. Creation of a Public Improvement District (PID) could help fund some enhancements, but input participants said more substantial funding will be required at some point.
- The first Implementation Plan called for a downtown economic development staff position. The City of Wichita Falls approved the position, but it was not created due to infrastructure needs at the business park and the imminent development of the Falls Future 2.0 plan.

- As discussed in the Competitive Assessment, there is disagreement among Downtown stakeholders regarding how the district is programmed and marketed. This represents a threat that must be resolved, as the continued growth and success of Downtown Wichita Falls will rely upon a wide range of property owners, businesses, and public and private partners working together.

7. A Bicycle-Friendly Community

- Stakeholders said success in this Catalyst exceeded expectations and the Bike Wichita Falls group “has done more than ever was done before in terms of coalescing the biking community.”
- The City of Wichita Falls and Bike Wichita Falls helped the community receive a Bronze-level Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC) award from the League of American Bicyclists in the second year of implementation. The Falls Future Implementation Plan envisioned this as a goal for year four.
- Looking ahead, stakeholders said the community should consider pursuing a Silver-level designation, which would likely require infrastructure upgrades such as protected bicycle infrastructure on public rights of way.
- Input participants said a dedicated professional staff position – discussed in the first Falls Future strategy – may be needed going forward.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FALLS FUTURE 2.0

A variety of funding sources may be needed. As previously discussed, Wichita Falls is fortunate to have strong public-sector support for economic development programs and investments. With a few exceptions (e.g., advocacy efforts for the school bond), stakeholders said limited private funding went into the direct activation of the first Falls Future plan. Input participants said the private sector may need to take an increased role in resourcing some aspects of Falls Future 2.0 implementation.

The importance of diversity and inclusion. The first Falls Future strategy included recommendations to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in Wichita Falls and the Chamber has subsequently engaged experts in this field for guidance. Stakeholders said that it will be important for Falls Future 2.0 to consider diversity and inclusion, particularly in light of findings in the Competitive Assessment that the community is struggling with issues of openness. Input participants said it will be important that any efforts undertaken are impactful and do not amount to merely “checking a box.”

Internal awareness of progress can be improved. Input participants said that many residents of Wichita Falls have a limited awareness of Falls Future or its outcomes. This is true even for some otherwise highly engaged community members who participated in the stakeholder engagement process. Input participants praised the Chamber’s marketing and communications capacity and said they would like to see enhanced internal branding and communication of progress related to Falls Future 2.0.