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Eds and Meds, Plus Labs and Govs: Partnering to Bring Innovation in Albuquerque.

To say a lot is going on in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is an understatement. “We’ve got \$157 million in projects coming out of the ground downtown right now. That’s unprecedented,” says Gary Oppedahl, director of economic development for the city. “We’re changing the skyline of downtown Albuquerque, and we were told when we got here that there was no money for any development.”

New buildings are only a small part of Albuquerque’s transformation. “It’s really about culture change here,” Oppedahl says, and he’s not referring to New Mexico’s unique heritage. Instead, it’s attitudes toward entrepreneurship, collaboration, and development. “What I’m doing here is making a platform city with an operating system that is inclusion, infrastructure, and innovation. And quite frankly, innovation is the result if you do inclusion and build an environment which supports it as well.”

At the heart of this vision is entrepreneurship facilitated by an innovation district that covers a two-mile (3.2 km) radius. The hub—named Innovate ABQ and located on 7.2 acres (2.9 ha) in the center of downtown—is the result of a public/private partnership spearheaded by the city of Albuquerque, the University of New Mexico (UNM), and the broader business community. The most important component was getting people to connect, communicate, and collaborate, says Oppedahl. Central New Mexico Community College and UNM, which are typically adversaries in the fight for dollars from the legislature, are working together, prompting a reaction from the community, which Oppedahl describes as, “If these two can get along, maybe I should get out of my silo and start thinking of ways I can collaborate.”

The headquarters of all the major health institutions including Molina Healthcare, Lovelace, and Presbyterian are downtown. Both the Air Force Research Lab and Sandia National Lab are committed to a presence in the innovation district, cementing another important component of Oppedahl’s formula to get “eds, meds, labs, and govts” downtown and collaborating

The involvement of Albuquerque’s research facilities was important. “They have their principal investigators outside the gates mixing with our entrepreneurs,” Oppedahl says. “I’m telling everybody, ‘We’re a laboratory city,’ and it’s a double-entendre. We certainly have national labs, which gets us to the point where we have more PhDs per capita than any other community in the world. But we’ve never been able to translate that into jobs, so now we’re starting to do that.”

To spark and support new businesses, Innovate ABQ also fosters six accelerators, including the first accelerator in the United States focused on painters, sculptors, and other artists. Two years ago, there were no accelerators in New Mexico. “We don’t care what your status is. If you’re an entrepreneur and you want to do some stuff, we’re here,” says Oppedahl, emphasizing the focus on inclusion.

Innovate ABQ might be a catalyst, but it is only a small part of the changes taking place in Albuquerque. The city has pledged more than \$24 million in projects, including a retractable 1,000-

seat arena added to the convention center. An existing plaza in the center of downtown got improved lighting, a water feature, and shading, and that is only one facet of endeavors to infuse new life into the Civic Plaza. A Heart of a Community grant for placemaking from Southwest Airlines sparked the Civic Plaza Presents initiative to bring performance arts, bands, art installations, outdoor movies, even a synthetic ice rink during the holidays to the venue. The downtown now has a full-service grocery store, which is part of a new four-story mixed-use project with rental apartments, retail, and parking. A large percentage of the apartments will be workforce housing. Another public/private collaboration is the creation of a destination entertainment district, which will also include residential units, adjacent to Innovate ABQ.

Another project focuses on transportation and creating a walkable and bikable downtown, including a proposed 50-mile (80 km), multiuse trail and bikeway. Plans call for a new transit-oriented district, but, instead of light rail, Albuquerque Rapid Transit will use electric buses, making it the first gold-rated bus rapid transit (BRT) system in the country. Implementation will cost substantially less than light rail. Still, the buses travel in a dedicated lane and platforms are raised to facilitate entry. Mayor Richard Berry has described it as “a game-changer for Albuquerque.”

The ten-mile (16 km) system runs along a stretch of old Route 66. According to the plan, historic buildings will be preserved. Todd Clarke, chief executive officer (CEO) of New Mexico Apartment Advisors, estimates that almost \$100 million is being invested in transit-oriented development in addition to the investment in the new transit system. Oppedahl says he sees this as another opportunity. “Each of our little enclaves and neighborhoods should have [its] own personality, and I’m creating an economic development center in each one of them.”

Albuquerque’s reputation as a tech center is just beginning. Already it has been included on the Rise of the Rest tour and cited as one of the top five cities to get in on the ground floor for a tech startup and one of the top five cities for women in tech. “In the end,” Oppedahl says, “I’ve got five strategies: business development, workforce challenge development, community development, cultural entrepreneurship development, and capital development. I know [that] if I do those five things, we will markedly change our economy, and it’s working. So it’s those five strategies, 36 performance indicators, and 138 projects that we’re going to accomplish and transfer all of those things into the community.”

The Urban Land Institute

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