

South Padre Island

Master Park Plan



Date: April 2006

South Padre Island City Alderman

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Town History

This thirty-four mile long stretch of white sand is bordered to the east by the Gulf of Mexico and to the west by the Laguna Madre Bay. The natural beauty of its beaches, its vibrant business climate and the friendly people that call the island home matches South Padre Island's rich history.



Walking along the beach at sunset.

Recorded history of the island began in 1519, when Alonso Alvarez de Pineda sailed past the Isla Blanca (White Island) while charting the Gulf of Mexico for Spain. At the time, Pineda noted that “giants” inhabited the coast. He may have been referring to the Karankawa Indians, also known as the “Kronks”. They were a tall people who wintered on the mainland and spent the summer on the island. By 1521, Hernan Cortez had conquered the Aztecs. Gold and silver were being mined in Mexico and shipped to Spain. Numerous galleons laden with treasure and immigrants were blown off course to Padre Island, where they foundered on sand bars with surf smashed hulls. Such wealth afloat offered irresistible temptation to buccaneers who preyed chiefly on Spanish ships. Indians and scavengers inhabited the island until the 1800's.

In 1804, Padre Jose Nicolas Balli, a Catholic Missionary Priest, founded a settlement on South Padre Island called Rancho Santa Cruz where he raised cattle and horses. The Island is named for Balli. On April 21, 1836, Sam Houston's forces annihilated the Mexican army led by General Santa Ana in the Battle of San Jacinto, and the Republic of Texas was born. Texas seceded from the union at the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 and the Island was engulfed in another war. The federal Navy moved to blockade the Padre Island coast, hoping to stop the flow of Confederate cotton and European guns.

Fighting continued on both land and sea throughout the war. The last battle took place in May 1865, a full month after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, within earshot of South Padre Island at Palmito Hill.



Horseback Riding on the Dunes.

A large part of the Island has not changed much since the Spanish Conquistadors first nicknamed it “el Desierto Muerto”, meaning the dead desert. Four hundred years of recorded history show that Indians, pirates, missionaries, conquerors, colonizers, ranchers, developers and visionaries have struggled across the dunes. The island has never been a static place: wind and tides are constantly changing its sandy contours, just as storms have opened and closed the passes across it. The island, steeped in history, has always been an enduring, fascinating place of natural and buried treasures.

While its many amenities make South Padre Island the premiere vacation spot in the State, the location of the Island makes it one of the most outstanding areas to observe wildlife in its natural state. This is particularly true with birding. South Padre is expanding its efforts to draw birders and other nature tourists to the Island. As a barrier island, the Town is uniquely situated for nature-tourism development. As the only barrier island on the great Texas Coastal Birding Trail’s Lower Texas Coast Section and a World Birding Center site (WBC), it can easily establish itself as a major birding destination. The Island is the only WBC site that regularly experiences the migrative “fall out” or “grounding”. During certain weather conditions, the Island’s groves of trees or tall shrubbery called migrant traps, attract myriads of exhausted land birds that have just crossed the Gulf of Mexico. Because of these spring fall outs, the Island is the primary neo-tropical migrant bird site in all of the WBC sites.

The Island is not only an important element of the system and habitat for migratory and shore birds, but is also a fairly untapped resource for public education regarding turtle nesting and the benefits of the wetland environment for fish nurseries. The wetlands of the Island are an essential element in the production of the beginning of the food chain for all of the birds and the aquatic Laguna Madre community.

Socio-economic Data

Ethnicity– The Town of South Padre Island is located within Cameron County at the southern most tip of the State of Texas. The Island's coast is the eastern County line. The Point Isabel Independent School District (PIISD), which serves the Island and four other communities, more closely reflects the ethnic distribution of the Rio Grande Valley. PIISD is comprised of 84% Hispanic children, 15% white and 1% other ethnicities. 87% are Economically Disadvantaged and 59.7% are At Risk. The residents of the Town of South Padre Island have the following ethnic composition: 73.6% white; 25.3% Hispanic and 1.2% other.

Age – The population of the Island for such a celebrated Spring Break and summer destination is surprisingly middle aged. The median age of the residents of South Padre Island is 51.8 years old. According to the 2000 Census Data there are 337 children between the ages of 0 to 19, 1,639 adults from the ages of 20 – 64 and 446 older adults from 65 years and up.



The Town of South Padre Island.

Income - 2000 census data shows the median household income was \$72,450. Per capita income is \$36,955. Cameron County's per capita income was \$3,952 in 1959, \$4,963 in 1969, \$7,266 in 1979 and \$7,125 in 1989. The median household income for the County was \$4,624 in 1969, \$11,731 in 1979 and \$17,336 in 1989. With all of the tourism that the Island draws, many jobs are created and available at the hotels, restaurants and shops.

Population – The 2005 population estimate for the Town at 3,439, 52.28% males and 47.72% females. The 2000 census data showed the town at 2,836. This reflects a 21.3% population growth over the past 5 years. There were 1752 family households identified. The average household size is 1.96 persons.

Cameron County's population over the past 100 years per the US Census Data has shown a steady increase as follows:

1900 - 16,095	1910 - 27,158	1920 - 36,662	1930 - 77,540
1940 - 83,202	1950 - 125,170	1960 - 151,098	1970 - 140,368
1980 - 209,727	1990 - 260,120	2000 - 335,227	

The County has had a median growth rate of 38.75% over the past 100 years. Even though the rate of growth in the County and Island have been generally the same, the Island is becoming quickly built out. There are still some open lots, but not many. The population of residents is anticipated to slow from the current rate since the number of permanent dwellings on the Island are limited.

Housing – The total number of units on the Island according to the 2000 census is 4,685, 1,211 of which are occupied, 3,474 vacant of which 2,068 are seasonal. The Homeowner vacancy rate is 7.2%. The rental vacancy rate is 74.9%. The 1990 census showed the number housing units at 4,082 with 813 occupied and 3269 vacant.

South Padre Island has the conveniences and attractions of a modern resort coupled with miles of pristine island terrain which draw thousands of visitors to the Island each year. The white, sandy beaches are known throughout the United States as one of America's top 10 beaches. While its many amenities make South Padre the premiere vacation spot in the state, the location of the Island also makes it one of the premiere spots to observe wildlife in its natural state. The City recognizes the importance of maintaining what is left of our open space and undeveloped land and at the same time providing active and passive recreational opportunities for not only our residents, but all of the many visitors that come to our Island.



Wildlife is abundant on the Island.

Chapter 2. Goals and Objectives

The Town in cooperation with the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) has spent much time, effort and money in preparing studies regarding strategic planning for the Island. These studies are incorporated into this document and are listed in the bibliography. These goals and objectives set the direction and reflect the attitude of the Town of South Padre Island. The goals and objectives of the Master Park Plan are the foundation of the Parks and Recreation system. The goals and objectives are the basis on which the City's Parks and Recreation accomplishments will be judged. This plan was prepared for use over the next five years.

Goal #1: Develop the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center to inspire restoration and conservation in the region through education and public outreach.

- 1) Develop the World Birding Center coastal anchor site "The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center"
- 2) Create quality wildlife watching experiences for local residents and eco-tourists.
- 3) Utilize interpretive signage to educate the public regarding the natural occurring and manmade features of the Island.
- 4) Enhance educational opportunities of how man and nature can cohabitate in such a manner that preserves the important ecological balance of this pristine island.



Goal #2: The Town desires to maintain and develop natural areas on the island.

- 1) Purchase open land as available.
- 2) Work with partners to develop dedicated park land.
- 3) Create opportunities for the acquisition of natural areas through the education and promotion of the World Birding Center and The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center.
- 4) Protect established wetlands.

Goal #3: Protect the miles of public white sand beaches along the gulf shore.

- 1) Continue to maintain the beach with regular grooming, daily during the summer months and spring break.

Goal #4: Create Bird and Wildlife Habitat.

- 1) Acquire and enhance diverse critical habitat.
- 2) Provide birding amenities such as observation areas and parking.
- 3) Develop a proactive promotion that includes directional and interpretive signage, handouts, coordination with other entities.
- 4) Capitalize on the existing tourism infrastructure to promote a theme of “enjoy world class birding while staying at a world class island resort.”
- 5) Identify tour organizers and operators who operate birding tours and work with them to promote the Island and birding activities.

Goal #5: Provide locals and tourists access to interact with wildlife.

- 1) Increase the availability of trails, boardwalks, interpretive signage and materials that ultimately lead the public throughout the Island connecting wetland areas, the dunes/sands and the birding sites.
- 2) Develop native plantings in public garden areas with educational/interpretive signage for enjoyment by the tourist and education of the locals. Encourage the locals to landscape with native plantings throughout the Island providing food and cover for the birds and butterflies.
- 3) Maintain and further develop bird watching blinds.

Goal #6: Develop nature and experiential tourism.

- 1) Develop a consensus among the business community, public and government that South Padre Island should proactively promote birding.
- 2) Capitalize on South Padre Island’s excellent position to serve as a base for off-Island birding excursions by providing high quality lodging and restaurants, coupled with day trips to prime birding areas throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Goal #7: Develop/maintain more passive and active indoor/outdoor facilities.

- 1) Construct an indoor recreation center.
- 2) Acquire land for parks.
- 3) Improve current park facilities



South Padre Island Convention Center on the Laguna Madre.

Chapter 3. Plan Development Process

Why does the Town need a Master Park Plan? South Padre Island desires to provide its citizens a solid, well thought-out parks and recreation system that provides equal and safe quality of life services for all. So that the Town might provide these services, a review of the current system must be done. Assessing each current park and the status of its facilities, noting needed repairs and improvements, allows the City to plan a maintenance schedule for repairs with budgeted improvements specifically for each park. By prioritizing the need for these repairs and improvements and cost estimates for each item, the City can more fairly determine where the available funds are best used. By comparing the population trends with current park placement, the City can best determine where new parks are needed. Setting goals and objectives, adopting facilities standards and creating a facility priority list by citizens with staff input, allows the City to develop the parks and recreation system appropriately for our residents and visitors.

Methodology

Rapid growth for a town has many benefits as well as many problems. Frequently during periods of rapid growth, cities cannot keep pace with the quality of life needs of the community, such as parks and recreation. During times of growth, many of the City's funds are directed to essential daily living activities like water, sewer and roadways. Keeping these systems available to all citizens and in good working order can easily usurp all the funds of a budget year.

Approximately five years ago, the City began the process of updating the parks and recreation systems and making them available to all citizens. There is much catching up to do.



An aerial view of the Gulf-side of the Island.

The Economic Development Corporation hired the consulting company of Langford Community Management Services to develop and complete the City's Master Park Plan. The many reports and studies were made available for review. A number of meetings were held over the course of several months to set community goals/objectives, facility standards and start a priority list of needed facilities. Public hearings were then held to take citizen comment on the plan and the priority list. Notice for these hearings was posted at City offices. All citizen input has been considered and included as part of this plan.

Chapter 4. Area and Facility Concepts and Standards

The Master Park Plan was discussed and presented to the Economic Development Corporation and Town Aldermen at meetings in March 2002. Comments were taken, the final document prepared and placed on the Council agenda for approval in April of 2002. It has been reviewed and updated several times leading up to the present April 2006.

Standards and Guidelines

Before planning can direct the development of a community, the Town must create standards and guidelines in which to achieve direction and to insure success in the planning efforts.

The standards and guidelines discussed in this section provide a classification system for the existing and future parks. Service areas for each type of park are identified and facility standards are defined. The standards and guidelines presented in this plan are meant to be guidelines, not absolutes.

Park Classification System

The National Recreational and Park Association's (NRPA) Recreation, Park and Open Space Standards and Guidelines have been reviewed and updated to meet the needs of South Padre Island. The following classifications provide descriptions for each type of park, existing or planned, on the Island and the placement of these parks.

Neighborhood Parks - Facilities that serve a concentrated population and an area for intense recreation. Such as court games, playground apparatus, picnicking, etc. Service area of ½ mile radius with a size of 10 acres or less. With 1 to 2 acres per 1,000 people served. The park should be within neighborhoods and in close proximity to apartment complexes. Suited for intense development and easily accessible.

Community or City Parks - Area of diverse environment quality. May be an area of natural quality for outdoor recreation, such as walking, viewing, sitting, picnicking. Service area of several neighborhoods and a 2-5 mile radius with a size of 15+ acres. With 5 to 8 acres per 1,000 people served. The park may include natural features such as water bodies. Easily accessible to neighborhoods served.

Linear Park - Area developed for one or more varying modes of recreational travel such as hiking, biking and pleasure walking. May include active play areas. No applicable standard for service area. The width should be sufficient to protect the resource and provide maximum use. Built or natural corridors, such as the beach, utility rights of way, bluff lines, vegetation patterns, and roads that link other components of the recreation system or community facilities, such as school libraries, commercial areas and other park areas.

Special Use Park - Areas for specialized or single purpose recreational activities, such as golf courses, nature centers, display gardens, arenas, athletic complexes, or areas that preserve or maintain, and interpret building, sites, and objects of archeological significance. Also plazas or squares in or near commercial centers, boulevards, parkways. No applicable standard for service area. Size is variable and is built within community.

Facility Standards

For the past 30 years, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has been involved in developing guidelines and standards for parks, recreation and open space. These standards and guidelines are published in the most recent edition of the "Park, Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Guidelines" (1995). The NRPA periodically updates this publication by bringing a diverse group of parks and recreation persons together to discuss and formulate the national standards and guidelines. This publication is recognized by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, as well as most states, as the national standards and guidelines and is the basis for the preparation of the Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan (TORP). The standards and guidelines developed for the Town of South Padre Island, based on the NRPA standards, are the standards by which the Town will measure itself. By using these standards, the Town can specifically identify needs and begin to meet them. Many cities use these national standards from which to develop their Master Park Plans. Most of the cities do not meet the standards. These standards are a starting point to help guide the Town's park and recreation development efforts.

The facility standards define the number of facilities recommended to serve each particular type of recreation. These standards are established on the number of facilities per population size. Standards have been adjusted to account for the Island's unusual status as a recreational destination and the limited space available for standard active recreational facilities.

Facility Standards

Type	# of Unit per Pop.	Space Requirements	Service Radius
Multi-purpose Courts	1/2,000 persons	9,984 sq. ft.(120' x 80')	1-2 miles
Trails	1 mile/5,000 persons	varies	N /
		A	
Playgrounds	1/2,500 persons	varies	1/4 mile
Golf	9 holes/25,000 persons	minimum 50 acres hour travel	½ to 1

Chapter 5. Inventory of Areas and Facilities

Island Gateway: In 1995, the EDC initiated the South Padre Island Gateway Beach to Bay Alternative Transportation Loop (Island Gateway). With assistance from the Texas Department of Transportation the project has come to life. It includes approximately three miles of hike and bike trails along the Laguna Madre and the east side of Padre Boulevard, including a low-level timber bridge under and around the east end of the Causeway. Select exhibits are included, as well as, bird viewing platforms. This park is classified as a linear park.



As part of the Island Gateway, this sign was constructed to welcome everyone to the Island.

Water Tower Park: This small, approximately ½ acre park, situated under the water tower, includes a concrete slab with basketball goal and bleachers, a two playscapes, public restroom facilities and three covered picnic tables. It is situated in one of the community's residential areas on the Bay side of the Island. This park is classified as a neighborhood park.



Water Tower Park.



Building sand castles is a favorite past-time on the public beaches.

The Town of South Padre Island also owns land adjacent to the Travellodge on Padre Blvd. The Town does not own any other land. Not enough open land is available for a large sports complex. All organized recreational activities such as baseball and soccer are played on the mainland. Affordable properties available for purchase by the City are few. A few blocks of land remain open and unused. After the completion of the Birding Master Plan, the EDC began to purchase land around the convention center to develop the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. Design development has been completed by Richter Architects from Corpus Christi, Texas.

Turtle Lady Park: This small road island has two covered picnic tables and a pavilion. It is on the north side of Town on Morningside Street. Improvements to the park including new picnic tables with grills, gazebo reconstruction, Xeriscape gardens, an irrigation system and the addition of large concrete sea turtles in memory of the turtle lady are needed. This park is classified as a neighborhood park.

Public Beaches: The beach within the Town limits is closed to vehicular traffic. The 20+ miles north of the Town that includes Andy Bowie Park and extends to the Mansfield Channel is open to vehicular traffic. The beach within the Town is completely a public beach. Even though the hotels and motels line the beach front, there are public beach access points all along the shore. The beaches are identified as a Linear Park. Andy Bowie Park, and the beach north of it, belong to the County. Isla Blanca Park on the south tip of the Island and the Laguna Madre Nature Trail next to the Convention Center, also belong to the County.

Site for The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center: The Town has purchased 7.3 acres of land adjacent to the Laguna Madre Water District treatment plant on which the Birding and Nature Center is to be constructed.



The proposed site of the World Birding Center with many birds already present.

Chapter 6. Needs Assessment and Identification

The Town employed all three types of standards in assessing the needs of the community. The NRPA standards are the most straight forward for comparison. The NRPA standards in comparison to the Town facility inventory is discussed in the recommendations.

The demand-based approach relied on information gathered from surveys and public hearings to indicate how much of the population wanted certain types of facilities.

The standard-based approach used established NRPA standards to determine the amounts of facilities and park area needed to meet the needs of the City.

The resource-based approach was used to identify assets and resources of the City for open space, parks and recreation facilities and define how these resources can be utilized.

Over the past ten years, the Town Aldermen and Economic Development Corporation have been actively seeking the council of experts to provide more than a “Spring Break” attitude regarding the Island. Through the many studies and planning instruments written, the development of the Island as a major nature and birding center has evolved. These documents have provided a base for this plan. The Birding Master Plan is attached as part of the Master Park Plan. The birding plan describes the specifics of the Island’s program of limited acquisitions, visitor amenities, selective habitat enhancement and focused promotion to develop the Island into one of the premier birding locations in the western hemisphere. Besides offering up to 306 reported species, the Island can also serve as a base from which to visit internationally known birding sites throughout the Rio Grande Valley on a series of day trips.



Chapter 7. Plan Implementation and Prioritization of Needs

The Parks Master Plan addresses the park facility needs of the Town of South Padre Island over the next five years. The implementation plan in this section sets the facility prioritization list, prioritizes the recommended improvements and suggests methods with which to fund the improvements. This section also includes a suggested schedule of improvements and addresses the updating of the plan and the development of policies to assist in planning and developing recreation facilities.

Priority Facility List

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Creation of Bird Habitat | 11. Meeting/training rooms |
| 2. Wildlife viewing blinds | 12. Wetland Development |
| 3. Nature trails & Scenic overlooks | 13. Recreation of plant communities for educational purposes |
| 4. Benches and picnic tables | 14. Swimming Pool |
| 5. Informational Kiosks | 15. Playscapes |
| 6. Walking/hiking/biking trails | 16. Tennis Courts |
| 7. Xeriscape gardens | 17. Sand Volleyball |
| 8. Boat ramps | 18. Pavilion |
| 9. Ampitheatre | 19. Racquetball Courts |
| 10. Basketball | |

Recommended Improvements

The Master Birding Plan discusses in detail the Town's implementation program and is incorporated herein as part of this Master Park Plan. The Birding Plan does include connecting County properties as part of the implementation even though they are not controlled by the Town of South Padre Island.

Potential Funding Sources

The Town of South Padre Island has a very tight budget with which to accomplish the business of running a city. With the recent growth, the Town has focused its spending on keeping up with the streets and beach needs of the community. The Economic Development Corporation has been focusing on the quality of life issues such as parks and recreation, beach nourishment and the Tompkins Channel dredging for boat access to the Laguna Madre. The Town is equally as committed to providing better park facilities at more diverse sites for the citizenry. Several potential funding sources are:

Schedule of Improvements

2006—2007

- 1) World Birding Center, The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center next to the Convention Center
- 2) Improvements to current parks, beach and bay accesses

2007—2008

- 1) Continue developing the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center
- 2) Acquisition of park land

2008- 2009

- 1) Develop new park land
- 2) Improvements to current parks



Funding Sources Continued

1. Grants - Through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas Recreation and Parks Account, The General Land Office Coastal Management Program, National Ocean and Atmospheric Association, Coastal Impact Assistance Program, and Parks and Wildlife Trails program. All require some matching funds.
2. Budget Line Item - The Town and EDC have a line item in the annual budget to complete priority items.
3. Bonds - The Town through bond funds can budget for development and renovation of park land.
4. Corporate and Private Sponsors - In the development of its relationship with corporate and private sponsors, the Town should consider possible fund raising events with sponsors and/or private donations for park land or equipment.
5. Volunteer time and donations - The Town, in conjunction with the residents and participant in the Parks and Recreation Programs and Facilities, should elicit assistance from volunteers and associations for fundraisers and “sweat equity”.

Conclusion

The Parks Master Plan is a fluid plan. It should be reviewed annually by staff, aldermen and EDC prior to setting the annual budgets. The plan should be updated as demographics change and goals and objectives are accomplished. The plan should be used by the Town to set the direction of the development of the Parks and Recreation system.

The importance of parks and recreation development is recognized by the Town and EDC as shown through the diligent efforts of both organizations to complete this master park plan.

REFERENCES

Shiner, Moseley and Associates, Inc., May 1996. Master Plan for Bird Watching Sites

Shiner Moseley and Associates, Inc., September 1999. South Padre Island Birding Master Plan.

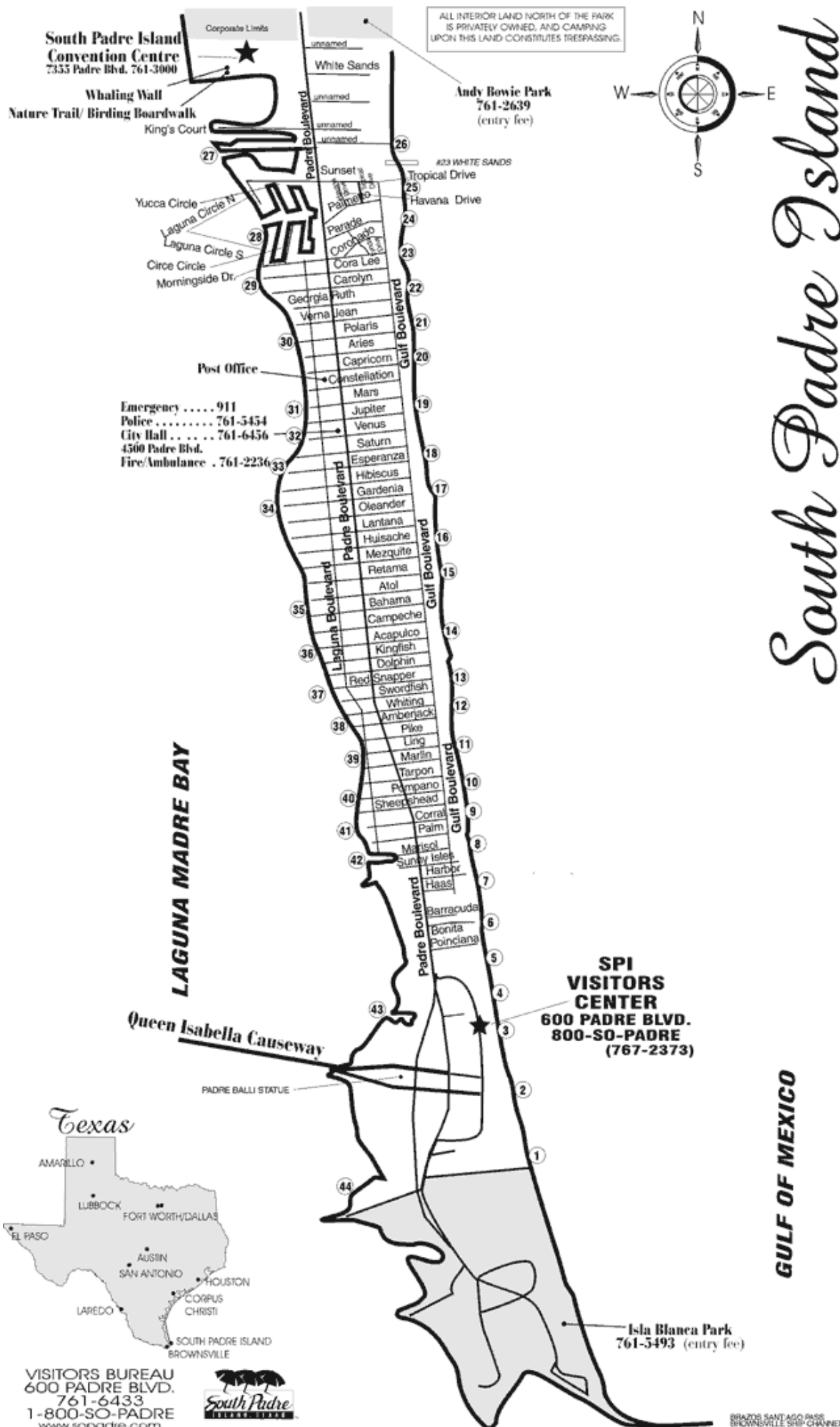
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South Padre Island Chamber of Commerce, 2001. South Padre Island Visitor's Guide.

South Padre Island Web Site. Pictures and Maps.



Sail boating on the quiet Laguna Madre Bay.



South Padre Island Convention Centre
7335 Padre Blvd. 761-3000

Whaling Wall
Nature Trail/ Birding Boardwalk
King's Court

Yucca Circle
Laguna Circle N
Laguna Circle S
Circe Circle
Morningside Dr.

Post Office

Emergency 911
Police 761-5454
City Hall 761-6456
4500 Padre Blvd.
Fire/Ambulance . 761-2236

LAGUNA MADRE BAY

Queen Isabella Causeway

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Corporate Limits

unnamed

White Sands

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unnamed

Sunset

829 WHITE SANDS

Tropical Drive

Havana Drive

Parade

Coronado

Cora Lee

Carolyn

Georgia

Ruth

Jean

Polaris

Aries

Capricorn

Constellation

Mars

Jupiter

Venus

Saturn

Esperanza

Hibiscus

Gardenia

Oleander

Lantana

Huisache

Mezquite

Petate

Atol

Bahama

Campeche

Acapulco

Kingfish

Dolphin

Red Snapper

Swordfish

Whiting

Amberjack

Pike

Ling

Marlin

Tarpon

Pompano

Sheepshead

Corral

Palm

Marisol

Sunny Isles

Harbor

Haas

Barracuda

Bonita

Poinciana

Padre Boulevard

Laguna Boulevard

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Andy Bowie Park
761-2639
(entry fee)

SPI VISITORS CENTER
600 PADRE BLVD.
800-SO-PADRE
(767-2373)

Isla Blanca Park
761-5493 (entry fee)

GULF OF MEXICO

ALL INTERIOR LAND NORTH OF THE PARK IS PRIVATELY OWNED, AND CAMPING UPON THIS LAND CONSTITUTES TRESPASSING.

**BRAZOS SANTAGO PASS
BROWNSVILLE SHIP CHANNEL**

