



CITY OF SAN MATEO

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Agenda Report

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TO: City Council
FROM: Alex Khojikian, City Manager
PREPARED BY: City Manager's Office
MEETING DATE: February 3, 2025
SUBJECT:
Downtown Survey Findings — Update

RECOMMENDATION:

Review the findings for the Downtown Survey and confirm or modify staff's response plan.

BACKGROUND:

A committee, Revv Up, was formed in April 2024, comprising of members of the Downtown San Mateo Association, San Mateo Area Chamber of Commerce, City Staff, Downtown business owners, and community representatives. This group met regularly from April through December 2024 to develop strategies to energize Downtown San Mateo by hosting and promoting events, creating a coordinated Downtown calendar of events, administering a comprehensive survey to better understand community experiences and needs in our Downtown, and developing stronger relationships and creating synergy between the Chamber, City, and Downtown Association. While the larger group has disbanded, the City will continue to meet monthly with the Chamber and Downtown Association to coordinate economic development activities related to the Downtown.

This report contains the key findings of the comprehensive survey along with staff's plan to address the top four areas identified by Downtown users to keep the Downtown vibrant. This plan is meant to bridge the gap until Fiscal Year 25/26 when staff begins working in earnest on City Council Blue Sky Priority #23: *Implement a robust, year-round, Downtown Activation Program as part of our core City services. Organize a committee to focus on the vibrancy of Downtown.* This priority was adopted last Fiscal Year and is on the City's 2–5-year completion schedule. The Revv Up effort and survey are pre-emptive steps to ensure we begin to move in the right direction as early as possible with the resources we have now, and set ourselves up for the work ahead, including the Council priority and the upcoming Downtown Area Plan update which will be a longer-term effort.

Survey Development

The Downtown Survey was created through a collaborative effort with the Chamber and was structured to ensure both accuracy and inclusivity. To reach a diverse audience, the Downtown survey was offered in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The questions were designed to gather demographic information, assess perceptions of Downtown, and collect suggestions for improvements. To maximize responses, we did not make all survey questions mandatory, especially the zip code identifying where the respondents were from. Before its release, the survey was tested with eight participants to refine its clarity and effectiveness. It was conducted from August 19 to September 3, 2024, and received 1,384 responses. Of these, 839 included zip codes. Among the 839 zip codes, 75 percent were from San Mateo, with the second-highest number of respondents from Burlingame, and third highest from San Francisco. Ninety-six percent of all the zip codes were from Bay Area cities (SF, Oakland, SJ). With a response rate of more than 600 San Mateans, there is a 95 percent confidence level and a margin of error of +/- 5 percent, and the results are statistically significant. To encourage participation, respondents were entered into a random drawing for a \$25 gift card. The Chamber of Commerce organized

the drawing, distributed the gift cards, and handled most of the survey evaluation. The following sections share key survey findings.

Demographics of Participants:

- 66 percent of respondents regularly visit downtown.
- 94 percent reported English as the primary language spoken at home.
- 48 percent were aged 40 years or younger.
- 23 percent had annual household incomes exceeding \$200,000.

Downtown Identity and Experience:

- Respondents visited Downtown the most on the weekends at 62 percent, evenings at 56 percent and weekdays at 55 percent.
- Respondents primarily visit Downtown for dining, shopping, and events.
- 73 percent of respondents felt it was easy to get to and navigate Downtown.
- Busy, Lively, Crowded, Vibrant, and Bustling are words that respondents used to describe the Downtown.
- Safety, Cleanliness and Walkability, Assortment of Restaurants ranked the top 4 most important aspects of the Downtown.

Downtown Satisfaction

The survey results indicate that overall, respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with Downtown, particularly when combining the responses for 'somewhat satisfied' and 'very satisfied.' Across all the different aspects that contribute to Downtown's importance, the composite mean score for their importance is 87 percent, while the satisfaction with these aspects averages 77 percent. This reveals a gap of 10 percentage points, showing that satisfaction falls slightly behind perceived importance. This discrepancy suggests that while Downtown is performing well, there is always room for improvement.

To address this, staff conducted an in-depth analysis of the difference between “very important” and “very satisfied” responses for each category. Through this analysis, four key areas were identified as priorities for improvement that can make a big difference: Cleanliness, Variety of Stores, Public Seating, and Safety. In this analysis, the gap between “very important” and “very satisfied” for these areas were 40 percent, 36 percent, 34 percent, and 32 percent, respectively.

Efforts to enhance these areas will be critical in closing the overall satisfaction gap and ensuring that Downtown continues to meet the expectations and needs of its community. By focusing on these priorities, staff’s goal is to elevate the overall experience for visitors and residents alike.

Top Four areas to keep Downtown vibrant included:

- Cleanliness: Requests for more frequent street cleaning, pressure washing sidewalks, and improved trash management.
- Retail Variety: Desire for more diverse shopping options beyond take-out food and service providers.
- Gathering Spaces: Requests for more and more inviting public seating and areas for social interaction.
- Public Safety: Downtown is regarded as a safe area; however, there is a desire for more police visibility and additional safety enhancements related to slowing traffic and increased lighting at night.

Staff Responses

Staff is taking several actions to respond to the items identified in the survey, some of which were already underway as the issues were known. This effort is ongoing and will continue to evolve as the City/DSMA/Chamber committee work together to identify and address issues to bridge the gap until Council Blue Sky Priority #23 is initiated and new work plan direction is sought from Council. Following is a summary of the primary actions that are currently underway to address the top four areas to keep Downtown vibrant:

Cleanliness:

- Annually, the City allocates \$500k to power wash the Downtown area and public garages. The DSMA allocates an additional \$100k for a porter service to pick up trash and clean public furniture.

- Collaborate with the Downtown Association, Chamber of Commerce, and City to raise awareness about reporting trash issues, making it easier for Downtown users to contribute to keeping the community clean.
- Increased cleaning efforts, merchant engagement, and monitoring walks by the Downtown San Mateo Association (DSMA) as their budget allows.
- Direct engagement with merchants to address sidewalk cleanliness in front of, and in the immediate area of, their businesses.
- Deployment of the City's 'Team Up to Clean Up' volunteers in the core Downtown, which is not a location that was previously on the rotation roster, has been initiated.
- Public Works staff is also exploring more frequent power washing, working with merchants on parklet and trash area cleanliness and monitoring hotspots.
- Collaborated with Rethink Waste to implement six three-bin trash systems for collecting rubbish, recycling, and organics. These bins serve to educate the public on proper waste diversion, reducing landfill contributions and promoting cleaner streets.

Retail Variety:

- Collaborate with a retail consultant before and during project development to assess future retail spaces, ensuring they can attract a diverse range of businesses and fill vacancies more quickly (Council Priority #4).
- Have quarterly broker's meetings with the City Manager's Office and Community Development Department to ensure the City is being responsive to the needs of the business community—this effort was initiated last quarter.
- Develop and adopt Interim Zoning Standards that account for the needs of Downtown as we await the full-scale Zoning Code update and Downtown Area Plan update.
- Cross train City staff on front line economic development matters to better assist new businesses interested in establishing in Downtown.
- Assign Assistant City Manager and communications staff to certain DSMA, Chamber, and other economic development meetings and activities to ensure policy, process, and other matters of import are properly communicated between the City and business community,
- Develop an economic development strategy with one of the focus areas being to attract new types and a variety of businesses to San Mateo.

Gathering Spaces:

- New public seating and planters have been installed in the pedestrian mall, with positive feedback.
- Staff is coordinating internally to explore reinstituting former seating areas located throughout the Downtown, which were removed for security purposes.
- Staff is looking at seating that already exists throughout the Downtown and ways to enhance it to make it more attractive and user-friendly.
- As new private development and public/private partnership development opportunities arise, pedestrian plazas available to the public will become more prolific throughout the Downtown, and we are already seeing this in development plans and some new developments that have been entitled, though it will take some time for new projects to be completed and if the development contains housing and is 100 percent private, there are constraints to open space requirements.

Public Safety:

- There are dedicated police officers that are assigned to the Downtown. These officers actively engage with businesses, residents, visitors and collaborate with stakeholders such as the DSMA, Chamber of Commerce, and City Departments. These officers focus on proactively addressing challenges in the Downtown and identifying opportunities to improve safety.
- A lieutenant oversees the Downtown unit, the Homeless Outreach Team, mental health clinicians, and traffic and parking staff, ensure resources are allocated effectively to meet the Downtown's safety needs through coordinated efforts.
- The Police Department conducts regular traffic safety initiatives, which include collaborating with Public Works on engineering solutions, running public education campaigns, and enforcing traffic laws to improve safety for

pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers.

- The launch of a Business Watch Program fostering partnerships between local businesses and the Police Department, offering timely updates on safety concerns, crime trends, and crime prevention training is being established.

Discussion: The Downtown Survey provides important feedback on the community's views and priorities for the Downtown. The inclusive approach to developing the survey ensures that the results are both reliable and representative. These findings help staff and our City partners address the needs of our Downtown users until such time that we embark on Council Priority #23, and later complete work and begin implementation of the updated Downtown Area Plan.

At this time, staff can use the survey results to form an action plan to address the immediate needs of the community, in concert with the work of the City/DSMA/Chamber committee to remain responsive.

Council Direction Requested:

1. Is the above action plan in its current form acceptable to Council?
2. If not, what should staff add, subtract, or modify?

BUDGET IMPACT:

No budget impact as of this report.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:

This item is not a project subject to CEQA, because it is an organizational or administrative activity that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment. (CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5).)

NOTICE PROVIDED

The summary was shared with Downtown Association members in November 2024. No other outreach has been done as of the date of the report.

ATTACHMENTS

Att 1 – Downtown Survey Results

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