

“State of Downtown Austin”
Mayor Lee Leffingwell

Thank you for that kind introduction, David. While I’m sure you’re up to it, I must say that you have big shoes to fill.

As DAA Chair, Tom Stacy has been a frequent visitor to my office since I became Mayor. I know he has devoted countless volunteer hours to supporting downtown Austin and the DAA, and I want to ask you to please join me now in giving Tom a round of applause in recognition of his service.

Thanks very much to the DAA for hosting this annual luncheon, and for inviting me to speak to you today. As everyone here knows, the DAA does a truly extraordinary job of promoting downtown Austin as a great place to live, work and play.

So, I want to take a minute to recognize my friend – and former McCallum High School basketball star –Charlie Betts; all of the DAA Board members; and all of the hard-working DAA staff.

What you all do makes a big difference for Austin, and I want to ask all of you from the DAA to please stand up right now so we can see you, and give you the round of applause that you deserve.

Now, in order to manage your expectations of me as a keynote speaker, I want to remind you that for over 30 years, I was a commercial airline pilot. And while I did give several speeches every day, they were all about 30 seconds long, and focused almost entirely on the weather.

So I’ll do my best here today to deliver something slightly longer, and a little more substantial. However, if I do slip back into my old ways and begin to give you a weather report, please assume that I’m speaking metaphorically.

You know, when I saw the invitation to today’s lunch, I really took note of the unique cover graphic. In the image, the sun is resting on downtown’s horizon.

In silhouette, we see the outlines of Austin’s newest high-rises – the 360; the Ashton; and the Austonian, which will be the tallest residential tower west of the Mississippi River.

That skyline image on the invitation reminded me of just how much Austin has changed since my youth.

As David mentioned earlier, I am one of those rare creatures commonly called the “Austin Native.” I also recently celebrated a milestone birthday. Let’s just say that it wasn’t my 40th.

As I think back over all those decades of watching Austin grow and change, the most striking and really unusual transformation has happened downtown.

In the downtown of my youth, the State Capitol dominated the skyline. The tall buildings were pretty much all on Congress Avenue, or at the University of Texas. And, they really weren't all that tall – I was just short.

But that downtown Austin – the downtown of the 1940s and 1950s – was a beehive of activity. There was shopping and entertainment of every kind, on every corner. There were people everywhere, all the time – including people who actually lived downtown.

Downtown was fun, it was active, it was colorful, it was exciting, and it was safe. My parents thought nothing at all of us kids going downtown by ourselves to spend a hot summer afternoon watching movies at the Queen Theatre on Congress Avenue.

But over the years, things began to change. With the explosive growth of the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, downtown gradually become more ghost-town. By the 1980s, to be very frank, downtown Austin was just plain lame. A lot like the 1980s themselves.

I know that many of you here today remember that downtown Austin. Lots of empty storefronts. Lots of empty office buildings. Lots of empty streets and sidewalks. And certainly not the kind of place you would send your kids by themselves.

But then, in the early 1990s, an effort to revitalize downtown got traction, and gained steam. In 1993, the DAA public improvement district was approved by the City Council, creating new resources and new leadership for downtown.

And while he certainly wasn't the first person to champion downtown, in 1997, Mayor Kirk Watson – you may have heard of him – delivered the kind of clear vision and strong leadership that really got the revitalization effort moving.

He said that downtown was Austin's Living Room – and we got it. He said that downtown was an economic engine, not just for Austin, but for the entire region – and we got it. He said that we needed Smart Growth to help protect our environment and our unique culture – and we got it.

But during his time as Austin mayor, Kirk did more than just talk – he took action. He not only changed the way we viewed downtown, he also rolled up his sleeves and went to work, laying the foundation for much of what is happening downtown today.

He pushed for what eventually became the CSC Buildings, the AMLI on 2nd Street, and the Gables on West Avenue. He also worked to expand the Convention Center, to build the Hilton hotel, to redevelop the Long Center, to build Palmer, and to create Butler Park. And, he made the vision of a new City Hall a reality.

What Kirk achieved was game-changing for downtown. And his work paved the way for another Austin mayor, Will Wynn, to keep pushing hard for downtown revitalization.

Will had been Chair of the DAA Board, and had worked on many downtown redevelopment projects, so it was natural for him to aggressively promote downtown as mayor.

Personally, I believe that one of the most important things Will did for downtown was to issue a simple, but memorable, call to action – and that was to have 25,000 residents living in downtown Austin by 2015. That one challenge – made right here, at this event, in 2005 – truly captured people’s imagination.

But like Kirk, Will also did more than just talk the talk – he walked the walk. Literally. During his tenure as mayor, Will actually moved downtown, albeit to a shabby little place called the Austin City Lofts. And on most days he walked to work at City Hall – occasionally stopping for a friendly chat with local construction workers.

Especially after he took up residence downtown, Will also began to champion the environmental benefits of living in downtown Austin. “Oh my god!” he would say. “Water use per capita plummets! Energy use per capita plummets! Miles traveled per capita plummets!”

If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard Will Wynn tell someone how low his monthly electric bill is now, I could pay his monthly electric bill.

But Will not only led by example, but he also delivered on some critical downtown projects. Not the least of those was converting Cesar Chavez into a 2-way street – something thousands of drivers, including me, now thank him for.

Will also oversaw the de-commissioning of the Green Water Treatment Plant, which opened up 6.3 acres in the heart of downtown for dense, mixed-use redevelopment. And, he led the way on execution of the Seaholm Master Development Agreement. The redeveloped Seaholm will be a downtown centerpiece.

And while there are many people to thank and recognize for that, the bottom line is that Seaholm, Green, 2nd Street, the Convention Center, and so many other key components of today’s downtown owe a lot to the leadership of these two great mayors.

And make no mistake about it, we have been seeing something incredible happening in downtown Austin. Just listen to these numbers:

In the last five years alone, downtown has added almost 3,500 residential units; more than 5,000 new residents; about 875,000 square feet of office space; over 1,200 hotel rooms; and nearly 250,000 square feet of retail space.

We've also recently seen some great new downtown projects come to completion, like the Cesar Chavez Esplanade – and to near-completion, like the Red Line. Anyway, the Red Line had better be near completion.

Looking ahead, there are a lot of even more exciting developments on downtown's horizon.

Even in this very tough economy, downtown Austin is adding another 800 residential units. The Austonian, the Four Seasons Residences, and the "W" Hotel and Residences will open soon. The "W" will also feature the new Austin City Limits studio, in the heart of downtown.

Next to Republic Square, the dirt has been turned on a new \$60 million dollar Federal Courthouse. And in the next 24 months, we'll break ground on the new Austin Central Library, a \$100 million dollar plus project, just west of Shoal Creek.

On the east side of downtown, we are making great strides on the Waller Creek tunnel project. The tunnel is now scheduled for completion in 2014, and will create huge new development opportunities, in an area that desperately needs it.

In particular, I hope and expect that the Waller Creek project will be transformative for one of downtown's major employers, University Medical Center Brackenridge. My hope is that in ten years, Brack will go from being most of a Medical School to being a full Medical City, and an anchor for east downtown.

We are also now breaking ground on the Brazos Street re-construction, which will be followed by the Colorado Street re-construction, and then the 3rd Street re-construction. These projects will help transform these corridors into Great Streets, with great promise.

And, we are fully engaged right now in some critical planning efforts that either center on downtown, or else will have a very big impact on downtown.

Most folks here probably know that the Downtown Plan is in Phase II, and will ultimately provide a blueprint for how we grow our downtown. We have also now launched a citywide Strategic Mobility Plan to identify gaps in our transportation system, and address them. The results of that plan will, no doubt, touch on downtown Austin in a major way.

But even with these big projects and near-term planning efforts underway, we can never stop looking ahead to downtown's distant horizon. After all, the lesson of the 60s, 70s, and 80s is that we can easily screw up a good thing, unless we stay proactive in our effort to make downtown even better.

Perhaps most importantly, we have to work hard to continue to promote the fact that a thriving downtown is beneficial to the whole city. Too often, I think the growth and

change that happens downtown becomes emblematic for those people who don't want to see Austin change, period.

As a native, I understand that nostalgia for old Austin. And, as I've said before, I sometimes think civilization was a big mistake in the first place. But when it comes to downtown, resistance to change flies in the face of the greater good.

The truth is, downtown Austin exports an enormous amount of property and sales tax revenue – revenue that we use to pay for vital public services in every part of the city. A thriving downtown equals safe, livable neighborhoods, all across Austin.

So we need to continually combat the notion that downtown development is bad; that downtown is already over-developed; or that we put too much focus on downtown. It's not, it isn't, and we don't.

In addition to delivering this message, we also need to deliver real, on-the-ground improvements to downtown Austin over the years ahead. I'll briefly mention three specific priorities.

First, as we continue to implement the Great Streets Program, we should also be making regular, significant investments in our existing downtown sidewalks. Sidewalks tell you a lot about a city's priorities, and ours should not be in a state of disrepair.

Second, I believe downtown Austin still has enormous untapped potential as a convention destination. We've made important strides with big investments in our Convention Center, the Palmer Events Center, and the Bergstrom Airport. The bottleneck is accommodations. That means it's time to get serious about attracting more large-scale hotel capacity to downtown Austin.

Finally, we must take real action now to fix our transportation problems downtown. Specifically, we need a downtown circulator system that works, so people who drive their cars downtown can park once, and then easily get around the entire central business district.

For almost a year now, I've been calling for a 2010 transportation bond election, which would include an Urban Rail system that would act as that downtown circulator. Our transportation team at City Hall is working hard right now to craft that Urban Rail proposal, and I'm cautiously optimistic that we can do so in time for November 2010.

I do know that some people are skeptical of rail. For those people, I would ask only that you study our Urban Rail proposal objectively when the time comes – and then decide to support it. But whether you are a skeptic or supporter of Urban Rail, I hope you will agree with me that doing nothing to fix our downtown transportation problem is not an option.

Because, ladies and gentlemen, the future of downtown Austin is simply too important to leave to chance. Yes, we have made great strides in the right direction. Thanks to the hard work of so many people – including many here in this room today – the state of downtown Austin is strong, and getting stronger every day.

But there is always more work to do. If we do it right, the downtown of 2020 will make the downtown of 1940 look like the downtown of 1980.

There is no doubt that the economic picture today is a little cloudy. In the near-term, we're likely to experience some uncertainty, and perhaps some setbacks. The ride could be a little bumpy just ahead. But even though it may be partly cloudy here now, I'm extraordinarily confident that the weather at our destination will be sunny, clear and very, very cool.

Thank you very much.