



Local News

Downtown Santa Barbara Leaders Inspired by State Street Changes

In presentation to former Mayor Hal Conklin's task force, organization praises possibilities of new pedestrian promenade



As Santa Barbarans take advantage of the newly pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly State Street and expanded outdoor dining options, the long-beleaguered downtown has been infused with a new energy. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)

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Despite the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, Santa Barbara is at a pivotal point in time, according to two downtown Santa Barbara leaders. Bob Stout, board president of [Downtown Santa Barbara](#), and Robin Elander, the organization's [interim executive director](#), say it's time to re-imagine the city. "This is a perfect time to experiment," Elander said. "Right now, State Street is a special place because it is changing literally over night. It really is an exciting time. I want to work with everyone to reinvent Santa Barbara."

The duo spoke at former Mayor Hal Conklin's weekly leadership team meeting, which he holds with a handful of business leaders to talk about the state of the city. With Elander at the helm and an array of new board members, the Downtown Santa Barbara organization has undergone some changes recently. It is no longer responsible for State Street cleanup, landscaping and maintenance, and instead is focused on marketing and promotions of the businesses between Gutierrez and Sola and Anacapa and Chapala streets.

Although the coronavirus crisis has dramatically shaken the economy, downtown Santa Barbara is experiencing a revitalization of sorts. When [Gov. Gavin Newsom](#) tightened up California's reopening and restricted restaurants to outdoor dining only, the [City of Santa Barbara](#) moved quickly to allow restaurants to serve meals outside. It [closed several blocks of State Street](#) to vehicle traffic and fast-tracked permits for parklet sidewalk extensions on many other streets.

As people take advantage of the newly pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly State Street, the long-beleaguered downtown has been infused with a new energy. The State Street pedestrian promenade is temporary but the city is likely to make it permanent, which would require a more serious and collaborative effort to figure out how it could best serve the area.

Conklin peppered last Wednesday's discussion with a blend of historical nuance and optimism about the city's future. "Here we are in the middle of a pandemic and the crisis becomes an opportunity," he said.

Conklin noted that the community came together to help create the vision for [Paseo Nuevo](#) in 1990, and a similar effort is needed now. He recalls that, 30 years ago, he and other city officials wanted to close State Street to cars but they encountered quite a bit of pushback.

He cited [Horton Plaza Park](#) in downtown San Diego and even [Disneyland](#) as examples of large outdoor pedestrian mall areas. “No one drives down [Main Street](#) of Disneyland,” Conklin said. “They walk it because it is an exciting place to be.

“We don’t want to turn into Disneyland, but we want the things that work in Disneyland and that attract a lot of people because, in a pedestrian environment, there’s a sense of meeting and greeting people on the street that you don’t have in a car.”

Stout said the State Street promenade and the addition of curbside parklets and outdoor tables arrived just when Santa Barbara needed them most. “It has been an incredible shot in the arm for businesses,” he said. The 500 block of State Street, between Cota and Haley streets, has the most restaurants and doesn’t have a vacant retail spot, Stout noted.

Elander said she wants to bring more art downtown and displayed images of chalk art, light shows, distinctly designed benches and other creative elements that could liven up the urban landscape. She talked of creating a “locals night,” when vendors from Santa Barbara would get priority.

She also said that Downtown Santa Barbara will begin doing video marketing of local businesses and sharing it on social media. Elander said the feedback has been about “95 percent positive” from downtown businesses. They have questions about how much space they can use on sidewalks, and specifics of what they can and cannot do, she said.

Not all is rosy, however. Some businesses outside of the nine closed State Street blocks and on Anacapa and Chapala streets have expressed concerns that their foot traffic has dropped. “We are kind of working with the different businesses to respond and explore what is possible and change things as needed,” Elander said.

One other area of good news for Downtown Santa Barbara is its recent acceptance of personal protective equipment from the [Economic Development Collaborative's](#) Small Business Development Center. Businesses are able to pick up face shields, masks and hand sanitizer at the organization’s offices at 27 E. De la Guerra St., Suite B.

“We are in a major transition,” Elander said. “It is going well.”

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