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101 SECTION B

Still devoted to downtown, 25 years later

They're in their 50s now, graying at the temples and, like all of us, not quite as agile or unlined as they once were. But over the past quarter-century, they have been the soul of a business generation that helped transform downtown San Jose.



SCOTT HERHOLD
COLUMNIST

Twenty-five years ago, they were young Turks, risk-takers who formed the Downtown Association as a private-sector group to promote downtown and balance the power of San Jose's Redevelopment Agency.

"We probably landed downtown because no one else would take us," quips Chuck Hammers, who opened a pizza shop downtown. "Downtown was a ghost town."

Physically, downtown has been

remade with a \$2 billion-plus public investment. But real vibrancy is still elusive: The streets have a grittier human cast than a decade ago. And the Downtown Association recently had to end its signature "Music in the Park" program.

It's again a time of inflection, a time when you wonder who will take up the mantle for downtown. So it's worth looking back at a generation that gambled on the inner city, fighting the suburban riptide of their parents' generation.

"We were all in our 20s or 30s, and we didn't have to wait until we were 50 to get respect," said Georgie Huff, a Realtor who served as an early president of the Downtown Association. "We were more innovative, creative, and kind of willing to take

everything on."

Some people think the spark had to do with the awning at Marsugi's, a SOFA night club that hosted the band Nirvana on its way up. Marsugi's owners were having trouble getting the awning approved by City Hall, which could be fussy.

One day in 1986, a friend of the owners, freelance photographer Ray Rodriguez, went to see Dan Pulcrano, the editor of Metro, the alternative weekly.

"Ray came in said, 'We need a group that will advocate on behalf of small business,'" Pulcrano says. "I said, 'We need a downtown association.' He said, 'What's that?' So I told him."

At the tender age of 27, Pulcrano

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FACES THAT CHANGED DOWNTOWN

THEN: In their 20s and 30s, the founders pushed for revitalization



NOW: The association is a significant player on major issues



Dan Pulcrano

Scott Knies

Georgie Huff

Chuck Hammers

Herhold

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had already helped to organize a downtown association in Los Gatos. So he and Rodriguez walked the downtown streets, asking businesses to chip in \$35 each for membership. By the time the downtown association had its first meeting in October 1986, it had 40 members.

The young Turks had organized a rebellion against the Greater San Jose Small Business Association, a dedicated foe of redevelopment run by veteran merchants like Ernie Glave and Denis Hooker.

Transit mall work

The problems facing downtown, however, particularly when transit mall construction began in 1985, afflicted a range of businesses, both old and new.

The story goes that when a First Street merchant planned a sidewalk sale of his goods one day, he found his sidewalk had disappeared in construction.

For all its power and money, the redevelopment agency wasn't particularly adept at promoting downtown or dealing with ground-floor merchants.

With seed money from the agency, the Downtown Association organized a business improvement district in 1988. That same year, it brought on Executive Director Scott Knies, an ex-reporter who proved adept at navigating the political shoals of the city.

The second Downtown Association president was a youngish downtown

lawyer named Chuck Reed, who had been given the job of organizing the "second floor" tenants — the professional, white collar class. Two decades later, Reed was elected mayor of San Jose.

The young organization initially had a tenuous relationship with Frank Taylor, the powerful chief of the redevelopment agency. "Frank Taylor was like the wizard, and you had to get special permission to go talk to him," said Hammers, whose early pizza place grew into the Pizza My Heart chain.

Promotions

Ironically, the young Turks took more than a few of the king's shillings to establish an influential organization on behalf of the private sector. Aside from "Music in the Park," it sponsored the downtown ice rink, the DASH shuttle and the "Groundwerx" street beautification program.

Equally as important, the association emerged as a significant player on major issues like the heights of buildings, the future of Fountain Alley, the parking program and police enforcement in the entertainment district. All of it served as a useful counter to City Hall.

Ironically, the Downtown Association, which faces its own funding problems, has outlived the redevelopment agency, which was emasculated by Gov. Jerry Brown.

Just last week, the association fought the high-speed rail planners over their plans to bring in a nine-story-high track through the area south of Diridon Station. Denouncing the high-speed rail people as "arrogant and

uncompromising," Knies has argued that a tunnel makes more sense.

Like I say, not all has worked the way that the Downtown Association founders hoped. When Knies announced that the association was ending "Music in the Park," it was an admission that the crowds they drew were riskier than those of the '90s.

Needing help

Metro's Pulcrano argues that the association still relies too much on professional members rather than street-level merchants.

"Every downtown has a Morton's, or a Merrill Lynch office or a Bank of America. That's great," he said. "But it's the unique things that come out of owner-operated businesses that make a downtown unique. That, unfortunately, still needs help."

Yet it has been a generation of achievement, and the question now is who will succeed them. The next generation will almost certainly have a more ethnic hue, though downtown has always had an ethnic hue.

"You continue to see San Jose draw the risk-takers," says Hammers, who points to the Mendez brothers at the Mmoon Empanadas or the entrepreneurs in the San Pedro Square Market.

"There's a whole new generation of people downtown trying new things," Hammers says. "It's the past, but also the future, a place where people take risk to do business."

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