

Downtown is Calling
Good Times Await

Or will once again



Action Plan for 2021

Draft for Review and Comment by Board

October 14, 2020 Meeting

Introduction

RDP committed to preparing a strategic plan to cover 2020 to 2024. The last strategic plan covered 2013 to 2016 and was not updated as most goals and activities had remained the same. However with the significant development in the downtown core and the expansion of the Entertainment District, it was decided a new Strategic Plan was needed. In preparation, RDP adopted new Bylaws and expanded its Executive committee by two members with the start of the 2020 term. However the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic derailed traditional strategic planning with in-person meetings restricted and uncertainty about longer term planning.

Following the example of other downtowns of similar size, it was decided to forego traditional strategic planning for the short term and instead develop an Action Plan for 2021. The Action Plan would focus on specific actions that RDP could undertake to deal with the disruptions caused by the pandemic and to build a base for recovery.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic impact

Currently many large businesses and government offices have their employees work primarily from home. Downtown Riverside was particularly affected with its concentration of government offices. State, County and City governments closed offices and furloughed employees, as did those organizations linked to governments. The reduction in office and government employees working downtown has had a significant negative impact on downtown restaurants and businesses, many of which depend on those employees to patronize their establishments.

The return of private sector employees has been slow, with many large companies finding that employees equipped with technology are able to effectively work remotely indefinitely. Similarly government and public sector employees have been trickling back, with many continuing to work remotely several days a week.

Although a number of restaurants and small businesses were able to operate at reduced levels with restrictions, the decrease in downtown workforce had an impact. Many restaurants reduced hours while some chose to remain closed, resulting in overall restaurant revenue declining by over 70% at the height of the pandemic. Small businesses didn't fare much better, with many opting for online and phone orders to keep customers.

The impact on businesses was worsened by the cancelling of special events such as festivals and the closure of museums, plus cultural and entertainment venues. As downtown Riverside is home to most of those, their cancellation and closure had a marked negative impact on downtown businesses. This was further compounded by the closure of the Riverside Convention Center and the loss of scheduled conventions. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the thousands of people from those special events, performances, and conventions not coming to downtown Riverside during the traditionally busiest months of spring and fall.

The announcement of a scaled down Festival of Lights has many businesses concerned since that event is a huge revenue generator for them. While there will be lights and 'selfie-stations', no entertainment or vendors are planned due to the restriction on large special events. One of RDP's priorities will be drawing people to downtown Riverside during the holiday season despite the lack of usual festivities.

On August 28th, Governor Newsom announced the 'Blueprint for a Safer Economy', California's retooled strategy for the incremented reopening of the economy with revised criteria for loosening and tightening restrictions on activities. Each county falls into one of four colored tiers – Purple (Widespread), Red (Substantial), Orange (Moderate), and Yellow (Minimal) – based on how prevalent COVID-19 is in each county and the extent of community spread. The color indicates how sectors can operate. Riverside County recently moved from the Purple (Widespread) tier to the Red (Substantial) tier which means that most downtown businesses continue to be under some operating restrictions. There are two further tiers to move down before broader reopening can occur.

It is uncertain when large businesses who have invested in their employees working from home or government and public sector employers will call their employees back. The smaller downtown workforce will continue to have an impact. The general public response is also uncertain. RDP participated in a survey with the International Downtown Association (IDA) and a major research firm on public perception to reopening. The survey overwhelmingly indicated that consumers expect reliable precautions to be in place. Those precautions include regular disinfecting, wearing of masks by employees as well as customers, and following physical distancing standards.

2021 Priorities

RDP's vision for downtown Riverside is that: "Downtown Riverside is the regional destination for businesses and service industries. With employment opportunities and attractive locations for growth, downtown Riverside is recognized for the quality of its cultural life, concentration of arts, educational programs, and urban living opportunities".

RDP's mission is that: "The Riverside Downtown Partnership will promote, represent, and manage an environment to support downtown Riverside as a regional destination for economic, arts, cultural, and residential uses."

RDP's goals are to:

- Promote downtown Riverside as a destination for residents and regional visitors.
- Develop and enhance RDP's influence and activities with downtown stakeholders.
- Promote Riverside as a regional center for private sector commercial and residential development.

These goals are normally the driving force behind RDP's activities, and the activities of the RDP. However, the new normal is now shaped by COVID-19. Consequently the activities of RDP in 2021 have to be focused on new goals and priorities.

In view of the decline in downtown workforce population and the public's perception of the pandemic, the number one goal for 2021 should be drawing more people downtown. The second goal for 2021 should be providing downtown businesses with the tools to market their goods and services. Each of these goals will involve specific steps and activities to achieve them, and each of these goals will have specific challenges and obstacles.

It should be noted that the 2021 Action Plan will need to be flexible during implementation in view of changing environmental factors.

GOAL One – Drawing more people downtown

Unfortunately, there are two major challenges to this goal; the perception that downtown is a magnet for homeless and transients, and paid parking. Both challenges, and most particularly the first, must be addressed in partnership with other entities.

The most frequent complaint heard from businesses and visitors is the disruption caused by homeless and transients. Many of the homeless are dealing with mental problems and exhibit disturbing behaviors that are sometimes frightening in nature. The transient population frequently bothers businesses and their patrons with panhandling and harassment. Both groups are service resistant and non-receptive to efforts of the office of Homeless Services Team. As several business people phrased it, “We feel we are under siege”.

To achieve the goal of drawing more people downtown, there are two main steps:

1. Establish a working group consisting of representatives from the County, the City, RDP, and appropriate stakeholders such as the Riverside Transit Agency to determine what specific actions should and can be taken with respect to homeless and transients. For example:
 - a. Assisting the homeless with mental problems by providing shelter and programs
 - b. Determining those of the transient population who require and will accept assistance and those who should be discouraged to remain in the area
 - c. Monitoring transit transfer stops and addressing security issues
 - d. Increasing cleanliness efforts including no tolerance for trash
 - e. Installing signage indicating prohibited behaviors
 - f. Increasing security as financially feasible

A meeting has been set up between Councilmember Edwards, senior City staff, and RDP to discuss security issues including the homeless. This can be considered a start. This particular step probably represents 65% of the 2021 Action Plan activities. It will also involve RDP actively seeking grants and other funding to finance additional security. Staff has submitted requests for two grants to cover the remainder of 2020 and will pursue grants for 2021.

2. Work with the City on how to offer parking enticements to combat free parking at malls. For example:
 - a. Offer 90 minute free parking at selected meters from 11:45 am to 1:15 pm to encourage people to come downtown to shop and dine.
 - b. Offer discount parking tokens or coupons for use in garages and meters
 - c. One day a week offer surprise free parking and a discount on lunch in a selected area using the Ambassadors.

This particular step probably represents 10% of the 2021 Action Plan activities. One challenge with this will be the need for parking revenue along with RDP’s reduced revenue. However that may be offset by some form of sponsorship with restaurants.

GOAL Two – providing downtown businesses with the tools to market their goods and services

One challenge with this will be businesses' limited time and resources. Consequently, the tools will need to be focused and free or reasonably priced. They also need to be cognizant of business owners' various levels of technology and social media skills.

To achieve the goal of providing downtown businesses with the tools to market their goods and services, there are two main steps:

1. Set up easy online workshops on Zoom, Facebook, or Youtube using available experts to instruct how to effectively use Facebook, Instagram, and email mobile marketing. For example:
 - a. Partner with the Small Business Development Center or others
 - b. Partner with private partners who will provide the training to introduce their product
 - c. Find businesses who will serve as 'Best Practices' mentors

This particular step probably represents 10% of the 2021 Action Plan activities.

2. Promote business activities. For example;
 - a. Sharing posts on Facebook
 - b. Tagging photos on Instagram
 - c. Using social media platforms to promote businesses and activities.

This particular step probably represents 15% of the 2021 Action Plan activities. As social media is not a major in-house skill set, RDP will be looking for an intern or funded placement for assistance.

Summary

A challenge for RDP in developing this 2021 Action Plan is recognizing our capacity to achieve desired goals. With a limited staff and funding, our stated goals reflect realistic expectations. We will endeavor to partner where possible and seek additional funding as available to achieve and exceed them