

Keeping the Downtown Gallup business district safe

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Leaders focus on solutions

A brainstorming group meeting to improve the quality of life in Downtown Gallup, has been gathering every couple of weeks since October to address some of the city's more stubborn challenges.

Francis Bee, executive director of the Gallup Business Improvement District is one member of the group.

He talked to the *Gallup Sun*, Dec. 15 about Gallup's downtown struggles with the numerous people who visit to do business and find themselves unable to get home.

"We don't have enough police to accommodate the 20,000 to 30,000 people who come here to do their shopping," he said.

"Our downtown is very small," he pointed out. "So if you have half a dozen panhandlers in one small space, it seems like a big problem."

Bee said there have been burglaries of closed stores during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Not a whole lot," he said. "But to people in Gallup, even one break-in is a major catastrophe."

A lot of things can happen when people come to town and can't get home he said.

The city had a homeless camp atop the Deluxe Barber Shop at 218 W. Coal Ave. In addition to the camp, the people staying on top of the business were using the roof of the Barry Klopfer law firm at 224 W. Coal Ave. to climb up to the camp.

Kara Smith, executive director of Gallup MainStreet Arts & Cultural District said people staying at the camp were building fires on the roof before the Gallup Fire Department stepped in.

Smith talked about other issues that affect the city, including the reduced capacity at the Na Nizhoozhi Center during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another location that used to provide space for people in Gallup's streets was the Lexington Hotel, which was turned into a transitional location for the homeless. Bee said the historic site on Route 66 was purchased from the owner and sold to a foundation, but was closed two years ago.

He said the plan to reopen the transitional center is one of the successes of what he calls the two-month old "Downtown Safety and Security Committee" and the Gallup City Council.

"The current mayor secured funding to reopen that [location and the] council voted to accept the grant from the government and open it up." He wasn't able to give an opening date, but said it would be soon.

There is also a plan to open a police substation on the walkway.

In addition to these changes, the group, which includes Bee, Smith, Mayor Louis Bonaguidi, District 1 City Councilwoman Linda Garcia, Gallup Police Chief Franklin Boyd and Captains Erin Toadlena-Pablo and Billy Padavich, is considering additional infrastructure solutions they believe would mitigate a variety of downtown activities, including drug use, vandalism, and the creation of graffiti.

One of those is increased lighting, particularly in alleys, and setting up more cameras around the downtown area.

Smith said, "Some of the action might fall on business owners." But she added that some of the responsibility would be on the city.

She also pointed to a safety tip sheet that has been distributed to business owners which suggests what to do when faced with a problem such as vandalism, discovering someone camped out in front of your business, or someone being threatened, or put in harm's way.

Bee said, "We're trying to give them [Gallup business owners] the tools they need to feel safe and feel empowered."

The next meeting will be in early January.



Francis Bee, director of the Gallup Business Improvement District, member of the Downtown Safety and Security Committee brainstorming group. File Photo

