

# Paradise in Progress, an Untold Story About Building

by Carl Nettleton and Gabriela Coverdale

The year was 1999, the San Diego Convention Center Expansion was underway, and planning for Petco Park and the 26-block redevelopment area surrounding it was in full swing. There were 30 projects in progress and more than 100 on the drawing boards, including high-rise condominiums, water and sewer pipelines, roadway improvements, and hotels. Downtown was expanding, but concern was brewing. How could businesses, residents, and the all-important visitors navigate a downtown that everyone feared would be torn apart by construction?

The answer was a new community made up of project developers, construction managers, special event organizers, downtown associations, and public agencies. The community began in December 1999 when more than 125 locals gathered to envision and participate in Paradise in Progress.

The idea was simple: even though the City had the authority to develop regulations to manage this activity, all the parties, including the City, felt sharing information about potentially disruptive construction activities was preferable to regulation. As a result, downtown construction and event managers were only asked to fill out a simple data sheet describing road and lane closures and other public impacts. Paradise in Progress would compile and share the data.

Unfortunately, the database was so large it was unusable. However, with mapping technology like geographical information systems (GIS), it was possible to visually display the public impacts within specified time frames. The participants could then easily see untenable or overlapping impacts. When these were identified, a three-phase conflict resolution process kicked in.

This process not only minimized public impacts, but was also designed to keep the construction projects and events on schedule and within budget.

On the third Thursday of each month the participants would gather for coffee and pastries, while viewing the latest maps, hearing presentations from new projects, and participating in neighborhood-by-neighborhood focus groups making sure everyone got to know each other. At the beginning of each year, participants joined with the mayor and other city leaders for an awards breakfast structured to recognize participants who had worked with the group in the past year.

The 13 organizations that provided guidance for Paradise in Progress offered in-kind contributions. The City provided the mapping technology and facilitation, while the Centre City Development Corporation provided a hot line, data entry managers, and an e-newsletter. The San Diego Convention Center arranged for the logo and much more. The Downtown Partnership came up with the name and the initial web site. The Little Italy, Gaslamp Quarter, and East Village associations ably worked with their members. The Port did the mailings, and the Padres, Metropolitan Transit System, and other remaining organizations provided what they could, whether it was coffee, copies, or a meeting place.

So why was Paradise in Progress an untold story? The local media was never interested in covering it, although they were invited to the annual breakfast and received the bi-weekly newsletters.

A story about the effort never appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, although there were one or two minor stories on television news and downtown newspapers over the years. *The Wall Street Journal* did carry a significant story at the beginning of the program questioning whether it would be successful.

## Downtown San Diego

However, despite all the construction and special events, downtown businesses, residents and visitors carried on normally. There just wasn't any news about negative construction impacts. And, as the participants regularly reminded themselves, Paradise in Progress would have been a very noisy failure, but it was a very quiet success.

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Work together at Nettleton Strategies LLC, specializing in organizational needs assessments, facilitation, utilization of GIS technology, and building communities of interest.



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