

chapter 2

palm avenue

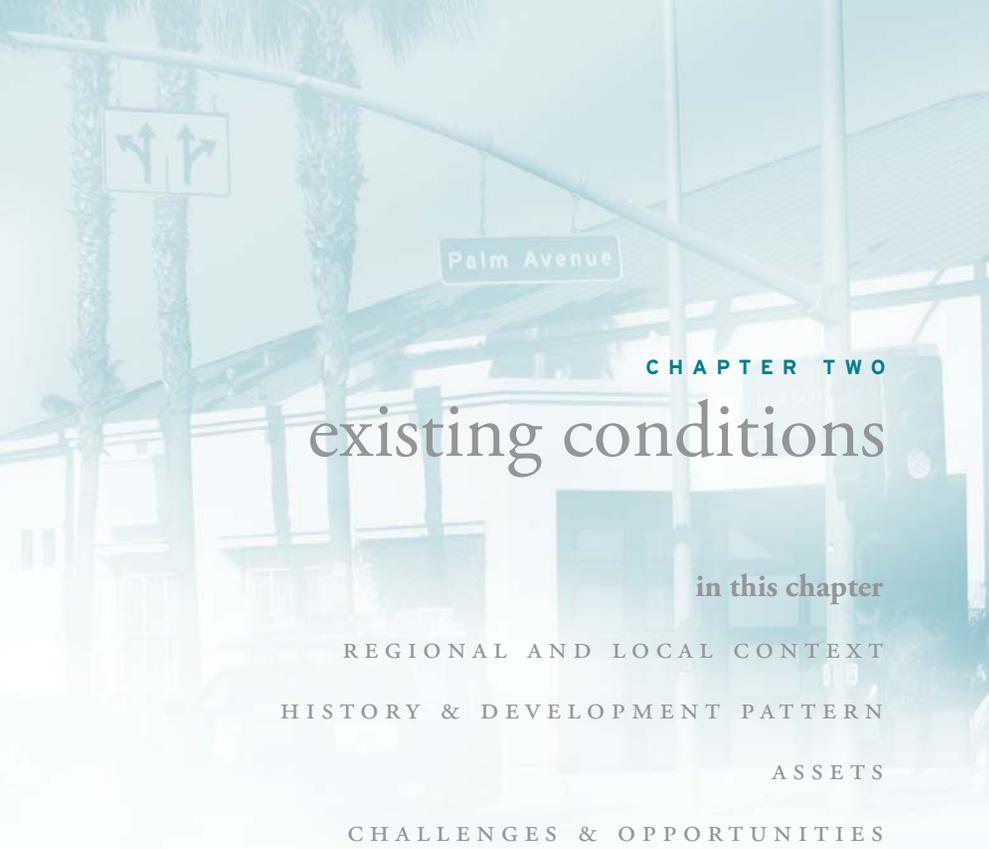
EXISTING CONDITIONS

People have a nice sense of the number that is right for a place, and it is they who determine how many is too many. They do not, furthermore, seek to get away from it all. If they did, they would go to the lonely empty places where there are few people. But they do not. They go to lively places where there are many people. And they go there by choice - not to escape the city, but to partake of it.

William H. Whyte

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.

(The Conservation Foundation, 1979) 100



CHAPTER TWO

# existing conditions

in this chapter

REGIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

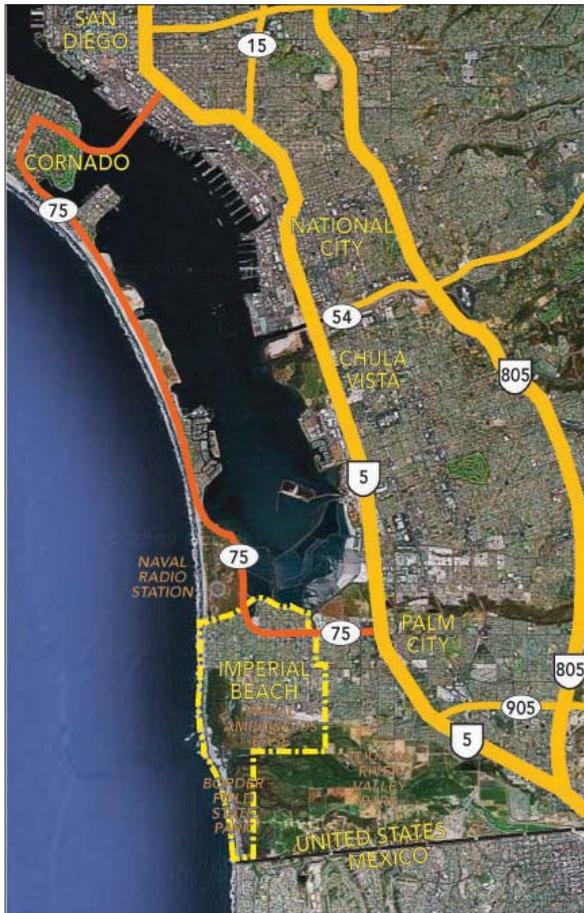
HISTORY & DEVELOPMENT PATTERN

ASSETS

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

**THE PALM AVENUE CORRIDOR HAS MANY STRENGTHS**, as well as some significant challenges to overcome. Future planning should build on the corridor's existing assets, maximize promising opportunities, and work to counter challenges. This chapter describes Palm Avenue's regional and local context, development patterns, and assets, and discusses challenges and potential opportunities that relate to the project area.

FIGURE 2.1 - REGIONAL CONTEXT



### REGIONAL & LOCAL CONTEXT

Imperial Beach is the most southwesterly city in the continental United States. It is bordered on the south by the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge and the Mexico-USA border and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. The Tijuana Slough, a 1,051 acre wetland complex, is one of southern California’s largest coastal estuaries, and the only one not bisected by roads and rail lines.

Currently, 28,200 people live in Imperial Beach (estimate for 2008, California Department of Finance). Redevelopment has been a focus for the City over last decade, and the town has seen a rise in property values as well as tourism and ecotourism.

On a regional level, Palm Avenue is part of State Route 75 (SR 75), a short, 13-mile expressway of Interstate 5 connecting Barrio Logan Community in San Diego in the north and near San Ysidro in South San Diego in the south. It serves as a major route to a number of regional destinations including National Wildlife Refuges, Tijuana River Regional Park, City of Coronado, Silver Strand State Beach, United States Naval Radio Station and United States Naval Amphibious Base. On a city level, it serves as the major east-west route providing access to not just the residential neighborhoods that lie north and south of the corridor, but also the commercial corridors along Old Palm Avenue and Sea Coast Drive.



*Coastal Renaissance along Old Palm Avenue*

## HISTORY & DEVELOPMENT PATTERN

The history of Palm Avenue is intertwined with the development of the City. The first fishing pier was also built in the early 1900s, and was an added attraction to visitors. In 1910 a channel was dredged so that boats could travel from the Coronado area down to what is now Imperial Beach. A battery powered trolley car would meet people at the Coronado landing and take them down 10th Street to Palm Avenue, then west on Palm Avenue to First Street where they could enjoy the beach and shops. This route was popular for several years, until heavy storms caused the channel to fill in with silt. Later development was oriented towards automobile uses, including motels and restaurants serving travelers headed north and south. The impressive surf, beaches and beach-goers imparted a distinct laid-back character to Palm Avenue that remains to this day.

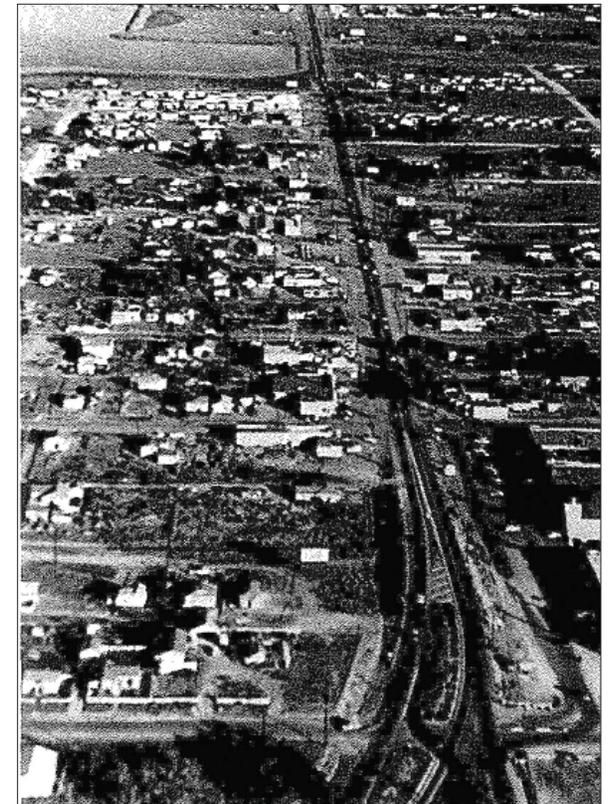
In early 1950s, Imperial Beach was becoming a vibrant place where people who liked to live near the beach also wanted to do their shopping close to home. The first shopping district in the South Bay where one could park free and shop in a variety of stores was the Miracle Shopping District on Palm Avenue from Delaware Street to 9th Street. Other destination included the Palm Theater,

the first in Imperial Beach, and George's Drive-In, the biggest highschool hangout in the 1950s and 1960s. The western end of the corridor was developed primarily with commercial uses. Residential neighborhoods were established to the north and south of Palm Avenue, providing a strong local residential base for uses along the corridor and enhancing its position as a destination in the city.

After rapid population growth of the 1950s and most of the 60s, the city began to experience growing pains. In March 1974, Palm Avenue was widened and became part of the State Route 75 expressway. After many years of disinvestment, the Palm Avenue corridor study area and its adjoining areas has seen a slow but steady increase in desirable public and private development in the past few years. Recent and current development include the 2001 rehabilitation of Imperial Beach Promenade shopping center at Palm Avenue and 9th Street, the 2008 North Island Bank development at Palm Avenue and 11th Street, Coastal Renaissance along Sea Coast Drive and Old Palm Avenue, Palm Avenue Street End Project, and the potential redevelopment of 9th Street and Palm Avenue. These signify a commitment to revitalize this area as the 'Main Street' and commercial hub of Imperial Beach.



*Palm Theater in Shopping District*



*Palm Avenue in 1950s before it was widened*



*Multi-family units next to auto oriented uses*

### ASSETS

Palm Avenue has many positive attributes with its location, unique development patterns and history, distinct character, community amenities, mix of uses, access and connections, and catalyzing forces of new development. Recognizing and capitalizing on these strengths will help create a distinct urban design concept that is unique to the Palm Avenue corridor.

### MIX OF USES

The corridor has a strong mix of land uses including commercial, residential, and institutional. Retail and commercial uses including retail shops, grocery stores, and restaurants are scattered along the length of Palm Avenue but can be found in higher concentrations around 8th and 13th Streets, as well as at Rainbow Drive. Neighborhoods to the north and south of Palm Avenue are predominantly composed of single-family homes and multi-family units. The mix of uses provides a strong foundation for a vibrant mixed-use, streetscape environment.

FIGURE 2.2 - BUILDING USE



MULTIPLE DESTINATIONS

Several community amenities are located on or near the corridor, including Imperial Beach Health Center, Adult Education Center, Teeple Neighborhood Park and the local post office. A multitude of local restaurants and retail shops flank the north and south sides of Palm Avenue, and the corridor is home to five shopping centers.

The proximity of so many community amenities to and along the corridor represents a wealth of destinations and social infrastructure. Capitalizing on the variety and types of amenities, such as locating new mixed-use development, can enhance the benefit the amenities bring to the surrounding residential community.



Imperial Beach Promenade shopping complex

FIGURE 2.3 - COMMUNITY AMENITIES





*Distinctive small beach-town character*

### DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER

Palm Avenue’s character developed from its role as the city’s key east-west spine. Beach-style architecture of some of the small buildings and eclectic business signs provide glimpses into the history of the area. While the auto-oriented strip commercial buildings dominate the overall image of the corridor, the fine grain of older buildings, overall craftsmanship, and use of materials recalls the desirable small-town character of the corridor and the city as a whole.

Similarly the rich planting in the roadway medians, especially around the intersections of 13th and 10th streets provides a distinctive character to the public realm and distinguishes it from the rest of the street.

Opportunities exist to celebrate the history of the corridor and link Palm Avenue with the Pier Plaza and beach front areas. Taking design cues from the existing planting and scenic vistas, Palm Avenue can become a reflection of this vibrant small beach town.

Quiet streets lined with healthy and mature trees characterize the residential neighborhoods to the north and south. Opportunities exist to link Palm Avenue with the residential neighborhoods, taking design cues from the use of trees to provide shade and cooler temperatures during the summer.



*Median planting*

MULTI-MODAL ACCESS

Palm Avenue is served by multiple modes of transportation. Though Interstate 5 serves regional travel needs, Palm Avenue remains an important route for local automobile and truck access and is one of only two major east-west routes through town. A number of major and minor arterials intersect with Palm Avenue and connect it with the rest of the city. Limited bus service operates in the study area, including routes along Palm Avenue, 9th Street, Rainbow Drive and north to Highway 75.

Existing bicycle routes extend in both directions along Palm Avenue and continue on the major arterials of Rainbow Drive, 7th Street, 13th Street, and along Bayshore Bikeway to the northeast.

While Palm Avenue serves auto and truck traffic well, opportunity exists to create a better balance amongst all modes of transportation.



Buses along Palm Avenue

FIGURE 2.4 - MULTI-MODAL ACCESS





*The Street is actively used by a diverse mix of people.*

#### DIVERSE MIX OF PEOPLE

The residents and visitors of Imperial Beach come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Over 20% of residents were born outside of the United States according to the 2000 census. People seek out Imperial Beach for a wide variety of recreational opportunities including bird watching, surfing, fishing, kayaking, shopping and art tours. There are numerous areas of employment along this corridor. This diversity allows for a multitude of project types

and designs. The variety of cultures have the potential to bring a colorful mix of shopping and eating preferences to the area. In turn, tourists would benefit from increased choices for their recreation and hospitality needs.



*The public realm is used by people of all age groups.*

**POLITICAL & COMMUNITY COMMITMENT**

There is strong political support and commitment towards enhancing the assets that make Imperial Beach a desirable place to live and play. The city is currently engaged in a Coastal Renaissance along Seacoast Drive and Old Palm Avenue. Their plans for redevelopment throughout the city are focused on the improvement of commercial properties, public infrastructure, and residential housing.

The people are equally committed in improving the public realm. Positive response to recent improvements like the Palm Avenue Street End Project and planned Bicycle Transportation Plan reflect the community’s need and desire to have a strong and vibrant public realm



*Dedication of the Palm Avenue Street End Project*

### CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

In order to create an implementable streetscape master plan for the corridor, it is important to understand the primary challenges facing Palm Avenue. Strategically building on key opportunities that the corridor presents will ensure a successful revitalization effort.

### IMAGE & IDENTITY

Palm Avenue lacks a sense of cohesion and identity. Problem issues related to image and identity include:

- Vacant and abandoned buildings;
- Poor states of repair of many buildings;
- Graffiti and litter;
- Insufficient lighting for pedestrians and bicyclists; and
- Mismatch of signs and store frontage.

The significant number of vacant and underutilized properties is both a challenge and an opportunity for new development. Once development of these properties is accomplished, graffiti and litter problems should no longer be acceptable in and around busy store fronts.



*Underutilized Land*

DESIGN OF THE PRIVATE REALM

Palm Avenue’s street edge, where the sidewalk meets property lines, is poorly defined and detracts from the pedestrian environment. Challenges include:

- Large lots with significant setbacks providing little or no connection with pedestrians;
- Large parking lots fronting sidewalks;
- Buildings facing the street having blank walls and a lack of entrances and windows;
- Lack of density in the building pattern with large swaths of land separating buildings; and
- Auto-oriented land uses including motels, large-scale retail and commercial buildings.

The existing design of the private realm presents an opportunity for infill development, and a more effective utilization of the land around existing buildings. The design of the private realm can influence the quality of the public realm and provide additional safety and activation on the street by bringing building uses to the street edge. However this project aims to focus on the public realm improvements. Revitalization of the private realm is being addressed in the Commercial Zoning Review project.



*Unfriendly building edges*

FIGURE 2.5 - FIGURE GROUND OF BUILDING FOOTPRINTS





*Frequent jaywalking*



*Large trucks along sidewalks*



*Discontinuous sidewalks*

**DESIGN OF THE PUBLIC REALM**

The current design of the public realm along Palm Avenue presents an unsafe, inconvenient, and pedestrian-unfriendly environment. Challenges include:

- Wide right-of-way of Palm Avenue;
- Pattern of long blocks with unfriendly human scale;
- Sidewalks with little or no shade providing trees;
- Discontinuous and unshaded sidewalks with inadequate ADA access;
- Unsafe, long, poorly marked and some ADA inaccessible crosswalks with inadequate travel time for people with disabilities;
- Frequent jaywalking of pedestrians because of large distances between signalized crosswalks;

- Wide driveways and frequent curb cuts; and
- Discontinuous bike lanes and bicyclists traveling in the wrong direction and on sidewalks.

The opportunity presented to change the existing public realm can help mitigate the vast auto-oriented nature of Palm Avenue by enhancing the pedestrian and bicycle environment. The streetscape master plan offers an opportunity to address these challenges by better designing the public realm.



*Lack of shade providing trees along sidewalks*



*Lack of safe bicycle environment*

TRAFFIC VOLUME & FLOW

Most intersections provide a satisfactory Level of Service (LOS). A majority of the traffic is ‘through traffic’ serving people who live and work outside Imperial Beach.

A ‘modelling’ of traffic conditions that takes into account existing conditions, as well traffic conditions in 2020 shows the following opportunities that exist at various intersections and roadway segments between traffic intersections to improve the overall traffic flow and balance the needs of pedestrians and bicylists with those of the automobiles.

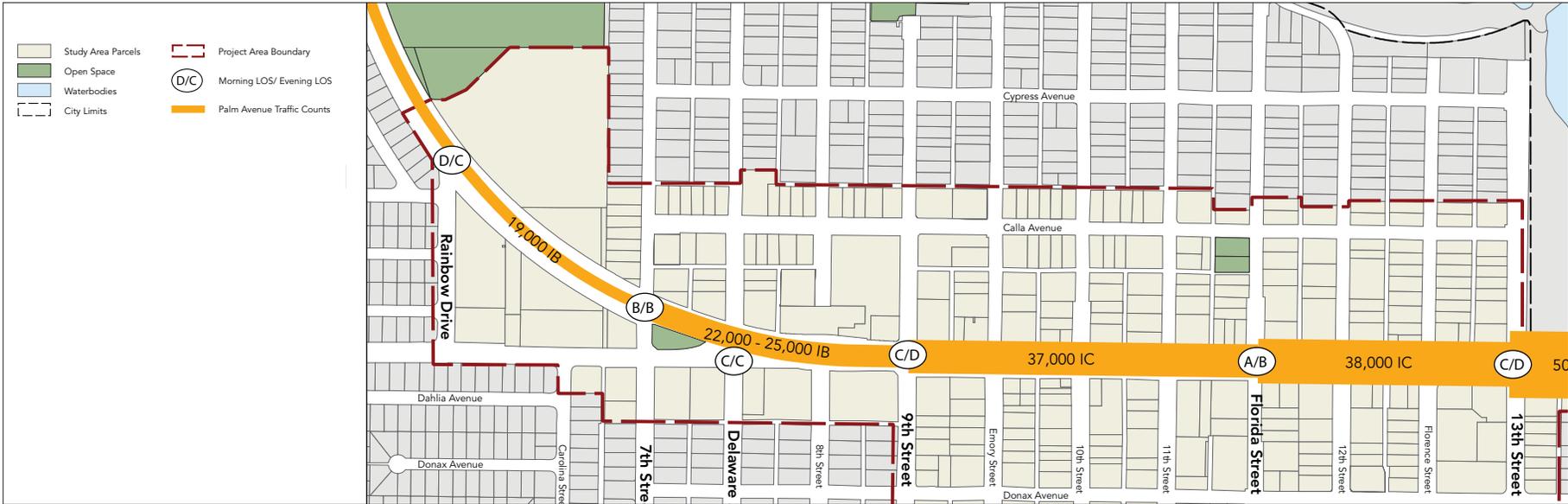
- Existing roadway west of 9th street is underutilized in terms of traffic capacity;
- Roadway segment west of 13th Street operates at LOS “C” or better;
- Potential for 4-lane from Rainbow Street to Florida Street; and
- Eliminating or isolating driveways may help roadway capacity in certain sections of the roadway.

Improved traffic flow allows for traffic calming and minimizes conflicts between different users providing better convenience and context for destination traffic.



Wide Right-of-Way

FIGURE 2.6 - KOA DIAGRAM





*Pedestrian unfriendly sidewalks and bus stops with no shelters*

### EXISTING RIGHT-OF-WAY CONDITIONS

The existing right-of-way conditions are varied. Sidewalks need to be improved in several areas and many of the access ramps are not up to current standards. Crosswalks, especially across Palm Avenue are inadequately marked. The road is surfaced with asphaltic concrete paving, which is generally in good condition, although there are steep cross slopes in some areas.

The bus stops lack shelters and there are few bus pads to protect the pavement. Signs along the Avenue are in fair condition, but could use improvement.

Traffic signals are aging and need minor maintenance or complete replacement in some cases. Changes to the roadway geometry will require signal modification and replacement, which will present an opportunity for improvement. The existing median lighting is evenly spaced and in good condition, however the sidewalk lighting is inadequate.



*Unmarked crosswalks*

## EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

The existing infrastructure along Palm Avenue is in fairly good condition. (A detailed discussion of existing infrastructure issues is in Appendix). Challenges to the existing infrastructure include:

- Aging cast iron water main, installed in 1916;
- Sparse and intermittently spaced storm inlets;
- Lack of storm inlet calculations;
- Lack of Fiber Optic Conduit for modern signal interconnection and future usage; and
- No known projects in place for upgrading or replacing existing gas and electric facilities.

The current infrastructure system presents an opportunity to upgrade in ways that will encourage new development and a safe and comfortable pedestrian environment.



*Aging traffic signals*



*Recent improvements*

### SYNERGY OF RECENT & PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS

In the past few years the City has embarked on a process of improving the public and private realm within and immediately outside the Palm Avenue corridor study area.

Recent and current improvements within the study area include the 2001 rehabilitation of Imperial Beach Promenade shopping center at Palm Avenue and 9th Street, 2007 Beach Side Station at Palm Avenue and 7th Street, and 2008 North Island Bank development at Palm Avenue and 11th Street. A number of existing businesses have improved their facades and parking lots fronting Palm Avenue. New planned improvements include the potential mixed use development of the two block area south of Palm Avenue between Delaware and 9th Street.

Surrounding improvements include the Coastal Renaissance along Sea Coast Drive and Old Palm Avenue, revitalization of the Pier Plaza and the Palm Avenue Street End Project. Current projects include the implementation of the 2007 Bicycle Transportation Plan that will reduce one lane in either direction along Palm Avenue, west of 7th Street, thereby improving the overall pedestrian environment along Old Palm.

In addition, it will create bike improvements along Old Palm Avenue as well designate 'ecoroute' bike route along 7th Street, thereby strengthening Imperial Beach status and commitment to ecotourism.

These recent improvements have begun to show tangible benefits that include improving the overall image to making Imperial Beach a bigger destination city attractive to both residents and visitors. Building on the synergy on these benefits, streetscape improvements along Palm Avenue will help catalyze the transformation of Palm Avenue as the 'Main Street' and commercial hub of Imperial Beach.