



► [Home](#) » [Categories](#) » [Downtown Idea Exchange](#) » [New downtown group works to broaden office district's ...](#)

New downtown group works to broaden office district's appeal

January 1, 2022

[Downtown Idea Exchange](#)



The outside world sees San Francisco (est. pop. 881,549) as an economic boomtown, a place defined by splashy tech companies, sky-high wages, and eye-watering real estate values.

That image is accurate as far as it goes. But even if the broader city is wildly successful, San Francisco's downtown has room to improve. Perhaps the biggest issue faced by the city's freshly formed Downtown Community Benefit District is that the 43-block area is dominated by offices.

That wasn't such a bad thing in January 2020, when Downtown SF launched. But starting in March 2020, an abundance of office space became a liability.

With white-collar workers staying home rather than going to their offices, pedestrian traffic plummeted in the Financial District. And fewer people meant less business for the restaurants and bars in the district.

"The pandemic deeply impacted the downtown's 9-5 workforce population," says Robbie Silver, executive director of the Downtown Community Benefit District. "The inherent lesson is that we can no longer be just a

financial district. Downtown San Francisco needs to pivot and pivot quickly to attract a more diverse range of people, businesses, and uses.”

As the group prepares for post-pandemic reality, it’s taking a hard look at how it can adapt. The district recently hired an urban design firm and hosted a public art show that used four downtown towers as canvases for an art form known as projection mapping.

San Francisco isn’t the only city struggling with empty business districts. In Washington, DC, the DowntownDC Business Improvement District says fewer than a quarter of employees had returned to their downtown buildings by mid-September.

“Going forward, downtown will be different,” Gerry Widdicombe, director of economic development for the DowntownDC Business Improvement District, told the *Washington Post*. “And offices are highly likely to be less prevalent.”

Time for a new focus

Downtown SF is a special assessment district that provides cleaning, security, marketing services, and placemaking. The new district’s first priority was addressing clean and safe issues such as removing graffiti from sidewalks and buildings.

Only by cleaning up could the district project the message that it was a safe and welcoming place, Silver says. “We had to get the district to a basic level of cleanliness.”

The payoff from power washing and steam cleaning came quickly. “A little goes a long way,” Silver says.

Next on the agenda: Preparing for a future in which office workers no longer stream into the district from 9 to 5 every weekday. Silver doesn’t think Downtown San Francisco’s office towers will stay empty forever.

“People are slowly coming back to work,” Silver says. “The sweatpants-work-from-home lifestyle isn’t sustainable. People need to work with people. People need to be with people. We can’t just be shut in our homes all day long and communicate by Zoom.”

At the same time, he acknowledges, office occupancies are unlikely to achieve the levels last seen in early 2020. Some of the city’s workers have moved to cheaper areas of the country and will work remotely. Others might resume commuting into the office, but perhaps only two or three days a week.

“People are going to come back to work, but it’s not going to be in the same numbers as pre-pandemic,” Silver says.

Many of San Francisco’s most prominent employers — including Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Dropbox — have embraced work-from-home policies. Salesforce, which has 9,000 employees, is requiring workers to come in to the office just one to three days a week.

That raises an obvious question: What becomes of an office district with fewer office workers to support restaurants, bars, dry cleaners, and convenience stores?



[See the promotional video for San Francisco's public art show.](#)

To answer that question, Downtown SF hired a consultant to envision a new future for the neighborhood. Downtown SF is paying SITELAB urban studio \$165,000 for work that includes tactical urbanism and community engagement.

While the details are a work in progress, the Downtown San Francisco Public Realm Action Plan recommendations will include a new vision for activating vacant ground floor retail spaces, investing in public art, increasing accessibility, and adding flexible seating.

SITELAB also will explore micromobility solutions, and Silver expects it to propose such interventions as car-free streets, parklets, plazas, and temporary street closures for events.

SITELAB is soliciting feedback from local residents and workers. The final plan is scheduled to be unveiled in late spring 2022.

In the meantime, Downtown SF is already moving forward on some pedestrian projects. On a section of Battery Street that's closed to cars, Downtown SF is working with an artist to create a 1,900 square foot asphalt art mural. The goal is to add seating and draw pedestrians.

Silver says some of the vacant office space ultimately could be converted to residential space. The city has long faced an acute shortage of housing.

A holiday light show

In an especially splashy event, Downtown SF hosted Let's Glow SF, a 10-day art show that projected artwork onto four downtown buildings. The exhibits — known as projection mapping — project five-minute long shows onto buildings that include the Pacific Stock Exchange and the Hyatt Regency.

The five-minute shows repeat every five minutes. Each building's projection was designed specifically for the location by local and international artists.

Downtown SF spent \$500,000 on the art project. Spectators will see projections of galloping ice horses, flying winter hawks and snowy owls, flowering poinsettias, polar bears, and ice castles.

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