



Memorandum

TO: COMMUNITY AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE

FROM: Nanci Klein
John Ristow

SUBJECT: Downtown and Regional
Wayfinding Status Report

DATE: February 10, 2025

Approved

Date:

2/14/25

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the status report on Downtown and regional wayfinding efforts.

SUMMARY AND OUTCOME

This memorandum provides a status report on Downtown and regional wayfinding efforts, including work related to the six-pronged plan the Community and Economic Development Committee approved as part of the May 2024 wayfinding update. The memorandum also addresses staff efforts to explore a wayfinding pilot that will enhance visitor experience during the 2026 major events, including Super Bowl 60, the NCAA Men's West Regional Basketball Tournament, and the FIFA World Cup. The Community and Economic Development Committee's feedback on this work will help prioritize limited resources on the most feasible and impactful opportunities as Downtown prepares to welcome additional major public events.

BACKGROUND

Effective wayfinding uses visual cues, signs, maps, and landmarks to help people navigate and orient themselves. Wayfinding is essential to achieving the City's vision of a connected, welcoming Downtown where visitors and residents can easily navigate and discover gems Downtown. In May 2024, the Community and Economic Development Committee approved staff's recommendations to improve Downtown wayfinding¹. This plan included a strategic pivot away from the previously envisioned system centered on static totems, toward a more tactical, resource-conscious approach that can be implemented more quickly and cost effectively. Key efforts include deploying

¹ 2024 Downtown and Regional Wayfinding Update: <https://tinyurl.com/2024WayfindingMemo>

new pole-based signs, publishing an updated walking map,² and addressing existing gaps in pedestrian navigation by working with partners. At the October 23, 2024, Rules and Open Government Committee meeting, staff was also directed to develop a plan to pilot digital wayfinding solutions as part of the efforts to enhance the visitor experience ahead of major public sporting events in 2026.

ANALYSIS

A strong wayfinding system helps people navigate an area with confidence, discovering businesses, amenities, and points of interest along the way. It also supports a sense of safety, encourages walking and biking, and helps an area feel more cohesive, even where the urban fabric is less connected.

Downtown's wayfinding challenges stem from a few longstanding issues. Fundamentally, activity hubs across Downtown are frequently separated by stretches of vacant and/or low-activity zones. Existing signage often focuses on vehicular traffic rather than pedestrians, and many signs are outdated or poorly maintained. Last year, the Committee approved a multi-pronged plan focusing on immediate wayfinding needs while positioning Downtown for larger-scale improvements in the future. The sections below detail the progress and next steps on these recommendations.

1. Tactical Signage

A centerpiece of the current wayfinding work plan is the introduction of a new system of pedestrian- and bicyclist-oriented wayfinding signs. These signs are currently in production, and installation is expected to begin in February 2025. A total of 61 pedestrian-oriented and 31 bike-focused signs will be installed Downtown. The pedestrian signs will be placed along key walking corridors and near Downtown destinations, providing estimated walk times in minutes and QR codes that link to more information on the destination. The bike signs will focus on the San Fernando corridor, enhancing the existing bike infrastructure with bike time in minutes to key destinations.

These signs are funded through an Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities grant. Stemming from the Iamesi Village affordable housing project, which opened in 2023, the grant provided funding for wayfinding within a one-mile radius of St. James Light Rail Station as part of a broader effort to improve access to transit and increase pedestrian activity.

What sets these new pedestrian-oriented signs apart is both tone and use of technology. Rather than simply pointing the way to a given spot, the signs encourage

² The existing Downtown Walking Map is available at <https://tinyurl.com/DTWalkingMap>

people to explore and enjoy Downtown with messages that feel personal and engaging – such as suggesting visitors “Relax in a Café in SoFA,” “Grab a Bite in Little Italy,” or “Cheer on the Sharks at SAP Center.” Walk times show how close a destination is, encouraging people to walk. This approach aims to make wayfinding not just functional but part of the experience of visiting downtown San José. Staff worked with the San Jose Downtown Association, Team San Jose, San José State University, and other stakeholders to refine messaging. While not every attraction or destination is included in the first round of installation, the system can be expanded relatively easily. Additionally, the QR codes located on wayfinding signs can be re-directed to updated digital destinations as websites change. Examples of wayfinding signage are shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Two of the approximately 61 pedestrian-oriented wayfinding signs that include walking estimates to key destinations and QR codes for more information.



Downtown also contains numerous outdated or poorly maintained wayfinding signs, contributing to a sense of visual clutter. As new signs are installed, staff will begin removing outdated signage at several key locations.

2. Downtown Walking Map

Despite the rise of Google Maps and Apple Maps, printed walking maps remain a simple and effective way to help visitors connect with an urban area. The City’s Downtown Walking Map was first developed in 2016 for Super Bowl 50 and highlighted key destinations, transit connections, and local businesses. While the map received a few updates over the years, it has not been revised since 2020.

Staff is working with the San Jose Downtown Association to update and redesign the map. The new version features a less-cluttered design, updated points of interest, and

increased usability. The goal is to distribute the map ahead of NVIDIA's Conference in March, which is expected to draw over 25,000 visitors. Once the maps are ready, partners such as Team San Jose, Downtown hotels, the San Jose Downtown Association, and arts venues will support distribution to ensure the map reaches as many visitors as possible.

Looking ahead, staff and the San Jose Downtown Association plan to annually reevaluate the map to ensure it remains relevant. Current project funding is allocated to print 10,000 maps. Additional resources would be needed to support future map distribution.

3. San José State University and Paseo de San Antonio

The Paseo de San Antonio is a key link between San José State University (SJSU) and Downtown. It is also growing in importance as the SJSU expands, including the development of Spartan Village on the Paseo de San Antonio (formerly the Fairmont Annex), which added more than 700 student beds, and new businesses like Eos & Nyx and Urban Putt.

As part of an effort to seed improvements on the Paseo de San Antonio, the 2024-2025 Adopted Budget allocated \$25,000, to be matched by SJSU, for public realm enhancements such as wayfinding and beautification. With recent staff transitions within SJSU, City staff recently re-engaged with university staff to discuss wayfinding improvement options. These include extending SJSU's existing wayfinding totems beyond campus boundaries to the Paseo de San Antonio and a refresh of the art crosswalks along the Paseo. These discussions are still in the early stages and will continue, but staff intend to allocate funds before the end of the fiscal year.

4. Metropolitan Transportation Commission Partnership

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) is advancing regional transit wayfinding efforts. Pilot projects in El Cerrito and Santa Rosa are testing standardized signage, transit information, and mapping tools to improve multimodal connectivity. MTC has also developed draft regional wayfinding standards to create consistency across transit systems, covering signage design, placement, and digital integration. These designs and standards will be deployed across all nine Bay Area counties through a series of pilot projects scheduled for completion by 2026.

City staff continues to coordinate with MTC on these efforts and recommends expanding tactical wayfinding initiatives while investing in interactive digital tools, such as real-time transit maps, mobile-friendly navigation, and event-specific wayfinding updates. This coordination will help ensure that both temporary and long-term improvements enhance major events and align with broader transit goals.

5. Digital Kiosk Exploration

In recent years, some cities have installed advertising-supported digital kiosks within the public right of way, combining touchscreens, maps, and real-time information. These kiosks go beyond simply providing directions; they can share events, highlight local businesses, and offer public service messaging. Typically, their installation and maintenance are subsidized by advertising, with third-party vendors managing operations, which creates potential revenue opportunities for cities and private sector partners.

San José's existing sign code prohibits commercial advertising in the public right-of-way except under limited circumstances, such as temporary A-frame signs. Amending the code requires environmental analysis under the California Environmental Quality Act, as well as additional regulatory review. Staff estimates that completing these steps could take up to a year. City Council has previously provided direction to implement changes to the sign code, and staff has conducted some preliminary analysis; however, this work has not advanced due to limited staff capacity and other City Council priorities.

Despite this hurdle, staff initiated a request for an information process in fall 2024 to evaluate the feasibility and potential timeline of implementing ad-supported digital kiosks. A request for information is designed to gather information from vendors about potential solutions. Staff conducted outreach to vendors active in the digital sign sector. The request for information yielded one responsive submission and two non-responsive submissions. The responsive submission suggested revenue generation could be approximately \$30,000 per year per kiosk, with a potential roll-out of 30 to 50 kiosks throughout Downtown. However, it is unclear if that many units are truly feasible. The submission did not address regulatory restrictions related to the State of California's Outdoor Advertising Act, which limits advertising from some of Downtown's most heavily trafficked streets, nor potential gaps in existing electrical infrastructure necessary to support the kiosks.

Based on the request for information and staff research, Table 1 demonstrates a draft timeline for the steps required to facilitate ad-supported kiosks.

Table 1: Draft Project Timeline for Ad-Supported Kiosks

Step	Timeframe
Sign Code Update, including engagement	9-12 months
Request for Proposals and Contract Award	6-9 months
Planning, Design, Engineering and Permitting	3 months
Installation	9-12 months
Total	27 months to 36 months

While the request for information submissions demonstrated some interest in San José's market for digital kiosks, they were not of a quantity nor quality that would confirm the viability of the Downtown San José market. As discussed with the Community and Economic Development Committee in May 2024, the timeline above rules out the implementation of kiosks in time for major sporting events in 2026. Additionally, there is currently no staff capacity within the Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works, or the City Manager's Office of Economic Development and Cultural Affairs to manage this major initiative.

6. Preparing for Major Events in 2026

Considering the challenges with implementing permanent digital kiosks ahead of 2026, staff has also been exploring the feasibility of a *temporary* digital wayfinding pilot with non-permanent infrastructure. Conceptually, this could include deploying several portable digital kiosks at key locations (such as San Pedro Square and Plaza de Cesar Chavez). The goal would be to avoid the need for permanent infrastructure connections, making devices faster to deploy. One pathway to facilitate a kiosk pilot could be using the upcoming Special Event Zone to temporarily suspend sign code restrictions, allowing ad-supported digital wayfinding within a defined footprint for the duration of events. Truck-based digital signs, which are increasingly used for "guerilla" advertising, could also be parked in major gathering spots.

There are several uncertainties around pursuing this approach. It is unclear whether suitable temporary outdoor kiosks exist, whether vendors would express interest given the temporary nature of the opportunity, or whether a cost-neutral business model could be achieved for a short program. The Request for Information completed in late 2024 included a section requesting details on temporary digital solutions to gauge vendor interest. None of the responses provided the requested information about a temporary mobile kiosk.

To move forward with temporary digital wayfinding procurement, staff would need to initiate a Request for Proposals to assess vendor interest and feasibility in more detail. This effort would require dedicated staff resources to manage the procurement process, coordinate with vendors, assess the responses, and – if responses yield a feasible partner – oversee implementation. This would require de-prioritizing other initiatives within Downtown, such as clean-and-safe work and business development.

Therefore, staff recommends a focus on traditional wayfinding improvements including:

- Consistent branding that welcomes people to explore, beginning at the airport and Diridon Station and spreading throughout Downtown, such as:
 - Expanding the newly installed wayfinding signs to fill gaps in the network with additional destinations and messaging.
 - Installing temporary multi-sided wayfinders, similar to those used for Jazz Summer Fest.

- Adding vinyl window coverings to vacant storefronts, and construction fencing, featuring custom-designed maps and directional messaging.
- Using decals, lighting, or temporary spray paint on sidewalks to direct visitors to destinations.
- Updating and expanding printing of a Downtown walking map specifically for 2026 events.
- Coordinating with other local and regional stakeholders like the Bay Area Host Committee and Team San José, ensuring alignment on event-driven wayfinding efforts.

The tactics above are most closely aligned with existing projects and partnerships. Staff has submitted a Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Budget proposal for \$50,000 to support these efforts as part of the planning for 2026 major events.

Conclusion and Recommended Next Steps

San José's Downtown wayfinding strategy progressed over the past year by focusing on practical improvements that can be built upon in preparation for 2026 events. While staff has explored digital wayfinding solutions, the challenges -- regulatory hurdles, uncertain vendor interest, and capacity constraints -- make these options less viable in the near term. Given these constraints, staff recommends prioritizing enhancements that build on existing work, such as expanding physical wayfinding elements, improving temporary signage for major events, and leveraging partnerships with stakeholders like the San Jose Downtown Association, Team San Jose, and the Bay Area Host Committee.

COORDINATION

This memorandum has been coordinated with the City Attorney's Office, the City Manager's Budget Office, and the Department of Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement.

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