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Recent business-focused efforts could help make Downtown ABQ 'cooler,' city leaders say



Image: Albuquerque Business First

Danielle Casey is the president and CEO of the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance, an economic development-focused organization that's been helping lead Downtown Business Improvement District efforts.

LIZ LOPEZ PHOTOGRAPHY



By [Jacob Maranda](#) – Senior Reporter, Albuquerque Business First
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Businesses want Downtown Albuquerque to be "cooler."

At least that's what Danielle Casey, president and CEO of the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance, or AREA, heard from the leaders of technology-focused companies in the Duke City more than three years ago, back in 2021.

That's when Casey, with AREA, put together what she described as a "tech and innovation advisory council" to discuss the specific needs of companies in that industry cluster.

Economic revitalization Downtown – making it "cooler" – quickly came up as the No. 1 focus area of the council, said Charles Rath, the co-founder and CEO of data and analytics firm RS21, who chaired the council.

Downtown revitalization, Rath said, would help recruit and retain the type of employees RS21 and other tech firms typically look for. He said the company's employees "crave" a place where they can work, live and play all in the same area.

Right now, Rath said Albuquerque's Downtown is struggling to offer that. RS21 is headquartered within the Occidental Life Building, a historic Downtown building at the corner of Gold Avenue and Third Street, less than a block south of Central Avenue.

"We believe that the tech economy and Downtown are inextricably linked," he said.

That linkage, Rath added, means a "fledgling" Downtown impacts Albuquerque's ability to attract "the type of talent it needs to grow," in sectors besides just technology.



The Occidental Life Building in Downtown Albuquerque, located on the northwest corner of Gold Avenue and Third Street. It hosts companies like RS21, New Mexico Community Capital and Electric Playhouse.

BILL TONDREAU

Hearing that from Rath and other tech leaders in Albuquerque was an eye-opening moment for AREA, Casey, its president and CEO, said. It made the nonprofit, which focuses on economic diversification and expansion throughout the greater Albuquerque region, realize Downtown redevelopment should be a priority effort in its strategy.

Casey said she invited Nancy Hormann, who had helped lead downtown redevelopment efforts in Mesa, Arizona and dozens of other cities across the country, to talk with Albuquerque's Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency (MRA) in mid-2022 about one particular revitalization strategy, what's typically called a Business Improvement District.

City leaders on Wednesday [discussed ongoing efforts to form a Business Improvement District](#), or BID, in Downtown Albuquerque. There are currently more than two dozen property owners Downtown who have supported the BID idea, said Bill Keleher, one such property owner helping lead organizing efforts.

Leading up to Wednesday's announcement, and off the back of Hormann's meeting with Albuquerque's Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency, Casey said AREA held private focus groups and discussions to educate people on the ins-and-outs of BIDs.

"There was a big lack of understanding on how statute works and the requirements," Casey said. "And, truthfully, there are a lot of really good best practices and a lot of

bad practices."

Those private sessions included representatives from cities with existing downtown-focused groups, like Las Cruces, which has an organization called [Las Cruces Community Partners LLC](#). Guests from out-of-state cities like Memphis and Gilbert, Arizona, also traveled to Albuquerque for a quarterly luncheon AREA held in March 2023.

Although BIDs can follow different structures, broadly, a BID functions as a collaborative entity between many property owners in a specific area. Those owners agree to collectively finance enhanced services "above and beyond" what a city provides, Casey said.

It's important, she added, to clearly decide what sort of services property owners in the BID pay into, whether that's cleanliness and safety throughout the district or marketing help. Those services decide the structure of BID – if it's cleanliness and safety, for instance, property owners' fees could be calculated based on the "linear" square footage their property occupies, but if it's marketing, for instance, total square footage might offer a better calculation method.

Multiple methods of calculation can be combined, too, Casey said. BIDs can also be updated over time to change their structures or expand or restrict their boundaries.

Ultimately, the purpose of Albuquerque's Downtown BID, in particular, is to "give rights ... back to commercial interests" Downtown, said Terry Brunner, MRA director.

BIDs that work closely with local governments are usually more successful than BIDs that function without government partnership, Casey added.

With Albuquerque's Downtown BID, once a "critical mass" of property owners support the idea, those owners would pen an agreement and petition the Albuquerque City Council to form the BID. A majority of Downtown property owners are required to file the petition, Casey said.

A BID study would follow City Council approval. The study would help determine the boundaries of the BID and its parameters, including fee structure.

The City would then have to accept the study and ultimately create the district.

And although the tech-focused advisory council initially spurred AREA's focus on Downtown revitalization, other business leaders outside the tech sector in the city see big benefits from Downtown redevelopment, too.

One of those is Doug Majewski, the principal architect and CEO of Hartman + Majewski Design Group. Majewski chairs the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce's Downtown Transformation committee.

Although his firm is headquartered in Albuquerque's Nob Hill neighborhood, at 120 Vassar Drive SE, Majewski said he's "passionate" about the city's Downtown.

"As a business community, we travel to try to find the best models," he said. "I know how important Downtown is not just to our whole city but to our whole state.

"I know that great cities have great downtowns," Majewski continued.



Doug Majewski is the principal architect and CEO of Hartman + Majewski Design Group, based at 120 Vassar Dr. SE, Suite 100.

JESSICA ROYBAL

When businesspeople come to Albuquerque, they look at the city's Downtown and compare it to other places, Majewski said. Originally from Chicago, he said he came to Albuquerque over 25 years ago.

While Majewski floated many ideas for how to help revitalize Downtown Albuquerque – from adding more residential units to expanding arts and culture venues to even planting more trees to help keep the area cool – he acknowledged there isn't "one magic silver bullet" to develop the neighborhood.

Another Downtown initiative proposed by City leaders Wednesday, called a Tax Increment Financing district, or TIF, could contribute to several Downtown

revitalization opportunities, Majewski added.

"It's a lot of things," he said about Downtown efforts. "I like the fact that from this TIF you can start to do both. You don't have to bite off the whole elephant; you can actually do some incremental things that will make a positive impact."