



# RIO GRANDE VALLEY RAIL FEASIBILITY REPORT

Prepared For: Integrated Travel Research

## ABSTRACT

The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) Passenger Rail Feasibility Study seeks to assess the practicality of introducing a passenger rail service in the region. The report includes a needs assessment and population data analysis to determine the most advantageous and cost-efficient rail routes.

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## **1. Introduction**

The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) Passenger Rail Report aims to explore the potential for a new passenger rail service that joins three counties, including Hidalgo, Cameron, and Starr. A successful project would re-establish a safe and sustainable passenger rail service in the region, contribute to the overall well-being, and increase opportunities for the people in the RGV region.

### **1.1 Background**

The railroad lines that traverse the lower Rio Grande Valley and all of Texas have a deep and storied history—formed initially as the San Benito and Rio Grande Valley Interurban Railway on June 28, 1912. The first board of directors, including prominent individuals such as Colonel Samuel A. Robertson, all of San Benito and Houston, enlisted the San Benito and Rio Grande Valley Railway Company to build and operate rail lines in Cameron and Hidalgo counties.

On January 1, 1925, the Missouri Pacific Lines acquired the San Benito and Rio Grande Valley Railway and its parent company. However, the two continued to operate independently until the complete merger into the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company on March 1, 1956. San Benito and Rio Grande Valley lines have mostly been abandoned, except for the stretch between San Benito and Rio Hondo, which remains in service as part of the Missouri Pacific system.

## 2. Needs Assessment

Texas's Rio Grande Valley (RGV) is experiencing population growth, expanding economic activity, and cross-border trade with Mexico.

The needs assessment will identify the most efficient and cost-effective rail routes to enhance connectivity, promote economic development, and address the region's transportation demands.

The primary goals of the needs assessment are to:

- Evaluate passenger rail service demand in the RGV region.
- Identify key corridors that would benefit from rail service.
- Recommend the most viable and sustainable rail routes for implementation.

The assessment gathered data from multiple sources to support informed decision-making, including demographic and economic data such as population growth, trade patterns, current road networks, and existing rail infrastructure.

Given the time constraints of this project, additional research should focus on the cost-effectiveness of different rail routes based on infrastructure, geography, and population density and examine potential environmental, economic, and social impacts.

The needs assessment has considered the following factors to determine which rail routes will be most beneficial:

- **High-Density Areas and Regions:** Significant population growth will offer higher ridership potential.
- **Economic Centers and Employment Hubs:** Connecting the heart of major cities, commercial epicenters, and industrial areas like Brownsville, McAllen, Harlingen, and Edinburg will stimulate economic activity and trade.
- **Cross-Border Trade:** The RGV's proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border presents a unique opportunity to enhance rail transport for goods and commodities. It includes routes that support international trade through existing border crossings, such as in Laredo and Brownsville.

- **Access to Existing Infrastructure:** Leveraging and upgrading existing rail infrastructure can reduce costs and increase the feasibility of new rail services. It requires an assessment of current rail lines and identifying potential connections to broader regional rail networks.
- **Environmental and Land Use Considerations:** Identifying routes that minimize environmental impacts while fitting into the region’s zoning and land-use plans is critical for long-term sustainability.

## 2.1 Potential Rail Corridors in the RGV

Based on current knowledge of the region, the study considered the following rail corridors for further evaluation:

- **Brownsville to McAllen:** The route would connect two of the largest cities in the region, serving a high volume of commuters. It could also support trade-related activities and tourism.
- **Harlingen to Edinburg:** This corridor would connect important commercial and transportation hubs and provide access to growing residential areas.
- **Rio Hondo to San Benito:** A shorter route for local passenger service, this line could serve as an essential commuter rail connection. However, findings reveal that San Benito and Rio Hondo are part of the Missouri Pacific system.
- **Laredo to Corpus Christi (via RGV):** Expanding the rail system to connect the RGV with the Port of Corpus Christi would enhance freight transport for exports, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing.

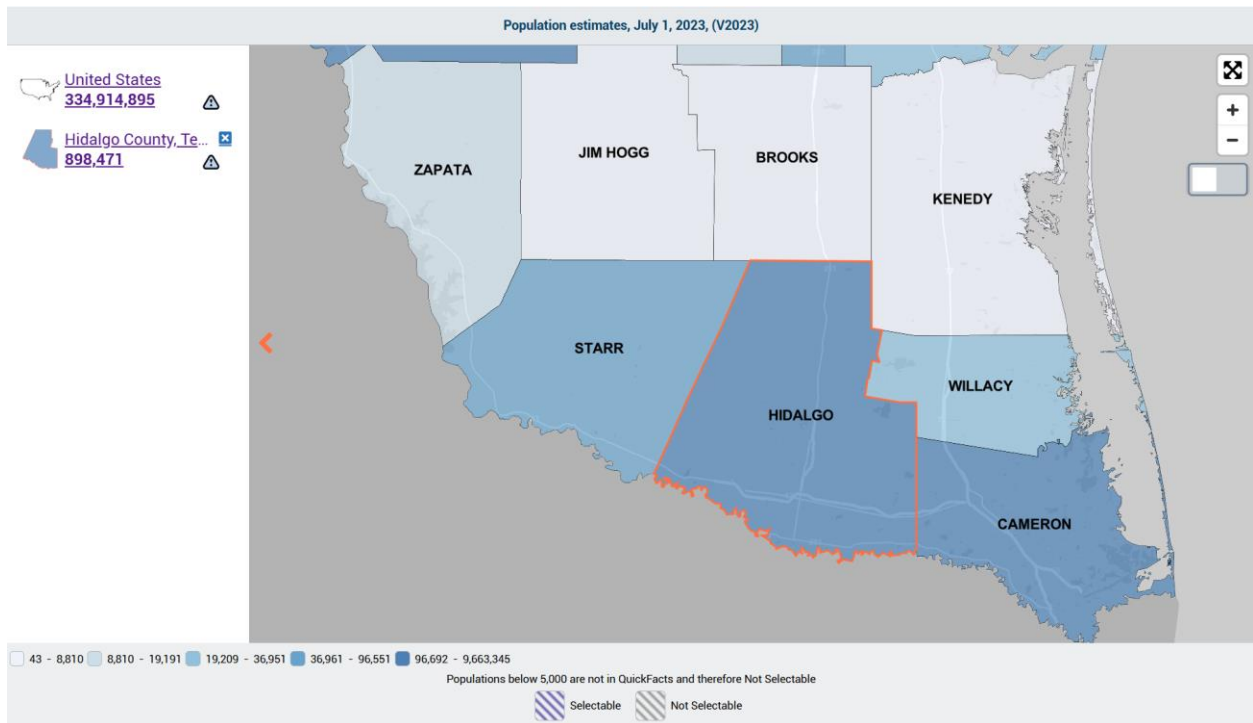
### 3. Population Data Analysis

This report focuses on three South Texas counties: **Hidalgo, Cameron, and Starr County**.

County	Population Estimates (V2023 - US Census)	Median Income (2022) - US Dollars	Housing - Owner Occupied
Hidalgo	898,471	\$49,371	67.8%
Cameron	426,710	\$47,435	65.3%
Starr	65,934	\$35,979	72.6%

#### 3.1 Hidalgo County

**Hidalgo County** is the ninth most populous county in Texas and the most populous in South Texas.



Source: US Census, 2023

Cameron County borders it to the east, Brooks County to the north, Starr County to the west, and Mexico to the south. The county seat, Edinburg, lies at the intersection of U.S. Highways 107 and 281, with the county's center located at 26°23' north latitude and 98°10' west longitude. Other notable communities in Hidalgo County include McAllen, Weslaco, Mission, Peñitas, and San Juan.

The county spans 1,596 square miles across the Rio Grande delta, with elevations ranging from 40 to 200 feet.

The two most populous cities in Hidalgo County; McAllen and Edinburg are highlighted as potential rail corridors.

The report highlights **McAllen and Edinburg**, two of the most prominent cities in Hidalgo County, Texas, as major economic and cultural hubs in the Rio Grande Valley.

**McAllen** is the most populous city in Hidalgo County and one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. It is notable for its **vibrant retail and commercial sectors** and is a **major shopping destination** because of its **proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border**. The city has a diverse population and strong ties to international trade, particularly with Mexico. Key sectors fuel its economy, including **healthcare, retail, education, and logistics**. **McAllen International Airport** connects the city to both domestic and international destinations. Additionally, McAllen has a growing reputation as a cultural center with a variety of events, museums, and art galleries and is often considered the gateway to South Texas.

Zip Codes	City	Classification	Population Estimates by City (V2023 - US Census)/Data USA/Others (See Links/Refs)	Median Income (2022 - 2024) - US Dollars
78501	McAllen	General	146,593	\$43,679
78503	McAllen	General	146,593	\$40,012
78504	McAllen	General	146,593	\$68,024
78539	Edinburg	General	105,799	\$54,139
78541	Edinburg	General	105,799	\$54,139
78542	Edinburg	General	105,799	\$54,139

**Edinburg**, the hub of Hidalgo County, is another important city in the region. Situated just north of McAllen, it has seen notable growth in recent years, particularly in population and infrastructure. The city is also home to the **University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)**, contributing to its academic and research-oriented growth. The city is also a **regional center for healthcare**, with several medical facilities and a considerable medical research presence. Like

McAllen, Edinburg plays a significant role in cross-border trade and has become a focal point for economic development in the area.

Both cities are connected by U.S. Highway 281, facilitating easy access to the broader region, including other important border cities. Together, McAllen and Edinburg represent the heart of Hidalgo County's economic, cultural, and educational life.

### Other Cities in Hidalgo County

Zip Codes	City	Classification	Population Estimates by City (V2023 - US Census)/Data USA/Others (See Links/Refs)	Median Income (2022 - 2024) - US Dollars
78574	Mission	General	87,292	\$56,421
78577	Pharr	General	80,401	\$45,016
78596	Weslaco	General	43,053	\$53,517
78589	San Juan	General	36,448	\$51,497
78573	Alton	General	21,130	\$44,317
78516	Alamo	General	20,460	\$47,398
78537	Donna	General	16,782	\$34,049
78570	Mercedes	General	16,732	\$43,243
78572	Palmview	General	15,874	\$41,483
78557	Hidalgo	General	14,678	\$45,919
78576	Peñitas	General	6,331	\$50,110
78560	La Joya	General	4,620	\$44,818
78595	Sullivan City	General	3,917	\$39,067
78538	Edcouch	General	2,754	\$38,594
78563	Linn	General	752	\$63,707

The **projected population of Hidalgo County is 908,354 for 2024**, reflecting an estimated 1.1% increase, consistent with the population growth observed from 2022 to 2023, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 Population Estimates Program. The **median age of residents is 29.8 years**, indicating a young and **growing population**.

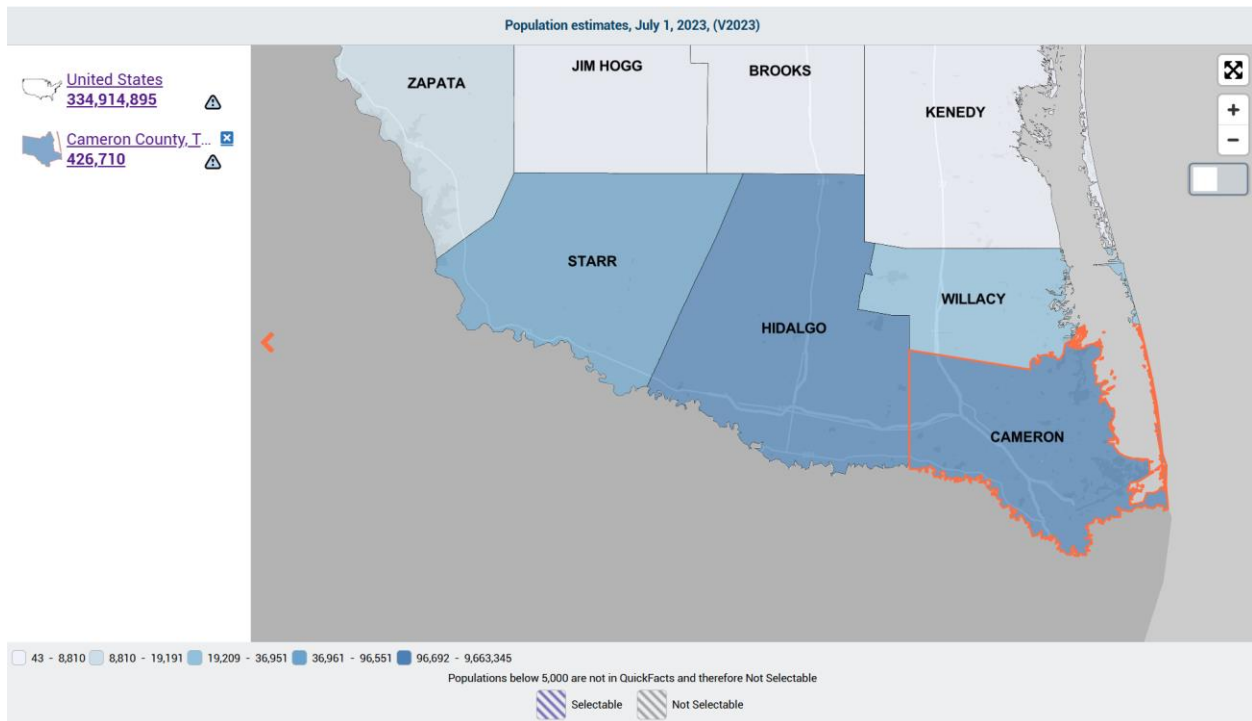


### 3.2 Cameron County

**Cameron County** is the next largest city in South Texas. The two most populated cities in Cameron County, **Brownsville and Harlingen**, are also highlighted as potential rail corridors.

Zip Codes	City	Classification	Population Estimates by City (V2023 - US Census)/Data USA/Others (See Links/Refs)	Median Income (2022 - 2024) - US Dollars
78520-23, 78526	Brownsville	General	190,158	\$46,735
78550-53 (2 P.O. Boxes)	Harlingen	General	71,510	\$50,367

Cameron County (U-17), located 140 miles south of Corpus Christi in the Rio Grande Plains of South Texas, is named after Captain Ewen Cameron, a member of the Mier Expedition. The county is bordered north by Willacy County, west by Hidalgo County, east by the Gulf of Mexico, and south by Mexico.



Source: US Census, 2023

**Brownsville**, the county seat and largest city, is the terminus for U.S. Highways 77, 83, and 281, including the Missouri Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads. The county's central point is 26°10' north latitude and 97°30' west longitude. Other notable communities include Harlingen, La Feria, Port Isabel, and San Benito. Cameron County spans 905 square miles, with elevations ranging from sea level to sixty feet.

It is situated at the southern tip of Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border, plays a key role in international trade, through the **Port of Brownsville**, and is also a hub for aerospace, manufacturing, and healthcare industries. The presence of **UTRGV** and historical sites like the **Gladys Porter Zoo** and the **Brownsville Heritage Complex** highlight its cultural and educational significance. Brownsville's proximity to Mexico is key for cross-border commerce and travel.

**Harlingen**, located north of Brownsville, serves as the region's transportation and distribution center, with a strong economy fuelled by **healthcare**, **agriculture**, and **logistics**. It is home to **Valley Baptist Medical Center** and benefits from its proximity to major highways and the **Harlingen Airport**. While less tourist-centric than Brownsville, the city offers cultural attractions like the **Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum**. It is close to nature spots like the **Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge**. Harlingen also serves as a gateway to **South Padre Island**.

Brownsville and Harlingen both play critical roles in the economy and infrastructure of Cameron County and the broader Rio Grande Valley. Their proximity to Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico, diverse economies, and vibrant cultural heritage positions them as key hubs for trade, tourism, and regional development.

## Other Cities in Cameron

Zip Codes	City	Classification	Population Estimates by City (V2023 - US Census)/Data USA/Others (See Links/Refs)	Median Income (2022 - 2024) - US Dollars
78559	La Feria	General	6,758	\$38,656
78566	Los Fresnos	General	8,362	\$39,536
78575	Olmito	General	794	\$37,950
78578	Port Isabel	General	5,118	\$42,601
78583	Rio Hondo	General	2,295	\$58,487
78586	San Benito	General	24,493	\$38,100
78593	Santa Rosa	General	3,093	\$27,973
78597	South Padre Island	General	2,386	\$62,557

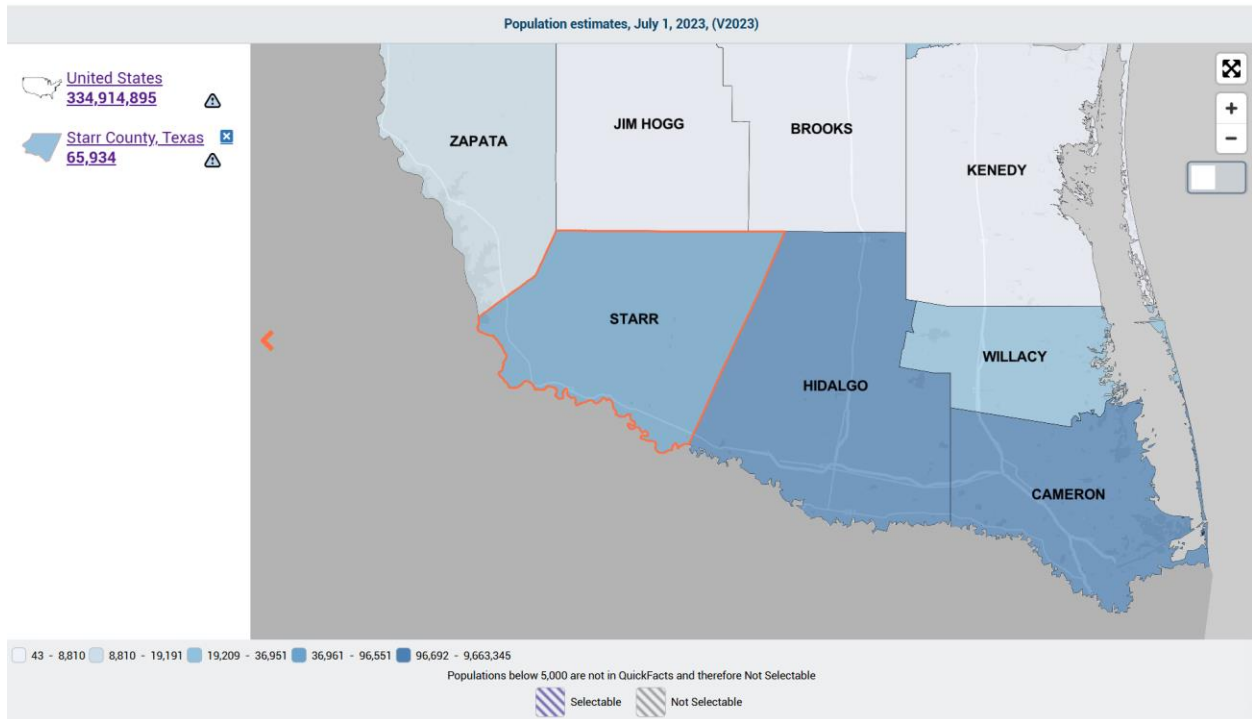
The **projected population of Cameron County is 428,417 for 2024**, reflecting a 0.4% increase, in line with the population growth observed from 2022 to 2023, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 Population Estimates Program. The **median age of residents is 32 years**, which indicates a young and growing population.

### 3.3 Starr County

**Starr County's** two most significant cities, **Rio Grande City** and **Roma**, play vital roles in the County's economy, culture, and international connections.

Zip Codes	City	Classification	Population Estimates by City (V2023 - US Census)/Data USA/Others (See Links/Refs)	Median Income (2022 - 2024) - US Dollars
78582	Rio Grande City	General	15,311	\$44,307
78584	Roma	General	11,554	\$26,951

The County's central coordinates are 26°34' north latitude and 98°44' west longitude. Part of the Rio Grande Plain region, Starr County spans 1,226 square miles, with elevations between 200 and 400 feet above sea level.



Source: US Census, 2023

Starr County, located in South Texas, is bordered to the east by Hidalgo County, to the northeast by Brooks County, to the north by Jim Hogg County, and to the west by Zapata County. To the south, the Rio Grande forms its boundary with Mexico. The county seat, Rio Grande City, is situated along U.S. Highway 83 and the Border Pacific Railroad.

**Rio Grande City**, the county's seat, is one of the major cities in the region and is situated along the Rio Grande River. Based on its closeness to the U.S.-Mexico border, it plays a significant role in international trade. The city's economy is strongly driven by agriculture, focusing on **citrus farming, livestock, and vegetables**. Rio Grande City also serves as a gateway for cross-border commerce, with border crossings connecting it to Mexico.

The city has a rich history, with landmarks like the **Starr County Historical Museum** and **Fort Ringgold**, which dates to the U.S. Army's presence in the area during the mid-19th century. Rio Grande City is also a local culture and education center, with schools and community events reflecting its strong Hispanic heritage.

**Roma** is another significant city in Starr County, located west of Rio Grande City along the Rio Grande River. Known for its historic downtown district, People often regard Roma as one of the most well-preserved historic towns in South Texas. The city is known for its **Spanish colonial architecture**, and the National Register of Historic Places lists the **Roma Historic District**.

Economically, its agricultural output, particularly **citrus, cotton, and vegetables**, and its role in **cross-border trade** shapes Roma. It is a quieter, more rural counterpart to Rio Grande City. It remains an essential connection between Texas and Mexico, with border crossings facilitating trade and travel. Roma is also a popular tourist destination for those interested in heritage tourism and historic sites.

The projected population of Starr County is 66,198 for 2024, reflecting a 0.4% increase, consistent with the population growth from 2022 to 2023, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 Population Estimates Program. The median age of residents in Starr County is 28.6 years, which also **indicates a young and growing population**.

## 4. Environmental Impact Assessment

### 4.1 Environmental Sensitivity of Proposed Routes

- **Land Use and Zoning:** It is necessary to identify areas of natural significance and protect land or agricultural zones that the rail construction could impact.
- **Noise and Air Quality:** The project should assess the impact of rail service on local noise levels and air quality, especially for routes running through natural habitats and residential areas.
- **Water Resources and Wetlands:** The project should assess the proximity of the proposed routes to water bodies, wetlands, and other vital ecosystems and evaluate the possible effects of rail construction and operations on water quality and drainage patterns.

### 4.2 Compliance with Environmental Regulations

- **Environmental Impact Statements (EIS):** The project must ensure compliance with federal and state environmental regulations (e.g., NEPA) by conducting a preliminary environmental impact assessment.
- **Mitigation Strategies:** The project should consider potential mitigation strategies to reduce adverse environmental impacts, such as noise barriers or wildlife corridors.

## 5. Suitable Locomotives and Railcars

### 5.1 Locomotive Technology

- **Electrification vs. Diesel:** Depending on the distances of the selected routes and the opportunity for electrification, the project may consider the feasibility of electric versus diesel-powered trains. Electrification offers long-term efficiency but may require substantial initial investment.
- **Battery-Electric Trains:** Battery-electric trains do not require fixed electrification infrastructure and provide a sustainable and flexible solution.
- **Low-Emission Engines:** Hybrid or low-emission engines will minimize the carbon footprint of rail operations.

### 5.2 Railcars Suitability Assessment

- **Passenger Comfort:** The railcars should offer comfortable seating, basic amenities, and accessibility features to cater to the diverse needs of passengers.
- **Cost vs. Performance:** The project team must carefully evaluate the initial investment and ongoing operational expenses, including fuel, maintenance, and staffing needs.
- **Capacity Planning:** The ability to scale with growing ridership is crucial and requires choosing the right train sets based on anticipated demand.

## 6. Projected Costs and Funding

### 6.1 Capital Costs

- **Infrastructure Development:** Includes the cost of building new tracks, stations, terminals, and other necessary facilities (e.g., depots, parking, transit connections).
- **Railcars Purchase:** The cost estimation of purchasing new trains and related equipment.
- **Land Acquisition:** Includes the land acquisition or rights-of-way required for constructing the rail lines.

### 6.2 Operating Costs

- **Maintenance and Staffing:** Includes the costs for maintaining infrastructure, railcars, and staffing (e.g., engineers, conductors, station attendants).
- **Energy Consumption:** The ongoing fuel or energy costs, primarily if the system utilizes electric or hybrid locomotives.

### 6.3 Funding and Financing Options

- **Public Funding:** The project may consider federal, state, and local government funding options (e.g., the Federal Transit Administration's Capital Investment Grants program or state-level transportation grants).
- **Private Partnerships:** Investigate public-private partnerships (PPP) as a potential funding model for rail infrastructure.
- **Passenger Revenue:** Forecast potential ticket revenue based on ridership predictions, fare structures, and service levels.



## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1 Phased Implementation Approach

- **Short-Term:** Choose the primary routes for the initial service, and prioritize those that will generate the highest possible traffic or ridership.
- **Long-Term:** Plan for a phased expansion and add more routes as the demand increases and funding becomes available.

### 7.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Partnerships

- Engage transportation authorities, local municipalities, business organizations, and community groups to gain support for the project.
- Establish relationships with federal and state transportation agencies to align the project with broader transportation goals.

### 7.3 Potential for Commuter Rail vs. Intercity Service

- Recommend which routes best serve commuter rail needs (shorter distances, higher frequency) versus intercity rail service (longer distances, less frequent service but higher capacity).

## 8. Conclusion

The feasibility study provides integrated travel research and development with a needs assessment and an elaborate population data analysis to assess the viability of a passenger rail system in the Rio Grande Valley region. It identified the routes with the highest potential ridership, the cost factor in developing the infrastructure, and the consideration for railcars and locomotives. With this comprehensive analysis, the team will be well-equipped to make informed decisions about the future of passenger rail in the RGV region.

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