

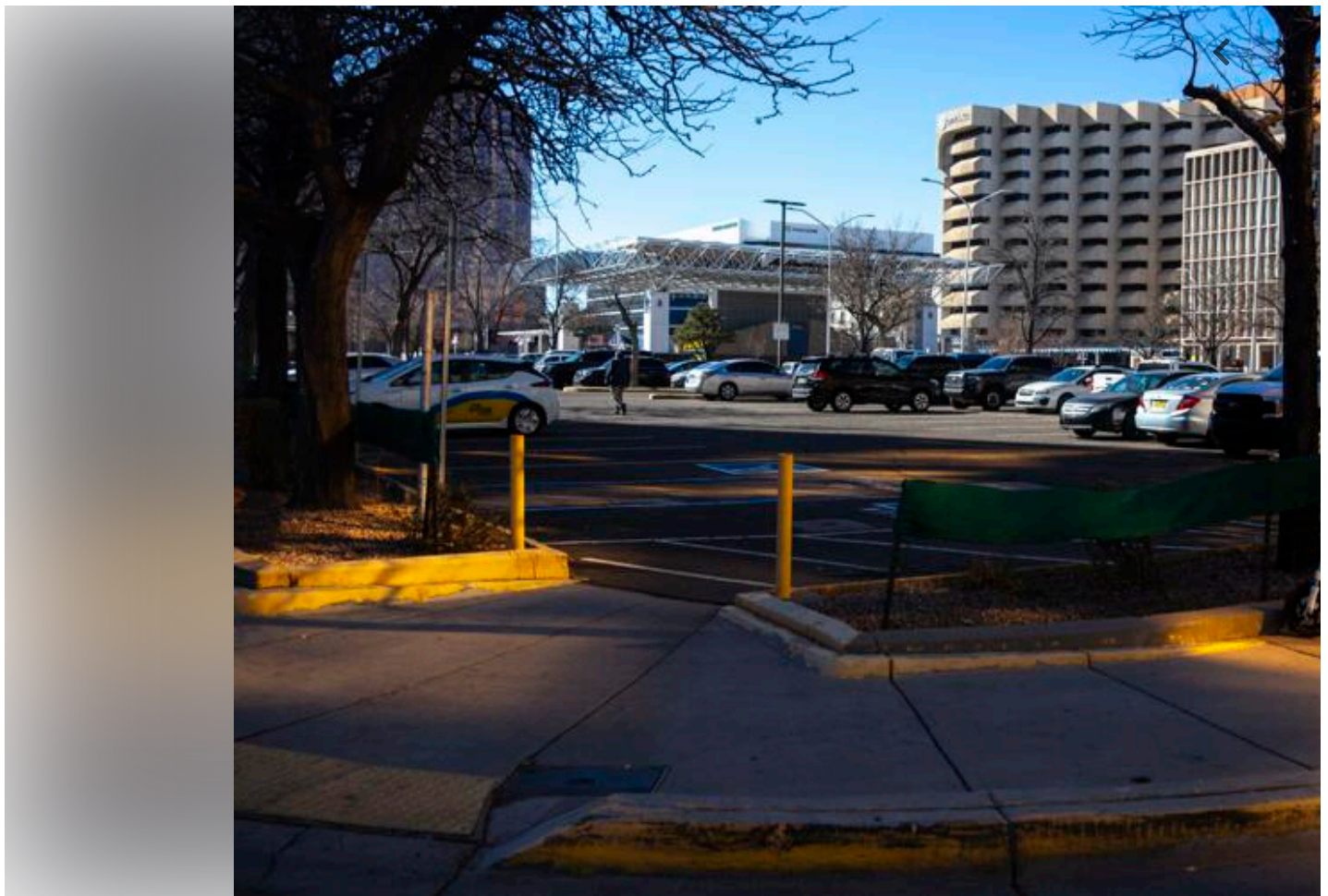
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FEATURED

Mayor: Free land for any NM university that helps revitalize Downtown ABQ

By Megan Gleason / Assistant Business Editor
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A parking lot near Civic Plaza that near Third and Fourth streets that the mayor said he will give away to a university.

Jon Austria / Journal

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If a New Mexico university is willing to work with the city of Albuquerque to revamp Downtown, Mayor Tim Keller is willing to hand over land in the heart of the city, free of charge.

Keller made the commitment last week at an Economic Forum meeting in Old Town. He referenced the University of New Mexico specifically but said the offer is open to any local higher education institution willing to take it.

“I’ve told UNM, that piece of land — it’s yours,” the mayor said, referencing a parking lot across from the Convention Center between Third and Fourth streets that the city has dubbed the “Civic Plaza lot.”

UNM is in talks with the city about “the possibilities for an expanded UNM presence” Downtown, according to Teresa Costantinidis, executive vice president for finance and administration at UNM. There are not yet specifics or a timeline for the potential project, she said.

“If a Downtown presence can contribute to invigorating the area, it not only benefits the heart of Albuquerque but also enhances the vitality and economic growth of the entire state of New Mexico,” she said via email.

Keller compared Albuquerque to Phoenix, where Arizona State University “helped resuscitate and rebuild Phoenix.” The Mayor’s Office and officials from UNM have visited Downtown Phoenix together, according to Costantinidis.

“This is going to take many more years,” Keller said. “But I’m committed to it.”

The out-of-state comparison was reminiscent of thoughts voiced at a September quarterly luncheon for the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance, a 501©(3) that works to grow the economy of the greater Albuquerque region.

Entrepreneur Larry Pobuda said on the September panel that when he came to Arizona in 2005, the state didn’t have a very dynamic economy. What began the “transformation of Downtown,” he said, was when ASU and the University of Arizona started moving facilities Downtown, like a University of Arizona medical center and ASU’s law school.

“You’ve got the University of New Mexico,” said Pobuda, executive vice president and general manager of Opus Development Company. “There’s no reason why they can’t be a billion-dollar research university. See what happens when you put the labs in for them.”

How would it work?

Over the past 10 years, the city has put out several requests for proposals and “never found the right prospect,” said Terry Brunner, the mayor’s chief of staff and interim director of the Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency.

So, after visiting Phoenix and being “really impressed with what they did,” the city wants to work with a New Mexico university for the benefit of both Albuquerque and the educational institution, Brunner said. He said the lot, which is a couple of acres, could mimic Arizona’s concept and host university facilities, parking lots, even a hotel.

“What we learned in and have seen in other municipalities in the West is it’s not uncommon to have a university purpose and a private sector purpose on the same site or in the same building,” he said. “So we should really explore all the options that are out there and not limit ourselves to traditional ways of thinking about university and higher education buildings.”

The university would still need to find the money to develop the site, said Danielle Casey, president and CEO of AREA. But, she said, it’s great that “the city is a willing and excited partner.”

“It’s exciting times here when we’re thinking about the possibilities of these big concepts,” Casey said, “and hopefully putting pen to paper and figuring out, not just conceptually, but how do we make it happen?”

And, Brunner added, New Mexico has even better incentives than Phoenix for development, like its tax abatement program or the MRA that can contribute land to developers, getting around the state’s anti-donation clause.



Terry Brunner

Source: City of Albuquerque

Keller prefaced his idea last week by cautioning that it “needs more work.” He said his vision was spurred by his predecessor, Republican Richard Berry, who wanted to build “the tallest building in the state” on the piece of land across from the Convention Center but lacked adequate financing to do so.



Danielle Casey

Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Journal

Brunner said the plan would require a change in mindset. The expansion of a university like UNM into Downtown would raise questions about transportation, resources and campus amenities.

And, Brunner asked, can universities lease out properties? Can they rehab vacant properties? These are things that still need to be worked out, he said.

“Those are all uses that could be interesting to a university and serve the purpose of not only helping that university but redeveloping your Downtown,” he said.

UNM already has a presence Downtown, Costantinidis pointed out, with its UNM Rainforest Innovations, a nonprofit organization owned by UNM’s Board of Regents focused on innovation and economic development. She said an expanded partnership with the city, UNM and Central New Mexico Community College could lead to “a dynamic hub of education, innovation and community engagement.”

“We look forward to continuing these discussions and working collaboratively to explore how UNM can play a meaningful role in Albuquerque’s Downtown revitalization,” Costantinidis said.

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