



Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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ATTRACTION

Best-dish contests drive traffic to restaurants during slow months

A decade ago, the downtown organization in Sioux Falls, SD (est. pop. 196,528), was looking for a way to boost business during January.

Downtown Sioux Falls decided to try Burger Battle, a month-long contest that pitted downtown restaurants in a competition to create the best new burger. Participating eateries debuted a new burger, and diners would try the dish and rate it.

A decade later, Burger Battle is going strong. In the 2022 version of Burger Battle, two dozen downtown

restaurants entered the contest, and 44,000 burgers were sold.

The 2023 edition kicks off Jan. 1, with two dozen restaurants again poised to compete. The event has a number of sponsors, with First Western Bank & Trust acting as the presenting sponsor.

Burger Battle is a success in part because it sparks activity during a traditionally slow month, says Tenley Schwartz, marketing manager at Downtown Sioux Falls.

(Continued on page 3)

CLEAN AND SAFE

Amid crime surge and police cuts, down- town association stresses safety plan

Burlington, VT (est. pop. 42,645), was long known as a picturesque college town with a healthy dose of liberal politics.

But in recent years, Burlington has become afflicted by big-city problems, including crime and homelessness. The Progressive Party members of the Burlington city council, meanwhile, responded to the civil unrest of 2020 by slashing the size of the city's police force by 30 percent.

"It has been traumatizing to watch the city kind of fall apart before your eyes," a Burlington resident recently told the *New York Times*.

Burlington's Democratic mayor has a plan to beef up the police department. But the city needs time to recruit and train new officers. That led the Burlington Business Association, a group of downtown merchants, to unveil a Fall 2022 Public Safety Plan.

(Continued on page 7)

Miami's linear park inspired by epiphany of self-described 'crazy citizen'

Miami is in the midst of transforming unused space beneath the Metrorail tracks into a 10-mile linear park, urban trail, and exhibit space for public art.

The idea was generated not by urban planners or elected officials, but by a Miami resident who calls herself "a crazy citizen." Meg Daly has often repeated the story that the vision for the city's new park, known as [The Underline](#), came to her nearly a decade

ago, after she had broken her arms in a cycling accident.

Unable to drive or cycle as her injuries healed, Daly walked to her physical therapy appointments underneath the elevated

Metrorail tracks. The overhead structures provided shade from Miami's intense sun, even if Daly did have to navigate the gritty ambience of a semi-public right-of-way that wasn't designed for pedestrians.

The experience led to what Daly calls "an aha moment."

"I just saw an opportunity and said, 'Why don't we turn all this dead land into a park and trail?'" Daly told the *Commercial Observer*. "It was just a big idea without any road map on how to get there. And it was a big idea without a plan."

After years of work by Daly and buy-in from city and county officials, The Underline is well under way. The first phase, which includes Miami's dense Brickell neighborhood, opened in 2021.

The inaugural section alone was landscaped with 30,000 plants and trees. Because the original Underline space was just desolate tarmac, the project required tons of topsoil. Workers also had to install electricity to support lighting.

A second 2.1-mile stage is set for completion in 2023. And the entire project is scheduled to be completed in 2025.

Daly founded the nonprofit Friends of the Underline, which spearheaded the development of the urban park. In all, the project will cost \$140 million.

Funding sources include \$22 million in the form of a BUILD transportation grant to the Miami-Dade County transit authority. Other funding has come from municipalities and from private donations.

As she worked on the project, Daly said she took inspiration from both the [High Line](#) in New York City and the [BeltLine](#) in Atlanta.

"Repurposing derelict land or giving them more than one intention, one purpose — sort of this hybrid use — is the new category of parks in major urban areas," Daly said.

She hopes the linear park can make car-centric Miami safe for cycling again.

"I grew up here and I used to ride my bike to school," Daly said. "A generation later, I wouldn't let my kids ride their bikes to school. And I hope we give that freedom back to our children. But you have to make it safe first."

When the first phase of the park opened, Daly was shocked to see how quickly local residents began taking advantage of it.

"People walked their dogs like it had always been here," she said. "I thought it would take some time for adoption. That's the beauty of good design, people think it's always been there and always [been] part of their lives."

"I just saw an opportunity and said, 'Why don't we turn all this dead land into a park and trail?'"



The Underline quickly had to adjust its estimates of how many Miamians would use the new trail to walk their dogs.

“Seems like everybody in our neighborhood has a dog,” Daly told *Commercial Observer*. “We used like 20,000 dog bags in eight months. So we had to add almost 100 percent more dog bag receptacles.”

The park is for more than just walking and biking. One section includes “The Urban Gym,” which includes an outdoor basketball court, a small soccer pitch, a running track, and fitness equipment. “The Promenade” was designed with a sound stage and tables for dining and playing board games.

A walking club and yoga instructors have taken advantage of the new public

space. And the Underline has sponsored public art, including murals and sculptures. One installation is in the form of a Ping-Pong table. Another is a piano painted tropical colors.

“There’s something about slowing and not driving,” Daly said in an interview with the University of Miami Herbert Business School. “It gives you the ability to see your city and community in a very different way.”

Contact: Meg Daly, [The Underline](#), 305-603-9895. **DIX**



[See Meg Daly talk about Miami's new linear park.](#)

Best-dish contests drive traffic to restaurants during slow months — Continued from page 1

“It just hits the sweet spot,” Schwartz says. “It’s January. The holidays are over, but people are still looking for something. It’s a lot of fun.”

What’s more, the event requires little in the way of public space, and it doesn’t create traffic snarls or add costs. The contest simply piggybacks off of the downtown’s existing assets.

To participate, restaurants must be members of Downtown Sioux Falls, and they must create a new burger for the contest. Entries have included super-spicy burgers and a burger served on a glazed donut.

“It’s become kind of a regional phenomenon,” Schwartz says. “We’ll have people come in from the surrounding towns to try burgers. It has also spawned a bunch of copycat events. Smaller suburbs have started their own smaller burger battles.”

In other words, the concept is easy to replicate in any downtown.

In Sioux Falls, restaurants must pay \$150 to participate, but Schwartz says that investment is a no-brainer, given the spike in business driven by the event.

“It’s absolutely worth it for them,” Schwartz says.

Over the years, downtown leaders in Sioux Falls have tweaked the way ballots are counted. In the early years of Burger Battle, diners cast

How Nacogdoches made the Burger Battle its own

Sioux Falls has done so well with its Burger Battle that other downtowns are embracing the idea. In Nacogdoches, TX (est. pop. 32,912), nine restaurants competed in this year’s Brick Street Burger Battle.

The competition ran from mid-September through mid-October. In a twist, Visit Nacogdoches entered consumers who voted in the Burger Battle into a series of cash drawings. Patrons who consumed two or three burgers were eligible for a \$100 prize. Those who gobbled down seven or eight in the course of the contest were entered in a drawing for \$500.

Sponsors of the Brick Street Burger Battle included a real estate brokerage, an architect, a wealth manager, and a bank.



"It just hits the sweet spot."

their votes the old-fashioned way.

"It was paper ballots and a staff member tallying them in an Excel spreadsheet, which was insane," Schwartz says.

In recent years, Downtown Sioux Falls has moved voting onto a mobile app, which makes vote tabulation far easier. A diner tries a dish, then rates it online. Downtown Sioux Falls

tracks average ratings, then chooses winners in a variety of categories based on their cumulative scores.

Categories include patty, bun, toppings, creativity, and customer service. So far, Burger Battle has been open only to beef-based burgers, a rule established when cattle ranchers sponsored the event. But Downtown Sioux Falls has considered expanding the contest to alternative types of patties.

An event with few drawbacks

As an attraction driver, Burger Battle has a number of things going for it. In contrast to a traditional weekend event, there's no need to set up and tear down, to close streets, or to pay police overtime. And there's no risk that bad weather could tank attendance.

Downtown Sioux Falls devotes some time and resources to managing the event, promoting it to customers, and counting the votes. But

otherwise, overhead is minimal, Schwartz says.

In fact, Burger Battle proved so successful that Downtown Sioux Falls launched a companion event. The city's Downtown Pork Battle now takes place during September.

Downtown leaders selected that month because it usually marks a lull in activity between the surges seen in summertime and the holidays.

The second annual version of the Downtown Pork Showdown, hosted this year, drew entries from 19 restaurants. Smithfield Foods signed on as title sponsor, and the event generated 5,130 pork dishes sold and 1,041 votes cast.

Entries included ribs and grits, pork sandwiches, pork tacos, pulled pork, pork shoulder, pork cheek, and pork belly.

For downtown promoters, the Burger Battle and Pork Showdown check many boxes. The events support member restaurants. They bring visitors downtown while building buzz and a sense of community pride. And they raise money for the organization without a large financial outlay.

In turn, Schwartz says, Downtown Sioux Falls aims to make the contests as painless as possible for participating eateries.

"The biggest thing," Schwartz says, "is really making sure it's easy for your restaurants to participate."

Contact: Tenley Schwartz, [Downtown Sioux Falls](http://DowntownSiouxFalls.com), 605-338-4009. **DIX**

CLEAN AND SAFE

License-plate reading cameras cut crime, proponents say

Crime is on the upswing in downtowns. Meanwhile, crime-fighting technology is growing more powerful and more widely accepted.

Those two trends are intersecting in a growing use of license plate readers, or LPRs. The devices can be mounted on utility poles, streetlights, and public vehicles.

In Indianapolis, city police are expanding their use of LPRs. There are currently more than 200 of the cameras in use in the city, including 22 stationed downtown.

The devices record license plate data, entering the time and location into a database. The hardworking cameras don't take

a break, and the images tend to be so clear that defense attorneys can't raise much doubt about the veracity of the evidence.

The Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District in suburban Atlanta is also using LPRs to reduce crime.

"There simply are not enough officers on the payroll," Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said during a recent webinar hosted by the International Downtown Association. "The public has really embraced having these cameras because they feel safer."

Still, use of LPRs does create concerns about privacy and government overreach.

Proponents of the devices say they're just one more way for overwhelmed and overworked police to solve crimes. Cops don't bother to review the surveillance footage until a crime has been committed — and then, the video usually provides clues rather than a smoking gun.

"Solving a crime is like putting together puzzle pieces," says Sgt. Christopher Cheek of the Gwinnett County Police Department.

In Indianapolis, Commander Matthew

Thomas underscored the message that police aren't legally allowed to look at images from LPRs without probable cause.

"We can't randomly search license plate readers. We need a case number to start that search and then an investigation into a crime,"

Thomas told WTTV-TV.

LPRs can also help when there aren't any witnesses to crimes, like a late night hit-and-run.

"Having these digital witnesses in place captures that information. We're able to match that up to the criminal incident reported," Thomas said.

But Thomas said LPRs do not replace eyewitnesses to a crime. The cameras instead serve as another tool to help the investigation along.

"If they are able to provide anything, partial plate number, color, make, direction of travel, timeframe, all of that stuff helps narrow the focus," Thomas said. **DIX**



ECONOMIC GROWTH

To level economic playing field, mid-sized cities foster "innovation districts"

With the US economy increasingly driven by the tech sector, a growing number of downtown leaders in mid-sized cities are looking for ways to spur innovation in their cities.

One example is in Fort Wayne, IN (est. pop. 263,814), where a rusting manufacturing hub has been transformed into an innovation district. Another case study is in downtown Richmond, VA (est. pop. 226,604), where city leaders envision a hub for biotech employment and other knowledge industries.

Jeff Kingsbury is a native of Fort Wayne and co-founder of Ancora, the developer of

that city's new innovation district. The 40-acre Electric Works is set to deliver 740,000 square feet in its first phase. The development group bought the site from General Electric and Norfolk Southern. The mostly abandoned facility had long sat "within spitting distance" of downtown, Kingsbury says.

"What would that hulking reminder of the past do to the psyche of your community when you're trying to bring economic development to the city?" he asks.

"If you don't like complexity, don't do an innovation district."

Kingsbury sees innovation districts in fly-over country as a way to both breathe life into struggling downtowns and to level an uneven economic playing field.

“On a national basis, the vast majority of innovation is happening in five cities — Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, and San Diego,” Kingsbury says. “When 90 percent of the innovation is happening in so few cities, there’s a vast area in the middle of the country where a lot of people live, that have felt disconnected.”

Kingsbury and a team of panelists discussed trends and lessons learned in fostering innovation districts in mid-sized cities at the Urban Land Institute’s Fall 2022 Meeting.

Innovation district lesson: Build the foundation first. Planning ahead is crucial — and not laying the groundwork can be fatal to redevelopment projects. In February 2020, Richmond’s city council voted down a downtown redevelopment project.

Considering an innovation district? Here are the basics

Proponents of innovation districts see the projects as a way to do nothing less than transform struggling downtowns.

“At a time of inefficient land use, extensive sprawl and continued environmental degradation, they present the potential for denser residential and employment patterns, the leveraging of mass transit, and the repopulation of urban cores,” the Brookings Institution writes on its website.

There are three building blocks of innovation districts:

- **Economic assets:** These are the research hospitals, large companies, and other innovation drivers that set the stage for an innovation economy.
- **Physical assets:** Parks, plazas, pedestrian pathways, and waterfronts are an important ingredient. Richmond’s riverfront, for instance, is a signature feature of its downtown.
- **Networking assets:** The first two categories are physical, but networking assets are all about people and their relationships. People or firms that have worked together over time tend to build a level of trust among themselves.

Martiza Pechin, deputy director of Richmond’s Office of Equitable Development, says that setback came after the city failed to properly communicate its vision.

“The city went out and did an RFP but without doing that community listening first, and ultimately the plan failed,” Pechin says.

City officials regrouped. And planners took city council members on trips to other redevelopment projects that relied on public-private partnerships, including in Alexandria, VA. By building trust and doing extensive homework, city planners were able to succeed with an ambitious downtown redevelopment plan.

The new City Center Innovation District is a project on 26 acres in downtown Richmond. Hubs for the project include the nearby state capitol, the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University, and a large new corporate office of real estate data firm CoStar.

Fort Wayne’s innovation district also required an involved process of soliciting community feedback and marshaling support.

“There was a lot of passion and emotion, unlike anything I’ve seen in any other project,” Kingsbury says. “People really wanted this to become a new economic engine for this community for the 21st century.”

Innovation district lesson: Complexity is your companion. Redeveloping an underused downtown area into an innovation district is a complicated undertaking with moving parts around financing, operations, and regulatory approvals. In Fort Wayne, the new development is funded with a variety of sources of capital, including tax credits, opportunity zones, and various forms of private and public-sector capital.

“I have a common-law marriage with complexity,” Kingsbury jokes. “In total, we have about 21 different sources of capital.”

Any innovation district is likely to require years of negotiations and approvals, and to generate reams of legal documents.

“If you don’t like complexity, don’t do an innovation district,” says Mason Ailstock, a consultant to innovation districts at HR&A Advisors.

Innovation district lesson: Embrace the shifting realities of the post-COVID world.

As Kingsbury mentioned, most of the benefits of the US economy have accrued to residents of a handful of high-tech metro areas. But the pandemic changed the calculus around economic development.

Workers have grown more willing to work remotely, and employers have gotten comfortable with the notion of virtual work. This means the most skilled workers no longer need to move to Boston, Seattle, or California.

That new reality means that second- and third-tier cities now can compete for top talent

in a way they couldn't as recently as 2019.

"Post-COVID, you can work anywhere," Ailstock says.

But, he notes, the flip side of that reality is that places must work harder than ever to create a sense of place and a compelling vision.

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DIX



Amid crime surge and police cuts, downtown association stresses safety plan — *Continued from page 1*

"While there is a plan in place to rebuild our police department, that effort will take two to three years," the Burlington Business Association writes on its website. "In the meantime, let's work together to help make sure downtown is safe for our residents, our employees, and our visitors."

The organization plans a number of initiatives for the holiday season, including:

- **Clean-up events.** The Burlington Business Association invited downtown merchants to participate in cleanups of sidewalks and parks downtown.
- **Graffiti removal.** The association is providing cleaning materials to downtown merchants who promise to remove graffiti within 48 hours of its appearance.
- **Lighting.** The business group is lobbying for the city to light walkways near the downtown parking garage. Its plan also calls for lighting streetlamps along side streets from fall to spring.
- **Provide security escorts.** During the 2021 holidays, the Burlington Business Associ-

ation made downtown ambassadors available to escort visitors who felt unsafe downtown. The plan calls for bringing back that program for the 2022 holidays. In a new feature, ambassadors will also be available to walk downtown workers from their places of business to their vehicles.

- **A phone tree.** If a downtown worker feels harassed or unsafe, they can text an alert to a group of downtown workers and managers.

- **Safety training for downtown employees.** The plan calls for training courses that include such topics as self-defense, treating overdoses, administering first aid, and responding to shoplifting and other crimes.

In an acknowledgment of just how precarious things have gotten in Downtown Burlington, the Business Association in July began raising money to buy stab-proof vests for staffers of the Howard Center Street Outreach Team, a nonprofit that works with homeless people and those dealing with addiction and mental health issues.

"It has been traumatizing to watch the city kind of fall apart before your eyes."



The Burlington Business Association raised \$5,000 to buy six stab-resistant vests, a type of body armor that protects against attacks from knives and needles.

Crimes ranging from bicycle thefts to murder have been on the rise in the once-tranquil city, a trend the *New York Times* attributed to both cuts to the police force and the new popularity of methamphetamine among local criminals.

Contact: Kelly Devine, [Burlington Business Association](#), 802-863-1175. **DIX**

ATTRACTION

Downtown turns grain silos into public art

In Coon Rapids, IA (est. pop. 1,244), the Main Street organization has transformed two grain bins into 360-degree murals that mark the entrance to downtown.

"After many years of work, the new mural is a wonderful success, bringing a sense of place to a longstanding feature of the community," says Katie Mason, executive director of Main Street Coon Rapids.

"The new mural is a wonderful success, bringing a sense of place to a longstanding feature of the community."

The concept of the [Naturally Iowa Grain Bin Gateway](#) was born in 2018.

That's when a team of four volunteers scoured Coon Rapids for sites that could accommodate public art on a large scale art. That scouting project coincided with the town of Coon Rapids' new focus on downtown revitalization.

First, Main Street had to get permission from the owners of the bins. The structures stand 40 feet high and measure 30 feet in diameter, for a combined surface area of 7,536 square feet. The silos are still actively used for grain storage.

The public art was designed to embrace two themes in Coon Rapids. It's a farming town, but it also has become a hub for out-

doors enthusiasts looking to hike, bike, ride horses, camp, gaze at stars, and paddle on the Middle Raccoon River.

The paintings on the grain bins include scenes that flow around each bin to the next in a 360-degree panorama. Beneath the "Naturally Iowa" logo are cattails and water grasses surrounding a canoe paddled by a couple. That flows into the second bin painted with a large tree and a family of four on bicycles followed by their dog.

Another section of the artwork shows a mother and daughter catching butterflies as a flock of geese fly overhead.

Long before paint was applied to the grain bins, a smaller-scale version served as a mockup. From there, Main Street Coon Rapids set about raising nearly \$77,000 to pay for the project.

Creating Great Places was the first major donor, giving \$26,000 to beautify the grain silos. That infusion gave downtown leaders the matching funds to apply for other grants. Other donations included \$5,700 from the City of Coon Rapids and \$5,000 from Main Street Coon Rapids.

Contact: Katie Mason, [Main Street Coon Rapids](#), 712-999-4769. **DIX**

Hometown Grants fund downtown projects in small towns

T-Mobile continues to parcel out grants to small and mid-sized cities as part of its Hometown Grants program. The mobile carrier recently released details about its latest round of 25 grant winners.

The awards of up to \$50,000 went to recipients around the country with a wide variety of ideas. One theme: All the winners are towns or small cities outside of major metropolitan areas.

In Keokuk, IA (est. pop. 10,225), a \$50,000 Hometown Grant will be used to transform a vacant lot into a multi-purpose outdoor space, complete with a performance stage, lawn area, and park. The grant aims to promote gathering for community events.

The project proposal was submitted by the Great River Players, a nonprofit dedicated to providing theatrical productions in the tri-state area and promoting local theater and aspiring actors.

“The City of Keokuk wholeheartedly supports Great River Players’ development of an outdoor event space,” Keokuk Mayor Kathie Mahoney said in a statement. “This project will have a positive impact in the Main Street District, bringing new life to a vacant space. On a larger scale, it will provide residents of Keokuk with a place of gathering and a location for unique outdoor cultural events.”

In Toppenish, WA (est. pop. 8,872), the \$50,000 grant will be used to repaint and restore the town’s 78 murals depicting the town’s history, one piece of artwork at a time.

The mural project debuted in 1989, but the works have fallen into disrepair over the decades. The Toppenish Mural Society aims to restore the murals. The group also wants to revive the annual Mural-In-A-Day event, during which several artists gather to paint a mural in a single day.

Toppenish had played up the Western theme in its downtown, where dozens of murals recount the area’s early settlement and culture. But over time, the Mural Society lost momen-

tum, the murals became weathered, and the annual Mural-In-A-Day faded.

In Doña Ana, NM (est. pop. 1,375), a \$36,500 grant will pay for benches and garbage cans at the historic Doña Ana Plaza.

“Over 12 years ago I was able to secure capital outlay funds from the New Mexico State Legislature to build sidewalks, a gazebo and add lighting to the historic Doña Ana Plaza,” former state Sen. Mary Jane Garcia said. “The T-Mobile Hometown grant will finally complete the Doña Ana Plaza project by allowing the Doña Ana Village Historic Preservation Committee to purchase benches and trash receptacles for the historic plaza.”

In Guthrie, OK (est. pop. 11,296), the city paired a \$50,000 grant from T-Mobile with an additional \$50,000 federal grant to build a pop-up shop park downtown. The park will serve as an incubator for entrepreneurs. And for the community, the downtown development is envisioned as a gathering space complete with pavilion, benches, picnic tables, and shade trees.

Shawnda Rooney, Guthrie’s economic development director, said the park will create a path for new retailers to follow in transitioning from startup to established brick-and-mortar business. The town has struggled to keep establishments open in the downtown district.

“Lots of small businesses try to get started in downtown but end up closing after a few years,” she told the *Journal Record*. “We want to break this cycle.”



“The funding of the downtown pop-up shops via the T-Mobile Hometown Grant Program will provide a unique opportunity to infuse new ideas into our downtown area,” Mayor Steve Gentling said. “It will provide incubator shops for new businesses and new ideas that will build and enhance retail activity in our community.”

See a case study of this concept from [Tionesta, PA](#).

In Versailles, IN (est. pop. 1,719), a \$50,000 grant will pay to build a splash pad

next to the Holdsworth Entertainment Pavilion in the new pocket park on the town square.

The latest round of grants is part of T-Mobile’s five-year, \$25 million initiative to boost downtowns. Other winners include education programs and improvements to ADA compliance.

To choose the winners, T-Mobile works with Main Street America and Smart Growth America. The deadline for the next round of grants is Jan. 1. The application can be [found here](#). **DIX**

ACCESS AND MOBILITY

Federal windfall takes aim at poorly planned highways

During the highway-building spree that began in the 1950s, many downtowns were disrupted in ways that were convenient for car commuters but damaging to public life and the urban fabric.

Now comes a federal investment in undoing the infrastructure projects from the 20th century. The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Reconnecting Communities Pilot provides \$1 billion “for projects that remove barriers to opportunity caused by legacy infrastructure.” The initiative provides cities with money to demolish highways and rebuild street grids and parks.

The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 included an additional \$3 billion for “cap-and-cover” projects.

A recent report by PwC and the Urban Land Institute laid out some of the ways that such projects are moving forward. In St. Paul, MN, the Rondo neighborhood was a vibrant African-American community with a thriving business district before Interstate 94 was built.

The state of Minnesota now plans to cover part of the highway and build a new 24-acre neighborhood on top of it, including parks and other cultural amenities, in addition to afford-

able housing and a new business corridor. St. Paul has already received a \$1.4 million grant for the project

Other similar initiatives include:

- The Texas Department of Transportation is building a deck above a sunken portion of I-10 separating downtown and uptown El Paso to create, as described in the federal grant application, “amenities such as green space, public gathering space, and entertainment venues.”

- A community group called Loving the Bronx supports capping the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which runs through dense neighborhoods in the South Bronx, with the goals of improving local air quality and providing new land for development projects.

- In Seattle, Lid-5 activists are advocating for the city government to cover and add green space over I-5.

- Reconnect Austin is pushing the city of Austin to bury I-35 through the urban core of Austin and dedicate the new land as public space and developable land.

While the deadline for the [Reconnecting Communities Pilot](#) has passed, the program is slated for five years, and cities will have future opportunities to apply for funding. **DIX**

Idea Exchange

Holiday forecast

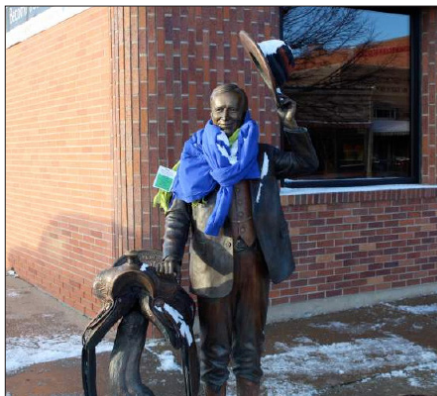
Downtown merchants can look forward to a happy holiday shopping season. The National Retail Federation forecasts that holiday sales during November and December will grow between 6 percent and 8 percent over 2021 to between \$942.6 billion and \$960.4 billion. Over the past five years, holiday sales in November and December have averaged about 19 percent of total retail sales, but the figure can be much higher for some retailers.

In addition to strong sales, National Retail Federation chief economist Jack Kleinhenz said the holiday shopping season kicked off earlier this year — a growing trend in recent years — as shoppers worry about inflation and the availability of products.

Additional information is available in the NRF report, [Retail Holiday Seasonal Trends: Winter Holidays](#).

Winter event highlights local need, downtown spirit

The City of Rapid City, SD, continues its tradition of collecting winter clothes for the needy while enlivening city streets. The downtown is home to 43 presidential statues. For a brief period from November 15 to March 15 individuals and groups are invited to place winter apparel such as gloves, scarves, hats, and coats on the statues. The tradition began in 2015 and each year since, residents have kept the presidents — and statues



of First Dogs Barney and Liberty — warm in various forms of colorful winter apparel.

"There's always a great outpouring of support in the community for this effort," said Mayor Steve Allender in a statement. "The simple gesture of placing that pair of gloves, winter scarf or stocking cap on a downtown statue will have an immediate impact on the person who stops to collect them. And it impacts the person donating and placing the item on the statue, knowing they are making a difference in a person's life."

The event coincides with the launch of National Hunger and Homeless Awareness Week, this year observed November 12-20.

Suburban malls look more like downtowns

Once fierce competitors for downtown shopping dollars, suburban malls across the country are facing a major overhaul. [Modern Retail](#) magazine reports that with traditional retailers such as Sears, Macy's, and JCPenny closing stores, malls are becoming "less transac-

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Idea Exchange

tional and more experiential.” Mall operators are turning to nontraditional tenants — such as grocers, entertainment spaces, and offices — to occupy these large spaces.

Event kicks off holiday season

Cumberland Square Park will be transformed into a Winter Wonderland for the holiday season. The event is the latest addition to a busy holiday season in downtown Bristol, TN.

Thirty trees will be set up throughout the park, each decorated by a local nonprofit or business. Visitors are invited to enjoy the winter scene and vote for their favorites. The launch of Winter Wonderland compliments the downtown’s long standing Annual Christmas Open House. This evening event is positioned as a customer appreciation night. Merchants stay open late and offer special discounts and refreshments. To round out the evening, there is a visit from Santa Clause, carolers, horse and carriage rides through downtown, and more.

Enhancing pedestrian safety

October is National Pedestrian Safety Month. The Texas Department of Transportation took advantage of the opportunity to encourage drivers to watch out for pedestrians.

TxDOT notes that in the El Paso area last year, there were 181 traffic crashes involving pedestrians.

18 year old festival is re-branded

The South Carolina Pecan Festival went on a brief hiatus as the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered much of downtown Florence, NC. Event planners and staff took advantage of the break to assess the event’s purpose, strengths, and weaknesses. This led to re-branding the event, developing a new name, logo, website, and festival app.

The event’s new name, SC Pecan Music & Food Festival, reflects the broader focus of the event. It’s much more than just pecans. There are eight stages of live entertainment, art and culinary competitions, vendors, kids zone, and more. The one day festival draws over 50,000 people to the downtown each year.



The Be Safe. Drive Smart. campaign brought attention grabbing “walking human billboards” to the streets of downtown El Paso.

The billboards, or wearable sandwich boards, display messages reminding drivers and pedestrians to follow the rules of the road.

The campaign collateral also includes video, radio, and outdoor advertising materials, which are available at the [TxDOT website](#).

A similarly eye catching safety campaign was spearheaded by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership. The [LOOK ALIVE PGH](#) campaign combined traditional advertising with “unique interventions.”

Improv actors dressed as the Grim Reaper frequented sidewalks around particularly busy intersec-

tions and engaged pedestrians in playful banter.

Anyone having an encounter with the Grim Reaper received a “Get out of Death Free” card encouraging the pedestrian to “Look Alive” and to visit the Look Alive website to become a safer, more engaged pedestrian. Sidewalk chalk stencils encouraged people to, “Look Left, Look Right, Look Alive!”

And geo-fencing technology was used to display pop-up messages on cell phones in highly trafficked areas.

To reach downtown drivers, transit shelter advertising was replaced by a stark white panel displaying the message “We’re keeping this space blank. So you can keep your eyes on the road.” DIX