

# Few Thriving Downtowns Include a Stadium — for Good Reason

East Village envisions a future filled with arts and innovation, mixed-use residential, office and commercial development – a plan whose street-smart scale precludes a space-eating football stadium.

---



Photo by Brent Beltran

A Barrio Logan protest against the Chargers' East Village stadium plan

Follow

By Lawrence A. Herzog | October 28, 2016

In this season of electoral politics, facts sometimes disappear behind the rosy scenarios stirred up by well-funded promotional campaigns and their consultants.

So, let's take a closer look at a few facts surrounding Measure C, the downtown football convadium initiative, sponsored by the San Diego Chargers and their owners, the Spanos family.

## COMMENTARY

### The Voices of San Diego

How this initiative came to East Village is hardly an example of organic downtown redevelopment planning via normal public policy channels. Instead, it's the story of a sports team searching for the best deal, and when that deal failed to materialize, jumping back to their last resort, the East Village site.

In 2015, the Chargers announced they would move to Los Angeles to share or occupy a new stadium in Carson. When the NFL owners voted instead to support a competing Rams stadium in Inglewood, the Chargers were suddenly back in San Diego, mulling their options. After toying again with Mission Valley, the Chargers decided their best option might be East Village.

---

Meanwhile, East Village has become the new rock star district in downtown, with a growing list of creative jobs being generated by local education facilities, the new library and the burgeoning IDEA District, an urban initiative that sets out to create new developments that will attract thousands of design and tech jobs to the neighborhood.

East Village is quickly blossoming into a dynamic neighborhood for residents and workers who want to live and create in a street-friendly, walkable, sustainable 21st century village-like community.

A football stadium is completely out of sync with that scenario.

But not everyone agrees.

In April, Chargers adviser Fred Maas showed up at a downtown breakfast forum on the future of East Village. Speaking ahead of Maas at that event was developer David Malmuth, who has worked with the Walt Disney Company, and is a development partner for the IDEA District.

Malmuth's slideshow and lecture highlighted the community's vision of arts and innovation, mixed-use residential, office and commercial development – a plan whose street-smart scale precluded a space-eating football stadium.

This was not music to Maas' ears. Once introduced, Maas bounded over to the podium and bluntly stated that Malmuth's ideas would be "sending the Chargers back to Los Angeles." "The possibility of bringing some artistic, airy-fairy, consultant-based, planner-based plan to those blocks is impossible," he said.

But Maas' statement does not hold up under scrutiny. Nationally, according to U.S. Department of Commerce data, export sales from cultural industries (Maas' "airy fairy" activities) [amounted to \\$45 billion](#) back in 2010. The same source indicates that the creative economy in U.S. cities (artists, film, culture, music, radio, TV and its linked industries) employs about 27 million people and contributes some \$4 trillion per year to our nation's GNP, or 18 percent of the U.S. economy.

The tired argument that sports stadiums are good for a downtown's economy has been discredited by a majority of national experts. One of the leading voices, Roger Noll, a Stanford University economist, [has written](#) that "public funding of professional sports stadiums is not a good civic economic investment."

More to the point, downtown and the East Village are both doing fine without a football stadium. A recent UCSDS Extension/Downtown Partnership [study of downtown](#) San Diego statistically described the boom in the “innovation economy” jobs and activities in downtown. Over 35,000 residents now live there, with double that number projected over the coming decades. And over 85,000 jobs are located in downtown, including a concentration of high-tech start-ups, co-working spaces and other knowledge economy employment.

But Maas doesn't seem to want to let such facts and trends get in his way. In a [recent VOSD commentary](#), Maas wrote about the “region's long existing plans” for the completion of a “long planned and awaited sports and entertainment district downtown.”

Really? Maybe those plans exist in Maas' bubble of reality, but an inspection of the actual city plans at three scales (regional, city, community) tells a different story.

Nowhere in the San Diego Association of Government's 2015 [regional plan](#) is there any mention of a football stadium or sports/entertainment district in downtown San Diego. Indeed, SANDAG'S regional plan calls for building a smarter downtown, by making it a densely populated employment center, with more housing and mixed uses.

The main downtown planning agency for the city of San Diego is Civic San Diego. Its downtown community plan [states](#) that East Village is “envisioned as a thriving residential and mixed use community.” Its Centre City Green Downtown Sustainability Plan argues for retrofitting downtown streets for people, not cars, making it more pedestrian- and bike-friendly. And Civic's Economic and Community Development Plan envisions the goals of downtown/East Village around affordable housing, mixed-use projects, small business and healthy neighborhoods. There is no mention of a convadium or a sports and entertainment district in any of these plans.

And, of course, the [East Village south focus plan](#), the only current community plan on the books, rejects the idea of a football stadium outright.

Very few downtowns across the U.S. have football stadiums, for a very good reason. Their footprints are too large for the tight, street-friendly, pedestrian scale, high density live-work environments that are being created there, in places like Portland and Seattle. East Village is yet another example of this kind of forward-thinking urban future.

On Nov. 8, San Diegans would do well to look past the advertising slogans and consider whether a football stadium really belongs in a 21<sup>st</sup> century downtown neighborhood like East Village.

*Lawrence A. Herzog teaches city planning in SDSU's School of Public Affairs. He has written or edited 10 books on cities, sustainability and urban design, including his most recent, "Global Suburbs: Urban Sprawl from the Rio Grande to Rio de Janeiro." He serves on the board of directors of C-3, Citizen's Coordinate for Century 3, and has been a consultant to local, national and international planning clients.*