

POLITICS & POLICY

What's Wrong With Downtown Dallas?

Violent crime is up. Street life is often lacking. Can a \$3.7 billion convention center expansion transform the fortunes of the city's central business district?

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Near a McDonald's in the heart of downtown Dallas, developer Ray Washburne walks along Griffin Street, laying out a vision for a "great, grand avenue" to reshape the city's core. He imagines a narrower road with wide, tree-lined sidewalks to create a scenic walkway stretching some two miles, from the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center northward to Uptown and the popular Katy Trail hike-and-bike path.

Businesses and “affordable housing and workforce housing and student housing,” he says, would pop up along the way. He brings up Mexico City’s iconic Paseo de la Reforma as an example, but he also pulls out his phone to share pictures of bike lanes and shaded sidewalks in downtown Indianapolis, to show that such transformations aren’t solely for cosmopolitan global capitals.

Today this part of Dallas looks nothing like Mexico City—or Indianapolis. Along Griffin Street, commuters speed along six lanes of traffic to reach one of the highways that encircle downtown. The sidewalks are almost entirely devoid of trees and pedestrians, and the emptiness makes the hulking convention center, a few blocks south, feel much farther. The Katy Trail might as well be in another city.

As a developer, Washburne is best known for having overseen renovations of the **historic Highland Park Village**, long a shopping and dining destination for Dallas’s upper crust. But he has also invested about \$75 million downtown. He’s planning to build a 180-room Embassy Suites hotel on the site of a Greyhound bus station and modernize an office building called Founder’s Square to attract new tenants. The former *Dallas Morning News* headquarters, which he also owns, will be sold to a data-center company.

Washburne worries that Dallas leaders aren’t thinking big enough (city hall is past “its useful life,” he says, suggesting it should be razed to “put the casino right there” if the Legislature ever legalizes gambling) or small enough (“I want to feel safe walking, and I want to feel shaded”) to revive downtown. “You’ve got to be on the cutting edge. You just can’t sit and let it pass you by,” he says. “Things have passed us by for twenty-five years.”

By some measures, downtown Dallas has improved significantly over the last quarter century. Its residential population surpassed 15,000 in 2023, according to the nonprofit booster organization **Downtown Dallas Inc.** That’s up from fewer than 500 in the late nineties and more than double the 2010 population. The neighborhood has added multiple museums and performance venues and roughly **twenty acres of parks**. Townhomes and restaurants now surround the redeveloped **Farmers Market**. In 2022, voters approved a hotel tax increase to pay for a **convention center renovation and expansion**, with city leaders saying that the \$3.7 billion investment will revitalize the same portion of downtown where Washburne owns property and would like to see Griffin remade as a grand boulevard.

Yet downtown Dallas’s population density, of roughly 10,000 per square mile, lags behind those of the city centers of some smaller places, including Miami (24,000 per square mile) and Kansas City, Missouri (close to 13,000 per

square mile). Office vacancy rates downtown are worse than elsewhere in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro, which has among the worst in the country. Some 90 percent of Dallas-area residents view homelessness downtown as a significant issue, according to a recent perception survey by Downtown Dallas Inc. And the neighborhood lacks a supermarket. One of two locations of Berkley's Market, the closest thing downtown has to a grocery store, shuttered in September. "Them closing is pretty painful and a little scary," said Krista Nightengale, who has lived in the Wilson building on Main Street with her husband since 2010.

Nightingale describes downtown as the busiest it's been since she moved there. "We go outside, and we see tons of people walking around, and I hear a lot of languages. You see a lot of different ages," she said. Yet she shares many of the same concerns as Washburne, worrying that the existing shops and housing are geared too much to the wealthy and that commuter-oriented streets spoil downtown's livability. "I think it plays to this theme," Nightengale said. "Who is downtown built for? And who should it be built for?"

Downtown's glory days are preserved on a 1955 film reel produced by the Dallas Citizens Traffic Commission, a now-defunct interest group. "This is Dallas, a towering tribute to man's ability to raise beam on beam and stone on stone," a man's voice announces over a wide shot of the skyline. Soon the camera cuts to a downtown crosswalk on a sunny day as dozens of pedestrians swarm into the street—far more than you're likely to see on a corner in the course of an entire half hour today. To the Citizens Traffic Commission, the bustling scene represented a congestion problem for nascent suburbanites, one to be solved with highways to swiftly funnel traffic in and out.

As happened in many major American cities, Dallas soon surrounded its downtown with interstates. Many small-business storefronts and much of the neighborhood's Theatre Row were razed and replaced by towering skyscrapers and parking garages. A network of underground tunnels between buildings, featuring shops and restaurants, was built to shield pedestrians from summer's scorching heat. The result was a sapping of the neighborhood's street-level vibrancy. "Very few people lived downtown [in the nineties], and at five o'clock you could see the streets were pretty deserted, and it was kind of a ghost town," said Paul Ridley, a city councilman whose district includes part of downtown.

The neighborhood's recent renaissance began in 1999, with the redevelopment of the early-twentieth-century **Kirby Building** into apartments, converting office space into residences. Since then, nearly five thousand housing units **have been constructed** inside repurposed structures, according to Downtown Dallas Inc.

But the upsurge in remote work brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for central business districts throughout the country, including those in Texas. Many who formerly commuted daily haven't returned to offices since the threat of the virus subsided. Anonymous **cellphone data** analyzed by Philadelphia's Center City District for 26 large American cities showed that 69 percent of Dallas's downtown workers—excluding those who live downtown—had returned to offices in the fall of 2024, when compared to data for the same period in 2019. That placed Dallas in the middle of the pack, at about the same level as Austin and Houston. Downtown San Antonio, downtown Nashville, and Midtown Manhattan had seen the most workers return—more than 80 percent.

Dallas's citywide office-vacancy rate **was 24 percent** in December—more than four percentage points above the national average, according to the real estate-data company CommercialEdge. In downtown, vacancies were **at about 32 percent** last fall, and not all of Dallas's skyscrapers can be converted for other uses. “We have some stock of older-era eighties buildings that are going to be challenging,” said Jennifer Scripps, president and CEO of Downtown Dallas Inc.

In September, developers Mike Ablon and Mike Hoque **agreed to purchase** one of those structures, Bank of America Plaza, the city's tallest building. Their \$350 million redevelopment plan includes a hotel, a sky deck on one of the highest floors, and restaurants, but most of the space will continue to house offices. With a more convenient parking garage and improved amenities, Ablon hopes to attract tenants who might otherwise pick Uptown or a suburban location. He believes most companies will eventually return to offices in full force.

Even in a best-case scenario, though, leading urbanist Richard Florida is uncertain Dallas's downtown office market will fully recover, noting long commute times for suburbanites. Plus, a model taking shape for residents of the Sun Belt, he said, involves living and working entirely at home: “It's let me buy a big house in the suburbs or exurbs with a gymnasium, a home theater, two offices, play spaces for my kids, a big backyard with outdoor space and a play structure, and maybe a pool.” Referred to as the **“one-minute city,”** it's the antithesis of the urban planning concept of a walkable “fifteen-minute city.”

What's missing from the one-minute city concept is social interaction. So Florida believes American downtowns should emphasize their connectivity and entertainment options to attract residents and visitors. Last year, the global architecture and planning firm Gensler released a survey finding that the characteristics most predictive of a successful downtown are whether it is a great place to have fun and to discover new things. Seventy-five percent of the survey's Dallas respondents said the city's downtown was a good place to have fun, and 73 percent said it was a good place for discovery, but those numbers ranked in the middle of the pack of three dozen comparable cities—and below Austin and Houston.

Now Dallas is betting big on the transformative powers of its **overhaul of the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center**. Construction is expected to be completed by 2029, and some forty-plus conventions **have already been booked** for that year or later. Florida said the renovation could spur new entertainment options downtown, citing Nashville's convention center, built in 2013, as an example. But in Nashville, honky-tonk-lined Broadway is a block away. Dallas's convention center stands near several restaurants and bars, inside the adjoining Omni Hotel, but is otherwise surrounded by city hall, federal office buildings, and several parking lots along relatively lifeless Griffin, Lamar, and Young Streets.

Dallas convention center boosters argue that downtown will start seeing more dining, entertainment, and even housing options because of the renovation. "It's going to be the first domino that will create a dynamic part of our city, and it will have a catalytic effect for everything around it," said Craig Davis, president and CEO of Visit Dallas.

Yet many urban planning scholars **have long questioned** whether the projected economic impacts of convention centers are as robust as municipalities claim. And even some who support the redo in Dallas doubt that such a revitalization will succeed if the city can't do the small things to make downtown more livable.

Nightengale and I were drinking lattes on the corner of Elm and Ervay when a driver blared a car horn at somebody trying to cross the street. The vehicle narrowly avoided the pedestrian. It could've been worse: Nightengale's apartment overlooks this intersection, and she frequently hears crashes, which she attributes to the convergence of one-way streets. "It just creates this environment that's not safe, as a pedestrian walking in the area," she says.

One-way streets are intended to reduce traffic congestion but are also known for encouraging speeding. Almost everyone I interviewed brought up their dislike for Elm and Commerce Streets (both one-ways), often unprompted. In 2011, the city council adopted the 360 Plan for downtown, which, among other ideas, recommended making Elm and Commerce safer and more welcoming for businesses, but no significant changes have happened yet.

Nightengale sees designs similarly hostile to pedestrians throughout the neighborhood. These include the walls around Thanks-Giving Square and the fences around developer and oilman Tim Headington's giant eyeball sculpture and luxury boutique Forty Five Ten. While she declines to opine on whether Dallas's investment in the convention center will pay off, she generally questions the city's penchant for prioritizing "big, flashy stuff" for visitors over improving livability. Take, for instance, the downtown Arts District, which received abundant public funding for its museums, opera house, and symphony center but—aside from Klyde Warren Park, on the district's border—is mostly lacking in street life.

"What I see in cities that seem to have successful, bustling downtowns—they were built and designed with residents in mind," said Nightengale, who travels often as executive director of the nonprofit neighborhood-development group Better Block. "What residents enjoy living in, tourists like to see as well. Whereas designing a city for tourists and maybe we'll have some residents come in—it doesn't work as well."

Mark Lamster, the *Dallas Morning News* architecture critic and a former downtown resident, believes there are "a million ways" to better spend \$3.7 billion than on a convention center. It's not that he thinks the renovation will be a bust. But if the goal is to revive a moribund section of downtown, he thinks Dallas should simply invest in specific amenities rather than hope an expensive convention center helps catalyze them. "If you want to make Dallas a better place, make it a better place by fixing the streets first and foremost, fixing the sidewalks," he said. "Plant more trees. Change the tax structure so there aren't so many parking lots. Get rid of insidious parking requirements. . . . Build more housing, especially affordable housing."

The city has lately considered the elimination of parking minimums for developers as a way to stimulate more housing and businesses. And in 2021, it established the Dallas Housing Opportunity Fund to invest in affordable housing (\$41.5 million so far). In downtown, 10 percent of units in subsidized developments have to be set aside as affordable housing. That share, however, is less than the 20 percent required of eligible developments in almost every other Dallas neighborhood.

In the 2024 Downtown Dallas Inc. perception survey, the neighborhood's residents weren't pining for event venues like a new convention center; they mostly wanted doctors and a grocery store. Such concerns unite both residents and developer Washburne, who is poised to benefit from the convention center's overhaul.

On a walk through downtown, Washburne could barely go a half block without a critique: Businesses putting trash on Main Street's sidewalks in the middle of the day. Sidewalks in need of power washing. A wall needlessly blocking the Civic Garden. He believes downtown parks are too often empty and need more organized activities, like yoga. "The bones of downtown are there," Washburne said. "It's just you have to have some kind of vision of how to glue all these parts together."

Such small touches can make a difference: Entertainment and connectivity don't have to mean major projects. Sofia Song, the global leader of cities research at Gensler's Research Institute, said people also associate fun, surprise, and discovery—the attributes they're most seeking in downtowns—with walkability, little shops in alleyways, street furniture, cleanliness, and a perception of safety. The latter has recently been a concern downtown. Overall crime in the neighborhood rose 17 percent between 2021 and 2024. And violent crime spiked 45 percent between 2023 and 2024, according to police data.

Homelessness is also cited as a problem by downtown residents, with nearly half of those surveyed telling Downtown Dallas Inc. they believed the issue worsened from 2023 to 2024. Downtown is home to the Bridge Homeless Recovery Center and the Stewpot, which provide resources to the homeless, and it's common to encounter homeless residents camping in parks and on otherwise empty sidewalks.

The city, working with Downtown Dallas Inc. and nonprofits, has ramped up efforts to resettle homeless residents during the last year, assisting more than one hundred in the summer and fall, according to Jesse Moreno, a city councilman whose district includes portions of downtown. A longtime encampment outside the Central Library, across from city hall, is no longer there. Moreno views enforcement of loitering and panhandling as "a last resort" after rehousing attempts. "At the end of the day, we're not going to ticket ourselves out of this," he said.

Developer Shawn Todd, whose firm has helped repurpose thirty downtown properties into housing, retail, and office space since 2006, acknowledged the improved rehousing efforts and the need to care for homeless residents with compassion. But he said city officials have failed to adequately enforce

ordinances against panhandling and loitering, which allows perceptions of a lack of safety to fester. “The focus of these laws that are on the books are to help these people,” he said, “to help them get off the streets and bring them to a place that can get them help and assistance.”

Todd believes weak enforcement of laws concerning vagrancy could stunt the development of downtown Dallas. “We’re at a very serious tipping point right now,” he said.

Shortly after Nightengale moved into the Wilson building, she was astonished by nearby Main Street Garden’s choice of holiday decor. The park, she recalls, displayed a hideous metal Christmas tree. It felt as though the city thought anybody who wanted to live downtown was a futuristic weirdo with avant-garde tastes.

During recent Christmas seasons, the park has had a green tree, albeit an artificial one, symbolizing to Nightengale a realization that downtown doesn’t have to be a vastly different space from the rest of the city and the suburbs. “We all really love green stuff too,” she said. Although her apartment building is mainly populated by young professionals, she’s routinely waited for the DART bus with a teenager on her way to high school in Oak Cliff. Twins have grown up in her building. An elderly woman lives there now.

Florida, the urbanist, said just about every American downtown needs to appeal to a wider spectrum of ages and embrace families. Where he lives, in Toronto, families are all over downtown. Remaking downtown in Dallas or some other Texas cities into something as welcoming requires fostering activity, entertainment, and connection. But also good schools, plentiful housing options, adequate streets, and safety.

It’s a vision that suits Washburne. In the end, he’s optimistic and would like downtown Dallas to achieve a simple-sounding goal—one that has eluded it for most of the city’s recent existence. It just needs to be, he said, “a great neighborhood.”