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INTRODUCTION

This plan was created by a group of 13 students from The Ohio State University (OSU) located in Columbus, Ohio, USA. The students range from undergraduate to Master’s students with backgrounds in a range of fields including government, architecture, city and regional planning, landscape architecture, finance, business and economics. Subrata Basu, an OSU alum and currently a Peace Corps Volunteer, stationed in Benque and assigned to the Benque Town Council contacted OSU to develop plans for an Historic Downtown and Riverwalk, two of the key elements of the recently completed Tourism Action Plan for Benque.

We started preparation for this project in October 2011, when Mr. Basu contacted The Ohio State University’s Knowlton School of Architecture. Mr. Basu and the Tourism Committee consisting of community leaders and public sector representatives, had begun creating a tourism plan for Benque Viejo del Carmen, and provided students with a chance of a lifetime to explore, serve, and fall in love with Benque. The students met multiple times over the next few months to learn about the history and culture of Belize and to discover more about how they could serve the town of Benque Viejo.

Once we arrived in town we had the pleasure of experiencing a few of the places that make Benque Viejo unique. Our first night here, we had the chance to dine at one of Benque’s local restaurants, Casa de Teresa, and enjoyed the family-style fajita dinner Gabriella prepared for us. On Saturday we took the bus to the market in San Ignacio, tasted Belizean street food and got to see some of what awaits Benque when the Farmer’s Market opens later this year.

We had an amazing time on Sunday when we were overwhelmed by the majesty of Xunantunich. We all gasped when we turned the corner and saw the ruins! On Wednesday, Ken Dart, a local resident, took us for an unbelievable experience exploring the caves of Antun Halal and Actun Chapat and hiking through the Belizean Jungle. After the hike we returned to Benque to enjoy a refreshing swim alongside the community in the beautiful Mopan River. Most of all, we were fortunate to meet the wonderful residents of Benque Viejo. Our friends and family will certainly be amazed to learn about the wonderful experiences Benque and its people gave us.

This document is a result of a collaborative experience between The Ohio State University and the people of Benque. The implementation of Benque’s Tourism Plan can only be achieved through collaborations between the people of Benque and various other domestic and international entities. A successful collaborative process is where both sides benefit from the experience. This process allowed us to learn about the rich cultural heritage of the community and in return we were able to share information to help Benque develop components of sustainable tourism plan.
COMMUNITY PROFILE

The history of the area goes back to the Maya time which peaked during the Classical period between the years of 200 to 900 AD. However, the more recent history of Benque goes back to the early 1600’s when the British loggers arrived in the area to cut logwood and mahogany. The word Benque means “old bank”, referring to the early logging camps nestled along the river bank. Loggers would float the logs downstream to Belize City where they would later be exported to England for the construction of train carriages and furniture. The inhabitants of Benque are primarily Spanish speaking Mestizos, the descendants of Maya and Spanish-speaking Peteneros from Guatemala and Maya and Mestizos from Yucatan, Mexico. Benque was formally inaugurated as a Town in October 1904 and enjoyed being the center of economic and cultural activity for the Cayo district in the days of mahogany logging and later harvesting of chicle, sap from Chico zapote tree, used in the manufacturing of chewing gum, until the industry was wiped out by the invention of synthetic chewing gum in the 1940’s. Since then, Benque has seen very little economic activity and growth.

In recent years Benque has been recognized as a center for culture, art and history. The Benque House of Culture (HOC) was created to raise awareness of the Mestizo and Maya culture and history. Today, Benque is a tranquil historic town of about 8,000 residents that are proud of their rich heritage and culture.

The Mayor and Town Council have been working diligently to increase business opportunities and entrepreneurship in Benque. In 2011, Benque opened a new library, a new clinic and the Heritage Bank, the first bank ever for the town. The Town Council is working with the Government of Belize through the World Bank Municipal Development Project to improve streets and drainage, and in 2010 successfully lobbied with BTL to re-open an office on Church Street. Most recently Benque has partnered with the Belize Trade & Investment Development Service (BELTRAIDE) to be a participant in the tri-party “Inclusive Linkage” Project. “Inclusive Linkage” Project is a collaborative effort between BELTRAIDE, Regional Center for the Promotion of Small & Medium Enterprise (CENPROMYPE) and the Ministry of Economy in Guatemala to enhance economic development, regional food security and environmental sustainability by providing technical assistance to Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the Belize-Guatemala border region. Currently, the Town is being considered by the European Union for funding a Farmers and Artisan Market in Benque, which will not only provide the convenience of meeting the daily household needs of residents here in Benque, but also to stop the economic losses from this community. All these efforts begin to build the necessary infrastructure needed to transform Benque as a tourism destination.
BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

According to the Belize Tourism Board (BTB), the entry point at the Western Highway between Guatemala and Belize ranks as the second busiest entry point into Belize. Benque is the first town visitors reach on the Western Highway coming from Guatemala into Belize. Despite this large inflow of visitors to the region, Benque is not benefiting as visitors pass through Benque in favor of other destinations. Benque aspires to turn this around. The Mayor has taken the opportunity to enlist us to prepare a sustainable tourism master plan that not only develops Benque as a destination but contributes to the economic health of the town.

It was recognized that a key element in the development of a meaningful community-based sustainable tourism action plan is a robust participation of the community stakeholders. The Mayor invited representatives of a wide cross section of the community including business owners, tour guides, taxi operators, residents, community leaders, students, representatives of the tourism industry, and the governmental agencies involved in tourism to participate in the Tourism Action Committee. A number of people accepted the Mayor’s invitation and formed the Benque Tourism Committee (BTC).

This Tourism Action Plan is the result of nearly six months of dedication and hard work by the Committee. The vision of the Tourism Committee is to: “Develop Benque Viejo del Carmen as a unique and attractive tourism destination while ensuring sustainable development through responsible tourism that allows both visitors and the local community to benefit from the local culture and heritage while retaining the small town charm and providing convenient access to the surrounding attractions.”
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Since the start of this project it has been about determining the wants, needs, and ideas that the people of Benque have to offer. Our first night here we began talking and meeting with as many people in the community as possible. We asked everyone we met what Benque needs to prosper and used the fruits of those conversations to build the foundation for our work. Our second night in town we met with Mr. David Ruiz at Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School to learn about the history and traditions of Benque. These traditions served to guide us in our actions over the following week. As we surveyed the city, we stopped to ask people their opinions of Benque and residents were always happy to oblige. This project isn’t just about what we think Benque needs, but rather what the people of Benque expressed the needs to prosper into the future.

We were fortunate and honored to meet with students from Our Lady of Mount Carmel and to ask their opinions of Benque. As future leaders of Benque, we realized the importance of their voice and the students seemed really excited about the redesign of the old downtown theatre. As the students explained, many of their parents and other relatives utilized this building and it has upset them that it was not being properly taken care of. It would be exciting to implement the theatre plan that the downtown team had proposed because it would be a way to tie the students to the memories of their family members. They also asked for a performance hall where they could learn to play instruments and perform to celebrate their culture and heritage. Showing even more pride in their culture and history they wished for a place where visitors could learn about the rich Mestizo heritage of Benque.

The students even accompanied us on a tour of the Mopan River to discuss its importance and the role it plays in their lives. They explained the significance of certain areas along the river and provided us with videos and pictures that gave us invaluable insight.

All of the community’s input were carefully integrated into this plan. The residents of Benque should be proud of their part in the creation of this plan as we could not have done it without them.
VISITOR PROFILE

A visitor to Benque is expected to be a self-confident, adventurous and seasoned traveler interested in experiencing local lifestyle, culture, and art. A visitor to Benque wants to mingle with locals and take in the exotic environment and natural beauty of the region. Visitors, both domestic and international, will support sustainable tourism and contribute to the local economy through their appreciation of the local food, art, culture, history, and natural beauty. Benque is an ideal location for an extended stay as it possesses a welcoming family environment, small boutique hotels, and proximity to major archaeological sites in both Belize and Guatemala. Benque is perfect for backpackers and budget travelers as it provides plenty of outdoor site-seeing and hiking opportunities without the commercialization found at other tourist destinations. It is important for Benque to maintain its small town charm and protect its historical assets as a major attraction that brings tourists into Benque.
The development of a tourism destination has two separate dimensions: First developing the place to become a desirable tourist destination and second developing the tourism products that are unique to the area. Based on Benque's strength, weakness, opportunities and threat (SWOT) analysis a number of deficiencies were identified to improve the desirability of Benque as a sustainable tourism destination. These deficiencies were then ranked in the order of their importance to be addressed with respect to both the destination and product developments. The scope of this report is to outline a set of strategic actions to develop Benque as a sustainable tourism destination.

DESTINATION PLANNING

The major priorities associated with improving the desirability of Benque as a destination were identified as:

- Provide environmental stewardship
- Continue to improve physical infrastructure and visitor amenities
- Streamline decision making process for tourism related issues

PROVIDE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Benque is endowed with nature, surrounded by an environment that is rich in flora and fauna and adjacent to major Forest Reserves. Compared to other places around the country, Benque boasts a cleaner and safer town and was awarded in 2010 the distinction of being the Cleanest Municipality in Belize. Benque has a good solid waste program, which can be taken to the next level by promoting recycling, composting and reducing the amount of waste that reaches the dump site. Currently there are very few or no effective regulations regarding animal and noise controls which can help improve the overall environment.
DESTINATION BENQUE CONTINUED

CONTINUE TO IMPROVE PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND VISITOR AMENITIES

Physical infrastructure and visitor amenities are important elements of destination planning. While Benque has adequate levels of physical infrastructure such as roads, street lights, drainage, open spaces etc., the roadway network currently consists of a combination of paved and unpaved surfaces. The town lacks in a variety of visitor amenities such as access to a full service medical clinic, quality retail outlets, restaurants featuring local or other ethnic foods, art galleries, a market place for locally grown vegetables or a place to sell local arts and crafts. The town has adequate police and fire protection and has access to a standard network of public transportation to San Ignacio, Belmopan and Belize City.

ASSURE QUALITY

One of the keys in maintaining a sustainable destination is to provide consistent quality assurance.

IMPROVE THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR TOURISM RELATED ISSUES

In developing an effective tourism destination, a streamlined decision making process that deals with the changes affecting the destination is critically important for building a confident and mature tourism industry.
**Destination Benque Priorities infographic**

**Action**
- Cleaner Mopan River Initiative
  - Active partnership in Friends of Conservation and Development (FCD) led Watershed Protection initiative
  - Create partnerships with FCD in other environmental initiatives
- Environmental Stewardship
  - Improve Access to Healthcare
    - Continue to work with the World Bank to complete the designated roadways with sidewalks, lighting, traffic controls and drainage improvements
  - Improve Physical Infrastructure and Visitor Amenities
    - Continue to work with the Solid Waste Department to influence the outcome of a plan relative to waste disposal and recycling
    - Explore a long-term locally acceptable and environmentally sensitive solid waste disposal solution
  - Improve Project Based Visitor Amenities
    - Develop a Master Plan for a downtown historic core as the “Soul of the Town”
    - Develop River Walk and public spaces along the Mopan River
    - Pursue adaptive reuse of the abandoned Impala Cinema as a Community Center/Art Gallery
    - Continue to pursue construction of an EU funded market
- Long Term Solution to Waste Disposal
  - Work with the Public Health Officials to enforce Noise Ordinance during late night events at the Cancha
- Upgrade Roadways Infrastructure
  - With the help of BTB, develop a quality assurance program for hotels and a “home stay”
  - Develop a partnership with the local hotel owners and raising awareness of maintaining certain minimum standards for cleanliness, amenities and comfort for domestic and international visitors
  - Provide necessary training to set up a “home stay” program and guidance to Benque residents
- Improve Access to Healthcare
  - Build partnerships with Ministry of Health to improve the quality and availability of medical care at the Benque Mopan Medical Clinic
- Animal and Noise Control
  - Public education campaign in schools and at home regarding the dangers of stray animals
  - Work in partnership with the Public Health Officials to develop programs to vaccinate and “tag” all animals with an ultimate goal of dog licensing and starting an impound program
  - Contact the Humane Society in other locations and seek their assistance in starting a Benque Humane Society
  - Work in partnership with Public Health Officials to enforce Noise Ordinance during late night events at the Cancha
- Training for Tour Guides and Taxi Operators
  - Develop training modules for tour guides specializing in Benque that capture the essence of Maya/Mestizo culture and Benque’s history and local folktales
  - Develop a customer service guidebook for taxi operators
  - Develop a customer service guidebook for taxi operators
- Assure Quality
  - With the help of BTB, develop a quality assurance program for hotels and a “home stay”
  - Develop a partnership with the local hotel owners and raising awareness of maintaining certain minimum standards for cleanliness, amenities and comfort for domestic and international visitors
  - Provide necessary training to set up a “home stay” program and guidance to Benque residents
- Improve the Decision-Making Process
  - Formulate the Benque Tourism Committee as a standing committee with defined duties, responsibilities and authority
- Improve the Decision-Making Process
  - Incorporate the committee as a Non-Governmental organization (NGO)

**Recommendations**
- Assure clean, comfortable lodging
  - With the help of BTB, develop a quality assurance program for hotels and a “home stay”
  - Develop a partnership with the local hotel owners and raising awareness of maintaining certain minimum standards for cleanliness, amenities and comfort for domestic and international visitors
  - Provide necessary training to set up a “home stay” program and guidance to Benque residents
- Assure quality
  - With the help of BTB, develop a quality assurance program for hotels and a “home stay”
  - Develop a partnership with the local hotel owners and raising awareness of maintaining certain minimum standards for cleanliness, amenities and comfort for domestic and international visitors
  - Provide necessary training to set up a “home stay” program and guidance to Benque residents
- Improve the decision-making process
  - Formulate the Benque Tourism Committee as a standing committee with defined duties, responsibilities and authority
  - Incorporate the committee as a Non-Governmental organization (NGO)
- Improve project-based visitor amenities
  - Develop a Master Plan for a downtown historic core as the “Soul of the Town”
  - Develop River Walk and public spaces along the Mopan River
  - Pursue adaptive reuse of the abandoned Impala Cinema as a Community Center/Art Gallery
  - Continue to pursue construction of an EU funded market
- Upgrade roadways infrastructure
  - Continue to work with the World Bank to complete the designated roadways with sidewalks, lighting, traffic controls and drainage improvements
- Improve access to healthcare
  - Build partnerships with Ministry of Health to improve the quality and availability of medical care at the Benque Mopan Medical Clinic
- Animal and noise control
  - Public education campaign in schools and at home regarding the dangers of stray animals
  - Work in partnership with the Public Health Officials to develop programs to vaccinate and “tag” all animals with an ultimate goal of dog licensing and starting an impound program
  - Contact the Humane Society in other locations and seek their assistance in starting a Benque Humane Society
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- Improve the decision-making process
  - Formulate the Benque Tourism Committee as a standing committee with defined duties, responsibilities and authority
- Incorporate the committee as a Non-Governmental organization (NGO)

**Outcomes**
- Cleaner and healthier watershed will help regenerate the health of the Mopan River promoting cleaner environment. Promotes sustainable water dependent tourism. Creates additional economic opportunities and jobs for local residents.
- Educate the future leaders on the importance of a cleaner environment and help them to develop values that are environmentally sensitive. Less waste to be sent to the landfill.
- Creates walkable, active and attractive streets to accommodate various modes of transportation (automobiles, walking, cycling). Creates economic opportunities for construction workers and improved infrastructure for additional retail opportunities.
- Easy access to medical facilities to provide a safer and desirable environment for both visitors and residents.
- These project-based initiatives will create a welcoming environment for private investments and will provide reasons for tourists to consider Benque as a desirable destination. Creates an identifiable center of town. Preserves local heritage. These initiatives will create temporary construction jobs as well as permanent jobs for both skilled and non-skilled workers. Creates a synergy for economic activities in the downtown core.
- Assures a consistent, predictable and comfortable lodging. Provides additional economic opportunities for residents through a “home stay” program.
- A well-defined predictable process that will bring about confidence and efficiency in making timely decisions effecting tourism related issues.
TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

“Benque has a lot to offer, but no one really knows about it” is a common reaction of many people around the country when the topic of Benque comes up in the context of tourism. In analyzing what Benque has to offer and what additional tourism products can be developed, the Committee classified all the possible current and future tourism products in the following categories and prioritized them in order of importance in which they need to be developed.

- Image: Highest priority
- Heritage related products: High priority
- Cultural opportunities: High priority
- Archaeological sites: High priority
- Natural resources: Medium priority

IMAGE

The very first step in developing tourism products is to create a community image or branding, for the area. The branding must encompass the overall value of the area in a short and concise statement or “tag line”. This will help create the very first impression one gets about the area. As we start to create collateral material, the branding will tie everything together to provide a level of consistency in our message to promote the town. Additional efforts to create a stronger image could range from a public information campaign on issues relevant to the community image, to defining the boundaries of the town to create a sense of arrival, to developing a resource guide that compiles useful information about the town for the convenience of visitors.

HERITAGE RELATED PRODUCTS

The unique blending of Maya and Mestizo heritage provides for a rich tapestry of options for visitors to enjoy and appreciate while in Benque.

CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

Benque offers a variety of unique cultural experiences to visitors. That includes enjoying the local arts and crafts, culinary delights, and the various festivities throughout the year.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

There are a number of archaeological sites within easy access of Benque. There is a designated Maya settlement site within the town that remains to be uncovered as well as the Mayan ruins of Xunantunich just northeast of town. These sites offer a fun-filled adventure to the visitors of Benque while attracting tourists to experience the history.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Throughout history Benque has utilized its natural resources. Benque is located on the Mopan River, which gives it access to shipping and recreation, in addition to being home to exotic trees and vegetation.
Tourism Product Development infographic
Masterplan Introduction

To increase the available tourist amenities in Benque and to provide the residents with additional economic opportunities. The recently completed Benque’s Tourism Action Plan emphasized the need for a number of projects including creating a “Soul of the Town” in its historic downtown, pursuing an adaptive reuse program for the abandoned theater as well as developing a river walk to create a linear public open space along the Mopan River. Our time in Benque was primarily devoted to these projects.

Part II: Riverwalk Plan

The primary goal of this undertaking was to connect Benque with the ancient Maya city of Xunantunich in Succotz and to create an increased awareness of the river for tourists and residents through water dependent recreational opportunities and safe access to the river. These activities will also create additional economic opportunities for all Benquño.

Part III: Historic Downtown Plan

The goal is to revitalize the historic and cultural center of Benque to increase additional economic opportunities through tourism. We concentrated our efforts on the area between Victoria and Diaz Streets and George and St. Joseph Streets. Our purpose was to turn the heart of Benque into a place where tourists can enjoy the charm and culture of the town. If implemented, the suggestions in this document will set Benque apart from all other communities in Belize.

Mopan River bank looking northwest into the dense tree cover
Aerial view of Benque with the proposed plans and focus areas.
RIVERWALK
PLAN

AREA OF FOCUS

The proposed Riverwalk area stretches from the Xunantunich access ferry south to the town of Benque Viejo and ending at Edison Coleman Park.
RIVERWALK IMPROVEMENTS

Due to the flow of the Mopan River, the quality of the shoreline has been compromised. This can create problems for building a continuous riverwalk.

This section will discuss how to reinforce local riparian areas (i.e. where the land meets the water) so it is strong enough to build on and create ways that will prevent further erosion. If Benque decides to pursue design and construction of the riverwalk, the following best practices are provided for its convenience.

Stretches of the Mopan River do not provide sufficient land to construct a continuous boardwalk along the river. The riverbank erosion is a major problem.

In several areas it will be necessary to reinforce land and divert the path from areas that have begun to erode. The following ideas are ways in which Benque can accommodate this goal:

**Install coconut fiber mesh:**

A coconut mesh is used to collect sediment and reinforce the structure of riverbanks. Coconut meshes have been used in various coastal regions around the world for the stabilization of stream-banks and shorelines. In order to make the mesh, coconut fibers are packed tightly together and bound with waterproof string. The benefit of this material is that it is flexible and can bend with the contour of the river. Installation of the mesh is the area where the bank begins to slope down toward the water.

Coconut meshes are delivered in rolled-up logs and come in various sizes. They are easily put in place by hand along the riverbank. Coconut facings are 100% natural, eco-friendly and have a high water and pollutant absorbency. For Benque, coconut logs could be a convenient way to reinforce banks because the fibers are abundant in the local area.

Coconut fascines are highly effective and relatively inexpensive; therefore, they could provide a viable option for improving and sustaining the health of the Mopan River. The benefit of coconut meshes is that they last for a long time without disintegration. Even when they do break down many years down the road, they add fertility and nutrients to the soil. Additionally, seeds can also be planted into the mesh so that an area can increase its visual appeal with greenery and foliage.
Use Live Bank Protection:

Any form of protection that includes the word, “live” means that it has living material within it, generally plants that have thick root systems that can permeate the ground and create strong bonds to the soil.

One example to consider could be “wattle walls.” These are structures made from willow branches that help to stabilize slopes. Wattle walls are effective because as they grow they establish an extensive root system within the ground that reinforces the shape of the land and holds the soil into place, thus preventing erosion. Similar to coconut fascines, they are 100% natural, easy to plant/implement, eco-friendly, and have good water absorbency. The life span of a typical wattle wall is about 20 years.

Install Gabion walls:

Gabion walls have been used on certain stretches of the Mopan River in Guatemala. In order to create a gabion wall, rocks are tightly packed and then held in place by metal wire. They are then placed alongside the river to create barriers that provide structure and prevent erosion.

Install Tire walls:

These walls can be made of rubber tires held together with plaster, mud, stucco, or any other binding material that does not disintegrate when touched by water. Tire walls are a new practice that has been widely used in places such as Costa Rica and Panama. These walls are beneficial because they can recycle discarded tires and are a relatively inexpensive way to enforce embankments.

Install rip rap:

Rip rap is a collection of rocks that is installed to protect shorelines from erosion. It is a practice that has been used in many coves and pocket beaches in both Northern and Central America. Rip rap is made from a variety of rock types (commonly granite or limestone) or formed from concrete remnants that have been left by building and paving demolition.

Rip Rap also has the ability to be used as steps. This is important because it means that it could create a safe descent to the river in areas that are steep. In addition, it would provide a safe walkway to those that need to carry their laundry up or down the embankment or for people coming from the road to the Riverwalk.

Pollutants Control

Channelized creeks allow street pollutants such as gasoline, diesel fuel, and improperly disposed trash are freely able to fall into the drainage system and be transported straight to the river. As pollutants enter the river, the water’s quality is compromised harming organisms and plants.
RIVERWALK PLAN

Section A: Proposed installation of a tire wall along Benque's river bank

Section B: Proposed installation of a tire wall along Benque's river bank
In order to prevent pollutants from entering water, Benque should redesign the drainage systems to have buffer zones filled with plants and gravel that are able to filter pollutants before they can enter the river. In addition, to aid in better river access, sidewalks can be built along the chutes to create a main entrance-way from the street to the Riverwalk.

Deep-rooted vegetation such as tall grasses, shrubs, and trees, and aquatic vegetation such as reeds or cattails (freshwater), help filter water by absorbing harmful substances.

If properly established and maintained, a buffer zone can:

- Remove up to 50 percent or more of fertilizer chemicals and pesticides.
- Remove up to 60 percent or more of some bacteria.
- Remove up to 75 percent or more of sediment (soil particles).

Water quality of the river is important to keep in mind if we want to preserve its beauty. Daily practices such as laundry and bathing in the lower Mopan River water affect the water quality. Soap pollutes the water and if not broken up can have effects on the wildlife and greenery. In order to maintain water quality, it is important to filtrate and/or dilute chemicals in the water.

One way to filtrate water is to install filtration-cloth at narrow parts of the river. Cloth is able to filter because it allows water to pass through it while collecting the suds/build up from the soap. Cloth prices vary according to the material but are easy to install and can be replaced at low cost. Although, burlap has been tested to be the most effective, there are alternative options if burlap is not readily available.

Filters would be attached on both banks and anchored by strong metal poles. In order to make sure the filters in the water rather than float on top, weights would be attached to the bottoms of the cloth.

Stores should promote the use of biodegradable detergents that break down easily and do not leave harmful chemicals in the water. Biodegradable stock is available online from a variety of suppliers. In addition, alternative cleansing materials like citronella, lavender, and oils like peppermint can be used instead of soap.
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In order to make sure that the community embraces the riverwalk, community involvement is key.

It is important to hold regular meetings that allow Benque residents to voice their opinions about the riverwalk issues. In addition, local residents should be kept informed of all steps involved in the implementation process. What is nice about a lot of the projects is that they have the potential to be run by residents and provide work to them. For instance, local artists will be a necessity in the Welcome Center in order to provide items for the shop to sell. Other ways the locals can work is in implementing the actual riverwalk and the bioengineering practices. Benque residents could lay the coconut mesh, gabion walls, rip rap, etc. because many of the projects simply require manual labor rather than extensive training. Therefore, residents can earn money and have a large part in the building process and establish pride in redeveloping their hometown.

Some additional ways that can foster community pride and keep people involved are as follows:

Programs for Benque residents:

1. River activity day camps for children. These activities could include:
   - Innovative Challenges: Recycled toy-boat races that the children have crafted out of plastic bottles/pieces of refuse.
   - Water testing education where kids sample water and then test it for pollutants with pH solutions.
   - Water Sports (i.e. tubing, canoeing, kayaking).
   - Fishing.

Camps would get kids excited about the riverwalk and give them full utilization of the river. The programs should be run during slower tourist seasons so that river doesn't become overcrowded.
2. Informative Poster Design Competitions: Students and/or adults could attend information sessions about the river and then have to design a poster that incorporates important river facts and/or facts on biodegradable materials. The winner could then be turned into signs that would be situated along the riverwalk. Runners-up in the competition could then have their designs turned into flyers that are passed out in order to promote riverwalk education.

A competition like this would give locals a chance to showcase their artwork in addition to spreading education about the river environment.

3. Establish river days where people can rent watersport materials cheaply. River days would allow Benque residents to come down to the river to spend time with family and the community.

**Programs for tourists:**

1. Sell small plants or trees at the gift-store and have tourists plant flowers as they travel along the riverwalk. A program like this would allow tourists to beautify Benque’s river border while allowing them to feel like they have contributed something to the town. They can come back in the following years to see the flowers that they have planted and the environment they helped to create.

**Implementations:**

1. Collecting old logs/dead trees and have local artists carve canoes that Benque Residents could use.

2. Transforming dead wood will clean up the river and re-purpose it to something that Benque Viejo residents could enjoy to explore the river.

3. Increasing benches for people to sit on so they can come visit the river with family. Benches placed along the river would provide a good place for the community to meet and relax.

4. Creating posts that families could tie their horses to while they graze. Posts would allow a place for people to attach their horses properly so that they do not have to be tied to trees. If trees are constantly being pulled on, it could compromise their health by weakening trunks and branches.
Signage along the riverwalk is necessary to improve aesthetic appeal, direct tourists, provide mile markers and suggest point of interest within Benque. Uniform materials and colors used to create the signs will contribute to the continuity and comprehensive feel of the riverwalk.

The 5 ft. metal sign placed on a single wooden pole will provide visual icons for activities available along the river. The 5 ft. stone poles should be placed at every ½ mile from Xunantunich to Edison Coleman Recreational Center. These will serve as mile markers along the riverwalk. The 5 ft. sign placed on a stone structure with two poles will serve as both a mile marker and activity board for things available in town. The larger stone structure will sit at the entrance of Benque and provide tourists with complete icon list of what is available in the town.
The basketball court/recreational area marks the first point of activity between Xunantunich and Benque and is primarily used by the residents of Succotz, local students for band practice and the bus drivers that use the area as a rest stop.

The space around the basketball court has the potential to be a multi-functional recreational area. Currently, there is only a basketball court and a small building that functions as a shelter where there is no seating for visitors. In addition, the area is barren, uninviting and overrun with trash. A bus parking lot used by bus drivers waiting for tourists at Xunantunich sits just south of the basketball court. The court sits about 24 ft. away from the edge of the road, and there is no marked trail or separation between pedestrians and automobiles. There is a makeshift driveway used by people to transport cars to the riverside for washing. Pedestrians also use this driveway as a point of access to the water.

Placing benches in the area around the basketball court and including seating in the space closer to the water will promote riverside activity from both tourists and the area residents.

Continuing the river walk through this area will separate the pedestrians from the traffic and create a barrier to stop people from driving cars into the river to be washed. Pedestrian friendly walkways leading to the riverfront are needed to increase accessibility to the river from the roadside.

A well designed social and activity location will not only enhance the visual quality of the area and entrance to Succotz and Benque, but will also create a much needed amenity for the local residents. These improvement will create a space where people will be able to sit, play basketball and access the waterfront to swim or do laundry.
SUCCOTZ MINI-PARK

As a major point of access to the riverfront for people to relax, swim, bathe, and do laundry, there is no comfortable or marked entryway from the road leading into this area. People that do laundry in this area, like other areas along the river, pollute the river with the chemicals in the soaps that they use to wash their clothes. Enhancing the beauty and increasing the accessibility to the river from this area will make it a welcoming and inviting destination for both residents and tourists.

A berm and vegetation buffer along the edge of the western highway will separate the road from the riverwalk and serve as a flood control mechanism. The access stairs and flood control wall will secure the embankment between the roadway and the landing and designate the landing as a recreational area.

A wetland filtration system is needed to prevent pollution of the river by chemically infused laundry water. In the proposed system, water from the river will be navigated into a wetland area. Large rocks will designate it as the space for people to wash their clothes. The water that is used within this wetland will pass over a slow sand filter, navigate itself through the plants and then travel back into the river rid of laundry detergent toxins.

By designating this area as a water front activity space with use of the landscape, it will be more a more inviting place for both residents and tourists to visit. The laundry water filtration system will provide an eco-friendly solution for the pollution of the river while embracing and highlighting a traditional part of the river community culture for residents to utilize and tourists to witness while passing through the town.
Concept rendering of the Succotz Mini-Park
ENTRY TO BENQUE

As the entry to Benque, this area should be a welcoming, informative and educational point of interest for tourists. Besides the ‘Welcome to Benque’ sign, a makeshift taxi parking lot, and the abandoned slaughterhouse, there is nothing that marks this junction as the beginning of a new cultural experience and gives a sense of arrival.

A well designed roundabout with native specimen trees and proper wayfinding signage at the intersection of the Western Highway and George Street will provide a visitor with a sense of arrival and direct visitors to the town’s historic and cultural core. This experience can be enhanced by incorporating a renovated slaughterhouse into a welcome center. It will provide space to display local artwork, and allow visitors to find information about the areas main attractions, accommodations, restaurants, and museum.

As part of the National Highway system and an area that carries heavy border traffic, the design of the roundabout will not only require a thorough analysis of traffic circulation, but will also require extensive engineering studies to effectively deal with the multiple drainage channels that converge at this location.
Above: Concept rendering of the new Welcome Center

Left: Existing Entry to Benque and proposed structure for the Welcome Center
**BUS TERMINAL/TAXI PORT**

The bus terminal and taxi port is part of the entryway to Benque. There is no seating or signage in the area and there is also no designated parking lot for vehicles. There should be a marked paved or graveled area for taxis and buses as well as seating and shelter to accommodate those waiting for transportation.

The proposed site plan for the bus terminal includes the reconstruction of the existing building making it a functional bus station. The placement of trees and plants around the terminal will add aesthetic appeal to the area. Landscape along the southern edge of the parking lot will separate the paved seating area from the buses and cars.

**RIVERSIDE STREET**

Riverside Street is located adjacent to the Mopan River and is an integral part of the riverwalk plan, especially the portion within the limits of Benque. In this section of the river there is no space between the river and the adjacent houses to create public access to the riverwalk. Though a majority of the adjacent land along Riverside Street is residential, there are several commercial and institutional uses. Primarily used by those residing along the street, there is little vehicular traffic.

Besides low volume of traffic, there are several key resources along Riverside Street that make it an ideal location for riverwalk developments including the Benque Viejo del Carmen Town Hall, two parks, the Medical Center, and its proximity to the river. By highlighting Riverside Street and its proximity to the river, this street can become an important corridor and component of the riverwalk with several access points to the river.

Through the addition of a sidewalk, cobblestone paving, street trees, and vegetation this section of the riverwalk can be retrofitted to be more pedestrian friendly. Along with making Riverside Street more pedestrian friendly, these measures could also increase property values along the road. This would serve as a vital connection between Benque and the Western Highway.
EDISON COLEMAN RECREATIONAL CENTER

This location provides for a perfect opportunity to create a major social and recreational stop along the river. A multi-use facility incorporates, at the river walk level, a restaurant with a small gathering place and a covered deck with the view of the Mopan River and the setting sun over the Guatemalan mountains while providing a rental facility for watersport equipment at the lower level. Additionally, the river bank is designed to accommodate family gatherings with barbeque pits, benches and shade trees for people to enjoy the river.

The plan also includes a retaining wall for shoring up the steep embankment and other locally available aforementioned treatments to stabilize the river bank.
HISTORIC DOWNTOWN PLAN

AREA OF FOCUS

The proposed historic and cultural area includes the portion of Benque Viejo Town bounded by Diaz Street to the west, Victoria Street to the East, George Street to the North, and St. Joseph Street to the South.

Photo of the old Teatro Impala, the original theatre of Belize
WAYFINDING

The boundaries of the Benque Downtown Historic and Cultural District and other tourist attractions are not properly indicated by signage. The signage system as it exists today does not label streets in all places; of particular importance is the fact that not every intersection is properly labeled. This makes it challenging for a tourist to conduct a self guided walking tour and it impedes general wayfinding for tourists who are unfamiliar with the area. The ability for a tourist to guide themselves is especially important for Benque as the town’s focus is on drawing tourists who wish to explore areas off the beaten path. If the town is to draw in substantial numbers of these tourists, then a convenient, effective, and comprehensive method of way finding must be implemented.

In order to remedy this issue, a signage plan should be developed. The plan must celebrate local artists, culture, and history in Benque. A system of signage can be painted on streets, telephone poles, trash cans, and blank walls. The signage system can also utilize murals created by local artists who celebrate aspects of Benque. This method of signage will be unique to Benque, cost effective for the town, provide an outlet for local talent, and will further designate Benque as a cultural attraction.
Proposed Riverwalk

Centennial Park

Proposed Homestay/POD Accommodation

Mayan Mound Site

Proposed Outdoor Cultural Arts Complex

Cultural & Entertainment District

Renovated Theatre & Culture Complex

Proposed Farmers Market

Connectivity diagram of the core commercial center of Benque
**ENHANCED COMMERCIAL DISTRICT**

With a new theatre in place as the community’s economic catalyst, Church Hill Street will become a more important commercial corridor. Tourists who will be attracted to the theatre, along with local residents, will have a new reason to go to the center of town.

The proposed commercial corridor plan shows where new buildings can be built on vacant lots. For tourists, these buildings could offer places for experiencing and purchasing local arts and crafts. With the implementation of the new plan, restaurants have the opportunity to capitalize on their business with the influx of customers from the nearby attractions. With endless opportunities for creating a thriving new downtown corridor, careful attention should be paid to appropriate land uses that will support the theater and the overall cultural district.
STREETSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

A main concern for Benque’s redesign of the downtown/entertainment district is connectivity. In order to address this issue, the plan shows proposed streetscapes that are more accessible and provide better comfort to pedestrians. Streets are lined with native shade trees in order to alleviate the heavy sun that beats down upon walkers, however, they are strategically placed so that they do not block storefronts. In addition, benches that face the buildings are placed between the storefronts along the road in order to provide walkers with places to rest. At the end of each block there are crosswalks that provide a safe areas for pedestrian to cross streets.

Even though the walkways terminate at each end of this site plan, they actually continue across to the boundaries of each side of town. This provides enhanced accessibility and connectivity for local residents and tourists who are walking from one end of town to the other. The primary streetscape improvements will create an aesthetically pleasing downtown experience for both tourists and residents of Benque. The improvements will also connect the major downtown points of interest including the farmers market, church, performing arts complex, theatre, shops and restaurants with one another. The sidewalks, benches, trees and crosswalks provide tourists with a comfortable and easy Benque experience. See above for a rendering of the proposed streetscape improvements.

An additional benefit of the proposed streetscape is to reduce the vehicular traffic from a two lane road to a one lane road along Church Hill and Church Street. The reduction in road width allows for the implementation of the aforementioned aesthetics but also to induce slower vehicular traffic through the district to aid in providing a controlled approach to the proposed pedestrian street crossings making the district more conducive to pedestrian traffic. The slower vehicular speeds will also allow tourist to see more of the district at a better pace to entice visiting the district while staying in Benque.
The general objective is to preserve historically or culturally important buildings within the town of Benque. The specific objectives are: (1) to promote the effective integration of culture and history; (2) to generate effective models for enhancing and promoting historic and cultural preservation so that it can be applied in future interventions; and (3) to protect the character and uniqueness of Benque and honor its contribution to the history and culture of Belize.

Historic properties are the built evidence of a community’s heritage. When these buildings are lost through public inaction they take a community’s character, individuality, and history along with them. A community’s built history is a limited resource and, as such, local governments need to carefully manage these resources and protect them for future generations. Proper historic and cultural preservation plans can help communities stabilize areas, stimulate private investment and attract tourists. Once Benque’s historical and cultural capital is preserved, it will be a strong tool for building community pride.

Benque is in a special position to preserve their culture and history as it is home to one of Belize’s Houses of Culture. This can be done by:

1. **Creation of a registry in connection with house of culture**
   - There are currently no guidelines which can be used to determine and designate historically or culturally important buildings. Historic Preservation guidelines create framework to allow communities to better preserve their history and culture. Benque should create guidelines designating that any building older than 75 years is eligible for historic status. Any building within the Cultural & Entertainment District should also be considered for historic status.
   - Currently, there is no registry or identification of which buildings are historically or culturally significant. A registry will allow for better organization of historic and cultural preservation plans. Benque should create a registry which denotes which buildings are historically or culturally significant. The “Benque Registry of Historic and Cultural Significance” would be made available to the public and to private developers in order to spread awareness of which buildings have been designated historic.

2. **Connect residents and tourists with history through the use of cultural events**
   - The connection between history and culture is not strong enough. Historic tourism is growing in popularity and as such, Benque must leverage its strong history and culture to attract more tourists. Events to showcase the connections between history and culture should be created. These events will be noted in a “Calendar of Events” and their location should be marked on the historic and cultural walking tours.

3. **Protect Benque’s built history through preservation of buildings in the Historic District.**
   - There are currently no incentives to preserve Benque’s cultural and historic heritage. In order to preserve history and culture, Benque should encourage owners of historic properties to maintain and reuse these structures. Incentives are needed to persuade residents to participate in historic preservation activities. One such incentive could be allowing Bed and Breakfast operations only with those properties that are historically significant or are designated as historic buildings.
   - Residents who own historic properties which are listed in the Registry and who fully maintain their buildings and meet the requirements of the aforementioned Benque Architectural Guidelines will be entitled to incentives. These incentives will include a decreased licensing fee for businesses located within the designated building, a plaque denoting the building as Historic to generate more traffic, and the building will be featured in a Benque historic and cultural walking tour.

The east wall frieze of Xunantunich just a few minutes away from Benque.
BEST PRACTICES FOR SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Micro-financing

1. **Credit is neither accessible nor available to small business owners in Benque.**

   Without credit, business owners are unable to improve or expand their businesses. In addition, it can be extremely difficult for additional businesses to open and operate successfully.

   By acquiring grant or low cost monies, micro-financing will be able to provide the needed capital to improve and expand existing businesses in Benque as well as providing seed money for new ventures. The additional revenue generated by these businesses may then be used to reinvest in the community and further promote economic growth in Benque.

   The political climate changes relatively frequently which results in shifting priorities. Continuity and accountability is necessary for the long-term success of micro-financing. An outside agency or not-for-profit should be placed in control of the financing to ensure objectivity and foresight in order to maintain fiscal responsibility. An example may be found in the Columbia Project by the Peace Corps and the Returning Peace Corps Volunteers which began in 2000 and has been a tremendous success. Any respected and independent outside agency which may be interested in administering the program for Benque should be contacted to gauge interest in running the program here in Benque.

   An outside and independent third-party will increase confidence in the program in addition to allowing an enforcement structure to be created which will work effectively. By eliminating potential conflicts of interests, or even the appearance of such impropriety, there will be a greater chance of both short-term and long-term success as well as gaining widespread acceptance in the community.
2. **The concept of credit is foreign to many business owners in Benque.**

Without an understanding of credit procedures and the need to repay loans in a timely manner, micro-financier will soon run out of money and will not have the impact within Benque which it could if it is able to recirculate loan money.

An educational system must be put in place to ensure business owners understand the importance of paying outstanding loan balances. If business owners are shown that their repayment of loans is necessary for funds to be available for future loans to them or their family and friends the likelihood of repayment will increase.

Once the local business owners accept the need to promptly repay loans they will not only become part of a self-sustaining financing but they will build up a credit profile which will allow for future loans at lower interest rates from traditional banks. This will in turn free up money for other small businesses without access to traditional capital markets and financing options.

3. **Business owners may not spend all borrowed monies on business development and improvement due to more pressing short-term personal needs.**

In order to have the ability to pay back the loan, the business owners will need to invest into their business. Since by definition they do not have the available funds to pay back the money from personal savings, the loans need to be paid back from the increased revenue of the business.

Instead of providing a check or cash as is done in traditional loans, a line-of-credit system should be employed. This will allow for business owners to purchase any necessary assets but will also eliminate the ability to use the loan money for anything other than business development. Accounts should be set up at local merchants to enable business owners to make necessary purchases. Additionally, this will allow the administering agency to monitor activities in a cost effective manner.

As business owners realize that proper investment in their business provides them with the means to increase revenues they will become less likely to abuse future loans and thereby increase their ability to obtain low cost financing through multiple sources. This will also decreasing future monitoring costs for the micro-financier.

4. **Most business owners are not aware of best practices for running a small business such as inventory control, cash flow tracking and revenue forecasting.**

In order to expand their business beyond a one or two person operation people will need to become aware of how to track the most important metrics which directly affect a business’ chances for success.

Prior to even applying for a loan, business owners must enroll in a series of seminars designed to teach them the best practices of successful ownership. This step should be made part of a comprehensive education program designed to teach the best practices and all related topics to every applicant. These seminars may be taught either by successful local businesspersons or outside entities such as NGOs, international organizations or Belizean institutions of higher education.

If the business owners are shown how to operate a business in a more efficient and proven manner their chances of success are greatly increased. Increased success will also increase the likelihood that business owners will be able to pay back the loan amount according to terms.

Without the proper knowledge base to draw upon, the likelihood of creating and maintaining a successful program is extremely limited. Due to the nature of the loans, which are uncollateralized and given with minimal documentation, it is necessary to have individuals with knowledge of the processes involved to administer the program as well as having access to those with the needed knowledge.

An independent and objective third-party should create and administer the program. The independent administrator will bring the needed knowledge and resources to increase the likelihood of success. As noted above, the Peace Corps has experience in this area. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Inter-American Development Bank are also potential candidates to administer the program.

Fiscal discipline and a strong organizational structure will be crucial to the program’s success during the first few years. Once the program has been established and the community has seen the benefits of it, there may be the possibility of transferring oversight responsibility to members and transforming the entity into a self-governing association.
5. **Given that the loans will not be collateralized and will be given to businesses and individuals with no credit rating or history in most instances, there is an increased likelihood of default.**

In order to reach and assist the maximum number of business owners in Benque, the micro-financier must safeguard its assets as much as possible. By dispersing many smaller loans as opposed to few larger loans the risk is spread out and the likelihood of successful payback will increase.

Setting a maximum amount of initial loans available will allow for successful loans to be made. Based upon costs of materials and wages in the Benque area, no initial loan should be for more than BZ$2,000 which should only be given to the more established and known businesses in Benque. The typical value of a loan should be BZ$250 to BZ$ 1,000. By taking this approach the threat of a few defaulters taking down the entire micro-financing system may be eliminated.

The smaller loan amounts will help business owners to understand the benefits of building credit. Increasing the amount of money available for each successive loan upon full payback of prior loans will also allow the business owner to grow their business at a more natural pace and help them to avoid the issue of carrying too much serviceable debt which increases the likelihood of future default.
Business Plan

1. Most if not all business owners in Benque, including those interested in starting a business, neither have nor know how to create a business plan.

Without a business plan it is not possible to obtain credit for one’s business which eliminates the ability to expand or begin it. A business plan is a road map for the business which allows others and oneself to see how the business is currently operating as well as its potential.

A basic template will allow for individual’s to more concisely and thoroughly explain and understand their business which will increase the likelihood of their success. To simplify the process, it should be made part of a very simple loan application. An example is shown in the appendix. Completion of a business plan will be a prerequisite for applying for a loan. The topic will also be covered in the aforementioned educational classes to be taken prior to applying for a loan.

Incentive Programs

1. Business owners and those wishing to start businesses must be encouraged to participate in the micro-funding program.

Currently the business owners and potential owners are underfunded and incapable of improving, expanding or creating businesses and without significant buy-in for the program it will not have as great of an effect on Benque as it could.

Providing free educational seminars will allow participants to increase their chances of success as well as increasing the likelihood of micro-funding succeeding. By making the seminars free it will encourage members of the community to participate even if they will not be original participants in the micro-funding program (but all participating members will be required to attend). Increasing the general level of business will benefit the community overall while also preparing business owners to eventually enter the program. Additionally, financial incentives such as discounts of licenses or property taxes may encourage participation in the program.

A more educated and knowledgeable populace will benefit Benque in two main ways. The first is that as the knowledge base will increases the level of business success and profits which in turn will increase the overall standard of living. The second benefit is that once the positive effects of implementing best practices is seen, the people will desire them to be applied elsewhere such as in the political arena which will add to overall stability and prosperity in Benque.

Commercial Development: Banks have recently opened in Benque and can provide local financing.
2. **Lack of business best practices knowledge and importance of loan payback are limiting factors in the success of a micro-financing program.**

Without a proper foundation of business knowledge or responsibility regarding the workings of loans or a micro-financing program, both the businesses and the program will be destined to at best a mediocre existence. If that is the case, the money and energy put into the program would be more productive if directed elsewhere.

As previously mentioned, participants in the program should be required to participate in a series of best practices seminars prior to being allowed to apply for a loan. Attendance will increase their knowledge and likelihood of success. Most importantly it will create positive word-of-mouth for the program which then encourages other business owners, even those not interested in the program, to attend future sessions. Upon completion of the seminar program the attendees will be more prepared to succeed both at their businesses and personally.

The micro-financing program and the availability of low cost loans will provide the needed capital for many of the local businesses currently unable to gain access to capital markets for funding. The training associated with the program will allow business owners and those interested in starting businesses to operate in a more efficient and sustainable manner which greatly increases the opportunities for success.

3. **Local business owners and those looking to open a business are unaware of the best practices for operating a business including how to finance it, how to create a business plan and how to properly operate a business.**

Without this knowledge, only a minimal amount of success may be expected. The fundamentals of business ownership must be understood and implemented in order to ensure success.

The free seminar series will enable attendees to gain the requisite knowledge in order to prepare them for success in both the micro-financing program and afterwards. By monitoring the progress of each step and ensuring compliance with minimum requirements, the micro-financier will be in a position to guarantee that participants have the necessary skills to understand what is expected of them and how their businesses can perform at a higher level and provide greater rewards for them and their families. The availability of this free business coaching should encourage participation in the program. By introducing the attendees to best practices, the educational program will provide the impetus for the expansion of the business base of Benque and thereby raising the standard of living within the community.

4. **Without current or recent past access to funding through loans, local businesses owners are unaware of the importance of paying back loans as quickly as economically feasible.**

In order to maintain the micro-financing program’s level of available funds for distribution, those having loans must be encouraged to pay back their loan amounts as soon as possible. By not repaying the loans quickly, the program participants will not only be diminishing the amount of available funds but will also be increasing the total amount they will be required to pay back on their loans as the interest compounds the longer the loans are outstanding.

In order to encourage repayment of loans, and even prepayment, a discounting scheduling should be implemented. Given that the loans will be originally for smaller amounts and for shorter periods of time (typically 6 months to two years), the most effective incentives will be decreases in future interest rates and rebates of a certain percentage of interest paid or principal amount upon final repayment of the loan. This will be more likely to be possible once the program is established or if some grant funding may be found.

These incentives will encourage participants in the microfinancing program to not only see the importance of payment of loans but also gives a tangible financial benefit for doing so. Once this behavior has been internalized it will spread throughout the business community of Benque which will then raise expectations of similar behavior by all. This process results in a more financially stable and prosperous business and overall community.
5. **The price of many necessities for business creation and improvement are currently cost prohibitive especially in small quantities.**

Small loans of the size which should be given by the micro-financier will be unable to support significant changes to operations if a majority of the monies received are spent on structural improvement materials such as paint. Either a subsidy or a bulk purchasing program should be created in order to defray a portion of the costs of needed supplies. Either program will cause the needed products to no longer be cost prohibitive for participants of the microfinancing program and will encourage participation in a beautification plan for the downtown Benque Historical and Cultural District. This will allow for more of the microfinancing loan amounts to be used for operational improvements.

By tying the subsidies and/or bulk discounts for needed supplies to both the microfinancing and redevelopment programs, participation should increase and will maximize the positive effects of both programs. Individual business owners in Benque do not currently have the purchasing power needed to acquire materials and equipment at favorable price points.

In order to compete with some of the larger and more organized businesses and associations in the area, business owners in Benque must be able to acquire needed materials and inputs at competitive prices. Without this, their finished goods will neither be priced competitively nor be as complete in terms of options offered as other businesses in the area and will not be able to gain market share and thereby limiting opportunities for success.

The creation of cooperatives amongst similar small businesses such as restaurants and stores or types of owners such as young people or women will allow them to place larger orders and gain bulk discounts. This will in turn lower their costs of operations and increase profitability. The discounts will also allow for the expansion of offerings and to become more competitive with some of the larger establishments in Benque.

Not only will the creation of cooperatives allow for decreases in operating expenses it will provide a means for greater cooperation within the business community of Benque. The increased cooperation will allow Benque to benefit from this synergy and prosper by a greater amount than through individual business successes.

6. **Business owners may be reluctant to join cooperatives.**

With many business owners struggling to survive and provide for their families they may not see the benefits of cooperation with other business owners. There may be a zero-sum attitude prevalent within the business community whereby individual business owners believe that the gain of another necessarily means a loss by them.

Education of the business owners in order to demonstrate that it is not in fact a zero-sum situation will begin to assuage their fears. Many may already wish to participate in cooperatives but do not possess the requisite knowledge to create one. An educational seminar will address this issue as well. Additionally, an incentive program should be put in place to encourage participation in the cooperative program. A reduction in yearly licensing fees, reductions in property taxes and the demonstration of pricing discounts on bulk purchases should the necessary motivation for business owners to create and join cooperatives.
ARCHITECTURAL GUIDELINES

The Cultural & Entertainment District is the focal point of commerce and activity in Benque. This area represents Benque, past and present, and should reflect the rich history and pride the residents have for their town. As efforts are underway to re-energize this area of town, measures should be implemented to ensure that Benque will not lose its heritage and charm as the town develops and grows.

These guidelines will serve to protect and enhance Benque’s unique personality and character by providing best design principles and guidelines for future development and renovations in the Cultural & Entertainment District. These recommendations are for certain architectural methods and features that have given Benque its unique identity and would continue to do so in the future if implemented.

The focus area for these architectural guidelines run from George to Saint Joseph Streets and from Victoria to Diaz Streets.

Mixed-Use Land Use

It is common in Benque for buildings to have commercial use on the first level with residential on the second. It is recommended that Benque continue this mixed-use principle as it provides a density to the downtown core and provides plenty of space for Benque’s retail entrepreneurs.

The examples seen above in Figures 1, 2 and 3 have many of the design aspects that Benque should preserve and incorporate into any new development of the Cultural & Entertainment District.

Maintaining and Preserving Historical Aspects

1. Preserve the Style of the Roofs

Both styles of roofing shown below are very conventional and traditional styles that incorporate the personality of the area. They will be used for all types of land use structures including commercial, residential, and mixed-use in the downtown area.

**Recommendations:**

- **Roofs should have a pitch angle no lower than 15 degrees.** (See Figure 4)
- **Some roofs should have pitches of various angles and length.** This style is very common in the area and is a unique aspect that must be preserved. (See Figure 5)
- **The roofing material should consist of different colors of zinc in accordance with the primary and secondary colors of the structure.** (See Figures 6 and 7)
- **Overhangs of the roof should be between one and four feet from the face of the structure.** (See Figure 8)
2. Windows

Windows provide the people of Benque an excellent view of all the natural beauty the Western Cayo region has to offer. The windows in Benque have many unique styles and characteristics that add to the town’s character. Different styles such as glass window, open frames, and jalousie windows are found in many homes throughout the town.

**Recommendations:**
- Window trim and shutters should match the primary and secondary colors of the structure.
- Window spacing should be consistent throughout the entire structure to provide uniformity.
- The common window size is roughly 30 x 45 inches. This is a standard size that would be beneficial to implement throughout the mixed-use, commercial, and residential structures. (See Figures 9 and 10)
- Window shutters are great additions that help protect a household from adverse weather. Two styles are commonly found in town: two door shutters and single door shutters. Both styles should continue to be used in new development. (See Figures 11 and 12)
- Ideally windows with no glass and/or no bars should be included in design plans as it enhances the open lifestyle in town.
- Jalousie windows should be limited to a certain extent in the historical area. Though very common in the area, they tend to decrease the traditional character of Benque.
- If jalousie windows are utilized, wood is the preferred material to use. If glass is used, wrought iron window bars should be installed to mitigate breakage. (See Figure 13)

3. Maintain the Historical Aspects of the Balconies

Second floor balconies play an important role in the life of Benque residents. They provide an opportunity to connect socially with passing neighbors and hear the latest news updates. They also provide shaded places to cool off from the day’s heat.

**Recommendations:**
- Many balconies in town have ornate balustrade features that should be preserved and replicated in new construction. Balustrade columns with intricate details add to the aesthetics of downtown and should be implemented when possible. (See Figure 14)
- Balconies should extend 3 to 5 ft. from the dwelling and abut the edge of the street (or sidewalk). (See Figure 15)
- Materials used for the balcony should be consistent with materials used on the building to which the balcony is attached.
- Balcony colors for support columns and beams should be similar to the secondary colors used for door and window trims. If balustrade is stone and has not been previously painted, it should remain its natural color. (See Figures 16 and 17)
4. Maintain the Styles of Porches

The space underneath the balcony is significant in connecting the building to the street and providing cover for residents or retail customers. Buildings with 1st floor commercial activity should utilize this space to place products for sale and entice customers to patronize their store. Buildings that have cafes or restaurants as tenants can utilize this space to place outdoor seating for patrons to enjoy Benque.

**Recommendations:**
- Porches should extend 3 to 5 ft. from the dwelling and abut the edge of the street or sidewalk. (See Figure 18)
- Columns along the porch should be spaced at least 48 inches apart to allow for maximum visibility of commercial space and provide space for movement along the porch. (See Figure 19)
- Materials used for porch columns should be consistent with other materials used on the 1st floor of the dwelling.
- Colors for support columns and beams should be the same as the secondary color used on the trim for the windows and doors.
- Colors for support columns and beams should be the same as the secondary color used on the trim for the windows and doors. (See Figure 20)

5. Preserve and Implement the Use of Patios

Patios would be excellent additions to buildings in the Cultural & Entertainment District which could be utilized for dining or social events. Establishments with room on the side or back of the building should convert that space into an outdoor option for patrons. Patios serve as a great place for tourists, and locals to gather and enjoy all the natural beauty Benque has to offer.

**Recommendations:**
- Patio placed to the side of a building should abut the sidewalk or road to allow for maximum visibility for pedestrians and vehicles from the road. If room isn’t available on the side of the building, then space to the rear can be utilized. (See Figures 21 and 22)
- Patios should provide covering from the sun and rain by including a structure or canvas over the dining area. If a structure is not feasible, trees that provide shade could be planted around the patio to provide a cooler atmosphere for patrons.
- Materials utilized to construct the covering should be consistent with the materials used on the buildings to which the patio is attached. However, concrete buildings should still utilize wood in constructing a covering to help keep costs low.
- Colors of support beams should be consistent with colors used on the building to which the patio is attached.
- Lighting under the covering should be installed to enable use of the patio during night hours. String lights are a cost effective option that will also increase the aesthetic appeal of the patio area.
6. Maintain the Unique Exterior Doors
The doors throughout Benque offer a unique architectural aspect to the area. They come in various colors, sizes, and materials and can add a unique identity to the building and the town.

**Recommendations:**
- Wooden doors are most common and traditional structures in town and should be used when possible. (See Figure 23)
- Wrought Iron gates can be used for added protection, however gates with intricate designs are preferable to add more character. (See Figure 24)
- Doors within mixed-use and commercial structures should typically be French doors as they are most common on the old buildings in town and allow easier access for patrons. (See Figure 25)
- Doors should be kept their natural wood color to help promote the natural feel of the town. However, doors are painted many colors here in Benque and any festive color for the door is advisable.

7. Signage
Signs are an important aspect of Benque that guide people around the town. Most signs around downtown exist to promote and advertise the local businesses and products. One aspect of signage that is unique in Benque are the hand painted street signs painted on or attached to corner houses. These bring individuality to the town and should be the standard for signs in Benque.

**Recommendations:**
- Hand painted signs should be used instead of vector font when possible to keep the town’s unique feel. (See Figure 26)
- Street signs should utilize the current street sign font. (See Figure 27)
- Signs for the building should be relevant to the use of the structure.
- Windows and doors should be free of signs and graphics.
- Signs for the businesses should be placed on the side of the building facing traffic to allow for highest visibility. (See Figure 28)
- Signs should not exceed the height of the building it is promoting. (See Figure 29)
8. Window bars

Window bars come in various designs and are common in Benque as they provide increased security for residents and their property.

**Recommendations:**
- The designs of the bars should be consistent with the designs of the others within the structure.
- If window bars are used for one window, bars should be in place for the remaining windows on that level of the structure.
- Bars should be wrought iron as that is the traditional material used in town.
- The color of wrought iron bars should remain black. (See Figure 30)

9. Maintain the Fencing

Fencing is an important element to the city that shows how friendly the residents are in Benque. Properties in Benque tend not to include any fencing at all which allows for easier social interaction between neighbors.

**Recommendations:**
- Materials used in fencing should be wrought iron to be consistent with surrounding properties. (See Figure 31)
- Zinc privacy fencing should be avoided when possible to maintain the “open” feeling that the town projects. (See Figure 32)
- Fences should not exceed 5 ft. in height so as not to ruin the friendly and open environment of the community.
10. Materials
Materials used in new construction should be consistent with materials currently utilized by buildings in town to enhance the architectural character of Benque. New construction which does not utilize materials consistent with its surroundings risks diminishing the unique personality of the community and should be avoided when possible.

Recommendations:
- Zinc should be utilized for gutters, downspouts, and roofing. Zinc used in roofing should be shaped in the traditional manner. (See Figure 33)
- Wood should be used for doors, window trim, and shutters.
- Wood siding is preferential for buildings in the district as it is the traditional material used and gives the town a unique personality. (See Figures 34 and 35)

11. Setbacks
Setbacks should be taken into consideration when designing any new building. Uniformed building setbacks consistent with the current layout will allow the Cultural & Entertainment District of Benque to maintain its unique character and “vibe.” To maintain consistency within Benque, buildings should be setback 3 to 5 ft. from the sidewalk or street, providing space for balconies and porches to abut the sidewalk or street.

12. Building Height
Benque is a small town and should embrace that by ensuring that new construction in the Cultural & Entertainment District is consistent with current building heights. Buildings should be no shorter than two stories and no higher than four stories.
**FARMER’S MARKET**

The proposed Farmer’s Market is to be located on the corner of Kennedy Street and Wyatt Street. Palm trees along the Kennedy Street and Wyatt Street, an existing wall along southeast edge and a parking lot along the northeast edge mark the boundaries of the market. The main entrance is located on the northeast side next to the parking lot. Sheltered vendor areas run along the southeast and southwest edges while a plaza for pop-up vendors lies in the center of the marketplace. The plaza is designed with a combination of pavers and trees adequately placed to provide shade for comfort.

**OUTDOOR CULTURAL ARTS COMPLEX**

The Outdoor Cultural Arts Complex (OCAC) is the premier location for all of Benque’s residents to gather and celebrate what makes the town so special. Local cuisines can be cooked in the kitchen while local musicians and dancers perform on the stage. As Benque residents celebrate their culture and heritage on stage, tourists will come to mingle, learn about, and take in what life is all about in this beautiful border town.

The prime location for the OCAC is just North of the intersection of George & Guerre Street. This location was chosen because it lies less than fifty feet off the river and is easily accessible and visible to people enjoying the river walk. It also sits only two blocks north of the revitalized Teatro Impala giving visitors a direct line-of-sight from the OCAC to the Impala and into the heart of Benque’s cultural and entertainment district.

The plan for the downtown cultural entertainment district serves as the economic development catalyst for the town of Benque. The farmers market provides a place for the residents to sell crafts, food and other items to other residents and tourists. The theatre serves as a source of entertainment and revenue for the town. The cultural performing arts complex is a space where residents of Benque can display various arts including plays, musical instrument performances, and dances. The farmers market, theatre and cultural performing arts complex are all points of interest that will drive resident and tourist activity within the core of Benque.
LODGING AND HOMESTAYS

The current number of lodging options for tourists in Benque is quite limited compared to nearby locations in both Belize and Guatemala. The amount of suitable and desirable lodging for tourists is a limiting factor in the growth of tourism in Benque. Without addressing this fact any plans for improvements will be dramatically hampered and their success will be limited. Prefabricated stand-alone accessory structures, or a tourist pod, and opportunities for Bed and Breakfast facilities are two of the most viable options for Benque.

A tourist pod typically allows for basic accommodation that includes an outdoor patio, a kitchen, a bedroom, a small living room, and a bathroom with a sink, toilet, and shower stall.

Small, environmentally friendly and sustainable pre-fabricated dwellings are available from several global manufacturers and several local manufacturers. The most economical are the P-Pod kits which are manufactured by the Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. based company Polehouses.com. The price for each unit when equipped with grey water and solar power systems is approximately US$20,000. This allows for the units to be completely self-contained and sustaining by producing their own water and power.

Benque can implement tourist pods immediately to attract tourists without having to rely on hotels. By starting out with approximately 5-10 pods, an instant critical mass of tourists can be provided for. Over the years, more pods can be implemented in backyards as the demand increases. The primary advantages of placing the P-Pods in the available open spaces in the back yards of Benque residents is that the feel and aesthetics of the community will be minimally disrupted.

A financial breakdown of the costs of financing the purchase of P-Pods and cash flow projections resulting from their use may be found in the appendix. The projections cover five and 10-year loan repayment horizons as well as the purchasing of 5 or 10 P-Pods. It will be the responsibility of the property owners to provide upkeep for the P-Pods and in return they will receive a portion of the money received in excess of debt servicing needs with the majority going to the Town Council to be used for infrastructure improvements.

There are more economical options that may be locally available that an individual property owner can afford and implement to supplement their income. Additional research should be done to find alternative solutions that are economically feasible.

A Bed and Breakfast option can provide families with supplemental income at the same time meeting a critical need for Benque. A homestay program should be established to maintain certain minimum living standards and to assure a standard of care. A limited program can be started to allow families who maintain a historically significant/designated house to operate a Bed and Breakfast facility.

There are several advantages to addressing the lodging problem through these methods of, as opposed to increasing hotel capacity in Benque. These options will have a minimal impact on the scale and the character of the town. It will also allow tourists wishing to truly experience life in a small community in Belize to do so without staying in a hotel; they will in essence be living with a local family.
Concept rendering of POD installation (Plan View)

Concept rendering of POD installation (Section View)
The restoration of the Teatro Impala will serve as the jumping off point for the renewal of the Cultural and Entertainment District. By having this focal point, the changing of downtown will spread outward from it to eventually encompass the entire area. The increase in visitors will allow the nearby businesses to benefit and increase their revenue. This will allow Benque to reach its full potential by improving its infrastructure and its business community.
Schematic ground floor plan of the Theatre & Cultural Arts complex
Theatre and Cultural Center

The proposed Theater and Cultural Center is conceived as a place where culture, art, and history will all come together to enrich the lives of Benqueños and to create a welcoming environment for tourists and visitors. The Center is located in the heart of the historic district to be a major catalyst for downtown revitalization and in creating the "Soul of Benque".

The proposed Center will be an adaptive reuse of an abandoned former cinema, Teatro Impala, which holds lot of memories for Benqueños. The intent is to restore the exterior to bring back the original aesthetics and renovate the interior to accommodate future uses. Adaptive reuse of the theatre is the most sustainable way to create a center with an art gallery for displaying local arts and crafts, a museum depicting Benque’s History and a stage for local artists to perform. The theatre will also allow Benque to be an important venue during the Belize Film Festival by providing appropriate facilities for the showings. The design for the new center is inspired by the original design of Teatro Impala. There is an awning-covered plaza located at the entrance of the theatre on Church Street that serves as a gathering place and a ticket window service location for customers.

The single story multifunctional hall seats 175-250 people depending on the use. The stage and large screen allow the space to be used as a performance hall, theatre, and town meeting hall. Located within the interior atrium, a space will be designated to display Benque cultural artifacts. The interior of the theatre will include new audio and visual equipment, finishes, wall coverings, and furniture making it a State-of-the-art facility for the western Cayo area.

Phase II: Expansion of Cultural Center

The vacant building adjacent to the theater can be used to expand the performance and other cultural activities, while also providing opportunities for new retail and a community garden on the roof. The facility can be a gathering place, practice space for performances, as well as provide ample space to showcase Benque’s history and culture. The facility could also provide for much needed community meeting space and connect to a small outdoor plaza in the middle of the block that creates an efficient connection through the town block rather than around creating a central core of the community. The plaza can have multiple uses including a place to meet family and friends, a small market complimenting the Farmer’s Market, or an intimate outdoor performance space.

The combination of the theatre space and the proposed phase II expansion can create a project focused in the center of the district that appeals to residents, nearby community members, and visitors. The center will also aid in providing a reason for the citizens of Benque to travel to the district from the developing areas beyond the district to create a point of community interaction.
Left: Concept rendering of Church Hill street with the renovation of the Theatre

Below: Existing condition of Church Hill Street looking towards the abandoned theatre (North)

Left: Concept rendering of Church Hill street with the renovation of the Theatre

Below: Existing condition of Church Hill Street looking towards the abandoned theatre (South)
INTRODUCTION

In March 2013, Project Team Member Daniel Mayer returned to Benque approximately 1 year after the completion and presentation of the work contained in this document. There were 3 objectives for the return trip to Benque:

- Realization and success of the projects outlined throughout this document.
- Review projects in progress and understand the delays or issues.
- Discuss the community decisions and changes in regards to the original project as presented in March of 2012.

The documented information in regards to these objectives were completed by on-site interviews with the stakeholders and residents as well as the thoughts and reactions of those who traveled with Daniel to Benque that had never visited the community before. The experience of returning to Benque and knowing the challenges that awaited this project was something Daniel did not take lightly and what awaited him upon his arrival was a combination of pride and curiosity. Was the project a positive impact on the community or has nothing really changed since March of 2012?

PROJECT REALIZATION & SUCCESS

As of March 2013, no projects outlined within this document have been completed. A project that was not identified specifically but is a potential result of the research and documentation during the project is the construction of a coffee shop in Centennial Park. The project was near completion upon my arrival and a local business owner will operate the establishment. The goal of the coffee shop was to cater to the 16 - 35 demographic residents of Benque. Centennial Park is already a successful part of the community and the coffee shop will continue to add to the destination value of the park.

Websites for local businesses that attract tourist continue to improve and provide adequate information. The interconnectivity of the various businesses allow an individual to contact one establishment, a hotel, and can schedule a local tour or dinner reservations while booking a room. The cooperation of the various community stakeholders and business owners is pivotal to growing the economic value of the town and increasing tourism.

Outside of Benque, the completion of the St. Ignacio Tourism Center has increased daily visitors the Cayo District of Belize and if proper steps are taken to advertise the many amenities of Benque then visitor traffic in Benque will hopefully increase.
PROJECTS IN-PROGRESS

Currently there are two projects in-progress in Benque that are part of this document. The Farmer’s Market continues to slowly move forward to ground breaking. The BTB and government officials are reviewing the application for financial assistance and the beauracracy has caused delays in the project. A summer ground breaking is anticipated as of March 2013.

The second project moving forward is the catalyst project, the renovated theatre. There are interested stakeholders and financial support exists to continue to move forward with this project. The theatre is still seen by the community as the critical piece to rejuvenating the downtown core and growing the economic base of the town.

Both of these projects, once completed, will provide the local residents and the residents of nearby communities a destination in Benque that will bring capital and investment interest into the community.

COMMUNITY DECISIONS & CHANGES

The most significant change noted in Benque was the closing of Casa de Teresa. The restaurant is a draw for tourist and residents. The owner has decided to relocate to St. Ignacio and downsize the existing business. The community has continued to embrace the project as a whole but have not shown an aggressive willingness to move foward on many projects. The continued hostility along the Guatemala and Belize border (Guatemala does not recognize the Belize border) continues to be a focus of the local residents as well as continued poverty and unemployment which has exceeded 35% of the community.

DEPARTINGoughts

Mr. Subrata Basu has petitioned the Peace Corps to remain in Benque for 2 more years. Mr. Basu still has high hopes that the community can move in the right direction and will continue to provide leadership when needed. Daniel’s return to Benque proved a very important point. Once you visits Benque, you are always a part of the community. Many residents and local business owners took the time to visit with Daniel and to talk about the project. They appreciated what the Ohio State students brought to the community and treasure the time we spent there. Daniel would be recognized while walking down Riverside and asked to share a drink at a local bar. That type of community character is the heart of Benque and it’s citizens and that is the core element of what will continue to allow Benque to thrive.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank everyone in Benque we have come in contact with during our time here. You have opened your hearts and homes to us and we want you to know how much we appreciate it. What started off as a school project for us has become so much more because of our time here. You have touched our hearts in a way we could not have imagined and for that we want to thank you. This project has turned into something bigger than the project itself and that is because of you, the people of Benque. We were accepted during our time here, and were made to feel welcomed by everyone, whether on our morning walk to our work space, or on the walk home to our hotel after a wonderful local meal. The friendliness and warmth we were shown will always be remembered.

Additionally, we would like to extend our appreciation to Benque Mayor Mike Velasquez for his warm hospitality, welcoming us to the town and giving us work space at the Town Hall. A special note of thanks to Mr. David Ruiz for allowing us to use the Mt. Carmel Project Office as our working studio during our stay and also letting us use the school facilities for our final presentation. Thanks to Ana Melita Castellanos for making sure the everyday we had our lunch, cooked by families belonging to the local women’s group.

While our ideas may seem ambitious, we know they are possible. Our vision for Benque is your vision because it was taken from many friendly conversations and more formal meetings with residents. This is why we have confidence that your hopes for Benque will succeed. Implementing this plan will neither be short nor easy, but it is worth pursuing.

We have confidence in your ability to transform your community to become what you would like it to be. The changes we have proposed will bring more visitors to Benque and they will want to spend time here because they will have fallen in love with it just as we have. They will go home and tell their friends and family about the amazing town in Belize that they enjoyed so much. And we know that the people they tell will have to come and see for themselves. That is how Benque will be transformed and become a destination for all those looking to experience the true Belize.

We cannot thank you enough for your gracious hospitality.

Muchas Gracias.
Special thanks to:

Community Members:
Ana Melita Castellanos
Claudia Orantes
David Ruiz
John Otley
John Tun
Jose Guerra
Josephine Juan
Keisha Rodriguez
Kota Murakami
Linda Luna Moran
Luis Ruiz
Monserrat Casademunt
Rafael Manzanero
Rene Emilio Montero
Rudy Bol
Steven Reichert
Subrata Basu

Benque Town Council Staff:
Ana Laura Carias
Anita Mendoza
Carmencita Sosa
Oscar Nabet
Amir Guerra
Carlos Gongora

Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School students:
Ada Olivera
Albert Fernandez
Ana Campos
Brescia Sanchez
Clarisa Quiroz
Daffne Coleman
Daniel Valencia
Deborah Xis
Edvin Veliz
Eric Lopez
Heidy Santos
Irvin Penados
Josephine Juan
Karen Juarez
Luis Figueroa
Marlon Tejeda
Mirbeth Juarez
Miriam Martinez
Rolfy Lopez
Shaninie Ramirez
## Figure 1: Cashflow Projections - 5 Pods

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### Figure 2: Cashflow Projections - 10 Pods

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FIGURE 3: BUSINESS LOAN APPLICATION EXAMPLE

Sample Business Plan and Loan Application

Name: _________________________________________   Date: ______________

Business Name: _________________________________________________________

Business Address: _______________________________________________________

Benque Viejo Del Carmen, Belize

What type of business do you own or are you looking to open?

How much money are you looking to borrow? _______________________________

What do you need the money for (please be specific and include prices if possible)?

How will this money help you to improve, expand or create your business?

How much money can you afford to payback each month currently? ______________

If you get the loan, how much money do you believe you will be able to payback each month? _________
REFERENCES

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

Information Disclaimer: A majority of the information contained within this document is a result of extensive on-site research and in-depth conversations with the community stakeholders. Unless otherwise indicated above, all terms, definitions, and details were produced and created by the members of the project team.
In March of 2012 a group of students (1 Professor, 1 Teaching Assistant, and 12 Students) traveled 2,844 miles to Belize, Central America representing 6 different majors from The Ohio State University. After 9 days of research, forums, exploration, documentation, design and production, the “Plans for a Riverwalk & Historic Downtown” document was created and presented to the residents, stakeholders, and officials of Benque Viejo del Carmen. The project team worked together with the local community to put thoughts and words into ideas and imagery. Every detail produced within these pages was completed during those 9 days.

The students experienced a once in a lifetime opportunity to create an actual living document for the people of Benque. The hard work of these individuals helped to conceive a project that left the people of Benque speechless and excited about the future of the community. Every resident that wanted to speak, the students listened. No one was turned away. The experience will never be forgotten by this group of strangers and the hope of leaving a lasting impression in a community miles away will be cherished.