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Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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ATTRACTION

Event street, murals, and more: How the arts are revitalizing this small city

For nearly a decade, Gallup, NM (est. pop. 21,333), has been building an arts district. Now those efforts are being rewarded with solid results.

Gallup's ArtsCrawl events once drew hundreds; now thousands come out. Downtown vacancy rates are down, investment is up. And Gallup's Coal Avenue Commons project won a Placemaking Award from the New Mexico Industry and Economic Development Association.

Gallup is a poor city (it has a 28 percent poverty rate), so an arts initiative can have an outsized

impact. Meanwhile, the city's population is 50 percent Native American and 25 percent Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — the type of demographic profile that can leave a city out of mainstream economic prosperity.

Seeking to address those challenges, Gallup won an Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2017. The grant provided \$150,000 which was matched by \$150,000 from local government, institutions, and organizations. The

(Continued on page 3)

PATHWAYS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Drive-through bans aim to improve safety, walkability

Across the U.S., a small but growing number of cities is targeting a familiar symbol of suburban sprawl: the drive-through lane.

Once considered a standard amenity for fast-food restaurants, banks, and pharmacies, drive-throughs are increasingly seen as obstacles to walkable downtowns, safer streets, and climate goals. In response, some municipalities now prohibit or limit new drive-through lanes, particularly in urban cores.

The policies are not retroactive. Cities are not ripping out existing drive-throughs or forcing bustling coffee chains to shut their windows. Instead, they are changing zoning codes to steer development away from car-centric designs.

Minneapolis, MN (est. pop. 428,000) is a prominent example. In 2019, the city banned new drive-through facilities citywide as part of a broader overhaul of its zoning code

(Continued on page 5)

As AI sparks data center boom, local leaders face pushback

Ever wonder what happens when you type a query into ChatGPT or another artificial intelligence platform? Turns out the cloud inevitably lands on terra firma at some point — AI is an industry that requires both massive data centers and huge amounts of energy.

This new generation of much larger data centers is stirring controversy at the local level. Data Center Watch reports that, in the past two years, \$18 billion worth of data center projects were shutdown and \$46 billion of projects were delayed amid opposition from residents and activists.

If a data center firestorm hasn't hit your city yet, get ready: At least 142 activist groups have formed across 24 states to block data center construction and expansion.

“Where communities once rallied against factories, warehouses, or retail sprawl, they’re now opposing data centers,” Data Center Watch says. “From noise and water usage to power demands and property values, server farms have become a new target in the broader backlash against large-scale development.”

In St. Charles, MO (est. pop. 71,802), city officials in late 2025 imposed a yearlong ban on any new data center development after public outcry over a secretive \$1 billion pro-

posal for a data center in the St. Louis suburb.

In Palm Beach County, FL (est. pop. 1,533,801), county officials put off a “hyper-scale” data center after protests from local residents. The operator of the 1.8 million-square-foot data center is unknown. In December, after feedback from residents, county commissioners agreed to postpone a decision until April 2026.

In Plymouth Township, PA (est. pop. 18,316), a data center developer has proposed repurposing a long-empty steel mill, another project that brought criticism from neighbors. “For residents around data centers, there’s just no positive,” Genevieve Boland, who lives near the mill, told the news site Vox.

Meanwhile, St. Louis, MO (est. pop. 281,754), is mulling a temporary ban on new data center development within that city.

A recent memo, written by St. Louis Planning and Urban Design Agency Executive Director Don Roe, said the city’s nearly 70-year-old zoning code cannot adequately manage the complex land use concerns around the projects.

“A time-limited moratorium would mean that no new permits would be accepted while the city develops a full understanding of the issue and develops quality land use, environmental, and other regulations,” Roe wrote, according to St. Louis Public Radio. “This path may very well be in the public’s best interest.”

St. Louis already is home to a dozen data centers, and the city is weighing a proposal for another data center in the Midtown district, just west of downtown.

While local officials can push off their decisions, the data center question isn’t going away.

Unlike other big economic development projects, such as factories or distribution centers, data centers tend not to create many local jobs. **DIX**

“Where communities once rallied against factories, warehouses, or retail sprawl, they’re now opposing data centers.”



Developers look to transform a vacant mill in downtown Lewiston, ME, into an AI data center.

Event street, alleyway murals, and more: How the arts are revitalizing this small city — Continued from page 1

funds supported a community-based, collaborative design process to re-imagine the city's Coal Avenue as a signature event street and creative commercial hub.

The first step in the design process was realized in four parts in 2018. During an in-person kickoff and on Facebook, GallupARTS solicited submissions of just one word which represented an individual's aspirations for downtown Gallop. Responses were scored by volume and turned into a mural by a local artist during the ArtsCrawl in May 2018.

At the June 2018 ArtsCrawl, attendees worked with local artists to design their own visions for Coal Avenue using street chalk. And in July 2018, concepts were demonstrated in the form of parklets.

Over the course of multiple public workshops, Gallup refined its street design, integrating ideas from the public with feedback from property and business owners, artists, and downtown residents.

Gallup even hosted a physical space where community members could ask questions face to face.

Over the course of this process, community support coalesced around a plaza-style design. In September 2018, the Gallup City Council voted to move forward with the plaza, which would feature new streetscape and connectivity improvements such as curbside sidewalks, patterned pavers, and a redesigned gateway.

In addition to proposed streetscape improvements, Gallup gained the state's first "scramble" intersection, where traffic stops entirely, and pedestrians may walk diagonally across the street. The total cost of the project came to \$8.3 million.

Separately, in 2019, GallupARTS collaborated with the Gallup MainStreet Arts & Cultural District to produce an open call for the first in a series of alleyway murals.

Construction of Coal Avenue Commons kicked off in July 2020, and the project opened in April 2023. It sits on a stretch of Coal Avenue downtown, a couple of blocks away

from the Amtrak station.

Since the project opened, downtown has seen nearly \$1 million in reinvestment. Creative placemaking has also flourished, particularly around cultural celebrations and parades. ArtsCrawl attendance and regional tourism have grown. And the El Morro Theater, one of several nationally registered historic structures downtown, has seen ticket sales for movies and private events double.

Downtown leaders say the success of Coal Avenue Commons taught them three lessons:

There is power in numbers. Coal Avenue Commons required collaboration among multiple organizations across the public and private sectors. The public sector drove the project, but the participation of artists and community members breathed life into the initiative. Coal Avenue's success reinforced the value of partnership in realizing a collective vision.

Lean into creativity. The project's roots in community-based design and meaningful engagement with the public yielded a much more significant outcome than if the partners had simply gone with whatever agenda fit the budget and the timeline. To put local voices at the fore, organizers worked with artists and arts organizations from the start. To win wider public support, Gallup capitalized on the talents of creative workers and involved them directly in the planning process.

Surroundings make a difference. Pedestrian-friendly walkways, active storefronts, and a vibrant arts scene don't happen by themselves. They are a result of concerted effort among municipal agencies, small businesses, organizations, and communities. For instance, curbside streets opened Coal Avenue, brought people together, and made citywide celebrations like ArtsCrawl bigger and better. DIX



As downtown's office market struggles, leaders look to arts to pick up slack

At first glance, Downtown San Diego seems to be a thriving place. Its waterfront convention center and major hotels host a steady stream of conferences. The San Diego Padres' ballpark is considered a model for downtown activation through professional sports. Residential construction is booming.

But take a stroll through other parts of downtown, and the image shifts. Homelessness poses an obvious challenge, and much of the downtown office market feels eerily empty.

Amid that backdrop of opportunities and problems, downtown leaders have embarked on a formal plan to create a Downtown Arts District.

The Downtown San Diego Partnership hired a new director of the arts initiative in October.

"Our urban neighborhoods are ripe with opportunity to bring in national and global best practices and innovative new approaches to more thoroughly integrate artists, creatives, organizations, and creative businesses," Justin Apger, chief operating officer and executive vice president of the Downtown San Diego Partnership, said in a statement.

Downtown leaders are still working out exactly what the arts district will look like. It could include pop-up public art installations, murals, and creative programming, as well as property tax breaks for owners who lease to arts businesses and nonprofits, or sales tax exemptions for original art sold in the district. "Everything is on the table," says Nathan Bishop, the Downtown Partnership's vice president of planning and economic development.

The Downtown San Diego Partnership hired Jonathan Glus as its Conrad Prebys Senior Art & Design Fellow in Residence.

"We're America's outdoor downtown," Glus recently told the *Times of San Diego*. "We have the best weather in the Americas. We want to really celebrate that, and we want to develop something that is wholly, organically unique to San Diego."

One quirk of San Diego's urban fabric is that its cultural offerings are concentrated outside of downtown in Balboa Park, home to multiple museums, including the San Diego Museum of Art, the San Diego Air and Space Museum, and the Comic-Con Museum. That reality means downtown doesn't have a major museum to build around. **DIX**

PATHWAYS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Mini-soccer field among projects funded by nationwide grant

Through its four-year-old Hometown Grants program, T-Mobile has funded more than 450 projects costing some \$20 million.

Its latest round of grants, announced in December, includes funding for a soccer facility in Moline, IL (est. pop. 42,235).

Moline will use a \$50,000 grant to install a mini-pitch soccer system at Riverside Park.

Mini-pitches have grown in popularity in recent years because the pre-fabricated fields can bring active recreation to small spaces such as vacant lots and roof tops. A typical soccer field is 200 plus feet by 300 plus feet while the mini-pitch can be just 40 feet by 74 feet.

Moline has selected a Musco Mini-Pitch

system, which includes built-in goals, benches, and lockers.

Musco, a lighting company, has installed more than 375 mini-pitches nationwide. Through a partnership with the U.S. Soccer Foundation, Musco plans to install 1,000 fields in time for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

The facilities aren't just for soccer — some include basketball hoops as well.

Other Hometown Grant recipients include:

- West Monroe, LA (est. pop. 12,837), where a park along the Ouachita River with signage, landscaping, and programming will activate an underused area and connect downtown West Monroe to the riverfront.
- Bangor, ME (est. pop. 31,663), which will upgrade the Penobscot Theatre Company's sound system to ensure high-quality productions, revitalize a historic venue, and strengthen its role as a cultural and community hub.
- Keene, NH (est. pop. 22,923), which will install a mobile outdoor stage to host free down-

town performances and events, supporting small businesses and activating public spaces.

- Jefferson, OR (est. pop. 3,316), will build a park that honors a beloved resident while offering a family-friendly gathering space and rest stop for cyclists.
- The Dalles, OR (est. pop. 15,973), will build shade canopies to create a versatile downtown gathering place that encourages year-round community use.
- Johnstown, PA (est. pop. 18,245), will turn a vacant, blighted property into a community pocket park that supports downtown revitalization.

Cities of less than 50,000 are eligible for [T-Mobile Hometown Grants](#). **DIX**



Rooftop mini-pitch in Queens, NY.

Drive-through bans aim to improve safety, walkability — *Continued from page 1*

aimed at reducing car dependence and encouraging dense, mixed-use development. City officials argued that drive-throughs take up valuable land, create traffic conflicts, and discourage walking, particularly in neighborhoods where transit and foot traffic are supposed to be prioritized.

Across the river, St. Paul, MN (est. pop. 307,000), considered a similar ban in 2024, but it continues to debate the matter. A public hearing on drive-throughs is scheduled for February 2026.

A similar debate is playing out in Frisco, TX (est. pop. 235,000), where city planners proposed a ban on new downtown drive-through lanes in August.

Other cities have acted with less fanfare. Fair Haven, NJ (est. pop. 6,100), a small

borough with a traditional downtown, prohibits new drive-through windows through its zoning code. Officials there framed the policy as a way to preserve the character of the downtown and prevent congestion on narrow streets. Creve Coeur, MO (est. pop. 18,600), has restricted new drive-through restaurants in certain districts, citing similar concerns about traffic flow and walkability.

Atlanta, GA (est. pop. 507,000), took a more targeted approach. In 2023, the city banned new drive-throughs within a half-mile of the BeltLine, a redevelopment project built on a former rail corridor that now functions as a walking and biking spine through the city. Planners said drive-through lanes were incompatible with the BeltLine's vision as a pedestrian-friendly economic engine.

Supporters of these bans say the policies are about correcting decades of planning decisions that favored cars at the expense of people. Drive-throughs, they argue, require curb cuts, stacking lanes, and wide turning areas that make sidewalks less pleasant and crossings more dangerous. They also consume land that could otherwise support housing, outdoor dining, or

small storefronts that generate foot traffic.

Critics counter that banning drive-throughs limits consumer choice and can hurt workers, seniors, and people with disabilities who rely on car access. Some business groups warn that restrictions may discourage investment or push development to neighboring jurisdictions with looser rules. **DIX**

ACCESS AND MOBILITY

10 takeaways from the Urban Bikeway Design Guide training series

As e-bikes explode in popularity and as more downtowns embrace cycling safety, transportation officials are improving bike networks nationwide. Cities are planning high-quality bikeways that rely on more than paint to protect their users.

The timely release of the third edition of NACTO's [Urban Bikeway Design Guide](#) provides a blueprint for implementing safe, connected, and equitable bike networks.

During the autumn of 2025, NACTO visited more than a dozen cities and trained hundreds of bike lane builders on new and updated content. Attendees heard about how cities can plan and implement bike networks that account for the many different types of people who may be using the street.

In addition to sharing expertise, NACTO says that trainers learned some important lessons from the people on the frontlines:

1. Transformative change starts with a bold vision for creating safer and healthier cities for all.

2. For successful bike network planning, community collaboration, and project development, cities need to have a clear, decision-making process.

3. Micromobility devices come in many sizes and shapes. Bikeway design should aim to serve a large and diverse group of people on bikes, cargo bikes, e-bikes, e-scooters, kick

scooters, skateboards, and other devices with small wheels.

4. All bikeways in a bike network should accommodate users of any age or ability — but not all bike lanes must be designed for the same volumes or mix of users.

5. Incremental change is meaningful. Balance what's possible with a need to build and design for the future.

6. Vehicle speed and volume management is part of bikeway design. Calming traffic through speed bumps or pinchpoints can make cycling more inviting.

7. Building bike infrastructure is an opportunity to address accessibility needs. Accessibility is required on all streets, and many bikeway projects offer an opportunity to provide for people with disabilities.

8. Design intersections for people. Create spaces where users are mutually aware of one another, visible, and generally predictable in their actions. This reduces crash rates and severity.

9. Make decisions that reduce complexity. Base design decisions on modal priorities, not the existing lane configurations.

10. Put pedestrians on a pedestal. Don't forget about pedestrians when designing bikeways and intersections. **DIX**

ROUND-UP

Celebrating the end of winter

Spring is on the way, and it's time to celebrate — with flowers. Across North America, spring blooms take center stage at a wide range of events that draw visitors and locals alike. There's everything from large-scale seasonal festivals (like tulip or cherry blossom festivals) and competitive flower shows (like the Philadelphia Flower Show), to local garden tours, plant and flower sales, window decorating, and more. Many of these events have run uninterrupted for 20 or more years, a testament to the ongoing appeal of these spring favorites.



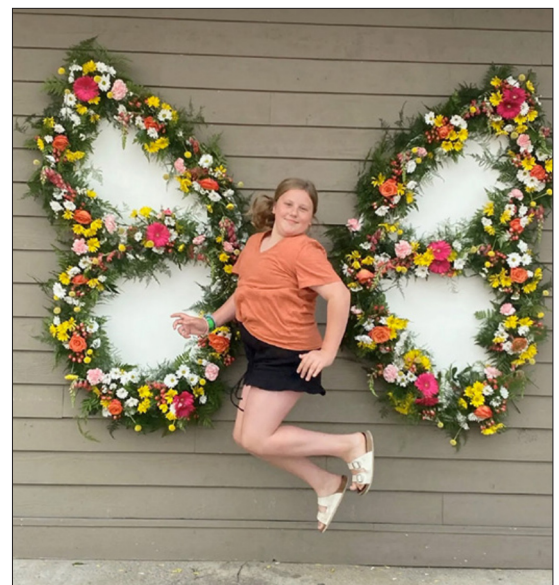
Now in its 25th year, the [Camas Mother's Day Plant and Garden Fair](#) continues to draw crowds to downtown Camas, WA. Held the day before Mother's Day, the fair takes over downtown with displays from dozens of vendors featuring plants, vegetable starts, trees, herbs, flowers, and garden decor, as well as live music and children's activities.

To get everyone, and their plants, to, from, and around the event, there is a plant holding area, a plant-wagon taxi service, free parking, and free shuttle service from nearby lots. The fair is sponsored by the Downtown Camas Association with support from local scout troops, and other volunteers.

In Annapolis, MD, [May Day](#) (May 1) sees the doors of homes and businesses in the Historic District adorned with baskets full of fresh cut flowers. What began as a Garden Club of Old Annapolis Towne beautification project in 1956 has grown into an annual tradition in which residents and business owners compete for ribbons and an invitation to the Garden Club's Annual Tea. Ribbons are pinned to winning baskets in several categories. Each basket must include a card bearing the name of the entrant so that roaming judges from the garden club know who to notify. Children are encouraged to make baskets and are judged in a special category.



Alpena, MI, also comes alive each spring with beautiful floral creations located throughout the downtown. The displays are created by local florist shops. Visitors are invited to tour the downtown, snap a photo in front of spectacular floral backdrops, create



their own bouquets, sip themed cocktails, and enjoy live music throughout the downtown.

The festival begins on Thursday evening with a Petal Pub Crawl. Participants can visit 10 downtown bars and taprooms and enjoy flower-themed cocktails. Now in its third year, Anne Gentry, executive director of the Alpena Downtown Development Authority says that the event has grown significantly each year.

An alternative to fresh cut flower displays is traditional spring window painting. While some downtown organizations hire professionals to brighten member's windows, others rely on talented volunteers.

In Glen Rock, NJ, 42 storefront windows were decorated by members of the Arts Council of Glen Rock. The art project started in 2021 and looks to have a bright future. "It's amazing how something as simple as seeing window drawings on a stroll through town can brighten people's moods, inspire goodwill, and more closely engage people with our local merchants," says Stacey Gilmartin, co-chair of the event. "Art is a unifying force."

The event receives financial support from **Blick Art Materials**, which contributes to hundreds of arts and community organizations across the country.



Greenwood, SC, celebrates the beginning of summer with its annual **Festival of Flowers**. While the event website boasts "something for everyone," the main event is a display of over 50 larger-than-life topiary sculptures placed in and around the square in Uptown Greenwood. Many favorites return year after year along with new pieces.

The topiaries are created and maintained by the city's Public Works and Horticultural Departments, along with a team of volunteers. The sculptures are created from steel frames covered in various plants like succulents, petunias, and palms. It's a year-long process, with crews building, planting, and caring for these living sculptures in the city's greenhouse. Over 70,000 people attend the month-long festival each year.

For many years the Downtown Frederick Partnership in Frederick, MD, drew shoppers with a high-impact, low-cost May Fest promotion. Participating merchants gave a single flower stem to each person entering their business. The flowers were purchased at wholesale prices and distributed at no cost.

"It's a nice customer appreciation-type event, in that people wander from store to store and basically build a bouquet of flowers," says Kara Norman, executive director, Downtown Frederick Partnership.

"People on the street usually feel fantastic ... everyone's got great big smiles. It also promotes a lot of interaction within the crowd, in that people are stopping other people, asking them, 'Where did you get that flower?'"

"Generally, that kind of a positive interaction really makes an event successful," she says. "It's an opportunity for people to talk with other people in a way that's not creepy. It's totally okay to approach someone with flowers and ask them all about that." **DIX**

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Businesses couple-up for Valentine's Day

To mark Valentine's Day and promote downtown shopping, the Greater Easton Development Partnership's Main Street Initiative, launched [Match Made in Easton](#).

The 10-day program has downtown businesses coupling-up to offer unique deals and promotions to customers who present receipts from their partner shops.

For example, a customer at Yellow Balloon Consignment can present their receipt at Mia & Maddie's for a free cupcake. And a customer bringing a Mia & Maddie's receipt to Yellow Balloon Consignment will receive 20 percent off any purchase.

"With Valentine's Day right around the corner, this idea came about for coupling up the businesses and really kind of creating these matches, showing our love for each other as businesses and organizations," says Communications Media Manager Jessica Ferrara.

The retail promotion complements the launch of another initiative, a community art project called "[Love, Easton](#)" that led to the creation of 28,127 hearts of all sizes and materials to fill windows and public spaces throughout Easton, PA, from January 9 to March 9.

Why 28,127 hearts? To represent each person living in Easton. Participants may hang hearts themselves and add them to the official count at the event website, or deliver them to Love, Easton drop boxes located around downtown.



The community art project also asks residents to submit their Easton love stories. The charming stories are shared online and via social media.

Business walks

Business First Walks in Eastvale, CA, are strengthening relationships with local businesses and fostering a thriving community. Through monthly visits, the economic development team connects directly with business owners. They provide goodie bags, informational brochures, and an opportunity to speak informally. The economic development team says that these walks offer valuable insights, allowing them to provide tailored support, address specific concerns, and celebrate successes. The face-to-face interactions, also reinforce the development team's commitment to an environment where business owners feel supported and heard, says the team.

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City fights billboards on aesthetic and safety grounds

The City of Santa Monica, CA, has spent decades cultivating a visually attractive, pedestrian-friendly community. A new proposal to bring digital billboards to the city's downtown threatens to undermine that progress, says the nonprofit Scenic America. The group cites the following research in its opposition to the billboards.

- Crash rates increase by 25 to 29 percent near digital billboards compared to control sites.
- In simulator and on-road studies, drivers exposed to digital billboards demonstrated slower reaction times, increased errors, and more risky behaviors such as tailgating and speeding.
- Fifty percent of drivers surveyed said they had been distracted by a billboard, and 22 percent reported being put in a dangerous situation because of it.
- Eye-tracking research shows that digital billboards capture and hold a driver's attention longer than static signs, pulling focus away from the road.

The nonprofit suggests that the most effective way to remove unwanted signs is with a process known as amortization in which local governments phase out billboards over time, typically five to seven years. Information on billboard laws, regulations, and important cases is available at scenic.org.

Local bank supports garage makeover

The Commercial Street Garage in Bellingham, WA, is often the first place that visitors encounter downtown. The multi-story cement structure is getting a colorful makeover thanks to a grant from the Washington State based Peoples Bank.

"Our goal is to infuse the garage's street-facing facade with color and creativity, turning it into a dynamic and welcoming space that reflects Bellingham's cultural identity," said Lindsey Payne Johnstone, executive director of the Downtown Bellingham Partnership. The grant will cover artist fees, design development, and installation materials.

The [Peoples Choice Impact Grant](#) awards up to \$10,000 to a Washington State nonprofit. The recipient is selected through public online voting.



Buy local bonus

The Buy Local Bonus program in San Luis Obispo, CA, was designed to encourage people to shop at local businesses on Black Friday and Small Business Saturday. The city purchases \$25 gift cards from participating businesses and gives them to shoppers who turn in \$100 worth of receipts from local businesses.

Each year, since its inception in 2020, the promotion has garnered involvement from nearly 150 local businesses and more than 4,000 shoppers in the community.

The city encourages participating businesses to market the event with a downloadable business toolkit which includes logos, social graphics, and poster art. DIX

