

Ideas for more vibrancy

City Council hears how to create a '365-day city'

Downtowners are asking San Jose City Council to fund a team of urban experts to assist them with bringing more excitement and livability to downtown San Jose.

"San Jose should be a 365-day city," said downtown developer **Gary Dillabough**, who co-chaired the Downtown Vibrancy committee to assist Mayor **Matt Mahan** and the City Council in understanding the biggest issues facing the city. The recommendations of five different transitional teams including Downtown Vibrancy will also help guide the council in determining where dollars should be spent during the 2023-24 budget cycle beginning July 1.

"We need to try to create some consistency so when people come here they can always expect to have some kind of interesting experience," Dillabough told the City Council at its Feb. 14 study session.

The Downtown Vibrancy team more closely defined its vision of downtown to be filled with active store fronts, and known for its walkability, world-class events, and as a regional center of arts and entertainment. The group came up with 11 recommendations.

At the top of the list, the team recommended that the City Council hire five experts who work with stakeholders "on all things downtown."

The team would include a director plus staff experienced in economic development of small businesses and large projects; a leader in social services, homelessness and quality-of-life issues; a team member to instigate and implement ideas for activations and vibrancy; and a brand manager to communicate and amplify downtown's assets.

Other top recommendations from the Downtown Vibrancy team:

- ◆ Activate downtown storefronts through leases, pop-ups, and other innovative means by removing fees, permits and other tax burdens.
- ◆ Consider a pilot program prototyping "permit free" zones downtown to increase the number of events that are free for participants.
- ◆ Ensure the gateways to downtown are clean and welcoming.
- ◆ Add additional dedicated police, safety ambassadors and private security guards who create a welcoming environment downtown and respond more quickly to quality-of-life and emergency situations.

"Let's do things that are bold and that we are really proud of and activate this city in a way that it really comes to life," Dillabough said.

The committee made more recommendations for future years:

- ◆ Develop a lighting plan that connects people-centered places including the Arena, Convention Center, Guadalupe River Park, San Pedro Square, Post Street, SoFA, San Jose State and City Hall.
- ◆ Identify 25 locations in Downtown San Jose for "interactive, high-impact, high-visibility, and dynamic art installations."
- ◆ Create a marketing campaign that draws residents, entertainment and businesses to downtown.
- ◆ Develop 10 changes and investments in downtown that add to the built environment and enhance the public realm.
- ◆ Identify new sources of revenue, such as fees on rental cars, electric scooter and rental bikes to be reinvested into the arts.
- ◆ Relaunch the parking validation program in specific areas to make it more inviting for people to shop and dine downtown.

"It was exhilarating to be part of a committee comprised of so many leaders who are super passionate about our downtown," said **Alex Stettinski**, SJDA chief executive officer and team member. "We identified the most pressing issues and made recommendations to create new vibrancy for San Jose's core. SJDA is only one player in the mix of several organizations and community partners and together we will move the needle. I am grateful that the mayor, Councilmember **Omar Torres** and city staff made the health of downtown a focal point, as a strong downtown is the heartbeat of every great city."

The Downtown Vibrancy Committee also included: **Adolfo Gomez** of Mezcal, **Janette D'Elia** of Jay Paul Company, **Janis Gemignani** representing downtown residents, **Laura Chmielewski** of Team San Jose, **Jonathan Becher** of Sharks Sports and SAP Center, **Scott Ekman** of Adobe, **Vincent Delcasino** of San Jose State, **Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez** of MACLA, **Frank Nguyen** of Academic Coffee and **Jimmy Sarfaz** of Signia Hilton.

Comments and recommendations impacting downtown were also included in reports by some of the other transition teams:

Homelessness: The objectives established by the Homelessness Committee are to shelter the unsheltered and reduce the impact of encampments on the community. Recommendations include building more permanent and emergency housing; increase budgets for assistance programs; encourage the county to implement the Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment Act (SB1338) before the end of calendar 2023; and provide a budget for trash removal and to

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Town Hall Meeting

Topic of Discussion → Find out who we are, what we do and how you can get involved in a more vibrant downtown, with a special focus on Clean, Safe and Beautification

4:30 - 6 P.M.

- Program Kickoff by Councilmember Omar Torres
- Presentation by CEO Alex Stettinski and Team
- Open Forum + Q&A

THURSDAY MARCH 9
4:30 - 6 P.M.

OPEN SAN JOSE
38 SOUTH SECOND ST.

Register: www.sjdowntown.com/town-hall

Get involved in downtown: Meet March 9

San Jose Downtown Association will host a Town Hall on March 9 at 4:30 p.m. at Open San Jose, 38 S. Second St. Hear about SJDA and what the association does, and how you can get involved in a more vibrant downtown. Everybody is welcome to attend.

Subscribe to electronic *Downtown Dimension*

Downtown Dimension is going all-digital this spring and subscribers will start receiving it multiple times each month through email when news about downtown San Jose needs to be shared with businesses and residents.

SJDA staff wants to make sure that all businesses and subscribers receiving the newsletter by traditional mail are included on our *Downtown Dimension* email subscriber list. Continue receiving the newsletter by clicking the **Subscribe** button near the bottom of almost every page of sjdowntown.com.

The electronic version allows SJDA to present more information about all things downtown, including the latest about business updates, Groundwerx clean and safe efforts, SJDA marketing and events, and general downtown news. Subscriptions are free.

Send feedback and comments to rjensen@sjdowntown.com.

Cafe Eden, Loft and others pivot and reopen after lengthy closures

Downtown restaurants continue to return to business by pivoting and reinventing themselves after closing for up to three years due to the Covid pandemic and its lingering effects.

Café Eden, The Loft and Opa have reopened in the past six months. In February, Enoteca La Storia repositioned itself as Ancora Vino (story on Back Page) and Erik's Deli and Café reopened after a short period by moving to the opposite corner of Market and Santa Clara streets.

Owners of Café Eden and The Loft shared their stories of what prompted them to get back to business in downtown San Jose:

Café Eden, home of Sweet Cheese desserts

Owner **Zaghloul Kadah** thought Café Eden was closed for good until the day he stumbled upon Lebanese desserts made by **Mohamad Akkari**, who started Sweet Cheese with his wife, **Noha**, out of their home during the pandemic.

"He reached out to us with the idea of a merger," Noha said. "Café Eden was always his passion and it was his dream to see his native culture being

shared in the Bay Area — as was ours. We are actually partners now."

The Akkaris now manage the entire operation of the bakery/café that reopened in October at 2 N. First St. Their idea for Sweet Cheese stemmed from a longing for their authentic homeland food and desserts.

"Although there are many delicious Mediterranean restaurants/bakeries in the Bay Area, none of them hit home," they said. "It was a piece of home we wanted to bring to Northern California."

Once travel restrictions lifted, Mohamad trained with top bakers in northern Lebanon for three months, and another six months with a friend who had just opened a bakery in Los Angeles.

Soon after, they were delivering orders all over the Bay Area through sweetcheese.shop. One went



Noha and Mohamad Akkari of Cafe Eden

to Kadah, who "was completely taken with the authenticity of our delicacies."

"We just went all in," they said. "We want our community and customers to drive us to where we need to go, because at the end of the day, without them we would not have a purpose."

The reopening remains a work in progress, with an almost completely new staff, including a long-time baker from Lebanon who moved to California pre-pandemic. They also recruited a previous Café Eden prep cook who has helped bring back favorite Café Eden recipes. Mohamad takes care of the restaurant and Noha the back work.

Operationally, they plan to offer their full menu in-house, online, and through third-party delivery services. Café Eden / Sweet Cheese has also put a priority on catering to corporate offices that have

not reopened their kitchens. Issues changing their status from "closed" to "open" on Yelp and Google are now behind them. They also hope to get back to the café's former hours as more employees return downtown.

"Every day has been a new adventure," the Akkaris said. "But our biggest successes are seeing our restaurant progressing day-by-day; more customers hearing about us and coming in; and being able to branch out to numerous platforms and hundreds of new customers."

The Loft

A combination of a great offer from his landlord and his own optimism prompted **Kam Razavi** to reopen The Loft, 90 S. Second St. in December.

"I'm always trying to see things in a positive way," said Razavi, born in Iran, longtime San Josean and also owner of Capers Eat & Drink in Campbell. "Some say I'm crazy, but I've been at this a lot of years and it's such a beautiful space — I figured I'd give it a try."

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served at Mexico Bakery.  sjdowntown.com/groundwerx