

BELIZE CITY & CLIMATE CHANGE: PLANNING BRIEFS

URBANIZATION



The city core is losing population while unplanned commuter towns are growing.

Commuter towns and suburbs to the north and west are gaining in population. Yet Belize City itself is emptying out. The once lively historic downtown now has hardly any nightlife and fewer residents. As a result, downtown is no longer as enjoyable for residents or visitors. There are signs of blighted and abandoned buildings. Crime is going up. Tourists do not stay in the city. Without a vibrant core, Belize City is missing out on potential economic growth, especially in tourism and hospitality. Meanwhile, unemployment rates for women and youth remain stubbornly high.

A high cost of living is driving the growth of sprawling suburbs and informal settlements.

Land within Belize City is scarce and expensive. Low-rise and single-family housing is the most common, which limits the number of units on the market. As affordable housing in the city becomes harder to find, commuter towns along the north and west highways are gaining population rapidly. These growing suburban communities are sprawling into extremely flood-prone land. Additionally, migrants from rural areas and border countries are having a difficult time finding quality, low-cost housing close to their jobs in Belize City. Many end up living in informal settlements. These areas usually lack running water, electricity, or sanitation services.

Development in ecologically sensitive areas is destroying natural flood protection.

Both informal settlements and commuter towns are expanding into vulnerable mangrove wetlands. These areas serve as critical buffers against flooding and storm surge. Mangroves are also natural drainage basins that ease the strain on the city's stormwater infrastructure. As mangroves are developed, the Belize City metro region becomes increasingly susceptible to severe storm damage and flooding. Insufficient solid waste management is also clogging drainage infrastructure.

Belize City's natural amenities are underutilized.

Belize City offers many attractive natural areas, including the banks of Haulover Creek, mangrove forests, marine and coastline areas, and public parks and green spaces. However, the city is not well known for its natural amenities, especially to international tourists, in part because these areas are not well-maintained or access points are limited. Many of the city's parks also have poor lighting, poor pedestrian access, and lack recreational attractions. These spaces are often not well used and may feel unsafe for residents, particularly women and children.

Congestion in, out, and around Belize City is significant.

Many residents of the growing suburban towns still need to commute to the city core for work and school. There is no efficient mass transit to connect these towns and Belize City. As a result, commuters are contributing to a spike in car congestion, chaotic traffic, and bottlenecks. This poor mobility is resulting in productivity losses that make the city unattractive to businesses and travelers. Additionally, there is no unified transit system within the city, which results in inefficient routes and stop placement, and inconsistent service and schedules. Some areas are not served by the buses at all, and there are reports that drivers do not allow proper time for seniors and riders with disabilities to board, or may not stop for these riders at all.

Belize City has limited institutional capacity, and coordination across jurisdictions is lacking.

There is weak local control over urban development and housing regulation. While much of development is regulated at the national level, coordination between municipal and national agencies needs improvement. Belize City is also challenged by the regional nature of its growth. The commuter towns are not under the jurisdictional control of the city and are themselves under several different local governments. Planning across the metropolitan region is not robust. Finally, though Belize City has a master plan, it has shortcomings. Critically, the Master Plan does not address comprehensive zoning.

URBANIZATION IN BELIZE CITY

PLANNING GUIDANCE

Congestion and affordability can both be addressed through infill and increased density.

Belize City's low density is contributing to higher housing prices and longer distances between different types of uses, such as residential and commercial areas. This makes it harder to get around by foot or bike, and drives up the cost of living. Increasing density can help to address both affordability and congestion within the city. Promoting infill development that adds new housing units to less flood-prone areas can help to move populations out of the most vulnerable parts of the floodplain and prevent sprawl into mangrove areas. Comprehensive zoning can help to promote a diversity of sizes and pricing in housing units and get more affordable units on the market. Affordable housing is essential to moving populations out of informal settlements and poverty.

Prioritizing ecological restoration and green spaces with key design elements can aid in flood control.

Preserving the natural areas of Belize City is critical for climate change resilience. Restoration and protection of existing mangroves must be prioritized to protect residents from the increasing risks of flooding and storm surge associated with rising sea levels and climate change. Adding green infrastructure elements, such as increased vegetation, bioswales, rain gardens, and wetlands, to existing public parks and streets can help control water. These new features can be paired with a campaign to improve pedestrian safety measures, such as sidewalk renovations or expansion. Parks can also be revitalized to offer natural flood absorption when designed with water absorption features, such as sunken areas, rain retention tanks, wetlands, and native plants.

A coordinated and efficient mass transit system and safe, multimodal corridors can improve mobility and attract visitors.

The congestion along the northern and western highways suggests these routes provide sufficient demand for transit lines to connect the commuter towns with the city core. However, comprehensive transit planning is needed to prioritize buses and incentivize commuters not to drive. Within the city, standardizing bus routes, stops, and schedules across private companies would make the system more attractive to residents and visitors. It is especially critical to improve stops and schedules so seniors and riders with disabilities have more equitable access to the buses. A centralized fare collection system, such as a refillable transit card, would also make it easier for commuters to utilize the system. Additionally, Belize City needs to prioritize adding bike lanes and improved pedestrian walkways. To start, the city can emphasize the creation of multimodal corridors throughout the downtown area by adding bike and walking paths that connect to water taxi stations and the bus terminal at West Collect Canal. This will also make it easier for tourists to enjoy the historic downtown.

Revitalizing public spaces, including both historic downtown and natural areas, can restore Belize City's vibrancy.

Lively and well-used public spaces are more attractive to residents and visitors, and can promote wellbeing, exercise, and the local economy. One way Belize City can promote vibrancy is by strengthening current efforts to revitalize the historic downtown. Revitalization of historic properties and public spaces is currently underway in the "EcoMuseum Zone," but planning can further support these measures. Additional amenities, such as walking and biking paths, rain gardens and native vegetation, and murals or public art that celebrate Belizean culture, can also be added. These measures can help direct visitors to circulate through the area and visit local shops and restaurants. Cultural programming can also help ensure downtown stays lively in the evenings and at night.

Protecting and restoring natural areas should also be prioritized to promote ecotourism and recreation throughout the city. This should include development restrictions to protect the wetlands along the banks of Haulover Creek and restore the water for fishing and recreation. The installation of boardwalks and other water access points for the creek and the mangrove areas could also make these spaces more accessible for leisure, while also protecting their ecological benefits.

Planning and coordination across jurisdictions are key to creating a more resilient metropolitan region.

Planners need regulatory tools like comprehensive zoning to help guide and control growth. Additionally, the city needs to have as much information as possible about the vulnerabilities its populations face. Community-led surveys and vulnerability mapping can help to identify areas where government assistance is most needed. Increasing cooperation between the city and the suburban governments will be necessary to properly address transportation, climate resilience, and other challenges. The creation of formal bodies, such as a metropolitan planning commission, can help spearhead these efforts, and work to develop critical guidance, such as a regional master plan.

ABOUT BELIZE ASSOCIATION OF PLANNERS

Belize Association of Planners is a proactive professional planning organization committed to assuring social justice and promoting sustainability in the natural and built environment. We work to address relevant planning and development issues in Belize by working in partnership with the public and private sector and civil society organizations, and the people of Belize through research, education, advocacy and action. For more information, visit belizeplanners.org.

These planning briefs were made in partnership with students from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.