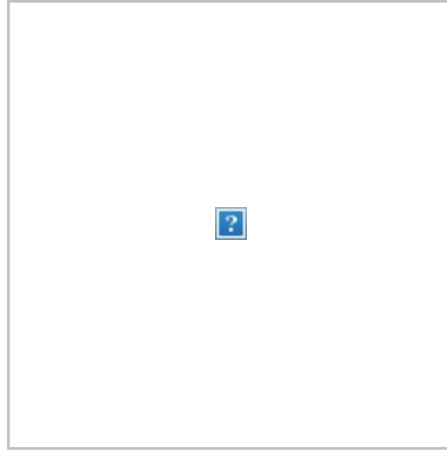


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Subject: Building Downtown Tucson's brain: How the business improvement district there gives the city center a voice and a forum to solve its own problems
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Building Downtown Tucson's brain

How the business improvement district there gives the city center a voice and a forum to solve its own problems

Though somewhat behind the scenes, this organizing is critical to the success of downtown areas across the country, experts say

Cities don't generally step in to replicate what BID's do, and we might not want them to anyway

— PART FOUR OF FOUR —



The board of the Downtown Tucson Partnership, a business improvement district, includes Downtown residents, the executive director of a children's museum, a middle school principal, a vice president of a credit union, a trial attorney, and representatives of the city manager, Tucson Police Department, Tucson Electric Power, and the University of Arizona. JJ Snyder Photography

TUCSON — There was plenty of routine business on the agenda March 14 when the board of the Downtown Tucson Partnership gathered in the airy conference room of a historic courthouse for its regular meeting. Someone gave a presentation on an effort to beautify and generally "activate" a section of El Presidio, a historic district on the edge of the Downtown core. CEO Kathleen Eriksen shared the news that the DTP had won an award for a marketing campaign. There was also some discussion of street banners and [a program meant to turn vacant storefront windows into giant attractive Downtown-boosting advertisements](#). And someone previewed an event called the [Haiku Hike](#), in which Tucsonans are encouraged to visit 20 planters

around the city center in which poems are posted, having been selected from over 2,000 submissions.

Toward the end of the meeting, Board Chair Crystal Moore rose to give an update on an effort near and dear to her heart and critical to her business. Speeding, street racing, and generally noisy vehicles, it seems, have become a problem in Tucson. Moore, who owns or administers five Downtown buildings that include many apartments, reported that residents feel as though they are being "swarmed by piranhas." Some people have been hit.

When someone speeds down the street, they don't think about the reality that "there's 500 people living above," she said.

In response to this situation, Moore and the Downtown Tucson Partnership had in recent weeks convened a task force that includes representatives from the city, the police, the tax increment finance district ([DAN, 4/9/24](#)), and the city councilor who represents much of the Downtown. The group has already met and is brainstorming solutions, which they are set to present at the June board meeting.

With the DTP on board, Moore likes her chances of seeing this problem solved in the coming months - not years.

"They really facilitated the necessary involvement of the entities that could come together and come up with a solution," she said. "This task force would not have been created if not for the partnership."

By Tucson standards, this is just another relatively mundane day at the office. Downtown has a problem affecting its ability to do business and keep visitors and locals in one piece, so an established, connected, and organized group dedicated to making Downtown better puts the right heads together and tries to sort things out.

By Downtown Albuquerque standards, on the other hand, this is a minor miracle.

To be sure, lots of people here work on Downtown in one way or another. Mayor Tim Keller lives in the Greater Downtown area, spends a fair bit of time on often very granular Downtown matters ([DAN, 7/10/23](#)), and employs [a special Downtown liaison](#). City Councilor Joaquín Baca lives in the Downtown core and is presently working on a program to spruce up Central (more on that soon). There is also the Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency, which works across the city but pays close attention to the city center. Downtown ABQ MainStreet runs the Downtown Growers' Market, is thoroughly involved with ABQ Artwalk, and organizes such

events as a monthly bar and brewery crawl. There is also the volunteer-led ABQCore Neighborhood Association.

Nowhere on that list, however, is an entity with the staff, time, and budget to pull off the sort of political organizing that the Downtown Tucson Partnership does on a regular basis. It is not clear how or whether Albuquerque's equivalent of Crystal Moore could get that same traffic safety task force set up, much less in a quick and efficient manner that would leave her feeling optimistic about its chances of success.

Nothing, it seems, beats a hyperlocal quasi-governmental organization with a decent budget, competent staff, a board made up of Downtown boosters, and a mandate to make things in the city center as good as they can be.

One voice

Much of what business improvement districts like the Downtown Tucson Partnership do is highly visible, physical, and easy to account for. They clean stuff, plant flowers, put up banners, and engage in a long series of norm-setting conversations with homeless people. But arguably just as important is their role as a place where downtown areas come to talk about their problems, scratch out something like a consensus agenda, and pursue it ([DAN, 4/15/24](#)).

"We act as the table that everyone sits around," partnership CEO Kathleen Eriksen said.

That is not to say that some other entity couldn't get the job done. But across the United States, as a general rule, they don't.

"To effect district-scale change you have to have collective power and vision," said [Philip Barash](#), an urban planner who is based partly in Santa Fe and serves on the board of the [International Downtown Association](#). "The BID, at a scale of a commercial downtown, is, in my opinion, the most effective, the most readily available tool ... it's hard to imagine a grassroots community effort [leading] the scale of change that we're talking about."

They are nevertheless very difficult to pull off, not least because such organizations are typically funded by an extra property tax, [as detailed yesterday](#).

In Albuquerque today and once upon a time in Tucson, that prospect has brought up some pointed questions: Why can't the city just do what a BID would do? Do we not pay enough taxes, for example, to have a Downtown where people can open a business without also having to manage the more harrowing effects of homelessness

and drug-induced psychosis? Failing that, is it too much to ask for the police to show up in less than 10 minutes? And given how a revitalized Downtown would goose the tax base - and thus local government's finances - why can't local government step in and be the one to put the plants in the planters (and keep them there)?

The answers seem to come down to practical political realities. There was a time, still barely in the living memory of some, when Downtown was just about all there was to Albuquerque, Tucson, and plenty of other similar cities. But over the decades, that size ratio to the rest of the city has not generally worked in favor of the political power of downtown areas. These days, even Greater Downtown Albuquerque - the core, Old Town, and surrounding neighborhoods - makes up just 3 percent of Albuquerque's footprint. It is represented by one of nine city councilors, and he also covers neighborhoods up to Montañito, near the Sunport, and across the river.

In that context, in other words, getting Downtown the attention and money most Downtown boosters think it needs is often a fight - one we frequently lose ([DAN, 4/28/23](#)). It's going to be very difficult to get things like lightning-quick police response unless the rest of the city can get them as well.

"You're part of a big city," said Terry Brunner, the director of the Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency. "The city has limited resources. There's only so much they can put behind specific efforts."

There is also the matter of how to arrive at that consensus agenda - some idea of what Downtown needs and wants. One option is for various city officials to function as Downtown's brain by putting out feelers, trying to get a sense of the situation, and implementing an agenda. But there's a good chance that if Downtown can build its own brain, it will come up with a product that is closer to the mark.

"A BID represents the collective interests of a district. It is in the best position to identify its strongest assets, to highlight its needs, and to direct on-the-ground long-term investment," Barash said.

The Keller administration seems to agree, at least in part: "We do the best we can to tune our services into the local needs, but it's always helpful when we get a lot of good input from the folks on the ground who are impacted by these things," Brunner said. "We're able to respond in a more thoughtful, considerate way."

Another problem with relying on City Hall is that the person in charge will not be there forever and the next one may have different ideas.

"In a way, BIDs are apolitical," Barash said. "They outlast administrations."

The Downtown agenda - whatever that is - thus has some "sustainability and duration," Brunner added.

Past and future?

Whether a business improvement district could be formed in Albuquerque remains an open question. Downtown once had such an organization, but it dissolved about a decade ago amid [a wave of discord and legal action](#). Jim Long, the owner of the Albuquerque Plaza Building and thus the district's largest ratepayer, was particularly dissatisfied with the BID and sought its dissolution in court.

But within the last year or so, the idea has gotten something of a jumpstart thanks to the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance. The group's day-to-day work mainly involves convincing companies to expand in or relocate to Albuquerque, but it believes that sales job will be easier with a vibrant Downtown to show off, so it has been looking into BIDs across the country and attempting to start conversations with the property owners who would ultimately have to make the call.

Long is still one of those key property owners. He told DAN in February that despite all the legal action earlier in this century, he has always supported a "properly organized" BID.

"I think the dialogue is there," he said, complimenting in particular the work of a consultant brought in by AREA. "We all have to get together and get on the same page."

The three-legged stool

There was a time not long ago in Tucson when their Downtown was in worse shape than ours is in today, a subject detailed in part one of this series ([DAN, 4/8/24](#)). They turned things around with the three-pronged strategy of serious public investment (mainly in the form of a streetcar), surgical redevelopment strikes conducted through a tax increment financing district (TIF), and a BID.

Albuquerque is presently maneuvering to copy all three of those strategies. City planners expect the Rail Trail to bring the same sort of knock-on investment that the Tucson streetcar inspired. A TIF looks set to be formed next year.

But the BID remains a tenuous prospect: There are discussions happening, but Downtown property owners have not yet taken the first legal steps to form one. And until they do, the experts interviewed for this series caution that we shouldn't expect

too much in the way of Downtown revitalization. Their argument is essentially that a collection of organs without a brain just isn't going to function very well.

"You need an armature. You need a crown for all those jewels," Barash said. Even with a TIF pursuing an array of individual projects, "you'd have a shot, but it's a bit of a shot in the dark."

Fletcher McCusker, the chair of the Tucson TIF, agrees: "The TIF is going to build a building," he said. But without an organization to keep things clean, the area "would be full of litter. It would be full of homeless people."

Cities play a key part in the success of BIDs by consulting with them frequently and (often) contributing money as the major downtown property owners they usually are, but it is a supporting role.

That's as it should be, argues Todd Hanley, a board member of the Downtown Tucson Partnership.

Downtowns need "an entity that is more nimble and more functional," he said. You can throw a lot of money and resources at a problem like Downtown revitalization, but it is unlikely to work without very local and very capable leadership.

"It's literally business and anthropology 101," he said, adding that "you cannot rely upon the government to make your downtown a success."

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