



A car-free section of Broadway in New York City, where efforts to expand bike infrastructure and car-free space are expanding. *Photographer: Liu Yanan/Xinhua via Getty Images*

CityLab | Transportation

## As Downtowns Struggle, Businesses Learn to Love Bike Lanes

From Manhattan to San Francisco, the need to rethink the urban core is encouraging business improvement districts to change their tune on prioritizing cars.

By John Surico

July 6, 2023 at 4:00 AM PDT

In early March, New York City Mayor Eric Adams stood on a stretch of Broadway just above West 25th Street to present Broadway Vision, his administration's plan to transform the famous corridor with bike lanes, low-traffic shared streets and plazas closed to cars.

The mayor brushed off concerns that the changes would snarl traffic. "There's a culture shift that must take place in this city," Adams said. "The number of pedestrians that walk clearly outnumber the number of drivers."



Looking on next to Adams was James Mettham, president of the Flatiron NoMad Partnership. That's the business improvement district, or BID, that represents some of the largest developers and property holders on Broadway, including countless eateries and bars.

The effects of the plan, whose latest phase in Midtown finished work in late June, can be easily seen. On a bustling spring afternoon, Mettham led a tour of the new streetscape. Every new outdoor table was taken. Cyclists flew down a new two-way "bike boulevard." And NoMad Piazza – a pop-up plaza that was among the earliest pandemic-era outdoor dining experiments – looked more like Milan than Manhattan.

"Before 2020, we were talking about one shared street," Mettham said. "Now we have six."



Broadway and 25th Street after pedestrian-oriented roadway revisions. *Source: New York City Department of Transportation*

Getting support from business groups for these kinds of street changes is something of a role reversal. BIDs emerged in the 1970s and '80s, when US cities, wracked by crime and fiscal woes, struggled to retain downtown retailers and employers. By collecting fees from property owners within the district, BIDs aimed to fill in gaps, funding supplementary services like street cleaning, security, landscaping and marketing. Historically, BIDs also typically favored access for cars, prioritizing suburban

commuters and visitors with amenities like parking discounts and public lots. Indeed, the built environment of the American downtown – a “precarious urban monoculture” optimized for white-collar work – is one that these groups helped cement into being.

So it’s striking to see the same groups now bang the gong for bike lanes, vehicle bans and pedestrian-focused facelifts. Reeling from the rise of remote work and the ongoing effects of the Covid pandemic, business groups are embracing policies and practices they long shunned.

In New York City – which has 76 BIDS, the most of any US city – the effort to trim traffic lanes and make Park Avenue look like a linear park has been led by the business group there, the Grand Central Partnership. Downtown Brooklyn’s pedestrian-priority plan came from a BID. And some of the most popular Open Streets, the pandemic-era program that restricts traffic on certain streets for other activities, are business-focused, like 5th Ave in Park Slope and parts of Chinatown.

Outside of New York City, business groups have advocated for expanding bicycling and walking infrastructure at the expense of vehicles in San Diego, Washington, DC, and elsewhere.

Not all BIDS have changed their tune: In Toronto, for example – the birthplace of business improvement associations – a business group battled a proposed protected bike lane in 2019; in the Bronx, a local BID is trying to kill a busway plan. (This despite an abundance of research showing how bike infrastructure boosts the bottom line of adjacent retailers.) BIDS have also drawn controversy: Critics say that these groups exert too much influence over public space, and their reliance on private security and surveillance has raised equity concerns. By absorbing some city responsibilities, some argue BIDS let cities off the hook. And BIDS remain largely out of the picture in smaller cities, residential areas and low-income communities, in particular.

But in many major cities, these groups are powerful local players. The paradigm shift that’s now underway could pay big dividends for walkability boosters – and be crucial to the survival of the urban core.

### **A Post-Pandemic Reckoning**

In explaining his group’s role, Downtown SF Partnership deputy director Claude Imbault described Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, fit for BIDS.

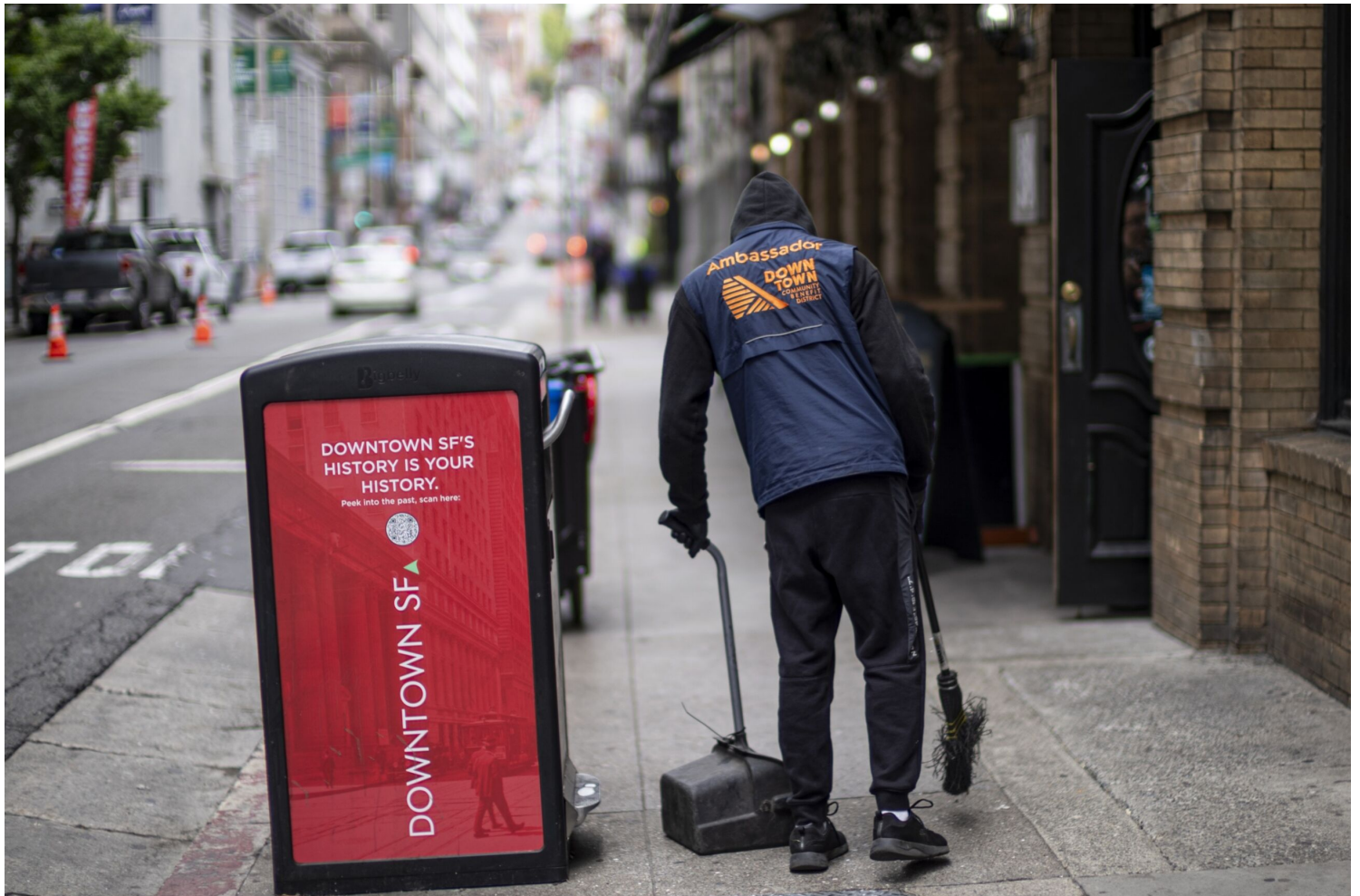
At the base of the pyramid are public safety and cleaning – the priorities that led business owners to organize the first improvement groups. Above that are placemaking and economic development, which are interconnected, Imbault said. “What we’re saying is that the built environment has a place in downtown’s economic recovery.”

At the very top of Imbault’s pyramid is advocacy – a job that, in San Francisco, is demanding special attention. Since the pandemic, the city’s business district has become a poster child for urban existential dread. Its office vacancy rate recently hit a new record high. The BART rail system’s



ridership remains frozen at a third of what it was in 2019. And a perceived sense of insecurity thanks to fewer people on the streets of the Financial District isn't helping.

“We’re struggling, and the reality is that there’s a media ecosystem reinforcing a message that it’s scary to come downtown,” said Imbault. “[Businesses] are just saying, ‘You guys, we need your help.’”



A Downtown SF worker cleans the street in San Francisco. The city's Financial District has been hard hit by tech industry layoffs and the rise of remote work. *Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg*

The Partnership's response, or at least part of it, is the Public Realm Action Plan. Made in conjunction with SITELAB, a design firm, the plan's goal is simple: Get more people on the street.

Read More: [A Rescue Plan for San Francisco's Half-Empty Downtown](#)

In surveys, residents voiced support for active frontages, more greenery and outdoor seating. Like many US business districts, downtown San Francisco is largely a landscape of modernist office buildings and sparse plazas, from an era when one did little else but work there. That worked out fine until relatively recently, said Laura Crescimano, a co-founder of SITELAB. “Ten years ago, there wasn't

even a conversation,” she said. “The demand for office space was so intense that, in a way, it meant that there wasn’t attention.”

Right now, businesses are desperate for immediate aid, so the BID is trying to fill idled streets with events – a South Asian night market, a Bastille Day-themed promotion (with free berets) and a series of pop-up drag shows. The idea, Crescimano said, is to “get some visible things out in the public to give a cue that things are changing, and that it’s not all bad.”

Public space pilots explore bigger changes to the neighborhood fabric. The Battery Bridge, a quiet slip street, became a plaza for live performances, while local traffic restrictions will soon be tested on the Landing at Leidesdorff, a set of tight alleyways. A larger curbside plan will bring parklets and more bike parking and bike lanes.

In a sense, the changes seek to restore the district’s original mix of uses. “Downtown was designed before the car,” Crescimano said. “It is an incredibly walkable grid. There’s high demand for biking, but at the same time, the current design of streets isn’t serving that.”

### **Business in Flux**

In the Meatpacking District in Manhattan, the local BID is helping to negotiate a different kind of transition.

For most of the city’s industrial history, this pocket of the West Side was a distribution hub to meat importers. But like manufacturing, those jobs moved elsewhere, leaving behind a network of buildings and streets out of sync with current uses.

The corner of Gansevoort Street and 10th Avenue – near the neighborhood’s last meat-packing facility, Interstate Foods – illustrates this shift. The intersection has an extra-wide berth to accommodate overnight truck deliveries. Now, it sits at the entrance to the new Whitney Museum, with the High Line, Chelsea Market and Little Island nearby.

“This is just kind of lost asphalt space,” said Evan Sweet, lead planner for the Meatpacking District Management Association. “Four a.m. is the peak for this industry, but not the peak for pedestrian activity in the neighborhood. So can we layer these two times a day over each other and create a management process whereby this activity could still happen?”





Pedestrians crowd the Meatpacking District in 2012. The neighborhood's shifting economics have demanded a series of street changes. *Photographer: Richard Levine/Corbis News via Getty Images*

The proposed fix, according to the BID's "Western Gateway Public Realm Vision," would be to chop up the block, allowing trucks to enter and leave at one entrance, rather than eat up the whole roadbed. A plaza in front of the Whitney would dead-end the block. The redesign, Sweet said, "would bring this area, which used to be very much the neighborhood back of house, to more like a back porch."

In an effort to turn the neighborhood into the city's first "pedestrian-priority district," the BID has also rolled out different street space templates, like Open Streets and outdoor dining, and is piloting trash containerization, last-mile delivery zones and movable planters.

"The pandemic really brought the need for public space and the demand that people have for it to the forefront," said Sweet. "Maybe five years from 2020, we would've brought some of this up. But the city didn't have tools then to do a street closure. Now there's more of a willingness to throw things at the wall and see what sticks."

### **Allies in Placemaking**

The Big Dig, the 20-year megaproject that buried Interstate 93 in Boston, didn't just give the city the Rose Kennedy Greenway, a 17-acre linear park through the heart of the city. It also led to the creation of A Better City, a member association representing 130 of Boston's largest employers, which followed



the project from start to finish. Since then, the organization has helped oversee the Greenway BID, where nearby businesses pay a supplemental tax for capital improvements; lately, they've complemented that work with car-free space enhancements.

“Business leaders want to see people downtown, and creating more pedestrian-friendly areas is a great way to have people downtown,” said Kate Dineen, its president and CEO. “Pop-up parks, parklets and pedestrian street closures are just more common in the lexicon now, and I think the pandemic helped people think, ‘Oh, we can use this space in different way.’”



Boston's Downtown Boston Business Improvement District closed streets to traffic for a block party in April 2022. Photo by Lane Turner/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

As in so many cities, downtown revitalization is the Greenway BID's priority now. But the organization also chimes in on land use and policy changes that affect the metro area, such as another potential Big Dig-like project – a billion-plus-dollar plan to reconfigure a notorious elevated stretch of the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston.

This isn't exactly anything new; businesses have always lobbied policymakers for projects that would benefit their bottom line. But the asks are changing – and so is who's asking them. Traditionally, BIDs had been staffed with former city service employees – sanitation, police, parks or firefighters. But as their focus shifts to placemaking and design, the Meatpacking BID's Sweet says that planners like him have followed. "I'd normally be hired by the city to do this work."

It mirrors a larger – and contentious – trend in city-building of ceding management of public spaces to private operators. Such arrangements can bring quicker results: Well-resourced groups often move faster with capital projects, and buy-in from the business community helps provide political cover for hesitant lawmakers. The most recent phase of Broadway Vision, for example, raced ahead of several redesigns for Open Streets in less-commercial corridors – most of which lack BIDs, and have stalled for months.

That speed could be a critical advantage now, amid a drumbeat of dire warnings about collapsing downtown real estate.

It took decades to create the modern office district; now that its critical vulnerabilities have been exposed, adapting these neighborhoods to again welcome a more diverse set of uses stands to be a similarly prolonged process. With the influence and resources they command, business groups stand to be powerful allies in this transformation project, if they get on board with the kinds of policies that other urban advocates have long clamored for.



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