



memo san diego

to **City of Westmorland**
from **Diana Gonzalez, Tessa Hocquet**
re **Focus Group Summary**
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As part of the Downtown Zoning Overlay project, three focus groups were conducted with representatives from the Westmorland community. The purpose of these conversations was to gather early, targeted input to help inform the development of the Downtown Overlay Zone. As the overlay is drafted, it is important to hear directly from members of the business and development community, local partners, and property and business owners to ensure the zoning framework reflects local priorities, market realities, and community needs.

Objectives

The focus groups were designed to better understand shared goals for the Downtown Overlay Zone and to identify priorities for future Downtown development. Discussions focused on needed land uses and services, development challenges and opportunities, and how zoning and permitting regulations may support or constrain private investment. Participants were also asked to share perspectives on Downtown's desired character and design identity, as well as housing needs, receptiveness to infill housing, and the types of housing that may be viable or desirable in Downtown Westmorland.

Participant Profile

The focus groups were held via teleconference on January 14, 2026. To ensure a range of perspectives, participants included representatives from the land development community, local partners connected to the Westmorland community, and local property and business owners. A total of 20 individuals were invited, and seven participated in the focus groups. Representatives from the Imperial Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Westmorland School District who were unable to attend the focus groups later shared their perspectives at the pop-up booth during the Honey Festival.

Invitees included property and business owners such as Love's, Date Shake, Town Pump Steakhouse, Avery's Honey, America's Best Value Inn Westmorland, Mallory's/El Sol Market, and local car-related businesses. The land development community included housing builders, real estate professionals, and economic development representatives familiar with development in and around Westmorland. Local partners included organizations representing business, education, faith-based institutions, business,

education, faith-based institutions, agriculture, community advocacy, youth and senior programs, and local leadership.

Below is a detailed list of invitees:

A. Property and Business Owners

1. Love's
2. Date Shake
3. Town Pump Steakhouse
4. Avery's Honey – Kenneth Ashurst
5. America's Best Value Inn Westmorland,
6. Mallory's/El Sol Market
7. Car businesses – Tony Dickerson, Dickerson/Premier Towing

B. Land Development Community

1. Raul Garcia Construction
2. A&N Quality Builders
3. Realtors: Cindy Vandiver
4. Imperial County Association of Realtors
5. Imperial Valley Economic Development Corporation
6. Joel Hamby, Economic Development
7. Tom DeBose

C. Local Partners

1. Imperial Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce
2. Westmorland School District TK-8
3. Carie Agusta (Presbyterian Church)
4. St. Joseph's Catholic Church
5. Imperial County Farm Bureau
6. Comite Civico del Valle
7. COLAB
8. Senior/Youth programs
9. Tina Cruz [Mayor & 4H representative]

Focus Group Topics

Three focus groups were conducted, each tailored to a specific audience and set of perspectives.

- The Property and Business Owners focus group explored how updated zoning and design standards could better support business and property goals, challenges related to developing or improving Downtown properties, opportunities to strengthen Downtown's identity through design, and ways to make Downtown a more attractive place to own and operate a business.
- The Land Development Community focus group focused on opportunities for residential and mixed-use development Downtown, barriers to development, experiences with the City's review and permitting process, potential incentives or changes that could support Downtown housing, and the types of housing or development that best align with market demand.
- The Local Partners focus group examined how Downtown can better serve community needs, the types of uses and activities that would strengthen Downtown, the desired visual identity of Downtown Westmorland, and existing community assets that could be built upon to enhance Downtown's character and role within the community.

Key Takeaways

Across the focus group discussions, several consistent themes emerged regardless of participant type. These areas of agreement highlight shared priorities related to housing, economic vitality, community services, and the overall character of Westmorland.

- **Housing as a Foundation for Growth**
Participants consistently emphasized the need for additional housing, particularly moderately priced, single-family homes that support homeownership rather than large apartment complexes.
- **Residential Base to Support Business**
Increasing the number of people living in Westmorland was widely viewed as essential to attracting and sustaining retail, services, and long-term economic activity.
- **Streamlined and Predictable Development Process**
There was broad agreement that development should be easier and faster, with clear zoning, streamlined permitting, reduced or flexible fees where possible, and easily accessible information about incentives and allowable uses.
- **Capturing Pass-Through Traffic**
Groups noted Westmorland's significant daily traffic volumes and shared interest in better capturing spending from travelers through food, fuel, and service-oriented commercial uses.
- **Need for Everyday Services**
Participants agreed on the importance of adding basic services such as restaurants, grocery options, medical uses, social services, and government or county satellite offices to better serve residents and nearby communities.
- **Community Facilities and Social Spaces**
There was recurring support for safe places for youth, expanded senior services including cooling centers, and multipurpose facilities that can serve residents year-round.

- **Preserving Community Character**

Maintaining Westmorland's small-town feel, agricultural identity, and strong Hispanic cultural presence was viewed as a priority, with growth that builds on these qualities rather than eroding them.

- **Public Realm and Walkability Improvements**

Improvements to sidewalks, lighting, pedestrian crossings, shade, and cohesive streetscape elements were commonly identified as important for safety, comfort, and reinforcing a recognizable town identity.

Detailed Focus Group Summary

Three focus groups were conducted to gather targeted input from local partners, the land development community, and property and business owners. While participation was limited, the discussions provided detailed and thoughtful insight into community needs, development challenges, and opportunities for Downtown Westmorland.

Local Partners

Local partners emphasized that Downtown should better serve everyday community needs, particularly for youth, seniors, and residents who may have limited mobility or access to services. A major concern raised was the lack of safe, structured places for youth to spend time. Participants noted that while the school district is working toward building a gym, there remains a need for additional spaces where young people can gather safely after school and during evenings. Related to this, partners also expressed a need for a larger senior center that could function as a cooling center during the summer months and accommodate more programming.

The idea of a multipurpose community facility emerged as a recurring theme, with potential to serve youth, seniors, and broader community needs. Participants also discussed the lack of essential services within Westmorland, including the absence of a laundromat and limited access to social services. There was interest in providing satellite office space for County agencies, behavioral health services, or social services, particularly given transportation challenges. Participants noted that bus service to El Centro is limited and time-consuming, which creates barriers for residents who need to access services outside the City.

In terms of Downtown activity, local partners identified frequently visited businesses and destinations such as El Sol Market, local restaurants, Town Pump, Circle K, and the post office. These were described as key everyday anchors, though not sufficient to meet broader community needs.

Regarding visual identity and character, participants noted that recent improvements along Center Street, including decorative light poles and beehive elements, were positive and could be extended along Main Street. Safety concerns were also raised, particularly the desire for a pedestrian crossing over the highway to improve safety for students and residents. Participants emphasized the strong connection between Westmorland and agriculture, noting that many residents are farmworkers and that this identity should be reflected in future development.

Housing needs discussed by local partners focused on affordability and serving specific populations. Participants referenced examples in nearby cities where housing has been developed for farmworkers and expressed interest in similar approaches for Westmorland. There was also a recognized need for additional senior housing. At the same time, participants stressed the importance of preserving Westmorland's small-town character, Hispanic culture, and sense of community, noting that these qualities are central to the City's identity.

Land Development Community

The land development discussion focused primarily on housing feasibility, market demand, and regulatory processes. Participants noted that housing could be a strong opportunity for Westmorland, particularly given the broader regional housing shortage. While some participants did not have direct experience developing in Westmorland, there was a general perception that City-level control offers an opportunity to streamline processes more effectively than County jurisdictions.

A recurring theme was the importance of speed and predictability in the permitting process. Participants emphasized that developers are more likely to invest when timelines are short and clear, particularly given changing market conditions and interest rates. A faster path from entitlement to construction was described as a major incentive. Fee reductions or leniency were also identified as potential tools to improve feasibility.

In terms of housing type, participants strongly favored ownership housing, particularly moderately priced single-family homes. Multifamily housing and large apartment complexes were viewed skeptically, with concerns raised about long-term quality and the perception that such developments primarily benefit large investment entities rather than local residents.

Homeownership was repeatedly framed as a way to build equity and long-term stability for families. Condominiums and townhomes were generally viewed as less compatible with the Westmorland market.

Participants noted that lower land and home costs in Westmorland provide a foundation for development, but that additional effort may be needed to market the City to builders. Suggestions included proactively communicating why Westmorland is a good place to build and reaching beyond the immediate region to attract developers from outside the Imperial Valley. Design consistency was viewed as more important to residents and businesses than to developers, though participants acknowledged that a cohesive Downtown identity could be a long-term draw.

Property and Business Owners

Property and business owners emphasized Westmorland's untapped potential, particularly given the high volume of daily pass-through traffic. Participants noted that tens of thousands of vehicles travel through Westmorland each day, yet the City captures relatively little of that economic activity. Love's was frequently cited as evidence that there is demand for services oriented to travelers, including fast food and convenience-oriented commercial uses.

Business owners expressed a strong interest in making it easier to invest, expand, or redevelop properties. Maintaining a straightforward, low-cost, and predictable permitting process was described as essential. Participants stressed that the City should avoid adding regulatory barriers and instead focus on facilitating development. Improved access to clear information about allowable uses, incentives, and development processes was also identified as a need.

Several participants highlighted infrastructure and public realm improvements as important to supporting Downtown activity. These included improved sidewalks, better pedestrian access along Main Street, and potential traffic improvements to support both local and truck traffic. There was also interest in expanding services oriented to truck drivers and pass-through traffic as a way to grow the local economy.

In discussions about Downtown character and design, participants generally supported the idea of a cohesive theme but emphasized that financial feasibility would be the primary driver of change. Some noted that while design standards can help guide future development, businesses are unlikely to invest in aesthetic upgrades unless there is a clear economic benefit or incentive. Questions were raised about whether grant funding or other financial assistance could help existing businesses adapt to a desired Downtown look.

Regarding housing, property and business owners echoed concerns raised by the development community. Housing was viewed as beneficial overall, but large apartment complexes were discouraged. Single-family ownership housing was strongly preferred, with some participants noting that rising housing costs in nearby cities could make Westmorland an attractive alternative. At the same time, Downtown's main corridor was not widely viewed as the best location for housing, suggesting that residential development may be more appropriate in other areas or as a secondary component of Downtown over time.