

Meet Alex Stettinski

SJDA's next CEO will use experience to improve downtown

Alex Stettinski, named July 11 the next CEO of San Jose Downtown Association, has more than 20 years in the place management and economic development field working for business organizations in West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, downtown Los Angeles and the past four years with the Downtown Reno Partnership.

Stettinski will begin serving the downtown San Jose community on Oct. 3, working alongside **Scott Knies**, the founding executive director and CEO since 1988, who will remain on the job until Nov. 4.

The hiring announcement is posted at sjdowntown.com/blog. For this edition of *Dimension*, we asked Stettinski to answer a few questions about his work and life experiences that could prove important during his tenure in San Jose.

You've worked for a number of downtown organizations. In such a diverse environment, how do you get everyone pulling in the same direction?

Reaching consensus and buy-in on initiatives is crucial for the successful implementation of any community-related programs. The process can be tedious and frustrating at times, especially if one has a strong vision and sense of urgency. It's not always a process that is quickly done, depending on the complexity of consensus-building required. Many of my projects have been realized through diligent outreach and surveying of community leaders and the general community, and I have been able to sharpen my skills in this area over the years — which doesn't mean that I am not still learning every day.

Any example?

A recent example is the ReTRAC (Reno Transportation Rail Access Corridor) beautification project in downtown Reno we took on a couple of years ago that transitioned a longtime railway into an art plaza. There were so many ideas, concerns, roadblocks and other challenges, which almost doubled the time from renderings to the actual realization, even though we raised the lion share of the funding needed. It took a huge amount of tenacity, patience and determination to get this awesome beautification project done, which now everyone loves and enjoys. I would say this wasn't an exception but more the norm when it comes to dealing with so many community voices and the City, which often has its own challenges getting things done swiftly. The secret for success in this area is to not lose focus and to keep pushing until you have what you need to move forward — and don't try to do it alone but get other community leaders to support your project.

What lessons learned growing up in Europe have you applied in previous city-



Alex Stettinski, left, meets with Downtown Reno Partnership board members in July.

building and place-making experiences?

I learned two things in Europe that I think totally apply to U.S. communities as well. First, every great city has a great downtown — it is literally impossible to have a vibrant and relevant city without the core being vibrant and relevant as well. Municipalities have to focus on their downtowns because they are the heartbeat of the city.

Second, you cannot neglect the weakest links of a community — it will backfire eventually. Mental health services, housing and education are some basic needs we must have to ensure all members of a community have access to, otherwise we will pay for it greatly. Structures and systems must be in place to catch people in need — the German system I grew up in offers more of these structures — their struggle is to not have them taken advantage of. Control mechanisms can curb the potential exploitation, and there is a fine line between helping people in need and enabling them. Europe has developed a few interesting models to help people while providing them with tools to become independent from government assistance.

You worked in SoCal for years — any insights from Los Angeles that are applicable to San Jose development?

There definitely are similarities between Downtown LA and Downtown San Jose. Both areas experienced a lack of residents and therefore a lack of retail and other businesses that would give a neighborhood vibrancy. Downtown LA also experienced an influx of new residential products, not unlike San Jose, which made it possible for us to reach out to companies to attract them to the area through the critical mass the additional residential units provided. Just like San Jose, Downtown LA used to be an “event vessel,” which attracted thousands of people for a Lakers game or for a special event at one of the big clubs — once the events were over it was dead again. It took a while until Downtown LA became vibrant on its own, even when there were no events.

One thing I found particularly similar when I walked through Downtown San Jose was the fact that there are areas like First Street that have the bones for a really cool downtown with stores, restaurants and light rail, but many of the stores are gone and way too many vacancies create a lack of foot traffic and vibrancy. I had exactly the same experience when I explored Downtown LA about 10 years ago — there were streets like Broadway that looked amazing — but you realized that most of the stores were empty or occupied by businesses that were sub-par. This all changed over the years, just like I know Downtown San Jose has upgraded its business mix and will continue to evolve into a vibrant neighborhood.

Another similarity that comes to mind is the fact that a big development helped downtown LA — LA Live became an anchor in the area — which helped give it a stronger identity and a focal point for the community to gather. Similarly, the anticipated Google campus could serve as such in San Jose.

What programs would you like implemented in response to increasing homeless conditions in downtown San Jose?

The Downtown Reno Partnership established a dedicated social outreach program, which today includes five ambassadors who are specially trained to effectively connect and communicate with the homeless population. Two of the five ambassadors are licensed and able to use a centralized data system that tracks homeless case management. Even though we are not a social service provider, we are able to connect people to resources like housing, food, medical services, clothing or transportation.

I think Downtown San Jose could greatly benefit from such a program, supporting the local service agencies and taking a big chunk of work off the police department's plate. It won't solve the homelessness issue, but it will help manage the houseless population while other more robust and sustainable solutions are created.

Hot August: dates abound

Downtown is very busy this month with major events scheduled 29 of the 31 days attracting different audiences of which total attendance could top more than 200,000:

Aug. 1-7: Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic at San Jose State University — Both finalists at Wimbledon, popular American players and five of the world's Top 10 will be in town for the longest-running women-only professional tennis tournament in the world. mubadalasvc.com; 20,000

Aug. 3-21: Disney's "The Lion King" — The popular musical by **Elton John** and **Tim Rice** returns to San Jose. Winner of six Tony Awards. broadwaysanjose.com; 54,000

Aug. 12-14: San Jose Jazz Summer Festival 2022 — R&B icon **Charlie Wilson** and R&B/soul vocalist and NAACP Image Awards winner **Leela James** headline the three-day event that includes an impressive lineup of more than 100 acts across 12 stages scattered throughout downtown. Returning and new stages include: Latin Tropical Stage, Jazz Beyond Stage, Silicon Valley Stage, Tech Interactive Stage, Next Gen Stage, and Swing Stage. sanjosejazz.org; 20,000



Aug. 16-29: Cinequest Film & Creativity Festival — After two years, Cinequest returns live and in person for its first-ever summer festival. Festival-goers can choose from 220 films from 55 countries, and 56 of the featured films are U.S. and world premieres. Maverick Awards go to **Alison Brie** and **Jim Gaffigan**, whose “Lino-leum” opens the festival. cinequest.org; 50,000

Aug. 18: City Dance — Learn Cumbia, a traditional folk dance from Colombia, at the Circle of Palms. facebook.com/citydancesj; 250

Aug. 19: Music in the Park — **WAR** returns. The last time they appeared in 2017, SJDA polled ticket-purchasers before the show to name their favorite WAR song and hundreds of people replied, offering an amazing 50-plus different songs. mitsj.com; 3,000

Aug. 20: Starlight Cinemas — “Sing 2” starts at dusk in St. James Park. sjdowntown.com/starlight-cinemas; 250

Aug. 27-28: SiliCon with Adam Savage — The comic and pop culture convention returns to San Jose Convention Center for a two-day party. Scheduled guests appeared in “Jumanji,” “Star Trek” and “Back to the Future.” siliconsj.com; 30,000

Aug. 27-28: Silicon Valley Pride Parade and Festival — The Parade and Festival are the culmination of a week of events. For 44 years, Pride in San Jose has been the biggest event in the South Bay to celebrate and honor the LGBTQ+ community. svpride.com 15,000

Business News

On the Roof returns above 3 Below: **Scott Guggenheim** is known as a creative guy, but the pandemic has forced him to use his creativity in more ways than just directing great musicals.

"It seems every time we start to get our audience back, another spike in coronavirus cases scares them away again," he said.

His San Jose Playhouse production of "XANADU," which was to be performed this summer in the large theater at 3Below, has been pushed back to mid-August and will move to the roof of the parking garage under which the 3Below Theater complex is located.

The company needed more time to prepare for On The Roof, which puts one week of the four-week run smack in the middle of the Cinequest Film Festival. Therefore, there will be films on the first level and live theater on the roof for a short period of time, which represents a first for San Jose.

3Below first introduced Up on the Roof in the summer of 2020 in association with San Jose Downtown Association and San Jose's Office of Cultural Affairs. At that time the rooftop was set with socially distanced seating "pods" of two to four seats, and the repertoire was classic films and movies that centered around issues of social justice.

Audiences loved the outdoor venue, and Guggenheim returns this summer to the parking garage roof with help from his landlord (and parking garage owner) City of San Jose.

Guggenheim said the production relies heavily on projection and lighting effects that can only be enjoyed at night in an outdoor setting. Ticket prices will remain consistent with other San Jose Playhouse presentations: \$45 for "banquet seats" and \$55 for theater seats with armchairs and cup-holders. The "roof" will accommodate seating for 200, which is roughly the same as the indoor venue.

Xanadu was a critical flop and box office disaster when it opened as a movie starring **Olivia Newton-John** and **Gene Kelly** in 1980, but received acclaim on Broadway when it was revamped as a live musical 25 years later. The stage version focuses more on the Greek mythology plot lines, and the new script was lauded by critics for its satirical approach.

Much of the show is performed on roller skates, which was a kitschy element in the movie version that carries the fantasy choreography on stage.



Phebe Shen has simple plans for Serious Dumpling.

Owner serious in opening new restaurant:

Phebe Shen and business partners **Tony Ye** and **Chris Yeo** made the best of the pandemic by sorting out the myriad decisions they needed to make prior to opening their Serious Dumpling restaurant on San Pedro Street.

After three years of planning, they decided to keep their menu and concept simple, said Shen, who oversees day-to-day operations.

"We want to focus on one type of dish and decided on dumplings," she said. "Americans like dumplings, that's one reason I chose them."

Keeping it simple also meshes with a long-term goal for the owners, who aspire to expand the business to new locations.

"When you think about a dim sum restaurant, the menu has too many things," Shen said. "We want to be able to build the brand and make our concept easy to manage for future franchisees. It has to be fun for

customers, but employees, too." She added that she was inspired by the simplicity of the menu at Voyager Craft Coffee at the nearby San Pedro Square Market. "It's busy every day," she noted.

There's a reason the restaurant is called Serious Dumpling. Shen believes she's on the front end of a growing trend in the restaurant industry to provide delicious, fresh and healthy food with minimum fuss.

"The food is important, but so is regarding our guests as friends, not customers and providing a casual and comfortable feel," she said. "We want them to enjoy themselves when they are here."

Shen and chef Ye, from Shanghai, spent months perfecting the original SJB — short for *Sheng Jian Bao* — a pan-fried dumpling, to taste like it does in the Chinese metropolis.

"We wanted it to be as authentic as possible," she said. "COVID gave us time to prepare and sort out the details."

Such details included perfecting the roundness and crispness of their dumplings, deciding to make the food as healthy as possible by reducing the salt content and not using a lot of oil, and emphasizing natural flavors and spices in their dishes.

"We have hot sauce on the side for those who need it," she said.

More major decisions they worked through included filling out the menu, finding the location in the new Moderna residential development (thus their Almaden Avenue address despite facing San Pedro Square), negotiating a lease, and designing and constructing the interior. The team emphasized creating a spotless restaurant and kitchen clearly visible from the dining room. The center of the business includes a Serious Dumpling sign in Chinese.

Shen thanked SJDA Business Development Manager **Nate LeBlanc** for working with her for more than a year to obtain the necessary city permits to open.

From Guangzhou, Shen's mother moved her to San Jose in 2008 to get a better education. Against her mother's wish for her to go into medicine, her daughter instead graduated from Cal State-East Bay with a degree in hospitality management.

She feels fortunate to have settled in San Jose, she said.

"I see the future in San Jose," she said. "San Francisco had its time and is too crowded and housing is too expensive. San Jose is more organized, newer, has more diversity and will have a better future for the next 10 or 20 years."

Likewise, she is pleased with improvements to San Pedro Square, including the additional new businesses and the attention to detail to maintain their property and from Groundwerx to keep the sidewalks clean.

Desi Express back to basics: Desi Express owner **Ritika Dua** says that providing healthy and delicious food enriched with Indian spices separates her restaurant in the SoFA Market on South First Street from her competitors.

"It all comes back to basics," Dua said. "Serve customers the best-tasting food at a good value in a clean, comfortable restaurant, and they'll keep coming back."

Desi Express has an expansive menu with many choices including chaat, sandwich and drink options, plus desserts that were featured in July during Dine Downtown. Dua points out that Desi Express is the only Bay Area Indian restaurant serving five *paani golgappe*. The menu and descriptions are at desiexpress.org.

SJDA Public Meeting

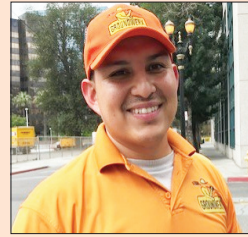
City Council candidate forum: Two of the San Jose City Council seats to be decided in the November election will determine who represents Districts 5 and 7. In District 5, **Nora Campos** faces **Peter Ortiz** and in District 7 incumbent Councilmember **Maya Esparza** and **Bien Doan** face off.

Join SJDA on Friday, Aug. 12, 8:15 a.m. to hear the candidates describe their qualifications, vision for the city, and respond to center city issues.

Attendees can attend in person at Tabard Theatre or watch online from home or office. To register to attend in person, go to sjdowntown.com/sjda-public-meeting.

For all guests attending in person, proof of vaccination will be required at the door. Masking is encouraged but not required.

Groundwerx Employee of the Month — Rico Montenegro



Rico Montenegro

Have a mess needing cleanup in front of your business? **Rico Montenegro** is your man.

Though he started in 2010 as an ambassador, by 2012 he had learned machinery skills to be promoted to a pressure-washer. In more than 10 years of service to the Property-Based Improvement District (PBID) and Groundwerx, he has become a pressure-washing master.

He begins his shift at 4:30 a.m. when fewer people are out and about, making his job easier and faster not having to worry about pedestrians maneuvering around hoses and equipment. He usually works alone.

Montenegro knows by heart how long different jobs take depending on the severity of the mess. One reason supervisors honored him as Groundwerx Employee of the Month is because of his responsiveness — he takes pride in cleaning messes within 20 minutes of the call for service.

"I try to take care of customer requests and the worst hot spots first," he said. Each day on the job, he also tries to get two block-faces cleaned before his lunch time.

"Sometimes I have a giant list of hot spots and need to figure out the best order in which to take care of them," he added. He notes that building and business managers always compliment him and thank him for his time.

His co-workers appreciate him as well. One of Groundwerx's elder statesmen, he serves as translator to make sure messages are understood by colleagues who primarily speak Spanish.

Montenegro's personal life has changed drastically since he first started in his 20s, lived downtown and enjoyed its nightlife "back in the day." He now lives in Tracy with family, where he raises three children, commutes to San Jose starting at 2 a.m. each shift, enjoys gardening, and relaxes by drawing and taking care of fish in two tanks at his home.

One thing he continues to enjoy are the shrimp burritos at Iguana's. A fan of older building architecture, he was glad to see the recent brightly colored and historical paint job on buildings in Fountain Alley.

Use the Groundwerx app or call (408) 287-1520 to report a mess.

sjdowntown.com/groundwerx

DOWNTOWN DIMENSION



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From the Archives

10 years ago — August 2012 — At the urging of Councilmember **Sam Liccardo**, downtown restaurants with limited sidewalk space were allowed to add "curb cafes" into parking spaces in front of their businesses. The first well-protected curb-side dining areas were located along sidewalk extensions in SoFA and on San Fernando Street.

20 years ago — August 2002 — The City of San Jose asked the public for ideas for the new City Hall. Ideas included in the final project were a water feature outside in front, local art and history displays in the public spaces and providing community groups with access to space. Ideas not making the cut included an observation deck and/or restaurant on the top floor and a green plaza space rather than cement.

25 years ago — August 1997 — SJDA opted to hold its 10th anniversary celebration at St. James Park, which had been neglected for decades and is now receiving community attention to have it restored to an urban oasis.

30 years ago — August 1992 — Cirque du Soleil pitched its 2,500-seat big top at the corner of Second and San Fernando streets. More than 23,000 tickets were sold in advance, prompting an extension to a three-week run.

Downtown Facts

Pageviews of two key downtown San Jose Web portals

January 2019 through June 2022

SJdowntown.com total pageviews	
January-June 2019	195,349
July-December 2019	210,369
January-June 2020	96,036
July-December 2020	87,165
January-June 2021	67,616
July-December 2021	96,831
January-June 2022	106,904

ParkSJ.org total pageviews

January-June 2019	107,788
July-December 2019	42,684
January-June 2020	65,214
July-December 2020	40,559
January-June 2021	48,191
July-December 2021	108,013
January-June 2022	92,223

Source: Google Analytics