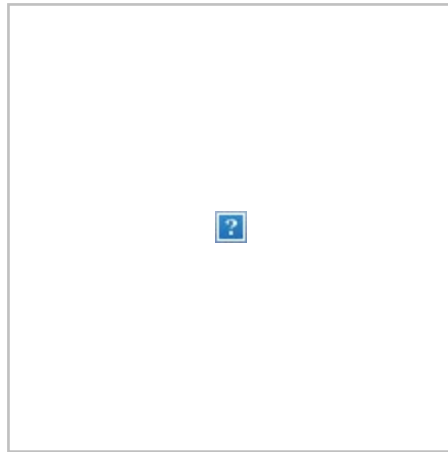


From: [Downtown Albuquerque News](#)
To: [News Tracking](#)
Subject: How Downtown Tucson revitalized itself / A multi-year campaign of institutions, money, pressure, and time
Date: Monday, April 8, 2024 6:59:20 AM



How Downtown Tucson revitalized itself

20 years ago, their city center was worse off than ours is today, locals who know both places report

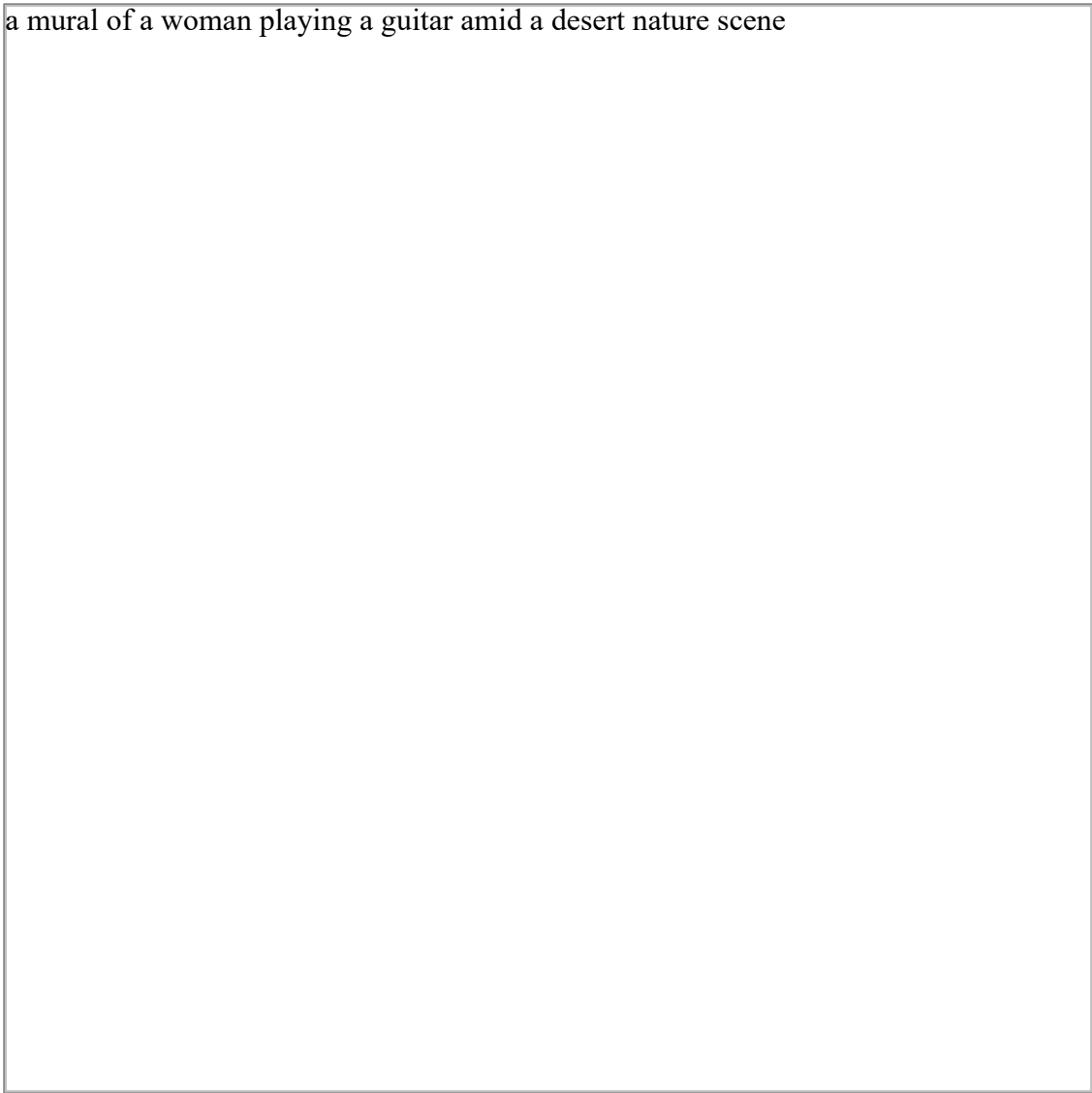
It is now cleaner, greener, and much busier than our Downtown. This is how they did it.

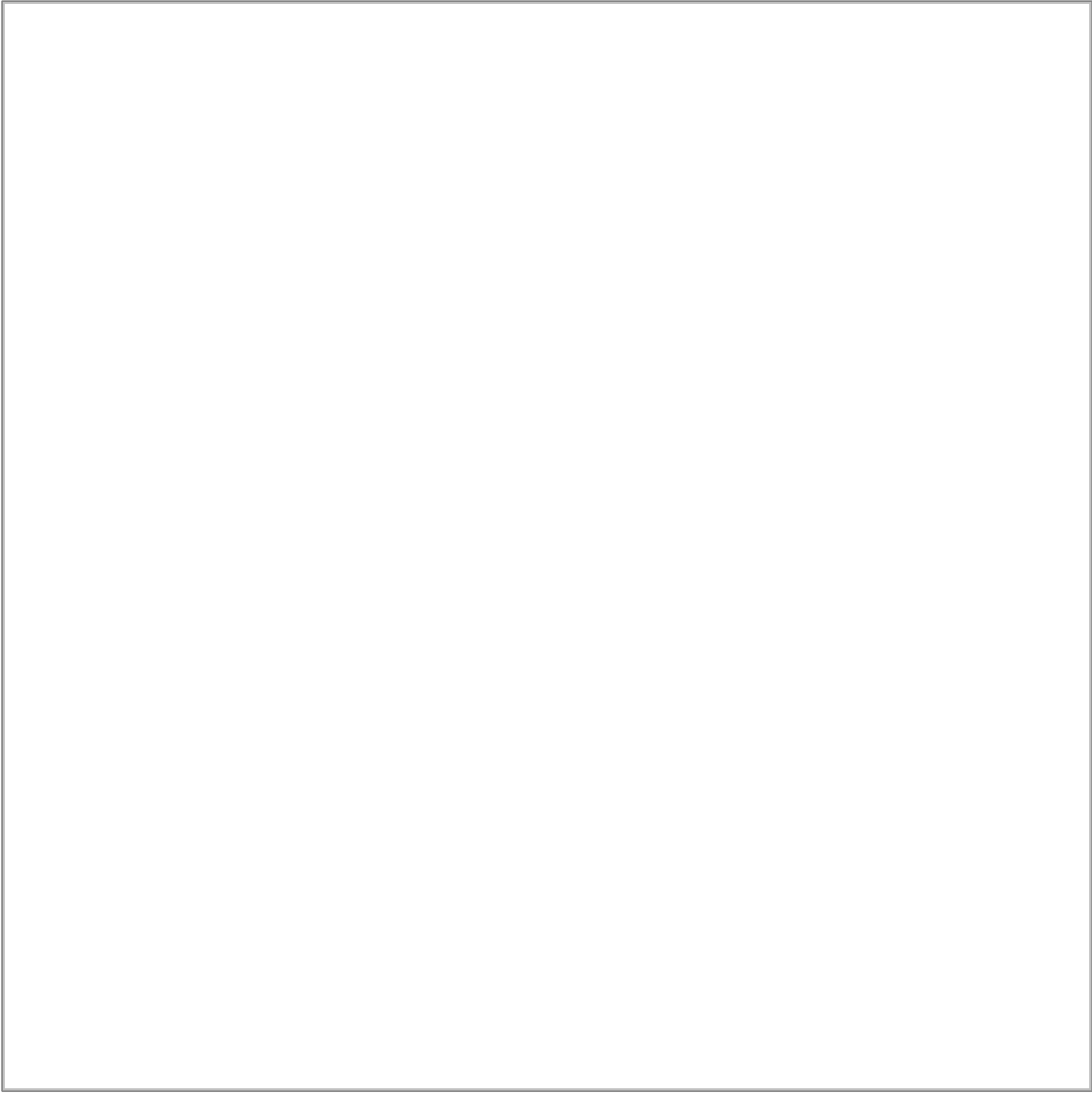
— PART ONE OF FOUR —

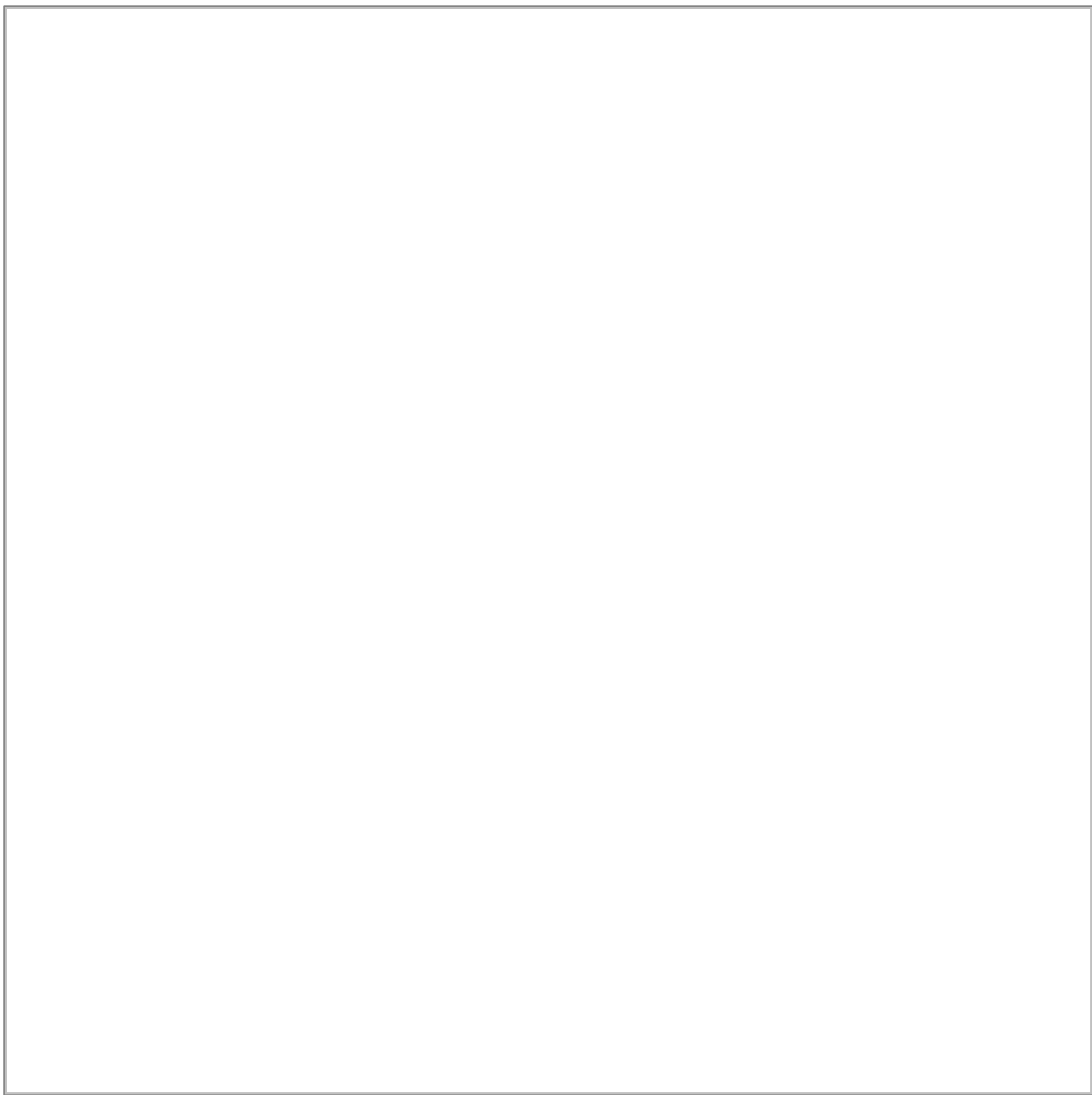
The corner of a brick building whose first story is dominated by big windows



a mural of a woman playing a guitar amid a desert nature scene







a planter with several types of cactus frames a Downtown apartment building



the building is a multi-story structure with a prominent central tower and several wings extending outwards. The building is surrounded by a lush garden with various plants and trees. In the foreground, there is a large, ornate planter box filled with several types of cacti, including tall, columnar cacti and smaller, rounded ones. The planter box is made of dark wood and has a decorative metal frame. The overall scene is a well-maintained urban landscape.

A three story brick hotel with spanish tile roof



Congress Street and the surrounding area, as seen in mid-March.

TUCSON — There are plenty of differences between this city and ours, but those who know both well are usually more struck by the very long list of uncanny similarities.

Albuquerque and Tucson are high-desert towns of about 550,000 flanked by mountains to the north and east. Overlay the map of one on top of the other, and you'll find that the university, the Air Force base, the freeways, the affluent areas, the less affluent areas, and the most prominent bike trails are all roughly in the same places. They even have a Rio Rancho equivalent - also to the northwest. The Tucson version of Nob Hill - a funky grouping of restaurants, bars, and one food co-op arranged along Fourth Avenue - is separated from Downtown by a railroad, and pedestrians must use special underpasses to get between the two places.

There are also echoes in the histories of both Downtowns.

"If you wanted a haircut, you came Downtown. All the department stores were Downtown," said Richard Oseran, who arrived from Phoenix for college in 1963 and later bought the Hotel Congress, then and now a prominent landmark. "It was the heart of the community. I got to experience that."

Then came suburbia. [A failed urban renewal project](#) put entire blocks to the wrecking ball and used the extra space for such things as wider roads. Stores left. A few marginal businesses and lots of boarded-up buildings remained.

"As we suburbanized, it became a ghost town," said Fletcher McCusker, a businessman whose grandfather moved to Tucson in 1930. "You wouldn't be caught dead here."

Todd Hanley, who was until recently the CEO of Hotel Congress, arrived in Downtown Tucson in 2003 and remembers it as "desolate at best" with "a smattering of bars that gave it a pseudo nightlife."

Insurance agent Edmund Marquez, meanwhile, is in a position to frame things in what for us are even more personal terms. His grandparents met at the Menaul School and he comes back to New Mexico frequently to visit. On a recent trip to Albuquerque, he was impressed by the indoor track at the convention center and confessed to tearing up in awe of the food at the Barelaz Coffee House.

He found the rest of our Downtown to be fairly underwhelming. And yet: "Downtown Albuquerque is nicer than it was in 1996 in Downtown Tucson," he said.

The turnaround

This is about where the similarities end. These days, Downtown Tucson is back in a big way. Their sidewalks are cleaner than ours. Vacancies on their equivalent of Central are few and far between and unlike the Gizmo or Kress buildings, do not stand out as massive sore thumbs. They have about as many sidewalk planters as we do, but theirs feature actual plants that are tended to daily. Trash cans are [Downtown-branded](#) with maps of the area and are designed so that nobody can reach into them. The branding continues overhead with [a series of colorful banners](#).

Quite simply, the place looks nice and well cared for, and locals and visitors alike have clearly noticed. Over the lunch hour of March 14, an average of 5.8 pedestrians per minute passed by a survey point near the corner of Stone and Congress. Identical surveys conducted at Fifth and Central in Albuquerque have shown a pedestrian count of less than half that pace - 2.7 per minute. The gender ratio of Tucson's pedestrians, meanwhile, was almost exactly 50/50 last month. At Fifth and Central,

it's 64 percent male even in the middle of a weekday.

To be sure, Tucson is not some sanitized Mayberry that has somehow avoided the problems of modern urban life. During last month's visit, there was plenty of evidence of homelessness. In front of the stately Fox Theater, a man could be found carrying on a dramatic screaming match with someone who wasn't there. At one point, a group of youths on bicycles went careening down the sidewalks, nearly taking out some pedestrians in the process.

But none of that has stopped Downtown Tucson from realizing dramatic success, and it has come largely within the last 15-20 years. Before that, Oseran said, it was common to read letters to the editor from people wondering why anybody would ever go Downtown.

"There hasn't been a letter like that in years," he said.

What exactly is behind all that progress is a complex matter. Plenty of people worked very hard. Many took serious risks. There was doubtless some element of right-people-right-place-right-time dumb luck.

And they had some built-in advantages. Arizona's per-capita annual income is \$6,000 higher than New Mexico's. The Tucson talent pool is educated by the likes of the University of Arizona, which is bigger than UNM and manages to graduate a higher percentage of students who enroll. Those graduates also go on to make significantly more money.

But Tucson also stacked the deck in favor of Downtown revitalization with three textbook maneuvers that have also been used successfully by cities - both rich and poor - around the country.

1. Public investment that leads to private investment: Most prominently, this took the form of a 3.9-mile streetcar line that connects Downtown to the University of Arizona, [raising demand](#) for apartments, offices, and retail space along its corridor. The system debuted in 2014.
2. Surgical redevelopment strikes: Since 2012, a tax increment finance (TIF) district has funneled grants to dozens of public-private partnerships around the Downtown area. The basic idea is to find entrepreneurs looking to do something that they can just about but not quite finance, then push it over the edge into reality.
3. Clean, green, and safe: Downtown property owners pay what is effectively a small extra property tax and in return get extremely regular cleaning, maintenance of things like planters, on-call 24/7 security with quick response

times, and a convenient political organization that can advocate for their needs. Called the Downtown Tucson Partnership, it is a classic example of a business improvement district (BID).

"It's a three-legged stool," Hanley said of the Tucson revitalization agenda. "It's the BID, it's the TIF, it's the public investment."

The conversation around Downtown revitalization in Albuquerque has for years been shot through with the idea that maybe - just maybe - the area will somehow stumble into the kind of success it enjoyed in the post-World War II good old days. Perhaps if the right chefs open the right restaurants, if the right businesses just hang on for long enough, if the cops try a little bit harder, if homelessness lets up a bit, if some one-off beautification initiative really takes hold, or if some unforeseen evolution in the commercial landscape is visited upon us, then perhaps the city center will just revitalize itself.

But that is not, by and large, how these things work in the real world. The Tucson experience - a combination of sustained public investment over many years plus property owners forming what is essentially a hyper-local government to provide extra-but-essential services - is far, far more common. One primes the pump and solves problems like vacant buildings while the other ensures that the downtown area looks good, feels safe, and has some capacity to set its own agenda.

In some respects, Tucson may have been lucky, but at the same time, it has shown that Downtown revitalization is not mainly a game of luck. It is a game of institutions, money, pressure, and time. And they are winning.

The spring of 2024 is an opportune time to discuss Tucson in detail because Albuquerque is presently beginning to copy two of its three main strategies and may well take the plunge on the third. Consider:

1. The equivalent of Tucson's streetcar is arguably our Rail Trail, an eight-mile Greater Downtown loop and linear park that Mayor Tim Keller and city metropolitan redevelopment officials believe will catalyze further knock-on development, just as similar projects have elsewhere ([DAN, 1/27/22](#)). And while a bit removed from the Downtown core, the Rail Yards also arguably falls into the category of large public investment with the potential to stimulate further development.
2. A TIF district for Downtown (and, separately, other parts of the city) is in the works, having been enabled by [legislation passed last year](#) in Santa Fe and shepherded through the process with a lot of help from Albuquerque officials.
3. A BID is actively under discussion, though as of this writing, it is a vastly more

uncertain prospect than the other items above.

Today, Downtown Albuquerque News begins an in-depth four-part series on what made the Tucson renaissance tick. Tomorrow, we'll dive into the TIF district and show how it remade the physical face of their city center. Next week, we'll take a look at how their BID keeps things clean, green, and safe, and how it helps Downtown organize itself into a force to be reckoned with.

The Tucson experience is especially instructive because some of the people most responsible for their success are quite familiar with Albuquerque and believe that we too can turn things around.

"I root for New Mexico. I pray for New Mexico," said Marquez, a board member of Tucson's TIF district. "We're very much alike. We're cousins."

But at the same time, they are under no illusions about the challenges we face and how far they have raced ahead of us in recent years.

"When you go to Albuquerque, you go to the museum, you ride the tram, and you go to Santa Fe," said McCusker, another TIF board member. "In Tucson, you go Downtown."

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