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- Elected officials tour downtown Richmond

‘Great bones, great heart:’ State officials tour downtown Richmond to envision its revival

Local business leaders and elected officials took a walking tour of the Macdonald Avenue business district, a mix of stalled housing projects and some success stories.
by [David Mills](#) Oct. 3, 2025, 3:36 p.m.



Rep. Matt Haney (D-San Francisco) (front, center), chair of the Assembly's Downtown

Recovery Select Committee, is joined by Richmond city staff, elected officials and business leaders for a walking tour of downtown Richmond on Thur., Oct. 2, 2025. The tour was to discuss efforts to revitalize ailing local commercial districts statewide. Credit: David Buechner for Richmondside

More than two dozen political, business and community leaders took a walking tour of downtown Richmond Thursday to better envision how to revitalize the Macdonald Avenue business district.

Participants, including state District 17 Rep. Matt Haney (D-San Francisco), chair of the Assembly's [Downtown Recovery Select Committee](#), acknowledged that rejuvenating the struggling business neighborhood is a formidable task. But they expressed hope that partnerships can be formed to slowly [rebuild this part of Richmond](#).

"This is an occasion where everybody comes together," said Mayor Eduardo Martinez. "We have a common vision of what Richmond can become."

The gathering was organized by the newly formed [Macdonald Avenue Corridor Task Force](#), a city commission whose short-term goals include enhancing safety and improving cleanliness downtown. Its long-term vision includes attracting new businesses and building housing.

Also on the tour were Richmond City Council members Doria Robinson and Jamelia Brown and members of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce and the Richmond Main Street Initiative (RMSI).

Haney, who grew up in west Contra Costa County and said he visited Richmond in his high school days, is touring downtowns statewide as part of the committee's downtown revitalization work.



District 17 state Rep. Matt Haney, who represents San Francisco, grew up in west Contra Costa County. He said Richmond is the 12th city he's toured so far as part of his role as chair of the Assembly's Downtown Recovery Select Committee. Credit David Buechner for Richmondside

"Our cities need thriving downtowns," he said, saying Richmond is the 12th city he's toured. "The future of Richmond is important to all of us."

Richmond's goal in hosting the tour was to showcase ongoing investments and community partnerships and to discuss projects that will strengthen downtown.

"We're not asking the state to build things for us. We're asking for a partnership," Martinez said. "With targeted investments, downtown Richmond can become a hub."

In a press release issued after the tour, the city noted that several efforts are underway to revamp downtown, including:

- [Richmond Rising Transformative Climate Community Hub](#), a 2022 \$35 million Transformative Climate Communities grant bringing a new hub to Downtown Richmond;
- BART/Amtrak Improvements and the Nevin–City Hall Bike Boulevard, supported by Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) and Bay Area air district grants;
- The establishment of the [Macdonald Avenue Revitalization Task Force](#), dedicated to activating and [reimagining the corridor](#); and
- [The Lot: Downtown Richmond Food Court](#), a small food vendor incubator.

The decline of downtown is reviewed

The tour began at Nevin Plaza in the midst of the Richmond transit center, where BART trains, buses and Amtrak trains could be seen rolling by.

Karen Buchanan, a historian from Point Richmond, played a video that recounted the downtown district's heydays when ships were being built at the Richmond port 24 hours a day during World War II and seven movie theaters were among the [180 businesses](#) along Macdonald Avenue in the 1950s.

The film then depicted what Buchanan described as the “dark part” of Richmond's history. That included the presence of white supremacists and a [1968 riot](#) that erupted after a 15-year-old African-American youth was shot by a Richmond police officer. During the riot, numerous downtown businesses were damaged.

Buchanan said the racial tensions deterred people from visiting downtown Richmond. Then, the opening of [Hilltop mall](#) in 1976 drew customers away more permanently.

However, Robinson noted the tables have turned. Hilltop mall has been mostly shuttered for years and there are [plans](#) to tear it down and build homes, shops, parks and restaurants.



“Richmond has such great bones and such great heart.” — Barnali Ghosh, BART board member

Photo by David Buechner for Richmondside

“Things are different,” she said. “Malls are not doing well. Retail in general is not doing well.”

Robinson said this is an opportunity for the downtown district to lure back customers with entertainment venues along with restaurants and shops.

“I have a bold vision for Macdonald Avenue that answers the challenges we face today,” she said.

BART District 3 board member Barnali Ghosh said the transit center makes it easy for people to travel to a revitalized Macdonald Avenue.

“The possibilities for downtown Richmond are endless,” Ghosh said.

Downtown Richmond tour highlights some successes, challenges



Lina Velasco (center), Richmond's director of community development, joined an economic redevelopment oriented tour of downtown Richmond held Thur., Oct. 2, 2025. Richmond historian Karen Buchanan (right) gave tour participants a history lesson on the area. Credit David Buechner for Richmondside

Tour stops included vacant lots just east of the transit center where Lina Velasco, Richmond's director of community development, discussed plans to build up to 900 low- to moderately priced housing units.

Velasco said it has been difficult getting financing for one of the projects while another has been delayed awaiting tax credit approvals.

Along the way, the tour witnessed some of the challenges facing downtown Richmond, including homeless people laying on the sidewalk, vacant storefronts and an absence of foot traffic.

Robinson pointed to the [Market Square Mall](#) as a success story.



Gratitude, an Afrocentric gift store, is in the Market Square shopping complex in downtown Richmond, a spot that shows how an historic building can be repurposed as a modern commerce center. Credit: Kari Hulac/Richmondside

The building on Harbour Way was built in 1924 and was home to a furniture store and a dance studio before it closed in the 1970s. The facility was renovated in the 1980s and split into 24 individual storefronts, many of them Black-owned enterprises.

“It became a draw instead of a drawback,” she said.

Another venue that was highlighted as a success was [The Lot](#), a parking area at 14th Street and Macdonald Avenue that on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays becomes a food court where mobile vendors sell all sorts of things to eat and drink.

Rep. Haney discusses two bills he authored that could help downtowns

As Haney walked around Richmond, he spoke to Richmondside about the variety of challenges cities face in revitalizing their downtowns.

He said larger cities such as San Francisco and San Diego are focused on bouncing back from COVID shutdowns. Smaller cities such as Richmond are trying to save commercial areas that have been struggling for decades.

He agreed with the city's approach of building housing to help create a customer base. And he suggested that helping property owners renovate buildings through tax credits and other means can help.

Haney pointed to two pieces of pending legislation he authored: [Assembly Bill 507](#), which would streamline requirements for developers of multifamily housing projects; and [Assembly Bill 1445](#), which would help establish districts to finance downtown revitalization projects. Both are awaiting approval by the governor.

Haney noted that housing and entertainment venues can expand a downtown's customer base beyond the traditional weekday working hours.

"We need to attract people to downtown areas," he said.

'Do what needs to be done'



Ruthie Dineen, executive director of the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Richmond, discusses how revitalizing vacant parcels adjacent to the 11st Street school could be complementary. Credit: David Buechner for Richmondside

The group finished the tour at the [East Bay Center for the Performing Arts](#) (EBCPA), where participants discussed how to build partnerships to revitalize the downtown core.

Ruthie Dineen, EBCPA's executive director, pointed to a lot across the street at 12th Street and Macdonald Avenue that has been vacant for 16 years. The [land](#) has been eyed for an apartment complex but nothing has come of it.

Dineen said she would like to see enterprises such as a dance studio and restaurant included with any housing that would be built there. That, she said, could be a boon to the center, which has served 50,000 students over 50 years with free performance art classes and provides free public performances.

Others talked about the importance of the public and private sectors working together as well as the unlimited potential of a downtown resurgence.

“Richmond has such great bones and such great heart,” Ghosh said.

Dineen said the time to act is now.

“This is a big moment for Richmond,” she said. “It’s time to take control and do what needs to be done.”



A walk around downtown Richmond offers a lesson in mural art. This work, near Marty’s Grill on Nevin Avenue, is by Richmond artist Richard Muro Salazar. Credit: David Buechner for Richmondside