

2015 IDA AWARDS SUBMISSION – PUBLIC SPACE SOUTH PARK BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT PROJECT SUMMARY

BACKGROUND:

The South Park Business Improvement District (SPBID) in Downtown Los Angeles includes the LA Convention Center, Staples Center, LA LIVE, and an increasing residential population. The neighborhood is a vital economic driver for the City; however, despite the growing number of residents and tourists, poor district conditions prevented the area from having a walkable, pedestrian-friendly reputation. Local business suffered as a result and potential retailers – lacking satisfactory foot traffic - were discouraged from moving into the area. To directly address the problem, the SPBID formed a Strategic Plan to enhance the physical environment.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

The SPBID 2014 Strategic Plan identified three key projects to improve our public space: repairing broken sidewalks, cultivating a vibrant street tree palate, and curating public art. With the help of strategic partners from/within the community, we were able to set precedents and creatively leverage resources. These projects collectively made the pedestrian experience safer and more intriguing – ultimately increasing business activity and attracting new retailers.

Pilot Program to Eliminate Sidewalk Hazards

District sidewalks were haphazard and dangerous – and the City had no plans or funds to repair them. With trip and fall lawsuits on the rise, and BIDs being detrimentally impacted, the issue was extremely timely. Searching for an innovative solution, the SPBID identified a company to conduct a district survey, detecting 800 trip hazards that could be repaired with a unique “saw-cutting” technique. The technique had never been formally permitted in the City but was more cost-effective and less intrusive than practiced methods.

Paving the path for future sidewalk repairs of this kind, the SPBID began working with the Public Works Commissioners, Bureaus of Engineering and Street Services to conceive a pilot project—composed of the project scope, agreed-upon standards and inspection plan. The project was submitted to the City for vote and approved unanimously. During report development, the SPBID successfully lobbied City Council in approving a collaborative plan to waive all associated permit fees—making the project significantly more affordable. The total cost for the survey, city time and construction was less than \$80,000 and resulted in the elimination of 800 sidewalk trip hazards that were brought up to ADA compliance, reducing liability – all in 14 working days.

During construction, the BID met daily with the construction team, distributed notices to businesses/residents and, consequently received zero complaints. The project received numerous community accolades, culminating with a BID-organized and hosted press conference. Over 80 individuals attended, including City Officials. Covered by print news and three TV news outlets, the project was prominently featured on the nightly news. As a result of the BID-led pilot project, the City now has a formalized process for saw-cutting and allowing third party entities to facilitate their own repair projects.

Cultivating a Vibrant Street Tree Palate

As the BID began work on sidewalks, it became apparent that inconsistent and disarrayed district trees were significant contributors to sidewalk destruction, also obstructing night-time lighting and business signage, and creating an overall safety concern. With 23 new projects in the pipeline, the BID wanted a plan to build a cohesive, sustainable district identity and walkable community with an improved street tree palate. This involved:

- Taking inventory of current trees
- Identifying locations and funding to plant new trees
- Determining best tree species to plant
- Developing a long-term strategy and list of specie recommendations for future trees

The SPBID engaged and utilized strategic partnerships with the following industry experts:

- Professional landscape architects – Determined most viable tree species

- LA Conservation Corps – (Non-profit group) Conducted tree well survey
- City pLAnts – (Grant-funded city entity) Planted and paid for tree-planting cost
- City Department of Urban Forestry – Approved tree selection
- Local Council Office – Conducted free tree-trimming

Over 8 months, the coalition met to conduct a district walk and survey and develop a formal list of specie recommendations, resulting in:

- 19 new street trees planted
- 38 new tree wells identified
- A formal “District Street Tree Palette” recognized by the City, and distributed to developers
- Street tree-trimming expedited by the City

By leveraging partnerships and resources in an unprecedented way, the entire project cost the BID zero dollars. The collaborative partnership is now being cited by the Planning Department as a model example of how other BIDs can cultivate neighborhoods at the most local level.

Curated a Cultural Destination

With the larger goal of beautifying the built environment, the SPBID simultaneously developed a vision to transform the neighborhood into a cultural destination. A comprehensive strategic plan was formed through a dynamic partnership with the non-profit, Do Art Foundation, to curate district art and develop an inclusive cultural narrative for the neighborhood – one characterized by movement, growth and diversity.

Success depended on identifying additional partnerships with:

1. Property owners willing to offer their sites as canvas’
2. Corporate sponsors to donate items like anti-graffiti coating, boom lifts and materials
3. City entities like the Department of Cultural Affairs

The BID proactively reached out to property owners to explain the projected ROI, and encourage investment in the community. Sometimes met with initial resistance, Do Art solicited artists and presented owners with examples to illustrate the (conversion) potential of a rundown building. If an owner decided to move forward, the SPBID would host a community meeting to garner community feedback and approval, and eventually present the design to the City for formal acceptance.

The resounding results are seven completed large-scale murals and nearly \$120,000 committed in-kind sponsorships from organizations like Hertz and Blick. Inspired property owners have also made large-scale investments--the largest to date being \$115,000 for three faces of his seven story parking structure. Art plans for utility boxes and construction fencing have also been solidified. The entire South Park collection was recognized at a recent launch event for Google’s Street Art program and is displayed on Google’s Cultural Institute online. The neighborhood’s increasing recognition as a cultural destination spurred the Special Olympics LA 2015 Games to approach the BID with an offer to install two fully-funded murals in the neighborhood to be a part of the torch press event.

The success of our program has inspired others to form similar partnerships and curate their neighborhood stories through art. Tourists and businesses have expressed gratitude in the transformation of formally distressed, ugly buildings into destinations that have enhanced their experience and business. The art program has only cost the BID \$4,000 to date.

CONCLUSION

While each one of these components seems different in nature, they collectively transformed South Park into a safe, beautiful and desirable neighborhood for pedestrians and businesses alike. Each component started with a strategic vision, involved key strategic partnerships, and fundraising efforts to forge an innovative, flexible and replicable path for other BIDs. An engaged community supported this project from start to finish--producing an enhanced and very pleased neighborhood. The entire project was completed by the BID for under \$90,000