

Downtown Organizations / Interests | 11 am to 12 pm

The consultants asked participants about what they felt was working in downtown, and what was not; what were the assets and opportunities that should be looked at?

Comments received:

- Difficult to get people downtown. Most folks will come to dine in Downtown but if they want to park and walk around, it feels unsafe – for example, in alleys. History of vigorous policing in 1980s and 90s ended with the teens getting driven out; Starbucks closed. Music clubs went away - so now downtown is dead. Policing is needed even today but was too forceful in that era. Downtown still not recovered from that problem.
- Traffic speeds especially on K is an issue – the parking lot across the theater is used very well. People park on J - then drive again; cumbersome. Lots of driving after show times end.
- New theater on Caldwell and 9th street – a mid-century modern building; with lots of space. Ideas include displays on cars, modernism (similar to Palm Springs), graffiti – local groups and architects can play a role.
- Strong desire to see placemaking and better sidewalks in downtown – traffic calming, trees for shading sidewalks. This will result in more foot traffic.
- Focus on Modesto’s strengths: culture, cuisine and community. It has what some other cities don’t have - a core group that really believe in downtown and will support it. Even if now only a few neighborhoods support downtown, it’s a start.
- Culture - 4 theaters of different genres + lots of art galleries + good base to build from. 45 restaurants. Densest and most varied cuisine option in the region. Mutually supportive community. Lots of community-oriented events – many people want them to happen in downtown. This can be a business opportunity as well.
- Modesto has done better than many other cities in preserving historic structures and having a stock of historic buildings that are in actual use.
- State theater in downtown: Art Deco building, 550 seats. Building second theatre next door - Jewel, 25 seats (check), funded by a local patron. Frames entry to J Street - beautiful marquee. Jewel is a renovation - connected through the concessions area. Multipurpose room for private screenings. Primarily independent films, but that is not profitable at all time, so can also do concerts and live performances.
- Route to the river needs to be better handled in downtown. Potential for kayaking, hiking, rafting, picnics, etc. – right now no one can do it because it feels unsafe. Safe biking routes will help a lot.
- Modesto has turned its back completely to the river - so only people interested are salmon protectors or farmers who think of river as economic opportunity. Dam has created an area that can be used for recreation. Maybe a part of the river can even be diverted to connect to downtown.
- Modesto has the potential for outdoor entertainment similar to Austin, has similar weather. Downtown can be a hub for business and also for outdoor dining and recreation. National Parks Service is sending a group to Modesto to study how Modesto has revitalized river area, bike trails, etc.
- Modesto has tremendous tourism potential because of its central location – two to three hours to Carmel, Yosemite, etc.

- High density near transit station – perfect opportunity to build more, and carry on the revitalization that started 15 years ago (Downtown felt scary before that).
- Wide sidewalks would be very nice.
- Homeless situation is an issue but much better than a year ago.
- Transit Center, a \$6 million project – a huge opportunity for downtown – historic building that frames view down J Street. Make train to bus transfers convenient. Streets in downtown to get to transit center are not in great shape, can be improved – if transit center looks more inviting more people will use the buses.
- Linking Transit Center to downtown destinations, and use buses / shuttles to move people around downtown? Austin has busloads of visitors.
- Recently, bus operations have been extended to 11 pm along most routes; and headways improved on three routes – from once an hour to every 15 minutes.
- Extended hours for buses can be one-time for special events but can also be a regular service extension. Once ACE train starts operating, security, lighting, safety, etc. will need to be looked at. Currently, perception is that it's not safe at night for pedestrians.
- Train station is historic - historic preservation work being done on building - interior not touched; entry and exit locations are staying the same - exit in now one lane; will be 2 lanes to get buses out faster on Ninth Street; lighting and landscaping improvements will be done.
- J street has the potential for major improvements in future. K is 3 lanes one way, I street is a busy street as well. J street has buses leaving, perception is that one shouldn't enter.
- Fees should be imposed for empty storefronts and buildings - prime locations are often vacant because Modesto doesn't charge property owners for vacant stores. Many property owners don't live here; many are third generation owners and have no incentive to improve their properties and invest in other areas where rent is higher. Tax write-offs make it easy for them to get away with this.
- Business owners feel property owners are not invested – rents are high and buildings not maintained.

The consultants asked: “if there is one big opportunity in downtown, what is that? If you came back twenty years from now – what would you be happy to see?”

Comments received:

- Existing buildings in Tenth Street area renovated to show original structure.
- Infill has occurred; multi-use buildings in downtown.
- Downtown has added parks, fountains, etc. and has more people living there.
- Shade using building facades and trees; awnings, shade structures, etc.
- Vision for Modesto must be ‘bold’ – it's a city of firsts; many patents, first airport in country, has a history of innovation.
- Better way finding; use of technology such as apps to update parking, pay fee.
- Dream for J Street; make it a park and enjoy street.
- Downtown has parks and residential and mixed-use buildings.
- Old and new architecture in harmony.
- Courthouse park has trees, artwork, maybe another small park/ plaza on J Street.
- Art in downtown in the form of murals, etc.
- More amenities in downtown – recreation centers, retail anchors, ballpark.
- Tenth Street reconnected to College.

Downtown Property Owners / Business Owners / Real Estate | 1 pm to 2 pm

The consultants asked participants about what they felt was working in downtown, and what was not; what were the assets and opportunities that should be looked at?

Comments received:

- Downtown Modesto is more compact than Fresno or Stockton, enjoyable place to be. Has many restaurants, good sense of community in downtown – people know each other by name and face.
- When the mall came up outside downtown, it took away a lot of the retail activity, but recent investments have reversed trend. Millennials want to rent downtown and also live downtown.
- Stanislaus as a business has been here since 1930s. Initially downtown was very industrial, and B street corridor was the extent of downtown.
- Courthouse property is generating a lot of interest – what will happen there? Its ownership is 2/3 county, 1/3 state. It's an Opportunity zone under tax act. Visualizes an incredible redevelopment as a 3-5 story mixed use building – entire block should be redeveloped. Housing is critical for downtown.
- Planned hotel in downtown may be challenging because train goes past every hour.
- ACE train may draw 1000 cars a day – will be a game changer. With self-driving cars in the future + ACE train, more people may look to live in Modesto (where an average home costs \$300,000 compared to \$1,000,000 in Fresno). People will work remotely, use transit – there will likely be sudden growth in 15 years, and we must start planning for that now, with gradual but steady improvements.
- Modesto downtown is poor at advertising – there is lot going on but takes time to discover it.
- Can see alternate transportation working here, such as electric scooters.
- FBC could find ways to encourage transition of commercial to residential buildings - should be an easier process.
- Vacancy is about 10% and multifamily market has potential - residential over office is a good opportunity.
- Recommendation that city should take a few blocks at a time and upgrade infrastructure and utilities. Think about future land use in determining upgrades.
- Homeless situation is limiting growth downtown, affecting business. This is an issue to be solved.

The consultants asked how to improve connectivity and suggestions on how to get people downtown.

Comments received:

- In latest General Plan amendment, Downtown has collector status for all downtown streets which will help.
- Virginia corridor is very busy - will connect to Hetch-Hetchy corridor which not busy right now, can connect to downtown.
- Trends show that the way people network nowadays is changing. People don't play golf as much nowadays; they ride road bikes. This offers an opportunity for a place like Modesto – connect river and trails to downtown.

- Dry Creek Trail: trails lead to downtown but doesn't go anywhere within downtown - grid is an opportunity to improve connectivity.
- To get people downtown, ambience has to be improved – introduce more outdoor dining, look at rooftop dining, do traffic calming; separated bike lanes.
- Within downtown – try new mobility such as shared electric scooters.

The consultants asked: “if there is one big opportunity in downtown, what is that? If you came back 20 years from now – what would you be happy to see?”

Comments received:

- A vibrant music scene.
- Multifamily mixed-use housing wherever possible.
- Tall buildings, an actual skyline.
- Downtown as a one-stop shop for all needs - don't have to leave downtown.
- Ubiquitous wi-fi (free) throughout downtown. Kids and teenagers like to hang out where there is free wi-fi.
- J Street as one way with diagonal parking. Avoid using it as a shortcut to freeway – need to communicate purpose of street.

Downtown Neighborhood Groups | 2 pm to 3 pm

The consultants asked participants about what they felt was working in downtown, and what was not; what were the assets and opportunities that should be looked at?

Comments received:

- Interested in seeing Modesto continue its transformation from rural to urban.
- Amenities such as Graceada Park are not perceived to be in downtown – need to have more events that should be advertised. It should become an anchor for the city. How do we connect it to downtown better? Need safer crossings, safer bike routes. It's Modesto's central park and should be used by everyone.
- Need to explore new kinds of housing such as lofts and courtyard home (precedent exists here from 1950s) – might help with homeless situation as well.
- Downtown needs to bring in families and children – must feel safe.
- J Street near 15th and 16th – feels unsafe for pedestrians. Not the best sidewalks.
- Getting to State Theater is an issue - unsafe crosswalk; same for library.
- No consistent shade in downtown – discourages people from walking.
- Core of downtown is considered to be J Street, but we should also consider I Street. As opposed to J Street it connects to the rest of Modesto - from Modesto arch to west. I street is getting some redevelopment – new steakhouse, residential development.
- Look at improving 12th street, connection to Virginia corridor. 10th to Gateway. Dry Creek trail, connection from Graceada to Farmers Market - 15th + 16th.
- Physical disconnect between downtown and south and west Modesto. At a recent downtown event, only 10-15 people showed up.
- K Street overpass has diagonal parking on ramp - no one uses it. Either improve overpasses or remove them.

- I Street idea: expansive bike-pedestrian network – connect to Modesto High. Need to create a network that is connecting beyond downtown - road diet on Paradise (starts 2021) and College brought sense of community back. West Modesto is interested in change. Modesto Neighborhoods Inc. has vision to bring together different neighborhood groups. Not just bring people into downtown, but also to downtown-adjacent neighborhoods.
- Events such as Family Fun nights, resource fairs, etc. can bring more people downtown.
- Circulator shuttles will be a great idea.
- Main problem that needs to be solved is the perception that downtown is unsafe. That's why people avoid it and are not aware of things happening in downtown. Need a more diverse range of events in downtown to attract different age groups, etc. Places should list things happening every week.
- Major shopping is all done outside downtown. We need to get more boutique shops in downtown – more restaurants and cafes, diverse ethnic foods.
- Suggestion - Punchbowl social. Need places to be active - maybe a bocce ball court.
- Expand on DoMo First Fridays.
- Downtown has no parks, no boulevards - nowhere to walk. Sidewalks are narrow – very limiting for a downtown. All retail places should be able to put out at least a couple of tables.
- Neighborhoods and streets should have their own character.
- Streets can have raised planters, trees.
- To get families downtown, it needs to be bike friendly, have rentable scooters, etc.
- Tuolumne area - Virginia Corridor – can develop nodes and make the river area an extension of Downtown. That area has lots of dilapidated buildings (along 9th street) that are prime for revitalization.
- Image from freeway is important – need to improve 9th street even if it continues being a busy street.
- The consultants asked what the group felt about the idea of downtown as districts – general support for the idea.
- Downtown needs to be a family friendly place. Right now, there is nothing to do with kids in downtown, not even an ice cream place. Food and entertainment together will be great. Needs to feel safer so kids can run around – outdoor patios etc. – downtown sidewalks are very narrow.
- Trees need to provide canopy - gingko and magnolia are ok but do not provide shade. Modesto nursery has 4 different ash trees that could work – we need to bring back urban forestry.
- Modshop has local artisans, can be an attraction.
- Downtown feels unsafe at night, need to change that.
- Modesto downtown is not perceived to be a safe place to stay – Gallo employs 3000 people, and many are bussed in from Dublin and other areas. Similarly, there are several big businesses in downtown but employees don't look to live here – this is a huge opportunity.
- No basic amenities in downtown, such as grocery stores, laundry, etc.
- Getting a grocery store here will be a challenge with average downtown income of \$20,000 versus \$57,000 citywide.
- Student-oriented housing is a major opportunity – MUC students.

Social Service Groups | 3 pm to 4 pm

This focus group meeting did not happen. Possibly reschedule during charrette week.

Suggested case studies (from all focus groups):

- Stockton (ballpark, waterfront), active transportation plan.
- Downtown Livermore (First Street improvements).
- San Antonio + Austin TX (riverfront development).
- Savannah GA (grid of small parks).
- San Luis Obispo (downtown art – murals on electric boxes).
- Sacramento (mixed-use redevelopment, Capitol Mall).
- Walnut Creek (bank building rehab).
- Tempe AZ (small city but vibrant).
- Downtown Oakland (businesses fund activities for kids).
- Turlock (sycamore trees in downtown – shade + identity).
- Rancho Cucamonga (overpass with trees and landscaping).

Suggested streets to prioritize efforts, connectivity improvements (from all focus groups):

- J, I, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth Streets.
- Virginia corridor, Dry Creek trail.
- Connection from Graceada Park to downtown, farmer's market – Fifteenth, Sixteenth Streets.
- K Street ramp.

Suggested amenities in downtown (from all focus groups):

- Diverse retail: book stores, record stores, grocery, personal services like nail salons, boutique stores for browsing, etc.
- Attractions / services such as ballpark, recreational centers, bocce ball courts, etc.
- Diverse restaurant and dining options: variety of ethnic foods, outdoor – patio, rooftop dining.
- Events such as family-friendly festivals, resource fairs, etc.