

Which Way, Downtown L.A.?

New Program Hopes to Give Downtowners A Clue, About Directions

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Even the most bullish Downtown Los Angeles boosters admit that one of the community's biggest challenges involves navigating the labyrinth of one-way streets. While occasionally difficult for area

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residents or workers, it can be downright confusing for visitors or tourists trying to get to the Convention Center, the Walt Disney Concert Hall or the 101 Freeway.

"People find it hard getting around Downtown — walking or even driving," said Darryl Holter, chairman of the Figueroa Corridor Partnership Business Improvement District board of directors. A few years ago, the confusion prompted some members of Downtown's numerous business improvement districts (BIDs) to find a solution. "We tried to think about what we could do in terms of directional signage," Holter said.

After more than seven years of work and an arduous city approval process, officials from Downtown's nine BIDs this week will unveil Downtown L.A. Walks, a system of more than 1,300 directional signs scattered across 13 Downtown districts. In a splashy Tuesday morning ceremony, complete with the Laker cheerleaders, the first sign in the \$2 million program will be affixed at Disney Hall. The rest will be installed by September.

In all, the signs will pop up on 300 blocks,

317 intersections and about 30 freeway off-ramps from Chinatown to the Figueroa Corridor. The network of markers, according to BID staffers, will be the largest in the country, ushering motorists and pedestrians to area venues, attractions and landmarks.

"It reflects the fact that Downtown has become a major destination and we have to make it easier for people to negotiate," said Carol Schatz, president and chief executive officer of the Downtown Center BID.

The signs will be attached to poles, and will be emblazoned with each BID's logo — for example, a diamond will signify the Jewelry District and a basketball will mark South Park. They come in three styles: large-font for drivers, text signs for pedestrians, and colorful street-level maps.

The 471 pedestrian signs will feature directions to Downtown districts, hotels and other points of interest. They will also detail information about Metropolitan Transportation Authority Red and Blue Line stations, DASH and other bus routes and stops, and Union Station.

Also at street level will be 285 maps depicting each three- to four-block neighborhood and its various sites. These signs will include a Downtown-wide map, from roughly Chinatown to Exposition Park and the 110 Freeway to Santa Fe Avenue.

The 545 signs for motorists will use arrows to identify Downtown attractions and provide information about streets and free-



photos by Dimmis Lee of Hunt Design

The \$2 million Downtown L.A. Walks program will erect signs identifying Downtown landmarks and attractions on area streets, intersections and freeway off-ramps. Some 1,300 signs will go up by September.

way entrances.

Organizers said the signs will not only help people get to attractions such as the Central Library and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, but also to lesser-known sites, such as Mercado La Paloma south of Downtown.

Schatz said the BIDs worked with the city's Department of Transportation to decide where signs would go. "We identified key locations that would make sense in terms of pedestrian [and] vehicular activity," Schatz said. The group also conducted pedestrian counts.

Come September, the result will be a comprehensive system of identification that Holter said will help usher people to Downtown destinations while encouraging foot traffic. "It makes it so there's a sense of place," he said. "It will give people a better sense of direction."

Navigating the Maze

Downtown L.A. Walks is what urban planners call a "wayfinding program"; successful systems are in place in such downtowns as Memphis, Vancouver and Sacramento. The Los Angeles version is funded by the participating BIDs, along with two federal transportation grants and money from the Los Angeles Department of Transportation and the Community Redevelopment Agency.

Plans for the program have been in the works since at least 1998, but were bogged down by a lengthy city approval and manufacturing process. Throughout, the aim was to address the long-held complaint that it is difficult to get around Downtown, especially for tourists.

"The streets have been set up to connect to freeways," Holter said. "The original intent of that was to move people in and out easily with little regard for pedestrians."

That has changed, BID officials said, as Downtown steadily increases its residen-

tial populace and more people turn out for events at Staples Center, the Music Center, Exposition Park and other locales.

Holter said some of the inspiration came from the serpentine streets of Paris, where there is a complex network of posted maps on public transportation platforms and on freestanding poles. "Partly it works because of its uniformity and partly because it's been there so long," he said.

Downtown's version of the Parisian signs were designed by Pasadena-based Hunt Design Associates, which also worked on directional signs for Exposition Park. Those will be installed through the end of the year as part of a separate program.

While the new locators play the pragmatic role of giving directions, Estela Lopez, executive director of the Central City East Association, said she hopes they will also brand the individual districts. "It's something that's going to help people know that Downtown isn't just one homogeneous place, but a collection of districts, and that each district is a jewel unto itself," she said.

Lopez, whose organization oversees the Industrial and Toy districts, also said the signs will encourage tourists and people unfamiliar with Downtown to look around. "This is one way to get people to explore those other districts," she said. "They have to find them and not be intimidated about how to get from here to there."

Kent Smith, executive director of the Los Angeles Fashion District BID, said the concept of bringing the growing community together is the most appealing benefit of the signs. "It means everybody's neighborhood will be featured throughout Downtown," he said. "It's a unifying project."

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The wayfinding signs seek to rectify one of Downtown's biggest challenges — the often confusing warren of one-way streets.