



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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## ATTRACTION

### Small, creative events drive traffic to downtown district

Like many downtowns, Santa Monica, CA (est. pop. 89,951), has been beset by complaints about public safety and challenged by an exodus of retail tenants.

As homelessness and drug use became more prominent in recent years, one building owner placed a sign on a vacant storefront on Third Street Promenade that read “Santa Monica Is Not Safe,” later changing it to “Santa Methica Is Not Safe.” So much for the national image of surf and sun.

During the pandemic, Old Navy, Banana Republic, and The Gap

left big-box locations along Third Street Promenade, pushing the strip’s vacancy rate above 30 percent. Third Street Promenade’s taxable sales plunged from more than \$435 million in 2017 to \$200 million in 2023, the city of Santa Monica reported.

And the hits keep coming. This year, sporting goods retailer REI closed its store on Third Street Promenade.

To counteract those trends, Santa Monica hired private security to patrol the streets. And Downtown Santa Monica Inc. has put on a steady

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## CLEAN AND SAFE

### Downtown leaders push back against crime wave, lax enforcement

Downtowns have long struggled with crime and homelessness, but those problems have intensified in recent years. Homeless populations have soared, drug overdoses have spiked, and organized shoplifting has mushroomed.

Now, downtown leaders are coalescing around the idea that lenient laws, indifferent enforcement, and drug decriminalization bear

much of the blame for a crime wave in recent years.

Many cities and states have attempted to undo the law enforcement excesses of the war on drugs by vastly changing their approach. Oregon is a particularly dramatic example — the state decriminalized drug possession, leading to a backlash from residents and business

*(Continued on page 7)*

## BID brings in extra revenue with “entrepreneurial” spinoff

The Hollywood Partnership is a nonprofit business improvement district that provides a variety of services to businesses along the famous Hollywood Boulevard.

In 2022, the BID took a creative step: It launched Hollywood Partnership Ventures, a 501(c)(3) organization doing business as Hollywood Partnership Community Trust.

*“The assessment rate is the stable portion of our budget. Our Community Trust is more entrepreneurial.”*

The Community Trust spinoff was a response to financial reality — BID property owners weren’t keen on paying higher assessments to keep the neighborhood looking good. So the Hollywood Partnership created a workaround. The Community Trust would host events and provide enhanced ser-

vices to those willing to pay for them.

So far, so good: The Community Trust has brought in several million dollars in fresh revenue, says Steven Welliver, who’s vice president of the parent organization and executive director of the spinoff. That includes \$1.5 million from the city of Los Angeles to build and manage Hollywood’s first public restroom.

“The assessment rate is the stable portion of our budget,” Welliver says. “Our Community Trust is more entrepreneurial.”

The Community Trust had total revenue of \$694,171 in 2022, according to its latest IRS form 990. Its first big event was a festival for LA Pride, which generated \$165,500 in revenue, according to the tax return.

Another Community Trust partner is Netflix, which invested \$60 million in a renovation of the historic Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. The tech giant also wanted the Hollywood Partnership to provide services above and beyond what was included in the BID’s routine services.

So Netflix pays the Community Trust for additional cleaning and security. For instance, the BID pressure washes the sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard twice a week. Netflix wanted its stretch of sidewalk pressure washed daily, so the Community Trust offers the additional service. Netflix wanted a bigger security presence but didn’t want to patrol the property itself, so the Community Trust assigned additional clean and safe team members to the area.

Netflix even pays \$800 a month for additional trash pickup. Welliver says the Community Trust is able to charge Netflix much more than the cost of that particular service.

“It takes our ambassadors five minutes to throw the bag in the back of the truck every Sunday,” he says. “We take that \$800 and invest it in other programs.”

### What’s your job and what’s not? Boundaries, communication key

The Hollywood Community Trust was formed to provide extra services to property owners. But an important part of downtown management is drawing the distinction between what you can do, and what you can’t.

For instance, in the Los Angeles Fashion District, safety ambassadors are contractually prohibited from physically entering private properties to deal with security issues, says Ivan Villegas, director of operations at the LA Fashion District BID. They have to stand by on public property while waiting for police or private security to respond.

In another example, the role of the BID’s clean and safe employees can be confusing. While the yellow-shirted workers clean up litter, they’re not sanitation workers. But many business owners simply leave bags of trash on the sidewalk for them.

“They’re like, ‘Oh, the yellow shirts will get it,’” Vallegas says.

After asking merchants not to leave trash on sidewalks, the district looks cleaner, he adds.

Contact: Ivan Villegas, [LA Fashion District BID](#), 213-800-3602.

As word has spread about the Community Trust's services, the organization has landed public contracts and has been hired by entities that are just outside the BID boundaries.

Welliver says he treats those requests as a private business owner would.

"We calculate how much it costs, then we put a 20 percent to 30 percent markup on that, and then bid it back out to our stakeholders," he says. "They're willing to pay that 20 percent to 30 percent premium on our services."

Setting up a separate 501(c)(3) can be an alternative to raising assessments, but there are some complications. For instance, the two organizations have separate financial statements and distinct accounting systems.

One board member asked for an hour-by-hour breakdown of Community Trust vs. BID projects, a request Welliver was able to fend off.

"It just doesn't make sense in our day-to-day operations," he says. "The BID's ambassadors do work every day that is attribut-



able to the Community Trust. But it doesn't make sense for them to say, 'I spent an hour wearing my Community Trust hat and an hour wearing my BID hat.'"

Contact: Steven Welliver, [The Hollywood Partnership](#), 323-463-6767. **DIX**

## Small, creative events drive traffic to downtown district — Continued from page 1

stream of creative, small-scale events. The idea is that a photo of a cool event is the perfect way to push back against negative narratives.

"I can tell you everything is fine, or I can show you photos of my Taylor Swift friendship-bracelet-making event," Ariana Gomez, director of marketing and partnerships at Downtown Santa Monica, said during a recent International Downtown Association conference.

Other events have included a chess tournament, a celebration of the Mexican Day of the Dead, a photo op with the Easter Bunny, and an outdoor showing of Jurassic Park.

Santa Monica used to be a shopping-driven district, but as consumer buying habits

have changed, the mall merchants along Third Street Promenade are no longer the draw they once were.

"If you ask my stakeholders, they'll tell you it's a security issue. It's not," Gomez says.

Instead, she argues, the real issue is about retail mix. Big-box retailers have been struggling for years.

### Rethinking tenant mix

The Downtown Santa Monica district doesn't include the beach, but it does encompass Third Street Promenade, a pedestrian mall that has long been occupied by the same sorts of national tenants that occupied regional shopping malls.

A recent influx of tenants has filled some





of the empty spaces. A fitness center took the 45,000-square-foot Banana Republic space, and Barnes & Noble signed a lease.

Gomez says the district's vacancy rate is now about 20 percent — not great, but not far from national norms. Even so, she says, media coverage and social media posts have focused on vacancies and public safety.

"I know those headlines are horrific," Gomez says. "It's a street that had the tenant mix of a mall. As those long-term leases end and they pull out, who is going to take those big boxes?"

In one response to the challenges, Santa Monica enacted new zoning ordinances that allow more flexibility in tenant types — Third Street Promenade now counts as tenants a tattoo parlor and an indoor pickleball court.

The shift also eased the way for restaurants to open downtown: The city eliminated restrictions on the number of restaurants on Main Street. The new rules allow health clubs, yoga studios, and fitness business up to 5,000 square feet to open "by right." And pop-up uses are more easily approved by the city.

### A picture is worth a thousand words

As for public safety, Gomez doesn't try to deny that there are some colorful characters in downtown Santa Monica.

"Yes, you might see someone yelling at the sun. Yes, you might see indecent exposure," she says. "But did you have a good time?"

To counteract retail shifts and safety perceptions, Gomez has leaned into public events.

And when those events draw crowds, she's sure to document the activity and post it on social media.

In fact, Gomez says her mantra is "puppies and babies." The idea is that no one takes their children or their dogs to places that are unsafe.

One example is an Easter celebration that brings in 2,000 people for photos with an Easter Bunny. Downtown Santa Monica spends just \$6,900 to host the event.

Gomez says she stumbled upon the Easter Bunny as a traffic driver. After another event fell through at the last minute, Downtown Santa Monica hired an Easter Bunny and marketed Easter on the Promenade.

The event was a hit.

"If you do nothing else, go hire an Easter Bunny," Gomez says. "It's good for kids. It's good for dogs. And it's a great photo opportunity."

In another small-scale event, Downtown Santa Monica hosts chess tournaments and chess Sundays. For one event, players paid a \$5 entry fee.

Santa Monica leaned into chess after the chess tables at a park were removed because they had become a public safety issue.

Gomez and her marketing team think creatively about how to sell their events. They start by asking: What makes good press? What makes a good photo op?

"That's the world we live in," Gomez says.

For a showing of Jurassic Park, Downtown Santa Monica posted an Instagram video with a paleontologist from a nearby museum talking about dinosaurs. For a December showing of Die Hard, Downtown Santa Monica did man-on-the-street interviews asking people for their opinions on the perennial question: "Is the Bruce Willis action flick a Christmas movie?"

Because Third Street Promenade is a narrow street, Downtown Santa Monica has stressed smaller events with modest budgets.

"You're not supposed to talk about making your events smaller, but we are," Gomez says.

Contact: Ariana Gomez, [Downtown Santa Monica](https://www.downtownsantamonica.com), 310-393-8355. **DIX**

***"You're not supposed to talk about making your events smaller, but we are."***

## Pedestrian fatalities spur quick safety upgrades

After pedestrians died on their streets, officials in Richmond, VA (est. pop. 229,395), and Stamford, CT (est. pop. 136,197), wanted to move quickly to protect pedestrians. Both borrowed techniques from the tactical urbanism playbook of cheap but effective responses to obvious problems.

In Richmond, two Virginia Commonwealth University students were fatally struck and killed by vehicles in 2023. The city and the school responded quickly.

They installed no right turn on red signs, added speed bumps along some high-volume campus streets, and added a feature known as leading pedestrian intervals. This type of traffic light adjustment gives pedestrians a head start by signaling to them to walk some three to seven seconds before right-turning cars are allowed to proceed.

Compared to most traffic safety measures, these responses came quickly.

“Typically, when there’s a safety issue, we have been solving this either by a study or some long-term solution,” Dironna Moore-Clarke, an administrator of Richmond Connects, tells Virginia Public Media.

These fixes fall under the category of “lighter, quicker, cheaper” or “tactical urbanism.” These safety enhancements don’t involve major investments in infrastructure. Instead, the goal is to quickly respond in a way that prevents more traffic accidents.

“While transportation planning and projects can take a long time, these really proved to be good solutions for right now,” Moore-Clarke told Virginia Public Media. “One of the key pillars of the action plan was to really give a directive of how we can do things effectively and efficiently.”

Other items on Richmond Connects’ wish list include temporary roundabouts that can be created with blinking signage and paint; and protected bike lanes lined with planters or posts.

Other projects would make sidewalks more compliant with federal accessibility guidelines by adding rubber mats at bus stops.

Money for the temporary projects — just under \$500,000 — is in the city budget, Moore-Clarke said. Once approved to move forward, her office would seek funds from state or federal sources.

“It’s affordable. We budgeted for it in this budget, because we want it to really hit the ground running,” said Moore-Clarke. “I think that is going to give a lot of momentum for Richmond Connects and its strategies to really get to an equitable and safe transportation network.”

Some of the other temporary installations involve projects like curb extensions, project administrator Kelli Rowan told Virginia Public Media.

“Instead of pouring concrete it could be flex posts and paint,” she said. “It could also include things like a bike corral or maybe there’s a parking space at the end of a block that we want to not have cars parked there to increase our visibility at the intersection and get some other use out of it like bike parking.”

### Temporary measures become permanent

In Stamford, traffic engineers have responded to pedestrian fatalities in a similar way. At one problem intersection, traffic engineers implemented a tactical urbanism project using red planters and flexible plastic delineators. They narrowed the wide intersection to slow traffic and make it easier to see pedestrians in the crosswalks.

Luke Bittenwieser of the city’s Transportation, Traffic, and Parking Bureau told the city’s Vision Zero Task Force that the experiment there is working.

“It’s a high-volume pedestrian area and a high-crash area,” Bittenwieser said, according to the *Connecticut Examiner*, and “it cost us nothing” to make it safer.

Buttenwieser told the task force that the bureau is using a map that pinpoints sites with high pedestrian volume and high numbers of crashes to create a list of 20 sites citywide where they can use paint, bump-

outs, cones, and other low-cost tools to improve safety.

The goal, he said, is “to initiate quick projects that will lead to more concrete, permanent measures.” **DIX**

## PATHWAYS AND PUBLIC SPACES

# Wayfinding system connects a community

Somerset, KY (est. pop. 11,998), unveiled a new wayfinding system that features directional and informational signs throughout downtown streets.

The signs carry the city’s brand and logo, and their role is both practical and less obvious revealing connections, highlighting diversity, and demonstrating community pride.

The network was launched in Somerset’s downtown core with plans to expand to other parts of the city.

The wayfinding and placemaking network was designed by Kinetic Strategic Design. It includes 110 signs that highlight parking areas, historical information and community events, and walking paths.

“In reality, visitors coming to our community and residents who are here every day have

an extremely fragmented set of shared information and experiences,” said Kirby Stephens, president of Kinetic Strategic Design, according to a city news release. “For instance, how many Somerset residents could tell you there is a Piano Park and where it is? How many could tell you when the buildings on East Mount Vernon Street were built and why they look the way they do? Or that Somerset once had trolley cars? And, more importantly, why does any of this matter in the continued development of the city we call Somerset?”

The civic life of a city is enriched when its public space is meaningful, interesting, and worth visiting, Stephens said.

The wayfinding and placemaking system includes four components — welcome/identification signs, directional signs, historic interpretive signs and location maps, and kiosks.

The welcome/identification signs are the first piece of the system a visitor sees. They’ve been stationed at three gateways into downtown.

All three are single-sided illuminated signs that read “Welcome. Downtown Somerset, Historic Arts & Entertainment District.”

As motorists travel toward the center of the city, they see directional signs, which point to such community destinations as the library, farmers market, Piano Park, and courthouse. Many of those signs are installed on city light posts.

*“I love the way it knits together a common sense of place for our people.”*





The third layer of the system is titled “Walk Somerset.” It comprises two dozen panels and location maps at strategic points downtown. The markers explain the history, culture, and development of Somerset. A self-guided walking tour highlights city parks and community artwork. The interpretive panels draw attention to noteworthy people, places, and events in Somerset’s history.

Walk Somerset also reminds visitors and residents of the Healthy Somerset initiative. That program aims to provide walkable areas and easy ways to incorporate physical activity. Multiple map locations identify a variety of walking routes of one to three miles.

The final component of the wayfinding system is four digital kiosks placed at community gathering spots, including the farmers market, Somerset High School, the county courthouse, and the Pulaski County Public Library. Each kiosk has a programmable digital screen that shows rotating messages about important community events, schedules, and announcements.

Mayor Alan Keck said the new wayfinding and placemaking system does more

than just direct people to destinations.

“At every touchpoint, this wayfinding strategy not only points residents and visitors in the correct direction, but it invites them to be a part of our story, whether that be in the distant past when our founders first established this beautiful city or in the more recent past as we’ve developed it for future generations through revitalization and growth,” Keck said. “I love the way it knits together a common sense of place for our people and encourages them to be the healthiest, most engaged version of themselves.”

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606-679-5634. **DIX**



## Downtown leaders push back against crime wave, lax enforcement — Continued from page 1

owners who say downtown streets are no longer safe.

Now, the momentum is turning in the other direction. After downtown Portland grew unappealing to visitors and merchants, Oregon is moving to recriminalize drug possession.

During the International Downtown Association’s West Coast Urban District Forum in San Diego, three prosecutors spoke at a lunch panel about public safety. All three strongly urged cities and states to return to tough-on-crime approaches — and their message was warmly received by downtown leaders.

Kevin Barton, district attorney in Oregon’s Washington County, criticized his state’s lax drug policies.

“Boy, was it a mistake,” Barton said. “Instead of doing as we have done, you should do the opposite.”

Now that Oregon is unwinding some of its recent policies, Barton acknowledges that law enforcement is only part of the solution.

“We’re dealing with a triple whammy — the fentanyl crisis, the homelessness crisis, and the drug decriminalization crisis,” he said.

In another example of pushback, many cities are pushing to overturn Martin vs.



Boise, a 2018 ruling involving the Idaho city's ability to deter public homelessness. In that case, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that cities can't

stop unhoused people from sleeping on public land unless there are sufficient shelter beds available. In an unusual twist, the court cited the Eighth Amendment, which protects Americans from cruel and unusual punishment.

Using criminal penalties to prohibit camping on public land regardless of shelter space amounted to criminalizing people being homeless, the court ruled.

Since the ruling took effect, many cities in the Ninth Circuit — which encompasses a wide swath of the Western U.S. — have decided to essentially stop enforcing ordinances violated by homeless populations.

"Martin vs. Boise is one of the most misused and misunderstood cases," said Thien Ho, district attorney for Sacramento, CA. "People have used it as an excuse to do nothing."

San Diego District Attorney Summer Stephan argued that the ruling has victimized both homeless populations and broader communities. For instance, homeless people die of overdoses at a far greater rate than those who aren't homeless. And fully half of arsons in San Diego County are set by people living in homeless camps, Stephan said.

The U.S. Supreme Court was set to review Martin vs. Boise and a related case as of early March. Officials from many cities, including Las Vegas, San Diego, Seattle, and Spokane, WA, have filed briefs seeking the repeal of the Martin vs. Boise ruling.

The International Downtown Association has also weighed in, filing a friend of the court brief with the Supreme Court.

The result of the decision, says the International Downtown Association, has been a "zone of immunity from enforcement of any quality-

of-life laws whenever the subject is unhoused," the brief said. "The product of this judicial meddling has been an encampment explosion, a kibosh on public-realm enforcement, and a culture of fear around the use of enforcement to address the crisis. In the laboratory of democracy, this experiment has failed."

Ho, for his part, sued the city of Sacramento for failing to take action to curtail more than a dozen homeless camps in his city.

One element of Martin vs. Boise is that the ruling applies to those who are involuntarily homeless. In Sacramento, Ho said, 90 percent of homeless people who are offered services refuse them, raising questions about whether they're really involuntarily homeless.

His suit against the city of Sacramento pointed to non-enforcement of ordinances around blocking sidewalks, storing possessions in public, and other seemingly small-scale offenses.

Ho said he used the public nuisance laws that municipalities deploy against problem properties.

"I took their playbook and turned it against them," Ho said.

Ho contacted city officials several times about his concerns. Just as a code enforcement agency proves a public nuisance by polling neighbors, Ho gathered horror stories from Sacramento residents who had been threatened, robbed, or intimidated by residents of homeless camps.

California has loosened anti-crime laws, doing away with three-strikes sentencing guidelines that give long penalties to repeat offenders. While such policies aim to unwind discriminatory sentencing practices, they've been exploited by criminals, prosecutors said.

"We're stuck between compassion and chaos," said Ho.

In other words, by stressing a hands-off approach to those who find themselves homeless, communities have unleashed lawlessness.

Prosecutors argue that taking away criminal penalties removes leverage from those in the justice system. If a troubled individual is told to choose drug treatment, he's likely to refuse. But if he's told that the alternative to

***"I took their playbook and turned it against them."***



refusing drug treatment is time in jail, then the answer might change.

“We’re not trying to go back to the war on drugs,” Barton said.

He argued that those with mental health issues need treatment, not arrest. But, he said, the justice system is an effective way to pressure reluctant offenders to get the help they need.

The West Coast is far from alone in adjusting its approach to public safety. In

New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul in March assigned hundreds of National Guard soldiers and State Police officers to patrol New York City subway platforms and scrutinize riders’ bags.

The latest show of force followed Mayor Eric Adams’ move to order an additional 1,000 officers to patrol subways in February following a 45 percent spike in major crimes in January compared with the same time last year. **DIX**

## ATTRACTION

# Downtowns partner with universities to drive traffic, activation

In a handful of downtowns, such as Berkeley, CA, and Charlottesville, VA, college campuses and downtowns have grown up together over a period of decades.

But most downtowns have to work to bring in college campuses and their steady streams of students.

Sometimes, the strategy works — expanding colleges can help fill downtown vacancies while creating pedestrian traffic. In other cases, colleges have only loose connections to downtown and leave as quickly as they arrived.

In Grand Junction, CO (est. pop. 68,054), Colorado Mesa University opened a downtown campus in 2023. The university says the satellite location will foster stronger connections between students, faculty, downtown businesses, organizations, visitors, and residents.

In San Jose, CA (est. pop. 971,265), San Jose State University announced in late 2023 that it will convert a downtown hotel to student housing. The project, funded in part through \$89 million in debt relief capacity through the Higher Education Student Housing Program, will house more than 700 students.

In Hartford, CT (est. pop. 120,682), the University of Connecticut is advancing plans to

add student housing, a research center, and a new academic major to its downtown campus. The school aims to add a finance focus for students attending classes downtown, a move that would align the school with the city’s employment base.

In Washington, DC (est. pop. 671,803), George Washington University in late 2022 paid \$11.5 million for an adjacent building owned by the World Bank. Thanks to a decades-old agreement with the World Bank, the university was able to purchase the office building for far below its market value.

In San Francisco, CA (est. pop. 808,437), the University of California College of the Law, SF opened student housing in August — just a block away from a corner notorious for drug sales. The 650-unit complex in the Tenderloin neighborhood is open not just to law students but also to those attending UC San Francisco, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, the University of San Francisco, and San Francisco State University.

Not all downtown partnerships have been winners. In Peoria, IL (est. pop. 109,221), a college ended its presence downtown. Illinois Central College closed its longtime downtown campus in 2011, and as of late 2023 was

still seeking a buyer for its former classroom building.

In Duluth, MN (est. pop. 86,615), Lake Superior College announced it would close its downtown campus and move programs back to its main campus in 2024 after a downtown lease expires.

And in New Bedford, MA (est. pop.

100,676), the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth closed its College of Visual and Performing Arts satellite campus in downtown New Bedford. After lease negotiations fell through, the school moved all classes and studios to its main campus in Dartmouth. The campus had been credited with spurring the development of a downtown arts district. **DIX**

## ACCESS AND MOBILITY

# Albuquerque ends bus fares, ensures access for all



Albuquerque, NM (est. pop. 561,006), has joined a growing trend toward waiving bus fares. The city council moved in late 2023 to remove all fees for transit services provided by ABQ Ride.

The move follows a two-year pilot program, numerous data reports, and feedback from community members.

“Since the Zero Fare Pilot Program began, we have seen the positive impact it has had on the lives of our neighbors, friends, and visitors getting around town,” Mayor

Tim Keller said in a city news release. “Zero Fares is one example of how Albuquerque is paving the way for cities across the nation to implement equity-based initiatives that benefit everyone.”

Transit officials say that by not collecting fares, they can focus on other priorities, such as improving the system’s safety and sustainability.

The buses run more smoothly without riders lining up to pay fares, says Althea Atherton, an organizer with the Albuquerque Bus Riders Union.

“It’s not only the equitable thing to do, but it’s also the better service solution,” Atherton told *Governing* magazine. “Once you experi-

ence it, you don’t want to go back.”

Not everyone is keen on the move. Paul Gessing of the taxpayer watchdog group Rio Grande Foundation said the city is losing money by not charging a bus fare.

“It’s about \$1.75 million in lost fares,” Gessing told KOAT news.

Albuquerque eclipses Kansas City, MO (est. pop. 509,247), as the largest U.S. city to implement a Zero Fare transit program. Kansas City made the move in 2020. Richmond, VA (est. pop. 229,395), is another notable city to end fares.

The trend toward zero-fare transit has been gaining momentum. Transit officials in Kansas City and Albuquerque argued that the revenue they collected from fares was outweighed by the cost of collections, especially when factoring in the benefits of eliminating fares.

Albuquerque’s bus fares covered between 12 percent and 16 percent of the system’s operating budget between 2010 and 2015.

Larger cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, have experimented with zero-fare programs. But larger transit agencies typically rely more heavily on rider fares to cover their operating costs.

New York City has been operating five fare-free neighborhood bus lines as part of a funding deal from state legislators. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, who ran on a “Free the T” platform, has been pushing for free rides in her city. **DIX**

# Idea Exchange

## Cultural events resonate with local communities

Communities with a strong representation from a particular ethnic group have an opportunity to create festivals and events that will educate the public, strengthen the downtown's identity, and attract visitors to the city center.

For example, Holland, MI, boasts a strong Dutch heritage. When the local convention and visitor's bureau wanted to add an event to encourage more winter visitors downtown, it was vital that the celebration remain true to the city's Dutch roots.

The bureau selected a Kerstmarkt (Christmas market), a pop-up retail market popular all over the Netherlands during the holiday season. The market offers a venue for local artisans and specialty shops while allowing customers to shop and enjoy traditional food, drink, and entertainment.

"While the Kerstmarkt has become a tradition for many West Michigan families, vendors report U.S. customers from as far away as Texas and many European visitors traveling from Chicago," says the CVB.

## Business mixers educate

Monthly mixers in downtown Paso Robles, CA, help keep the business community close and well informed. Each month, downtown association members are invited to mingle and learn more about each others' businesses and downtown activities.

The events are held after normal business hours and are hosted at a different business location each

month. Additional businesses donate wine, snacks, and door prizes.

## Event timing matters

The long-standing Summer Sidewalk Sale presented by Downtown Lawrence Inc. in Lawrence, KS, was re-imagined for 2023. The event, now called Mid Summer Night on Mass runs on a Friday from 4 p.m. until 10 p.m. It continues to feature sidewalk sales, and has added restaurant specials and live entertainment.

"The goal is to reinvigorate the event," says DLI board member Jennifer McKnight. "We think that a later start time and inviting all businesses in the downtown district will appeal to more of our downtown guests."

## Sidewalk Stroll draws visitors on rainy days

The availability of paint that shows up only when it's wet has inspired whimsical, low-cost "invisible art" projects on sidewalks nationwide. Now, the town of Danville, CA, has launched its own Sidewalk Stroll.



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# Idea Exchange

The stroll features 10 messages that appear on downtown sidewalks when it rains. Passports and maps guide visitors to each message. Once all messages have been identified, passports are turned in for a small gift and entry into a raffle. The town's cultural arts team placed the messages around downtown.

## Children's programming draws families

Because children usually require adults to drive them, supervise them, and pay their way, children's events are a great way to bring people downtown.

Cities nationwide are adding a wide array of children's programming to downtown calendars in an effort to attract those families. Some efforts include folding children's activities into existing events, while others are kids-only fun, and still others focus on kid-friendly holidays with Easter egg hunts, costume parades, main street trick or treating, and early-evening fireworks on New Year's Eve.

Downtown organizations are even hosting Spring Break events for local students. In Baltimore, MD, the Downtown Partnership hosts a pop-up outdoor roller rink which attracts children and their families for Spring Break Skate. From March 22 through March 31 there's daily skating, and food and beverages are available for sale. But this event is not just for kids, there's Family Skate, 90's Night, Slow Jam Sunday, College Night, Skate with Pride, O's night, Big Hair Don't Care, and Ladies Night.

## Food tourism continues to grow

Traveling to a destination specifically for its food and beverages is on the rise. The World Food Travel Association defines food tourism as "Traveling for a taste of place to get a sense of place."

In 2019, the global culinary tourism market was valued at \$1.1 billion and is projected to grow to more than \$1.79 billion by 2027, according to *Culinary Tourism Market 2020* from Allied Market Research. The most popular form of culinary tourism is food festivals followed by culinary trails, other assorted activities, cooking classes, and restaurants.

Food festivals often take place on downtown's streets and feature local delicacies like the popular Livermush Festival in Marion, NC. The festival celebrates a beloved local specialty called livermush. The event features a Livermush Food Truck Road, where the food truck with the most votes is named "Livermush Master," a live band, dancing on the street, vendors, inflatables and activities for children, a pig calling and pig squeal-ing contest, and more.



## Students patrol downtown

Portland, ME, has taken an original approach to controlling crime and supporting local students with its [Downtown Cadet](#) program.

The cadets are typically college students in criminal justice programs, or young people aiming for careers in the military or on a police force.

The cadets don black polo shirts and khaki pants and travel through downtown in teams of two. The cadets give directions

to tourists, visit downtown businesses, identify people in need, and they try to gently cajole people they see violating bans on public drinking or smoking.

The cadets are trained by the police department in the concept of "verbal judo," a tactic for encouraging a scofflaw to comply without physical force. They give warnings for violations of city ordinances, but the cadets aren't empowered to make arrests. The program is now in its fifth year of operation. **DIX**