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First 100 days

SJDA's CEO puts fresh lens on downtown

Three months into his job as CEO of the San Jose Downtown Association, **Alex Stettinski's** enthusiasm for downtown grows by the day.

"The thing I am most excited about is the number of truly passionate, committed people I have met who want to collaborate with us on creating a better downtown," he said. "I am honored to be part of a team of new leaders — a new mayor, new council representatives — looking at our problems with fresh eyes and sincere desire to fix the things that need fixing and enhancing that which is working well in our downtown."

Mayor **Matt Mahan** recently appointed Stettinski to sit on the transition team focused on Downtown Vibrancy, to be headed by new District 3 Councilmember **Omar Torres**, who most recently worked at SJDA.

"I think I will bring a good perspective to that group on what is happening in other downtowns around the country," Stetlinski said.

It has taken some work to get his arms around the inner-workings of a "rather complicated" organization, he said.

"SJDA has a lot of moving parts and complex partnerships within its separate organizations: the Downtown Association, the PBID and the Downtown Foundation."

He spent his first two months gaining an understanding of internal work flow and an intricate budget, but is now working with a consultant and the staff leadership team on transitioning the internal mindset to be more strategic and focused on metrics.

"It's important to measure the results of our work and our initiatives," he said.

Externally, he has attended daily meetings with stakeholders, including elected officials, business



SJDA CEO Alex Stettinski

owners and managers, developers, and community leaders.

"There are so many people here who are passionate about downtown and want to help take it to the next level"

"I honestly hear a lot of enthusiasm and passion when I am talking to people who live and work downtown, and often hear negative remarks from people who tell me they never come here because they have some misconceived notion that downtown is dead or that downtown is unsafe. When I hear that from people, I always ask, have you been downtown lately?"

"Downtown San Jose is going through a huge transition now," Stettinski explained. "We're not alone in this, as downtowns across the country are shape-shifting from being mostly made up of businesses that service the daytime population of office workers to businesses that support a diverse and growing residential population."

As a downtown resident himself, Stettinski can attest to the fact that downtown really comes to life at night.

At Miro, the new tower across Santa Clara Street from City Hall, Stettinski continues his love for high-rise living. In his previous job leading Reno's equivalent to our downtown association, he also chose to live in a high-rise overlooking downtown.

"I spend a lot of time meditating and looking out my windows," he said. "I can see all the way to the mountains, and it's thrilling."

Besides enjoying his view, Stettinski likes walking his dog **Spencer** through the Sonic Runway art installation at City Hall, working out at WestCA or the Miro gym, going to coffee shops, and eating at restaurants. A few early favorites are Petisco's, Scott's Seafood, and Tostada's on Santa Clara, but he still has a lot more eateries to try, he said.

His greatest disappointment since moving to San Jose is the condition of St. James Park, which he can see from his apartment.

"It looks so beautiful from up there, and I was excited to have a great park just a short walk from my home," he said. "I would really like to see our city leaders take a look at how they can better manage the activities in that park, as it could be such an amazing community asset."

After 100 days on the job, he sees the opportunity to put a spotlight on St. James Park and the Guadalupe River Park as two areas that could become important attractions for residents and visitors alike.

When asked what he hopes people will say about him at his retirement dinner years from now, Stettinski took his time before answering: "I want to be remembered as a great collaborator who helped to create the vibrant downtown we will be enjoying by then."

Changes for newsletter

Downtown Dimension, the longtime monthly newsletter of the San Jose Downtown Association, will transition to an all-digital format this spring.

Dimension will be emailed to business members and subscribers whenever important news and announcements need to be shared. This is the next-to-last printed version — the March edition will be the final printed version.

"It's time that *Downtown Dimension* cater to the way most people want to receive their news these days," said **Rick Jensen**, SJDA communications director. "News about downtown will be offered in short bites, with the gist of the message at the top. If they want more of the story, they can click to an expanded version posted on sjdowntown.com."

Print-only subscribers can click on the *E-News* button at the top or the *Subscribe* button at the bottom of most pages of sjdowntown.com to continue receiving *Downtown Dimension*.

For more than a decade, SJDA has offered print and online versions of *Downtown Dimension*, a total of about 5,000 subscribers, of which more than 3,000 receive it through an email that links them to that month's newsletter. The online option was created when business members said they preferred a more timely digital version.

Most readers want the information today without waiting for the start of a new month. Look for regular editions of the online *Downtown Dimension* beginning in mid-March. Information shared in *The Weekly Message to Businesses* — which debuted the week after COVID shelter-in-place orders were issued — will fold into the *Dimension*.

The upgraded e-version will include a combination of news that impacts businesses and downtown; features about the people who add to downtown's economy and vibrancy; updates about seminars, workshops and loan and grant opportunities for businesses; and links to downtown San Jose coverage by other media outlets. SJDA will also celebrate new openings and business anniversaries and will retain the "From the Archives" feature.

Dimension has been printed for 35 years, starting as a quarterly publication for members in 1987 and transitioning into a monthly in 1995. The design has been updated, but the format has remained largely unchanged.

The change is backed by national and local metrics that suggest people open and close email messages in 10-15 seconds. Both the *Downtown Dimension* and the *Weekly Message to Businesses* far exceeds industry open-rate averages and the time spent on SJDA emails. However, statistics reveal that most users are satisfied with the summaries and don't click for a deeper dive as often.

"We think our subscribers will appreciate the summaries and timely presentation," said **Nanci Williams**, SJDA brand manager, who did the analysis.

Questions, feedback or to subscribe?Message rjensen@sjdowntown.com.

Q&A: D3 Councilmember Omar Torres

Omar Torres, lifelong San Jose resident and longtime community advocate, started serving as downtown's councilmember in January.

Torres grew up in the Guadalupe-Washington neighborhood south of downtown, the son and grandson of Del Monte cannery workers who instilled working-class values around education, community and hard work. He previously served on two school boards, worked at City Hall and most recently served as business resiliency manager for San Jose Downtown Association.

He will serve as City Council liaison on the new Downtown Vibrancy transition team, and responded to questions for *Downtown Dimension* on more challenges he plans to take on the next four years:

What are your primary objectives for your first term as Councilmember?

My goal has always been to revitalize the downtown area to make it an attractive place for businesses to flourish as our

job base and population grows. At the same time, support existing local businesses that create the backbone of our city's identity.

I will work with all stakeholders to foster economic development opportunities throughout District 3, and focus on filling our vacant stores in Luna Park, Calle Willow, Japantown, East Santa Clara Street, and downtown - the core of San Jose. Economic recovery for the core of San Jose is critical.

Investing in our arts organizations is a must to improve our downtown. If our art scene is not thriving, then downtown isn't either. Making significant investments in our arts and culture is my top priority.

Also, addressing public safety and quality-of-life issues leads to a vibrant city. Men, women, single mothers, families and our kiddos deserve to walk on safe streets without the concern of abandoned vehicles or seeing illegal dumping.

Continued on Back Page



D3 Councilmember Omar Torres

Workingman's Emporium to move after 54 years downtown

Gary and Sue Wing have built Workingman's Emporium workwear business at 260 N. First St. for 54 years and quietly made a life for themselves — despite some major obstacles over the years.

The Wings were already in business for almost 15 years when North First Street was torn up, parking spaces removed and light-rail tracks installed in the late '80s. They have also seen persistent substance abuse and homeless issues escalate at St. James Park and watched as a proposed residential development across Devine Street sat fallow and blighted — its parking lot fenced and turned into rubble. And they endured "draconian shutdowns" during the pandemic as well as post-pandemic supply chain issues.

Soon, The Workingman's Emporium will leave downtown San Jose and move to Gilroy — but not because of nearby issues or for lack of business. Rather, because it is the home of **Mark Jenkins**, the man who has worked alongside Gary Wing the past 22 years and who will take over the business when Gary, 76, retires.

"As soon as this building sells and I get things in order, I'll retire," Wing said. "With the interest rates, though, we're not sure when that will happen."

"Our loyal customers will follow us," said Jenkins, ready to give up his longtime Highway 101 commute.

"I've been a customer here since I was 16 years old," said **Diviel Guerrero**, a trade worker from San Jose's East Side and big fan of the store. "I see clothes from this store everywhere -- on job sites and on the streets."

During his stopover, Guerrero at first purchased pants and shirts for himself, then went back to a rack of Carhartt branded outerwear.

"They will be sold out soon," he said. "I'm getting these for my kids."

Such store visits are common at The Workingman's Emporium, Wing and Jenkins said.

"The clothes are made for people in the trades but spill over into being quasi-fashionable," Wing said. "They are so durable.

"We're three generations deep with our customers now. Every 10 years, young people discover work clothes."

Owning his building and parking has proved invaluable.
"Without those eight spots, we would have been out a long time ago." he said.



Mark Jenkins, left, and Gary Wing keep Workingman's Emporium well-stocked.

He also avoided paying rent during the pandemic shutdown. COVID and resulting supply chain issues caused him to disable the commercial activity on workingmans.com.

"Our main goal was to keep going. To do that, we had to take care of the customers whose preference is to come into the store and try on the clothes. They are a touchyfeely sort."

well-stocked. Supply chain issues have improved, Wing said. "Before, they couldn't get supplies into warehouses. Now they have a labor shortage and can't get supplies out of warehouses." The skyrocketing cost of freight has also limited their ability to ship clothing through the mail and cut into profits.

"We've always had reasonable rates and taken care of our unique customers," Wing said.

Retirement for Gary and Sue, who does the clerical work for the business, starts at their South San Jose home of 44 years. "We'll miss our customers most," Gary Wing said. "They are like family."

From the Archives

15 years ago – February 20 – The 140-year-old Porter Stock Building at 89 S. First St. was demolished after a gas line ruptured and burned the 1867 structure beyond repair. It is now the location of the panda mural backed by bamboo.

20 years ago – February 2003 – Construction began on Campus Village, San Jose State's first high rise dormitory, which replaced three low-rise brick dormitories.

25 years ago – February 1998 – SJDA moved into its current 2,836-square-foot space on the 10th floor of the Commercial Building, 28 N. First St. The association had occupied a small space on the second floor of the same building between 1991–1998. The new space includes conference room, 500 square feet for storage and "an enviable view of downtown's ever-changing skyline."

30 years ago – February 1993 – SJDA finalized plans for downtown's first farmers' market on the surface lot at Second and San Fernando streets and expected to draw 3,000 customers each week. The market was deemed a priority by the SJDA Board of Directors as a way to further stimulate downtown retail.

Business News

Lee's keeps up with the times: The next generation of Lee's Sandwiches has opened on the ground floor of The Grad student-focused housing project at San Carlos and Third streets.

Thang Le, the youngest of nine brothers and sisters who have all been involved in the family business, is orchestrating the update. His focus is on modernizing and elevating menu options and food preparation processes.

Thang Le

"We have added several healthy vegan options," Le said. "The menu is designed to focus on what people want, made to order and making it easy for people to know exactly what they are getting."

The modernization is also underway for the next generation of the Le family to take over the family business. "My brothers and sisters are starting to talk about retirement, and their children don't want to run the old business model, but a fresher and more modern version." he said.

Le is going as strong as ever since graduating from San Jose State University with a business management degree in 2001. He's a partner in the family-run business that includes 70 locations around California and the U.S., and personally owns six, including the downtown locations.

"I've done a makeover before and am very motivated to take Lee's in a newer and brighter direction," he said.

With Google moving forward with its plans to for Downtown West, Le believes two more downtown locations could be added in the next decade, he added.

"We'd like to see downtown thrive," he said

Both current locations count on plenty of student traffic from San Jose State students. Recruited by building developers SWENSON and AMCAL, Lee's agreed to be The Grad's first tenant in February 2020, one month before COVID outbreak forced everyone to shelter-in-place. More than 1,000 students reside above the Lee's storefront.

The family business was founded by **Chieu Le** in 1980 as a food truck at Sixth and Santa Clara streets. Thang Le's parents, **Ba Le and Hanh Nguyen**, opened the first permanent brick-and-mortar location at Sixth and Santa Clara Street in the space now occupied by New Tung Kee Noodle House, where the couple sold traditional banh mi sandwiches.

They moved to the present location at Sixth and Santa Clara by moving the Lee's Laundry that previously occupied that building, owned by one of his brothers.

The more modern Euro-style sandwiches with fresh baguettes and famed iced coffees were introduced in the early 2000s. The Americanized additional "E" was added to the business name Lee's at the outset of the venture. Visit leesandwiches.com.

Q&A: Omar Torres From Front Page

They should be provided with opportunities to enjoy a quality of life that we can all be proud of.

What do you anticipate your biggest challenge to be?

Our ongoing homeless crisis. We need to address the lack of affordable housing, and we need to collaboratively work with our county partners, non-profits and other stakeholders to get our unhoused residents the mental health and drug services that they need and stabilize their housing. This is one of the greatest humanitarian crises in our lives, and it will take all of us to make sure we do it right. Our unhoused suffer and our downtown businesses suffer as a result, so we need to work together.

Let's say you serve two terms. How might downtown look to you after eight years in office?

I want a vibrant and thriving downtown. Let's see more construction cranes in and around downtown San Jose. I want to break the stigma that our downtown is unsafe and dirty. I am committed to working with all stakeholders to make sure that we have a robust downtown. Every neighbor and business owner should be able to feel safe and at peace in our downtown.

Downtown West, BART, homeless issues, filling downtown with workers and/or residents. Which giant initiative do you think will show the most progress by 2030?

All of these issues and projects are important to down-town San Jose reaching its potential. And all of the above will show progress if we all work together and sit at the table to create a path forward.

What else is important to downtown reaching its potential?

Making it easier for small businesses to open and thrive. We need to create a one-stop shop for permits. We must invest in our small businesses because many of these small businesses are investing in San Jose.

If you could change one thing about downtown, what would it be?

I want a more walkable downtown. I do not want to see ugly parking structures or empty storefronts. I also want to see housing for all income levels and a thriving arts scene.

What are your favorite things to do downtown?

My favorite things to do downtown are my daily runs around my alma mater -- San Jose State University.

I also enjoy supporting local small businesses -- especially restaurants, coffee shops and pop-up events. I love spending time in the SoFA district and along our East Santa Clara corridor. There are plenty of beautiful things to love in our downtown.

Name a Downtown Gem.

We must remember our Children's Discovery Museum and Discovery Meadow.





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Groundwerx Employee of the Month – Joel Ramirez

When he's not leading the Groundwerx Clean Team, **Joel Ramirez** can often be found dancing like a professional anywhere Salsa music is playing. While he may not make a living as a ballroom dancer, he does compete and often wins. It's not surprising then that the Groundwerx Employee of the Month says his favorite downtown event is City Dance featuring **Orchestria Latin Heat**.



Joel Ramirez helps keep the team on track.

Gwx sjdowntown.com/groundwerx

Three years ago, Ramirez let reason trump passion and decided to trade his dancing shoes for work boots and join the Groundwerx team. To support his family, he responded to an online job posting and was offered a position as Safety Ambassador. Three years later, he learned the skills to become a machine operator, and was promoted to Clean Team Lead last month.

Managing a team has taught him that juggling assignments is sometimes a necessity. With the spate of storms and team illnesses, Ramirez found himself juggling three roles for a week in December. He's great at focusing on tasks, and once collected 27 bags of leaves on just one block of downtown.

He likes to help his team meet its goals, and often uses self-talk to motivate himself. His go-to phrase is, "Someone has to do this because it has to get done," and he knows that every task he completes takes something off the very full plate of his team.

Although he lives in South San Jose, Ramirez spends a lot of his free time checking out new restaurants, and believes he has actually tried every food and beverage establishment downtown. He recently took his girlfriend to FoxTale Fermentation Project and San Pedro Social, and says the thing he looks most forward to is when new restaurants open downtown.