



Mpls Downtown Improvement District

INNOVATION

The program was designed to reanimate a space that people had trained themselves to avoid for nearly three years—to bring people down from the skyways and back to the street. The audience was the entire downtown community—anyone who lives, works, visits, shops, worships and plays downtown. It's the broadest and most diverse population in our region across every demographic and economic measure. Direct outreach and engagement to these populations was necessary in order to discover what the public was looking for from activation offerings. Listening sessions with neighborhood groups, talking to downtown workers over lunch, and hearing from community organizations and social service agencies about needs and opportunities was essential. Mpls Downtown Improvement District (DID) became a catalyst for efforts that partners had been ideating but unable to execute. If the idea brought positive activity to the street, staff were eager to engage in a conversation about how to make it happen. This strategy built immediate partner buy-in and collective impact value. Because Minneapolis has an extraordinarily strong arts ecology, many of the activities leaned on arts- and artist-centered activities and organizations. DID also debuted a first of its kind Pop-Up Satellite Office in a vacant storefront on Nicollet, open 9am to 9pm, Monday through Friday, and 3pm to 9pm on Saturdays. From the Pop-Up, DID deployed games and activities, provided drop in connections to Ambassadors, directly engaged the community, hosted a public restroom and provided space for the Livability Team to engage folks in need.

OUTCOME

DID's leadership (made up of commercial ratepayers) has been overwhelmingly supportive of the first-year results—amazed at all that was achieved. This provides continued organizational support for dedicated activation resources. DID evaluated efforts with audience counts, participant surveys, situational observation, direct feedback and programmatic deep-dives with partners. This allowed DID to nimbly address challenges and improve results. Key programs and partnerships continue to-date and are growing stronger and more strategic (another success marker). Collaboration is beginning on launching a Downtown Street Art Festival in 2019. Street Show—the curated street performer program, which offered more than 630 hours of sidewalk performances—continues. It received earned media attention and spawned a Facebook group for buskers. More performers are coming to Nicollet on their own, and a command performance by a city council member provides inspiration for other celebrity performers. And the program's success in mitigating “hot spots” has garnered vocal support from local law enforcement and informed the location and timing of the upcoming season. The outcomes from the Pop-Up Office and our deepening relationships with downtown communities are incalculable, but more than 470 written comments and 780 votes were recorded to prompts on everything from activation to safety, greening to transportation, smoking to public restrooms. This feedback was shared with leadership and guides DID's work in 2019. The challenges of programming the Theater in the Round led to a new partnership and spawned a mentorship program that received state grant funds to present four innovative commissions there in 2019.

EXECUTION

Programming efforts began in early 2017 with robust engagement with downtown communities and early identification of key partners and potential collaborators. By mid-2017 several activations (sidewalk performances, pop-up craft markets, audio tours and mobile libraries) were prototyped. These tests were key to establishing effective partnerships, level-setting the scope of the challenge, determining resource levels and building stakeholder buy-in. They also helped make the case for placemaking among important influencers, including police leadership, who became vocal supporters of these strategies as game changers downtown. By spring 2018 (with Super Bowl LII's million visitors in our rearview mirror), DID had a rich season of activation still to come. Key partners were full-on collaborators in the effort, activation equipment was purchased and deployed, and more boots and ground (i.e. paid interns) brought added capacity. The Pop-Up Office opened and began redefining DID's relationship to the public. By the end of the year, Nicollet had hosted more than 1,100 hours of events/programs, including 638 hours of Street Show performances, 12 bi-monthly Nicollet Makers Markets, 12 performances at the Nicollet Theater in the Round, and four self-guided audio tours (including Weird Nicollet) that were available 24 hours daily.

REPRESENTATION

DID worked with more than 35 strategic partners, including downtown businesses and neighborhood, community, arts and service organizations—building relationships of trust, clearly defining goals, and centering collaborations on the common actions that all partners could take together to achieve activated streets. These partners, many of whom have deep relationships with underserved communities, help DID inclusively serve audiences who don't typically have a voice in these discussions. As an example, DID partnered with zAmya Theater Project, a community theater whose performers either currently or previously experienced homelessness. With DID support, zAmya conducted "Dramatic Encounters" on Nicollet sidewalks—short lunchtime micro-performances about homelessness. These vignettes formed the basis of a full-length play "Second Chances," performed for 400 people later in the season at the Theater in the Round. DID's Livability and Activation teams partner closely to adapt operations to livability concerns, working side by side during events to ensure people feel safe and included. More than 1,500 people from all walks of life participated in DID's weekly open houses at the Pop-Up. These Tuesday afternoon events (July through October), welcomed communities with free lemonade and popcorn, as well as opportunities to talk with Ambassadors, and share thoughts and experiences about downtown.

REPLICATION

Nicollet activation continues to this day, including the annual Springtacular launch, Makers Market, Bike Library and Street Show. Other programs, including winter activation, are evolving and growing. The collective impact partnership model and Nicollet Activation Strategy (see below) allow DID to respond strategically to activation opportunities and practically guide staff and financial resource commitments. Street performance programs may not be original, but having community partners curate performer selection, paying and outfitting those performers, and the use of little red wagons, signage and provided gear are new, and worked superbly to support musicians and performers—providing cues to property owners and audiences that ensured success. DID has shared these learnings with other BIDs in informational conversations and will be hosting this material on a website in the coming year. Commercial ratepayers could view BID storefront operations as a waste of critical resources, but DID has learned that the efficiencies of operating it, the open door to communities and stakeholders, the ready storage and deployment of activation gear, the access to Ambassadors and the synergies with deploying Livability outreach, mean a storefront operation is not only NOT impractical, but the very the best solution.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

With the \$50 million public investment in the new Nicollet, there was a tremendous amount of interest in what would happen after the construction was complete. Would public trust be upheld and the new spaces deliver on the promise? DID had the foresight to recognize that even well-designed public spaces need to be intentionally programmed to be successful, and to lean into activating the street. The pitch to the public and ratepayers was that with a strong design, an answer to managing livability issues and a strong activation program, the reanimation of Nicollet would be assured. DID ratepayers were increasingly relying on activation to deliver on its promise of providing a vibrant and safe downtown. This meant a tremendous amount of interest and scrutiny in the burgeoning program. A clear Nicollet Activation Strategy was developed to clarify DID's role in leading activation—ATTRACT activities that support a vibrant Nicollet, AMPLIFY partner activities to expand their scale and impact, INCUBATE activities to self-sustain over time and CREATE activities that fill in the gaps. Expectations were managed with routine updates to stakeholders, presentations and in-person. A modest marketing strategy, a website, email newsletters, social media and physical signage were deployed as well.