

Downtown Richmond Walking Tour: past, present, and promise

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Sarah Wally's extensive Downtown Walking Tour included a visit to Heart of Richmond park. (All photos by Kathy Chouteau)

By Kathy Chouteau

You better put on good walking shoes for the “Wally Walk.” Historic buildings, vibrant murals, local shops, multimodal transit, future development sites and more encompass Richmond Main Street Initiative’s (RMSI) fun and insightful walking tour.

Led by RMSI executive director Sarah Wally, Downtown Walking Tours occur on the fourth Thursday of each month from 10:30 a.m. to noon and guide participants through 28 specific stops along the Macdonald Avenue corridor.

Those wanting to share a walk with Wally can meet at RMSI’s office at 1600 Nevin Plaza, next to the Richmond BART Station. That’s where this reporter met Sarah for what I affectionately dubbed the “Wally Walk.” Tour participants get a handout containing a map of the walking tour, along with photos and a thorough listing of the downtown stops along the way. Wally is extremely knowledgeable about the downtown district, from its historic buildings and history, to its present purposes and future economic potential.

Junne Garcia from the City of Richmond’s Economic Development Department conceived of the walking tour after seeing some similar YouTube videos.

“We don’t have a shortage of people, right?,” said Garcia, referencing a packed parking lot nearby. “There’s a lot of things going on and we’re working very hard to maximize that

potential.” He expressed confidence in Richmond’s capability to “really blossom into its greatest glory ever.”



Transit village

After a quick stop at RMSI’s offices, we headed to the Richmond BART Station to learn more about the Public Transit Village, which offers multiple transportation options alongside BART, including Amtrak (both the Capitol Corridor Train and San Joaquin Train), AC Transit buses, electric bikes and connections to the Richmond ferry and bay trails. This local hub makes “seamless connections across the Bay Area” and to Richmond possible, according to RMSI. About 4,000 people per day come through the Public Transit Village, Wally said.

The transit center is a mere four blocks from the Richmond Civic Center, featuring a Modernist design by Timothy Pflueger that’s home to city offices, Richmond Art Center, Richmond Public Library’s main branch, an auditorium, senior center, and U.S. Representative John Garamendi and CA State Senator Jesse Arreguin’s offices.

‘You’d never see it driving’

Leaving the Public Transit Village, we spotted the first of many historic metal markers embedded in the plaza and sidewalks that share insights about Richmond’s history. Referencing them, Wally said that the walking tour was started, in part, “because you would never see it if you were driving.”



At the end of Nevin Plaza where the street meets the plaza, a colorful, artistic fence reflects the city's history in its design, from Point Richmond to "railroads and riveters," to the "Richmond beat" blues and jazz scene, to Chevron Richmond jobs and more. It offers the first hint of an abundance of art to enjoy along the way.



Historic buildings

Some of the stand-out moments of the walking tour occurred viewing historic buildings throughout the downtown, once the bustling epicenter of city activity before the Hilltop Mall

opened in September 1976. There was the U.S. Post Office, built in 1938, on Nevin Avenue, and the 1015 Nevin Ave. building, home to Healthy Richmond.



Also, there's the Milens sign building at 914 Macdonald Ave., the old Mechanics Bank Building on 9th Street and Macdonald Avenue built in 1920, the Market Square Mall at Harbour Way and Macdonald Avenue, and the towering Winters Building built in 1923 at 11th Street and Macdonald Avenue. Today, the Winters Building is home to the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, where free music classes are available to youth.



Although we didn't walk down Nevin Avenue to it, the Richmond Museum of History & Culture is typically featured on the walking tour and was built in 1910. An original Carnegie library, it is also a notable historic building in Richmond.

Shops and nonprofits

During our walking tour, we took time for a quick visit inside the Market Square Mall, where we met a few downtown Richmond business owners. At the New Life Café, Bendrick Foster and his longtime friend Dasan Mahaway greeted us and said that business at their alkaline vegan eatery is booming. Foster noted they're currently hiring youth interested in training in the culinary arts while learning to eat better.



Near the mall's Harbour Way entrance, Ghaliyah Roberts-Palmer of Gratitude LLC, an Afrocentric gift store, was ready to welcome us with a smile. Just the day before, this reporter spotted Linda Whitmore at the annual Black History Month celebration at Chevron Richmond wearing a vibrant top she said was from this shop.



Back on Macdonald Avenue, we stopped by Leftside Printing for a quick visit at Diego Garcia's popular family business on downtown's "main street."

Art everywhere

Art was everywhere on the walking tour. While at the Public Transit Village, we took in a trio of "On the Right Track" murals by Joe Sances and Daniel Galvez, then viewed the Iron Triangle mural by artist Richard Muro Salazar off Nevin by Marty's Grill.



We also checked out the longstanding Alive & Free mural created by Salazar on the corner of Harbour Way and Macdonald Avenue.

We also spied an interesting \$1 dollar sign on the ground through a chain-link fence near 9th Street and Macdonald Avenue. This sign is a remnant from a demolished building and has transitioned into a piece of unanticipated art.



Perhaps this reporter's most enjoyable artistic moment occurred at the Heart of Richmond park, at the corner of Harbor Way and Macdonald opposite Salazar's Alive & Free mural, where large murals and other art abound. It's the perfect spot to catch your breath or eat some lunch downtown amid beautiful tree lined environs.



Downtown Richmond is currently developing an Arts Corridor and Art Walk primarily along Macdonald Avenue and 23rd Street, focused on highlighting public art, murals, cultural institutions and creative spaces in the area. The effort is connected to downtown revitalization work and is supported by the City of Richmond, RMSI and other community partners.

Wally said the Arts Corridor will run from "the Parkway to 47th Street all along Macdonald and all along 23rd Street," noting she's "so very excited about that."



Future envisioned

Lots throughout the downtown corridor are available for future development. Also developing is The Lot: Downtown Richmond Food Court, available on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., with numerous food vendors serving up international fare.



Wally has hosted an assembly member, supervisors and a senator on this walking tour “in just the past five months, so they can see all of the opportunity that’s being planned in downtown Richmond.”

RMSI aims to revitalize downtown Richmond along the Macdonald Avenue corridor “as a pedestrian friendly urban village, offering products, services, arts and entertainment that reflect the community’s rich and diverse heritage,” according to the nonprofit. Learn more about RMSI and what’s coming up at the organization [here](#).



Check out the full list of stops on RMSI’s Downtown Walking Tour:

- Richmond Main Street Office
- Transit Village – BART, AMTRAK, AC Transit, Transbay, Ferry Access, Bike Share
- Richmond BART Murals
- 19th Street Transit Entrance, Future Housing Site
- Pathway to Richmond Civic Center, Art Center, Auditorium & Library
- History Markers in Nevin Plaza
- Social Security Building

- Post Office – Built 1938
 - Iron Triangle Mural
 - Carquinez Building – Built 1926
 - Kaiser Permanente Campus
 - Market Square Mall
 - Wells Fargo Bank – Built 1927, Originally America Trust
 - Community Park – Heart of Richmond Park with Murals
 - Dollar Sign Mosaic – 9th Street & Macdonald Avenue
 - Mechanics Bank – Built 1920
 - Richmond History Museum, Built 1910, Original Carnegie Library
 - Macdonald Avenue Murals
 - History Markers – Corner of 8th to 13th Street on Macdonald Avenue
 - Bicycle Boulevard – 8th St & Macdonald Avenue
 - Pathway to Greenway
 - Yellow Brick Road – 8th Street & Macdonald Ave, Iron Triangle Walkable Neighborhood
 - East Bay Center for the Performing Arts – Built 1923, Winters Building
 - Site for Future Housing & Retail Development, 11th – 13th Street
 - Richmond City Center – Shopping Plaza with Supermarket, Restaurants and Retail, Future Improvements for Tenants
 - The LOT Outdoor Food Court
 - Gateway Underpass – Built 1909, Opened Downtown Richmond to Civic Center District
 - Rooftop – 360 View Of Surrounding of Bay Area Cities
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