

Hotel growth

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tion, he said, and among its top sites is San Jacinto Plaza.

The downtown plaza, which reopened in spring of 2016 after a three-year renovation project, has given Downtown an attractive focal point, which is within either full view or short walking distance from all of Downtown's hotels.

"The redesigned plaza is meant for activity," Gudenrath said. "There's the café, the chess tables and horseshoes," Gudenrath said. "Every weekend, you will see some kind of photo shoot like weddings or quinceañeras, and in the summer there's the concert series going on."

Other key sites for hotel guests and other downtown visitors are the new Southwest University Park stadium, performing arts venues and museums.

For their inaugural season in 2014, the El Paso Chihuahuas AAA baseball team partnered with downtown hotels such as the Double Tree and Holiday Inn to host room specials and even special menu offerings for those coming from out of town to watch some games.

Big name concerts and the Broadway in El Paso series, whose season was highlighted this year with "The Lion King," also draw hotel guests who want to stay within a short walk of the Plaza or Abraham Chavez Theatres. The Judson F. Williams Convention Center is another major reason visitors choose to stay downtown.

Adding to the attractions soon will be the

El Paso's Streetcar system, which will run from Downtown to Glory Road on the UTEP campus. The streetcars are now in their testing phase and expected to be operational by the end of the year.

With the increase in both attractions and accommodations, there is a need for more parking. Gudenrath said construction is currently underway to turn the open air parking area between the Paso del Norte and Plaza Hotel (across from the Plaza Theatre) into a full parking garage with 500 spaces.

Gudenrath believes El Paso's Downtown offerings will continue to grow, and a good choice of hotels is not just an important influence to the Downtown area, but to the entire community. "Hotels bring out-of-town money into a community," he said. "It is a huge boost in the economy in the Downtown area and throughout the city when those hotel rooms fill up."

Gabriel Ayub, current president of the El Paso Hotel and Lodging Association, said the presence of sufficient and diverse hotel space is one of the factors that draw larger groups, such as conventions to the area, and this is important in the Downtown area.

"Hotels downtown will help to bring in bigger conventions, and when the hotels fill up Downtown, the entire city will feel the convergence."

Having plenty of nearby restaurants and other attractions in an area are vital to the hotels as well, and he feels optimistic about improvements like the coming streetcars helping to draw more people to the area.

"Hotels alone don't bring in tourists,"

Ayub said, "but when people come to an area for another attraction, they want to be able to stay in a good place."

Not just for visitors

Out-of-towners aren't the only ones taking advantage of downtown hotels' proximity to these attractions.

They're increasingly a "staycation" option for local residents.

"These hotels provide the opportunity where El Pasoans can get away and experience that urban Downtown environment for a weekend," Gudenrath said.

Ayub said El Paso's hotels throughout the city already work to encourage use by area residents, and many offer "staycation" packages.

"People do want to travel, but when you can't getaway during a summer or you can't afford it, this is a way to get away without having the extra costs of traveling," he said.

People like to "staycation" in a different part of the city they live in, Ayub said, so they have an excuse to explore and discover places they might not have otherwise



Gardner Hotel & Hostel lobby.

Photo by Rick Tate

heard about. People have a tendency to overlook their attractions and offerings in their own city, but making an overnight destination out of it encourages them to discover what there is in their hometown.

"By creating that diversity in hotels, we're giving people more reasons to stay in the city," he said.

"Staycation" tourism is also a win-win for the city, as it not only gives area residents more things to enjoy, it boosts the local economy so that even more can be offered in the future.

"We want El Pasoans to take advantage of the local hotels for 'staycations,'" Ayub said. "It not only gives them a close and affordable destination, but it puts dollars back into El Paso. That's a good thing for everyone."

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