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# LONG-TIME CCFM RESOURCE OFFERS MUCH NEEDED GUIDANCE

By Samantha DeKoven, Counselors of Real Estate

## Leverage Strategic Real Estate Guidance

How do you access expert assessment, objective analysis, and an actionable strategic real estate action plan at well below market rates?

For more than 20 years, The Counselors of Real Estate through its public service initiative, the CRE Consulting Corps, has been helping non-profit groups solve specific real estate challenges in communities throughout the U. S. Municipalities, government agencies, community-based organizations, and educational and religious institutions. Arch/diocese such as Charleston, Brownsville, and Philadelphia as well as religious institutes such as Holy Wisdom Monastery, Sisters of Divine Compassion, and Progress of Peoples Development Corp., the affordable housing arm of Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens, have all benefited from the market-driven counsel offered by CRE Consulting Corps teams.

## About The Counselors

The Counselors of Real Estate® is an international organization of commercial property professionals who hold leading positions in real estate, finance, law, and academia, as well as roles with business advisory firms and government agencies.

Counselors volunteer their time and expertise for CRE Consulting Corps assignments. Typically, a team of five members conducts a week-long site visit, touring the property, interviewing principals and key stakeholders, and engaging local community sources for additional perspective. Property and market data are researched and analyzed, targeted recommendations are developed, and a presentation is delivered at the end of the week. The client receives a written report within 45 days.

## A Closer Look

The Catholic Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, is a large, dynamic, and growing diocese. They own a large portfolio of property, including churches, schools, land, and other facilities. The Diocese area encompasses four counties in southern Texas bordering the Gulf of Mexico.

A rich and deep tradition of the Catholic faith has endured in the Rio Grande Valley for more than 500 years. However, the diocese itself is young. It was established in 1965, formed by separating the four counties from the Diocese of Corpus Christi.

Economically, it ranks among the poorest in the nation. Serving a population of more than one million and covering an area of about 4,200 square miles, the priests and other clergy are stretched thin. Nonetheless, this growing diocese estimates it will need to build 5-6 new parishes in coming years and is challenged with how to plan and fund this future growth.

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## The Challenge

The diocese asked for an objective assessment of its Office of Buildings and Properties. Parish priests had expressed frustration at requirements and current policies that complicate and delay projects—whether replacing a roof or building a new parish hall.

Another important need was a plan to help the Diocese quantify its real estate holdings, determine which properties were in use by the parishes, which parcels were currently vacant but designated for anticipated future growth, and which properties were surplus and could be monetized to support the church mission.

## The Assessment

Prior to the on-site visit, CRE Consulting Corps team members reviewed market data and information provided by the diocese, including the current policies and procedures for building renovation and construction. On-site, the team was briefed by the diocesan leadership and toured several sites, including the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle, several parishes, land that may be candidates for disposition, and other church holdings. They continued to gather market information and interviewed key stakeholders, including diocesan leadership and staff, area business leaders, and local real estate professionals.

## The Recommendations

To steer its work, the CRE team drafted a “working” real estate mission statement with guiding principles. The diocese was in the process of developing its strategic plan and the team believed the draft real estate mission statement should mesh with the mission of the diocese.

The team proposed that the diocese move quickly and permanently to a new model for real estate services that changes from a risk-only paradigm to a customer service paradigm and includes the proper stages of real estate development and management. The proposed process would more accurately define needs and estimate costs and project timelines, enabling the bishop to make executive-level decisions more quickly and confidently. The recommended process was more in line with a widely used model in the broader real estate industry that manages risk in a more comprehensive and programmatic way. The proposal also included recommendations on staffing, advisory, and oversight responsibilities.

The team suggested that an organized effort be undertaken to inventory and catalog all the real estate the diocese owns. Because it is a large landowner—with 75 parishes and 45 missions, diocesan offices, and other land in the four-county area—the task is complicated and time-consuming. Finally, a basic process to facilitate buy/hold/sell decisions was provided.

The Catholic Diocese of Brownsville is one of more than 50 projects completed by CRE Consulting Corps teams. If you're aware of an organization that may need assistance with its real estate assets, contact Samantha DeKoven at [sdekoven@cre.org](mailto:sdekoven@cre.org) or visit [www.cre.org/initiatives/consulting-corps](http://www.cre.org/initiatives/consulting-corps). If you'd like to talk directly with CCFM members at the Diocese of Brownsville, check the website or send your email request to [info@ccfm.net](mailto:info@ccfm.net).



*Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle, Brownsville, Texas*