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Cover story

Exclusive: Swenson reveals vision for dramatic transformation of San Jose's Guadalupe River area

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Though downtown San Jose may be in the midst of a building boom, Case Swenson says the city's urban core hasn't hit the "critical mass" it needs — but he has a vision to get there.

Swenson, president of the prolific San Jose builder and developer of the same name, has released a 23-page document outlining how a 30-acre stretch surrounding the Guadalupe River could be transformed into a massive, 6.81 million-square-foot mixed-use development.

The group, with help from three other local design firms, spent four years and between 1,200 and 1,500 man-hours refining the vision before releasing it this week, though Swenson said he's been mulling the idea for decades.

"I'm about as pro-San Jose as a guy can get," he said. "We've always needed that critical mass ... and what happened was we took the critical mass and we moved it to Santana Row."

San Jose-based Studio Current and Mayberry Workshop and San Francisco-based CMG Landscape Architecture also worked on the report and renderings.

Early renderings show an urban village, which Swenson is calling The District, tucked between West Santa Clara Street, Autumn Parkway, West Julian Street and Highway 87. The project would connect the Diridon transit station — where Google is considering building a multimillion-square-foot campus — to San Jose's Little Italy neighborhood.

Urban riverfront neighborhood

In those drawings, meandering bridges crisscross the Guadalupe River, where pedestrians watch kayakers float down a manmade waterway below next to the river, and daredevils speed past on a zip line overhead. High rises filled with office, retail, hotel and residential space envelop a long, central park that follows the river.

In all, the vision supposes that the developable area around that central park has room for about 3.8 million square feet of office, 2 million square feet of residential space that could bring up to 2,400 residential units,



SWENSON AND STUDIO CURRENT

420,000 square feet of retail in a five-story terraced shopping center and 590,000 square feet of hotel space with 1,100 rooms.

It's not a formal proposal. Swenson says the idea is to spark a conversation, gather feedback and try to win support for remaking the space around the Guadalupe in downtown — arguably one of the most overlooked nooks in the city.

Indeed, the vision is in stark contrast to the reality of the river in downtown today. The primarily publicly owned land abutting the river is often home to a slew of homeless encampments and on an average day without rain the river could be easily mistaken for a creek. But allowing private development to rise on its edges could help to pay for remaking the recreational, public amenity portion of the river, the Swenson report says.

The vision will likely get a mixed reception, [Scott Knies](#), executive director of the [San Jose Downtown Association](#), said in an interview Wednesday. But he's glad to see someone thinking holistically about the area.

“The west side of downtown has too much potential to develop piecemeal,” he said. “The vision embraces a new way of approaching downtown building heights that encourage the densities to support the area’s transportation and recreation investments.”

One of the biggest keys to making a district like what Swenson has outlined work will be loosening height restrictions in the area, Knies said. Currently, most buildings in the area on the west side of downtown don't rise above 110 feet — about as tall as the SAP Center stands today. But shrinking the buildings lessens the space for greens space and amenities, he added.

Challenges

Outside of the most obvious challenge of getting community and political buy-in for such a dramatic change along the river, one of the biggest hurdles to making a master plan come to fruition will undoubtedly be getting ownership or building rights on the primarily publicly owned land in Swenson's plan.

The developer doesn't own the land it envisions being transformed, and it's not often that a private developer spends so many resources creating a master plan for a site that it doesn't have a financial stake in.

The vision might not come to fruition, [Case Swenson](#) acknowledged. If it does, the San Jose developer might not even be involved in actually building the project, he said. But if a private development were to move forward, he estimates a long-term ground lease would play a part in remaking the river.

If a group were to be granted a 25-year lease, it wouldn't need to go to referendum for a larger vote by the citizens, he notes. A longer lease of 99 years — the maximum amount of time for which a ground lease can be granted — for the public land would require approval by residents.

That would be a more difficult process, but could make such a public-private partnership feasible.

“To pay back for the cost that it would take to put something like this in would take roughly 40 to 50 years, based on rents and construction prices,” Swenson said. “It would be a very difficult undertaking for whoever it might be.”

What's next?

The Swenson firm will be looking for feedback on its vision and seeking buy-in from residents and politicians in the near-term.

Among the most important stakeholders to get on board will be the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, a group that helps lead the charge on developing and activating the river park and gardens, Swenson said. He hopes to increase the number of natural habitat acres on either side of the potential development with the group's help.

"We could actually create a habitat that is two times the size further down stream or upstream," he said.

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