



Memorandum

TO: COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

FROM: Nanci Klein

**SUBJECT: DOWNTOWN AND REGIONAL
WAYFINDING STATUS REPORT**

DATE: May 7, 2024

Approved

Date

5/10/24

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the status report on Downtown and Regional Wayfinding efforts.

SUMMARY

This memorandum provides an overview of wayfinding concepts, a summary of wayfinding work completed to date, considerations related to ad-supported digital kiosks, and recommended next steps. Staff proposes a multi-pronged approach to improve wayfinding in the Downtown core, focusing first on low-cost street pole-based sign improvements using existing resources. Facilitating digital kiosks should be explored, pending staff capacity.

BACKGROUND

After being hit hard during the pandemic, Downtown San José is making a strong comeback, with events, conferences, and the arts driving increased foot traffic. However, Downtown still lacks a clear and comprehensive system for finding your way around. As a result, visitors – especially new or infrequent ones – often struggle to find restaurants, attractions, or amenities that may only be a few blocks away. The result is lost business activity and a sense of disorientation that detracts from the overall Downtown experience.

Staff, alongside regional partners, have been engaged in efforts to improve Downtown wayfinding over the years. In 2015, these efforts produced a Wayfinding Program Development Final Report, funded by the Knight Foundation, which laid out recommendations for a comprehensive wayfinding program. City staff then worked with a consultant to develop design language, base maps, plans, and strategies for physical wayfinding infrastructure based on static totems. Staffing changes due to the pandemic led to a pause in work progress. However, in Fiscal Year 2023-2024, the Office of Economic Development and Cultural Affairs and the Department

of Transportation staff began to explore re-launching the wayfinding program as staff capacity increased and economic activity Downtown began accelerating. These efforts include assessing current needs, resources, and lessons learned during the pandemic.

As Downtown anticipates post-pandemic growth and upcoming major public events (such as FIFA World Cup and Super Bowl 60), now is an opportune time to start afresh with wayfinding efforts, exploring new technologies, while being informed by past work.

Wayfinding Basics and Previous Work

Wayfinding describes how people orient themselves and navigate from place to place. It includes subliminal signs – such as the dome of a mosque or a recognizable monument – and literal signs pointing toward a destination. When well implemented, wayfinding can support not only navigation but also spontaneous discovery and placemaking, helping visitors develop a deeper understanding of an area. By highlighting well-traveled routes, wayfinding also supports a sense of safety and security.

Downtown San José – home to a major university, civic institutions, public spaces, arts venues, and transit infrastructure – needs a wayfinding system that serves diverse user groups, facilitating intuitive navigation, exploration, and enjoyment. Yet, it is challenging for people to find their way around Downtown San José for several reasons:

- **Varying levels of activity:** Significant gaps in the urban fabric – stretches of parking lots, blank walls, and vacant spaces – separate sub-areas and keep people from exploring.
- **Inconsistency:** Existing wayfinding signs vary in design, are often poorly maintained or outdated, and are placed inconsistently.
- **Mismatched with need:** Existing wayfinding measures are primarily auto-oriented, directing drivers to parking lots, garages, or freeways.

The 2015 Wayfinding Final Report brought focused and sustained attention to the issue, with significant engagement with partners and stakeholders. During this time Walk [Your City] was launched, a Knight Foundation-funded initiative that encouraged people to walk more through wayfinding signage. The easily implemented signs – featuring corrugated plastic construction and tied to poles with zip ties – featured arrows and slogans such as “it is a seven-minute walk to bike Guadalupe River Trail” and “it is a five-minute walk to read a book at St. James Park.” While temporary, the roughly \$25,000 pilot project was well received, demonstrating the possibility to improve wayfinding without high cost.

The four goals of the Downtown wayfinding system, as articulated in the 2015 Wayfinding Final Report, are to:

- Create a walkable Downtown at the heart of a more sustainable movement network;
- Anticipate and prepare for a changing Downtown and changing demographics;
- Communicate and enhance active, urban, and distinctly Silicon Valley lifestyle choices;
- and

- Develop the City's place values and unique sense of identity.

Over the next several years, staff worked with City ID, a design and placemaking consultancy, to develop a wayfinding program that focused on pedestrian and non-auto travel. Focused initially on static wayfinding totems, the program recommended four primary navigation categories – Arrival, Navigation, Destination, and Routes – providing a progressive disclosure of information where pedestrians need it. These efforts were refined based upon input from stakeholders, site visits and observations, user testing, and workshops.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the project timeline. As staff were redirected to emergency operations, progress on the initiative stalled, leading to a pause in the work. Prior to contract expiration in 2021, most of the budget for design services was expended to accomplish the following: a graphical design and overall brand, initial product design concepts, a base map with points of interest, and a location plan for product deployment, along with a series of community workshops and engagements. However, additional work is needed to take the design from concepts to buildable blueprints. Funding is not currently available to complete the design, fabrication, installation, or maintenance of wayfinding totems. Consequently, staff recommends not pursuing the totem-based approach at this time. Pausing also aligns with the possibility of future support for totem installations from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission as described in the Analysis section of this memorandum. In the near term, staff recommends leveraging the existing work products and insights to deploy more feasible wayfinding systems using other funding sources.

ANALYSIS

This section of the memorandum provides an overview of strategies staff is exploring to enhance wayfinding in the near term, projects in the pipeline from other agencies, considerations related to digital kiosks, and staff recommendations for the next steps.

Utilizing Bassett Project Funds: Implementing Tactical Urbanism for Wayfinding

In 2015, the City received a grant under the state's Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) program to fund new affordable housing, infrastructure, and programs that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Most visibly, the grant supported the development of Jamesi Village at 201 Bassett Street, a 135-unit affordable project from First Community Housing. However, it also included \$180,000 in funding, programmed in the 2025-2029 Proposed Traffic Capital Improvement Program, to improve pedestrian wayfinding within a one-mile radius of the St. James Light Rail Station, the AHSC project's "qualifying transit station." Providing a sense of direction and walk times to key destinations encourages people to travel by foot or bike, reducing car trips in alignment with the AHSC goals around greenhouse gas.

Staff initially began exploring utilizing the funds to deploy the City ID-developed totems near the project site. However, a totem-based project was not implementable by the grant deadline,

nor would the budget cover more than a couple of installations along with finalizing product design and base maps. As such, staff intends to leverage these funds to implement low-cost, easy-to-install wayfinding signs within the one-mile radius, an area that covers the wider Downtown district. This would entail introducing low-cost street pole signs highlighting key destinations and providing walk/bike time estimations – along the lines of the Walk [Your City] pilot but using metal signs. This approach aligns with the concept of tactical urbanism, which emphasizes proactive, community-driven solutions for neighborhood enhancement and will build on learnings gleaned through the earlier consultant work.

Metropolitan Transportation Commission Regional Project

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) is spearheading the Regional Mapping and Wayfinding Project to enhance transit accessibility and user experience across the Bay Area. MTC aims eventually to standardize wayfinding materials and streamline transit navigation across all 27 Bay Area cities. Currently, MTC is developing design standards tailored to transit needs, installing prototype signs at key hubs for user feedback, and preparing for a pilot phase in 2025-2026, starting in El Cerrito and Santa Rosa. Widespread installation at Bay Area transit stops could come by 2027. While the focus is primarily on transit connectivity, broader pedestrian wayfinding efforts can be coordinated with local jurisdictions. The agency is currently exploring a solution that integrates QR codes, so users can access updated maps and destinations on their phones, illustrating the evolving nature of wayfinding approaches and technologies. Staff will stay abreast of MTC's efforts and look for opportunities to engage and leverage funding in ways that are aligned with the City's goals to improve physical wayfinding signage not just for Downtown but citywide.

San José State University

With 40,000 students and more than 4,000 staff, San José State University is a major anchor in Downtown San José. Recently, the University has expanded into the broader Downtown, with a storefront meeting space on First Street and the acquisition of Spartan Village on the Paseo (the former Signia, née Fairmont, Annex). The latter will be home to more than 700 students, with an opening planned for fall 2024. University leaders have underscored their strong support for improved Downtown wayfinding, particularly in and around the Paseo de San Antonio, which stretches from the University to Plaza de Cesar Chavez, and its importance to building a sense of safety and vibrancy. As such, \$25,000 is included in the Fiscal Year 2024- 2025 Proposed Operating Budget to support improving the feel of Paseo de San Antonio, including through wayfinding updates. The University has also committed to allocate \$25,000 for this effort, bringing the total to \$50,000.

Ad-Driven Digital Kiosks for Enhanced Wayfinding

Staff's wayfinding efforts have so far focused on traditional, static systems. In recent years, some cities have partnered with private companies to install digital kiosks. These multifunctional kiosks feature large, bright touch screens and are usually supported by advertising, with cities receiving a portion of the revenue or other community benefits in exchange for the vendor's use

of the public right-of-way. In addition to offering maps and directions, kiosks may offer event calendars and restaurant guides while integrating with public alert systems or emergency dispatch. Some systems provide free Wi-Fi, pedestrian counting functionality, or environmental monitoring. A key advantage is their ability to instantly update maps and offer multiple language options.

However, while ad-supported digital kiosks have some advantages, they are unlikely to constitute a comprehensive solution. Because kiosks are placed in high-traffic/high-revenue areas, certain locations may be underserved; others may be off-limits due to regulations, as described below. To address this gap, static pedestrian wayfinding is essential and can facilitate seamless navigation between kiosks. Unlike their digital counterparts, static signs can consistently guide individuals walking by without their having to pause and interact with a screen. Because of this, a comprehensive wayfinding solution in Downtown San José could include ad-driven kiosks, but it must also include static wayfinding signs.

Staff researched recent digital kiosk initiatives to better understand opportunities, challenges, and processes; key takeaways are summarized below.

Revenue Generation, Term, and Maintenance

Typical agreements with kiosk vendors vary substantially in terms of the number of deployed units, length of term, functionality, revenue generation, and revenue share. In recent agreements, staff surveyed called for 20 to 50 kiosks, with the municipal revenue share estimated in the range of \$10,000 to \$20,000 per kiosk annually. This variation can reflect differences in foot traffic, as well as municipal priorities. For instance, typical agreements require a set number of ads for every one public service message. Some contracts mandate fewer ads and more public-service messaging, but that reduces the revenue generation potential.

Initial contract terms are usually at least 10 years with renewal options. Cities generally receive a share of the advertising revenue. Initially, the vendor gets a larger portion, but the municipality's share increases over time. Agreements often include a minimum guaranteed revenue base and sometimes an initial sign-on bonus to help get a system up and running. Some contracts provide for a full-time local program manager. Figure 1 provides information on deal points for recent ad-supported kiosk agreements in various cities.

Figure 1: Deal points for recent ad-supported kiosk agreements

Year	City	Kiosks	Est. Revenue Range/Kiosk	Initial term (years)
2019	Berkeley	31	\$27,000	15
2021	Houston	125	\$7,333-\$10,666	12
2022	Santa Monica	50	\$100,000	20
2022	Phoenix	20	\$14,000	5
2023	San Diego	50-75	\$29,400-\$44,000	10
2023	Miami Beach	15-30	\$20,000	10

Year	City	Kiosks	Est. Revenue Range/Kiosk	Initial term (years)
2024	Oakland	50	\$10,000	10

Maintenance and upkeep costs of ad-driven digital kiosks are higher than static wayfinding. That said, in scenarios staff studied, maintenance falls on the vendor, typically with a set period of 48 hours to remedy most issues.

Speech and Digital Privacy

Concerns relating to ad content, freedom of speech, and digital privacy have emerged in relation to digital kiosks. Some kiosks include selfie cameras and sensors, raising concerns about privacy and data sharing. In response, municipalities commonly address digital privacy in vendor agreements. Ordinances, agreements, or contracts may also restrict tobacco-, drug- or alcohol-related or violent advertisements. However, beyond these provisions, there are often minimal additional restrictions.

Implementation

While ad-supported digital kiosks could provide attractive benefits, implementation requires a significant body of work including:

- **Amending the Municipal Code.** The City’s sign code does not currently allow for commercial advertising in the public right of way. While the Department of Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement has existing City Council direction to facilitate this change, these efforts have not moved forward due to a lack of staff capacity and competing priorities. A Municipal Code change will require analysis under the California Environmental Quality Act and is expected to take approximately a year after staff capacity becomes available. This change is necessary before going out for any request for proposals.
- **Reviewing Regulatory Issues.** Caltrans regulates outdoor advertising under the authority of the state Outdoor Advertising Act, which restricts the placement of outdoor advertising near state- and federal-designated highways, including freeways and principal arterials. Examples in Downtown San José include portions of Santa Clara Street, San Carlos Street, Market Street, and First Street. Specifically, outdoor advertising is banned within the right of way of freeways and principal arterials, and the placement of such is severely limited within 600 feet of those rights of way. This law also impacts sites located within 660 linear feet of state-designated landscaped freeways. More research is needed to understand how this regulation impacts placement, but it is likely to reduce the number of possible ad-supported kiosk locations.
- **Planning for an Evolving Downtown.** Significant private development and public infrastructure is planned throughout Downtown over the next 10 years, a period that would easily cover the useful life of digital kiosks. It would be imperative to coordinate and integrate commercial kiosks with proposed improvements to ensure compatibility and avoid clutter.

- **Vendor Selection Process.** A competitive procurement through a request-for-proposals process is advised, a process that can take six months to a year to arrive at a contract. Additionally, stakeholder input is recommended to ensure community priorities are considered.
- **Implementation Planning and Logistics.** Significant staff time will be required to analyze site locations, infrastructure requirements, and coordinate across departments and agencies.
- **Exploring Potential Revenue.** While Downtown is showing strong foot traffic recovery, it is unlikely to command revenue at the high-end of surveyed cities. Additional research is needed to understand the true revenue potential of an ad-based system here.

Estimated Staff Resources for Implementation of Ad-Supported Digital Kiosks

A complete implementation of ad-supported kiosks would be staff- and time-intensive. To implement the ad-supported digital kiosks, staff estimates at least 50% of an existing full-time senior executive analyst position within the Office of Economic Development and Cultural Affairs would need to be redeployed from other activities to project manage and coordinate across multiple departments and agencies. Staff is also developing a more thorough cost estimate of time and resource needs across departments, likely including the Department of Planning, Building and Code Enforcement, the Department of Transportation, the City Attorney's Office, and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services.

Short-Term Improvement: Taking Care of What We Have

It should be noted that Downtown San José is not devoid of wayfinding. Throughout the years, the City and the former San José Redevelopment Agency have installed a variety of wayfinding sign types. However, the San Jose Downtown Association highlighted shortcomings in a recent survey that found current signs are predominantly:

- Outdated, inaccurate, and faded
- Designed for vehicles
- On the edge of Downtown
- Placed too high for pedestrian visibility

The San José Downtown Association further ranked 25% of signs in poor or very poor condition, and only 40% as in a like-new condition. Signs with outdated information make up about 30% of the signs Downtown.

Conclusion and Recommended Next Steps

While non-digital wayfinding initiatives have been the focus of previous efforts, staff recommends a dual approach going forward: enhancing pedestrian-oriented analog wayfinding while also exploring the implementation of ad-supported digital kiosks. However, effectively implementing wayfinding approaches will require additional staff capacity and/or re-prioritization, especially for the successful integration of ad-supported kiosks. The following

recommendations could be achieved using existing resources and those on the horizon; however, reductions in the 2024-2025 Proposed Budget could delay the implementation of some elements of digital wayfinding.

- **Tactical Improvements:** Use Affordable Housing Sustainable Communities grant funding of approximately \$180,000 to deploy pedestrian- and bike-oriented wayfinding signs throughout Downtown. Staff estimates that approximately 50 wayfinding signs could be implemented. At the same time, use recent research of the San Jose Downtown Association to update and declutter Downtown’s existing portfolio of out-of-date and poor-condition wayfinding signs.
- **Paseo de San Antonio Improvements:** Collaborate with San José State University to improve the pedestrian experience along the Paseo. The 2024-2025 Proposed Budget includes \$50,000 of combined San José State University and City funds to support improvements in the public realm in the Paseo area, including wayfinding.
- **Refreshing the Walking Map:** There have been significant changes since the Downtown walking map created by City ID was last updated in 2020. As large public events return to Downtown, it should be updated to serve as a base map for printed and digital applications. Some funding remaining from the previous wayfinding work could be leveraged to complete this project.
- **Further Explore Digital Kiosks Through a Request for Information and Update the Sign Code Pending Staff Capacity:** An exploratory request for information (RFI) should be conducted to further understand how a San José implementation of digital kiosks would work, costs for ad- and non-ad-based digital solutions, and potential revenue. This should be paired with work to update the sign code to allow for ad-driven digital kiosks in the public right of way. This would open the possibility of establishing ad-driven kiosks to supplement static wayfinding efforts and the potential for revenue generation¹.
- **Explore Partnership with MTC:** Staff will re-establish and maintain a strong working relationship with the MTC wayfinding team, monitoring progress on the regional implementation and integration. Staff will seek opportunities for wayfinding partnerships and funding, especially at major transit locations in advance of major public sporting events planned for 2026.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

The draft January-June 2025 Community and Economic Development Committee Work Plan currently includes an update on this item at the May 2025 meeting. This is pending approval by the Rules and Open Government Committee.

¹ The Department of Planning, Building and Code Enforcement has the capacity to begin this work in the summer based on existing staffing levels, but if the proposed reduction of one Planner I/II/III position from the Citywide Planning is adopted, the Department of Planning, Building and Code Enforcement would not have the resources to begin this work until spring 2025. Funding for the CEQA Technical Consultant is dependent on approval of related rebudgets.

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Subject: Downtown and Regional Wayfinding Status Report

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PUBLIC OUTREACH

This memorandum will be posted on the City’s website for the May 20, 2024, Community and Economic Development Committee meeting.

COORDINATION

This memorandum was 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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