



THE BIGGER PICTURE

FEBRUARY 2021

Seven Ideas for Downtown San José

AECOM

Making the most of big plans for new development, a major rail expansion and a project to re-envision public green space

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This report is one in a series of publications that lay the groundwork for the SPUR Regional Strategy.

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The Bigger Picture

SPUR's Bigger Picture series proposes ideas for key locations in San Francisco, San José and Oakland, the Bay Area's three largest cities. Each exploration represents an opportunity to tackle major regional challenges through local planning processes. And, conversely, each suggests how big investments in infrastructure can — if planned carefully — bring about positive transformation for the immediate neighborhood.

This series is part of the SPUR Regional Strategy, an aspirational 50-year vision for the Bay Area and a roadmap to creating an equitable, sustainable and prosperous future. We partnered with AECOM to identify and explore locations that have important implications for the region. Each one has the potential to uplift both the local community and the greater Bay Area — if decisionmakers keep that bigger picture in mind.

Rather than starting with a blank slate, the ideas we offer build on the best efforts already underway, proposing bold new ways to make the most of existing plans and ensure that they work with — not against — one another. We also shine a light on some lesser-known proposals that we think deserve consideration. These ideas are not policy prescriptions but possibilities — offering one vision of what a more sustainable, equitable and prosperous future might look like.

Our first exploration looks at the western side of downtown San José, where a major rail station expansion, a park reinvisioning process and a record number of proposed developments are pointing to big changes for the neighborhood.

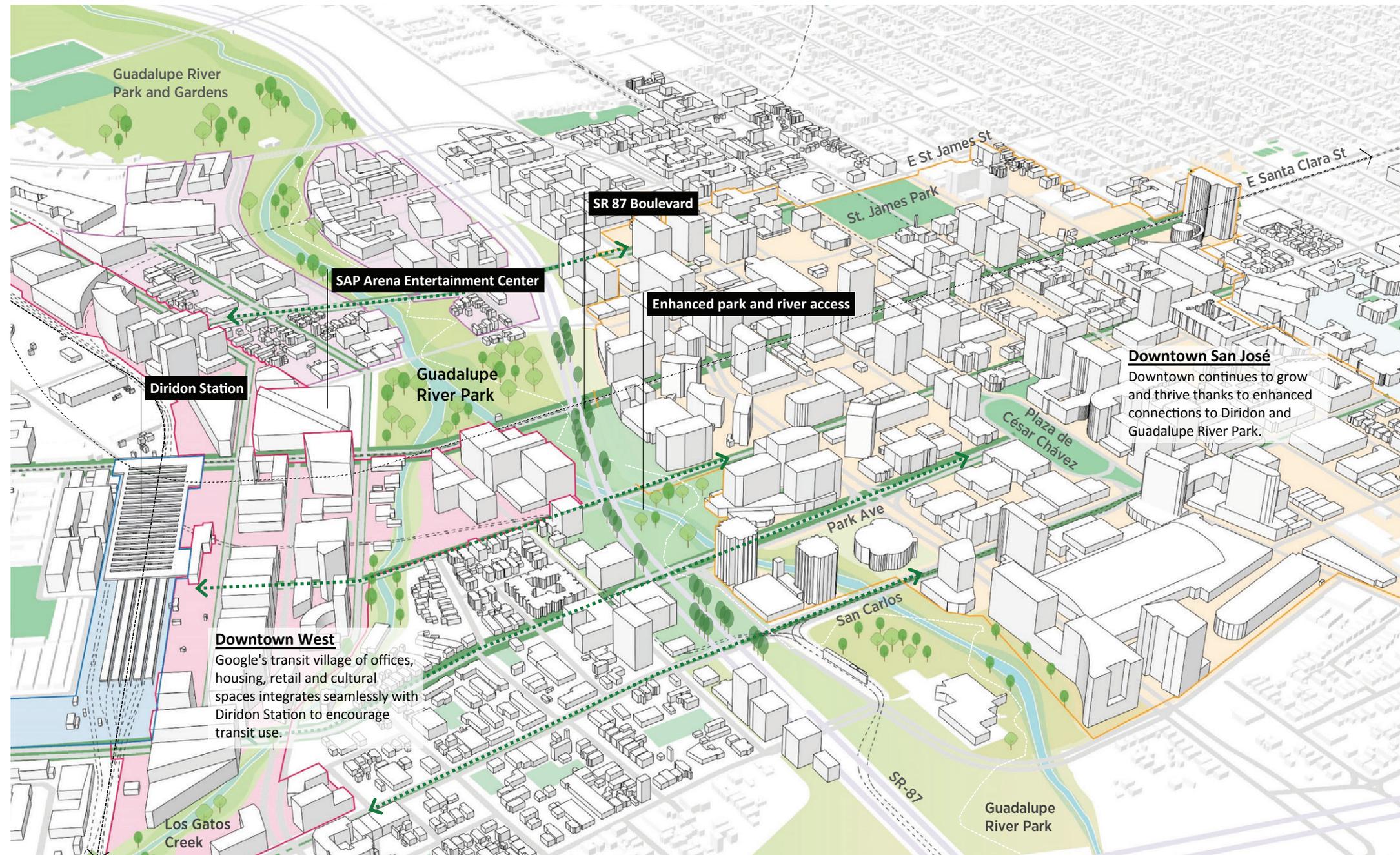
Our Vision for Downtown San José

By 2070, downtown San José has become a dense, thriving urban center, anchored by the Guadalupe River Park. A new regional rail hub brings people from across town and across the state, activating the city and the park day and night. Steelhead salmon run in the Guadalupe River once again, highlighting the park's restored ecology and offering children and families the chance to reconnect with nature. The green spaces surrounding the river attract picnickers, cyclists, families and employees from nearby offices.

With some of the best transit in the region, San José has attracted people and investment to the new Downtown West neighborhood, reclaiming space once devoted to parking in order to provide housing, jobs and public gathering space. Demand for private vehicles has gone down, allowing the elevated stretch of State Route 87 to be re-imagined as an urban boulevard. Taking down the highway overpass has reconnected once-separated neighborhoods, giving residents access to essential services and amenities within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. After a major expansion and redesign, Diridon Station has become the focal point of an innovative urban district. BART, regional rapid rail, California High-Speed Rail and local transit all converge here, offering quick access to the entire Bay Area and beyond. Passengers step off the platform and into a dynamic environment filled with art, culture and urban life.

Downtown San José, 2070

In our future vision, two urban centers, downtown San José and Downtown West, frame the Guadalupe River Park, which has been integrated with the neighborhood after the removal of the elevated State Route 87 highway. The expanded Diridon Station provides quick connections to the region and the state, bringing over 70,000 people to and from the city each day.



Downtown San José
Downtown continues to grow and thrive thanks to enhanced connections to Diridon and Guadalupe River Park.

Downtown West
Google's transit village of offices, housing, retail and cultural spaces integrates seamlessly with Diridon Station to encourage transit use.

Downtown San José Today

Three main elements define this area today:

Guadalupe River Park, a three-mile linear public space, is one of the largest parks in the city network, serving as the spine of downtown San José. On the eastern edge of the park, the Guadalupe River Trail runs through the heart of downtown, past the Children’s Discovery Museum, the Center for Performing Arts and Adobe headquarters, connecting to a trail network that links the cities of the South Bay. The park was originally created by stitching together leftover city-owned land. One of its major challenges is the elevated freeway that runs the length of the trail, dividing it into many isolated spaces and creating noise, poor air quality and shadows. Although urban parks often provide a significant economic premium to surrounding real estate, Guadalupe River Park has not delivered on this potential. Major adjacent sites remain empty, and most nearby buildings face away from the park. The park also suffers from years of disinvestment, which has taken a significant toll.

State Route 87 is relatively new (the section through downtown San José was completed in 1992), but it represents an outdated period of thinking about urban infrastructure, when planners prioritized the movement of vehicles over the experience of people. The elevated structure and its berms and ramps send a clear signal that this space is for cars, not community. Well-intentioned efforts to mitigate this effect with paint and lighting can only do so much. These structures also consume nearly 50 acres of land in the urban core that could be put to more productive use.

Diridon Station is San José’s central transit hub, providing Amtrak, Caltrain and Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority train and bus services. Cut off from the city’s urban core by the elevated freeway, the station and the properties around it have operated in a silo, with little connection to downtown or the surrounding neighborhoods. The district consists mostly of low-rise commercial buildings, many of which are vacant. Surface parking lots cover the spaces between buildings, creating a harsh environment for pedestrians and cyclists.

Right: Guadalupe River Park and State Route 87

Below: Diridon Station
Photos by Sergio Ruiz



Why This Place Matters

Downtown San José is experiencing tremendous growth and economic investment from both the private and public sectors. Thanks to major transportation investments, the city is poised to become one of the region's most transit-accessible and connected locations. Diridon Station will be the first high-speed rail stop in Northern California. Phase 2 of the BART to Silicon Valley extension will connect downtown and Diridon Station to the East Bay. Caltrain's planned service upgrades and switch to electric engines will greatly improve the frequency, reliability and speed of service to the Peninsula and San Francisco. Adjacent to the station, Google's proposed mixed-use campus, Downtown West, will provide up to 5,900 residential units and up to 7,300,000 square feet of new office space, significantly transforming this district. With increased commercial and residential development on the horizon, it's more important than ever to balance the investment in physical infrastructure with investment in open spaces, which bring people together, connect natural habitats and provide a healthier quality of life.

Guadalupe River Park has the potential to become the key connector between the two sides of downtown, now separated by a highway overpass. Because it runs between neighborhoods of extreme economic disparity, it could serve not only as a physical connector but as a place to foster social and community connection. Currently, neighborhoods such as Washington Guadalupe are physically cut off from the park by highway overpasses and have limited access points to the Guadalupe River Trail. Reconfiguring certain areas of the park would give these neighborhoods greater access to the planned public spaces and other amenities in Downtown West. In a city experiencing tremendous growth, it's important to ensure that public spaces are equally accessible and welcoming to everyone.

Right: Recent bike lane improvements have helped connect downtown San José to Diridon Station and other destinations.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz

Below: Guadalupe River Park's downtown trail intersects with other modes of transportation.

Photo by Kara Brodgesell



Seven Ideas for Downtown San José

Unlocking the potential of this area will require visionary leadership. First of all, many projects that are currently in the works could make or break the future of this place. The decisions that shape these projects should prioritize the area's potential and its importance to the region. Second, leaders should be willing to consider some bold ideas for making the most of this place and the investments being made here.

IDEA 1

Complete Planned Projects with the Bigger Picture in Mind

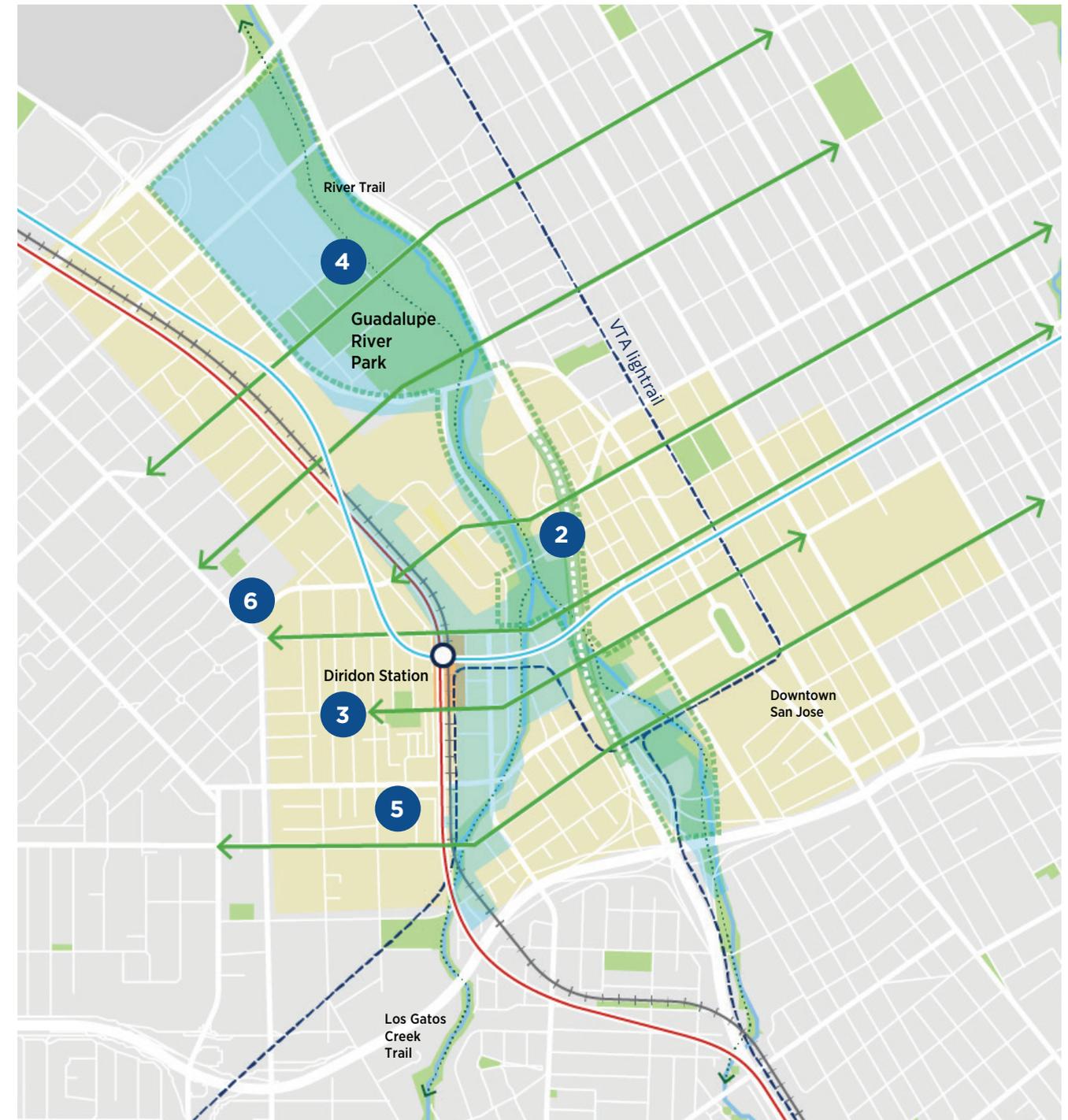
A number of plans currently underway will be critical to the future of downtown San José. The vision outlined above depends on the following projects moving forward without delay:

- BART to Silicon Valley Extension
- Caltrain electrification and service upgrades
- Zoning changes to allow taller buildings around Diridon Station
- Downtown Transportation Plan
- Build out of Adobe Tower, Platform 16, City View Plaza and Museum Place developments

What Should Happen Here

2. Tame State Route 87
3. Go Big on Diridon Station
4. Invest in Guadalupe River Park
5. Build Out Downtown West
6. Turn SAP Arena into a Downtown Entertainment Center

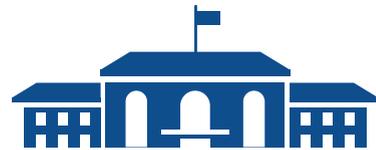
Note: Ideas 1 and 7 are not shown on map.





IDEA 2 Tame State Route 87

The elevated freeway is a barrier between downtown and Diridon Station and has significant negative impacts on Guadalupe River Park. Although it may be imprudent to contemplate removing this asset in the near term, by 2070 it will have been in service for 78 years, and it will likely require major rehabilitation before then. Across the United States, as new highway infrastructure investment dollars become available, cities are reconsidering the purpose of and need for urban freeways. Replacing the elevated freeway with either a surface boulevard or underground tunnel would alleviate the current noise, pollution, safety and economic impacts on downtown and would improve the physical and social connection of nearby neighborhoods. Redesigning this leg of SR87 is a long-term project that would need to be coordinated with the other proposals outlined here. Ideally, a redesigned SR87 would celebrate the Guadalupe River Park, connect Downtown West to downtown and bring San José communities together.



IDEA 3 Go Big on Diridon Station

With more than \$10 billion in rail investments and 240 acres of developable land, San José's Diridon Station is the largest transportation and city-building opportunity in the Bay Area. Bringing together Caltrain, BART, statewide high-speed rail, light rail, and local and regional bus services, Diridon represents a chance to integrate more transit modes more seamlessly than any other place in the region. It also provides an opportunity to create an anchor of public life in greater downtown San José and expand the urban core of the South Bay. The future success of the station will require that the many transit agencies involved commit to a single, shared vision and a new governance structure that will put the transit rider at the center of decision making.



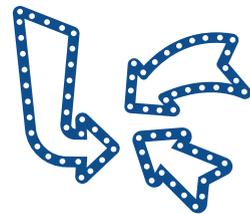
IDEA 4 Invest in Guadalupe River Park

For the park to achieve its full potential, the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy should be positioned as the lead agency for revitalizing the river park. Currently, the city owns the land and the conservancy stewards the space. Giving the conservancy control over things like maintenance and signage would allow the group to make changes to improve recreational access, enhance the natural ecology and create a space for social cohesion and community building. This would require a revised management plan between the conservancy, the City of San José and the Santa Clara Valley Water District, as well as the creation of a river park alliance of nearby companies and neighborhoods that could support the care and upkeep of the park.



IDEA 5 Build Out Downtown West

Google's Downtown West campus will be one of the largest developments in San José's history. The proposed development should be an active neighborhood that offers a variety of amenities and integrates well with Diridon Station to promote transit use. Planning of the project should put strong emphasis on employment uses, complemented by a range of housing options accessible to all income levels, retail, entertainment and cultural uses.



IDEA 6 Turn SAP Arena into a Downtown Entertainment Center

Building on precedents like LA Live, Sacramento's Golden 1 Center (see the Case Study on page 14), and Brooklyn's Barclay's Center, the home of the Sharks could embrace its urban context as a value proposition, emphasizing public transit and its location next to Diridon Station. While the current arena provides significant economic and community benefit, the physical structure is closed off from the surrounding area, with no ground floor retail or commercial space to engage people on the street. Space currently allotted for parking could be repurposed for community uses such as a sports field or pedestrian plaza.



IDEA 7 Implement Congestion Pricing

A congestion pricing program for downtown San José would help manage peak period automobile congestion while creating more flexibility to adapt local streets for transit and pedestrians. It would also raise revenue that could help fund improved transit, better pedestrian and open space design, and reconstruction of SR 87 as a surface boulevard or tunnel. By allowing alternate downtown access routes to be managed more efficiently, a downtown congestion pricing strategy would create more flexibility for SR 87 design options that reduce automobile capacity. Congestion pricing discounts and revenues would be designed to support alternatives to single-occupant vehicle travel.

Case Studies

Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail and Summit Lake

Akron, Ohio

The City of Akron is collaborating with nonprofit organizations and community groups to better connect three neighborhoods through the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail. Temporary and permanent design features and regular programming are reestablishing the 100-acre Summit Lake as a place of civic pride and play, bridging diverse neighborhoods and fostering economic development and public life in Akron's downtown.

A key site within this project area is Summit Lake. Once a retreat for the wealthy known as the “million-dollar playground,” the park suffered from disinvestment and neglect after the lake became contaminated with industrial pollution. Today, the lake has recovered and the park around it has undergone a transformation with a new beachhead, pavilion and nature center; improved facilities for fishing, canoeing and kayaking; arts projects and a farmers' market, all of which have fostered an increased sense of community pride.

Key idea for San José: This project would not have succeeded without dedication and investment from the City of Akron. For Guadalupe River Park, it will be imperative for the City of San José to name the park as a city-wide priority and make a dedicated investment in it.



Photo by Meghan Meeker, courtesy Akron Civic Commons

Cheonggyecheon River

Seoul, Korea

In the 1970s, the Seoul Metropolitan Government built a 10-lane roadway and four-lane elevated highway over the Cheonggyecheon, a heavily polluted river that had been channelized for sanitation reasons. The freeway overpass created an unsafe environment for pedestrians and neighboring communities and was considered an eyesore.

In 2003, the government initiated a project to remove a 3.6-mile stretch of the freeway, clean the waterway, and create a new waterfront urban park, revitalizing the communities along its banks. The river park is now a major destination for Seoul's residents and tourists alike, and its landscape design and integrated waterway ecology have increased biodiversity, improved air quality and decreased high temperatures by reducing urban heat island effect.

Key idea for San José: While removing SR 87 may seem unfeasible and daunting, cities like Seoul have undertaken similar efforts because of their potential to transform the physical landscape of the city and bridge communities that were once physically divided.



Photo by Lucy Wang, courtesy IN HABITAT

Los Angeles River

Los Angeles, California

Once a critical water source, the Los Angeles River has faced nearly a century of abandonment and disuse. After a catastrophic flood in 1938, the Army Corps of Engineers began to channelize the nearly 50-mile waterway. The project left some sections of the river more natural, but in many places, just a thin ribbon of water flows through the channel, surrounded by fences and debris. The current infrastructure is very similar to Guadalupe River Park, which went through its own transformation by the Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1990s.

In 2016 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved an update to the LA River Master Plan for the first time in over 20 years. After years of community meetings and research, the county released the updated master plan in 2020, setting forth a new vision for the river and adjacent open spaces. Goals include reducing flood risk, improving resiliency, and providing equitable, inclusive and safe open space. A key theme throughout the plan is how to improve the river without displacing lower-income Angelenos who live nearby.

Key idea for San José: In many cities, investment in parks has raised concerns about increased displacement or “green gentrification.” The City of San José will need to find balance in both revitalizing Guadalupe River Park and enacting strong anti-displacement and value capture policies to support nearby neighborhoods.



Rendering by AECOM



Golden 1 Center

Sacramento, California

The National Basketball Association and the Sacramento Kings team worked with the City of Sacramento to develop a new arena that would reimagine the heart of downtown, create a fan experience that felt uniquely Sacramento, and push the boundaries of sustainability. Opened in 2016, the Golden 1 Center was designed to be easily accessed by public transit; the stadium is a short walk from the Sacramento Rail Station and is served by five light-rail lines. The state-of-the-art arena is used for Sacramento Kings games during basketball season and year-round as an entertainment venue. An outside events plaza hosts both Kings events and other public activities. The stadium is integrated into the surrounding shopping and restaurant district with a design that encourages people to move around the area rather than park their cars and enter the stadium in isolation.

Key idea for San José: The city is fortunate to have an entertainment and sports arena in the heart of downtown, right next to San José's largest multimodal transit station. As downtown continues to grow and evolve, it will be important for the SAP Center to reimagine itself and improve its connection to both Diridon Station and the surrounding area.



Rendering by AECOM



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