



Beyond Basketball

How can the Downtown District Deliver
Community Benefits?



Acknowledgments

About Better Futures Institute

Better Futures Institute (BFI) is a San Antonio-based think tank dedicated to advancing a culture of innovation, civic technology, and social impact. Through paid internships and fellowships, BFI empowers emerging leaders in STEAM—Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics—to build the resilient and inclusive cities of the future.

Author

Edward Aaron Romero, CSO, Centro San Antonio and BFI Fellow

BFI Team

Alberto Gomez, President, CEO
Ruchika Sharma, Program Coordinator

Board

Alberto Altamirano, CEO, Irys
Jordana Barton, Director, Connect Humanity
Nathan Burkhardt, VP of Entrepreneurship & Innovation, BCIC
Jordan Ghawi, Chief Strategy Officer, STRAC
Dr. Joca Marquez, Space Launch Electrical Integration Specialist, NASA
Javier Paredes, Founding Principal, StudioMassivo
David Robinson Jr., Development Manager, Weston Urban

Civic Tech Scholars

Richard Powell, Civic Tech Scholar, Fall '24
Roel Jaramillo, Civic Tech Scholar, Fall '24
Joshua Duque, Civic Tech Scholar, Spring '25
Liz Obst, Civic Tech Scholar, Spring '25
Abdullah Mohammad Mahi, Civic Tech Scholar, Spring '25
Savannah Rakowitz, Civic Tech Scholar, Summer '25
Bella Alvarado, Civic Tech Scholar, Summer '25

Design by

Jon Rodriguez, Civic Tech Scholar, '25

About BFI Fellows

The Better Features Fellowship provides months of direct support to remarkable individuals, empowering them to advance new and innovative approaches to improve, research, and enhance community impact through storytelling in the Better Futures Series. By collaborating with industry experts and program stakeholders, fellows turn insights into policy recommendations and other creative outputs such as briefs, reports, and publications.

Editorial Consultant

Rocío Guenther, Guerita Consulting

Acknowledgements

Xavier Perez, Graduate Researcher, University of Texas at San Antonio
Trish DeBerry, President and CEO, Centro San Antonio
Scott Griscom, Assistant Chief Appraiser, Technology and Tax Entity Relations, Bexar Appraisal District
Paola Fernández CNU-A, NCI, Director of Urban Planning, Urban Alchemy Collective
Joe Gudenrath, President and CEO, El Paso Downtown Municipal Management District
Roger Weber AICP, Urban Places Sector Leader (USA), Stantec
Alyssa B. Mason, Executive Director, Corpus Christi Downtown Management District
Alexandra Frey, Executive Director, 80/20 Foundation

Sponsors

This research project was made possible thanks to the support of the:

Publication Date

October 2025

Contact

info@bfinstitute.org

Contents

Beyond Basketball	01
Poverty by Design	02
Does Location Matter?	03
Historical Promises Vs Outcomes	04
Community Benefits Agreement	05
Ball Arena	06
SoFi Stadium	07
San Antonio S&E District	08
Conclusion	09
Timeline	10
References	11

Beyond Basketball

How can the Downtown District Deliver Community Benefits?

By Edward Aaron Romero, CSO, Centro San Antonio and BFI Fellow

The Admiral. The Big Fundamental. Coach Pop. The Coyote. Honking Horns. Nombre Shut Up – Go Spurs Go. With five NBA Championships and a 50-year history, no other professional sports team in San Antonio has made such a cultural and economic imprint on the City of San Antonio as the Spurs. As many die-hard fans like to say, Spurs Por Vida (Spurs for Life)!

Now, the question is:

Why is it taking so long for elected officials to finalize a deal that could keep the Spurs in San Antonio for another 50 years – and potentially bring them back to a new arena in the heart of downtown?

The Spurs' story began in 1973 when the franchise relocated from Dallas, rebranded, and settled into the HemisFair Arena, which was initially built for the '68 World's Fair. That downtown pairing of city and team energized the urban core and gave the team a home base (Wolff, 2008).

As the Spurs' popularity grew and their needs evolved, they moved to the Alamodome in 1993 and later to the SBC Center (later renamed the AT&T Center and now the Frost Bank Center) in 2002. With each move, the team's geographic center of gravity shifted further from downtown. Each time, local leaders promised revitalization of adjacent neighborhoods—particularly on the historically underserved Eastside (Wolff, 2008). Nevertheless, many of those promises remain unfulfilled. For many fans, attending a game still means driving in through endless lines of orange cones, parking, cheering, and then going home (Wolff, 2008).

San Antonio's experience with large sports infrastructure projects mirrors national trends. Throughout the United States, sports facilities have often been unable to deliver transformative goals. Previous studies note this is partly due to the lack of enforceable metrics and accountability, leaving residents with no way to measure whether promises were kept (Been, Gross, & Stein, 2005). According to findings from the Civic Scholars Program at the Better Futures Institute, the lack of consistent public data infrastructure has slowed evidence-based decision-making, making it difficult to track outcomes in San Antonio.

The initiative to bring the Spurs back downtown is bigger than a new arena for the team. With HemisFair and a state-of-the-art arena as an anchor, the Downtown Sports and Entertainment District aims to bring together housing, retail, parks, convention space, and cultural amenities to unlock the full potential of the southeast sector of San Antonio's urban core. Initial community engagement meetings have highlighted excitement and deep concerns, demonstrating the City's commitment to a new level of transparency while community members insist on rigorous oversight.

Poverty by Design

The current Frost Bank Center is located in San Antonio's Eastside, a historically underserved community with some of the city's highest poverty rates. This reality is directly tied to redlining – the legacy of racially discriminatory land-use and housing policies.

In the early 20th century, racially restrictive deed covenants barred African American and Mexican American families from purchasing property in San Antonio's expanding northern neighborhoods. Dr. Christine Drennon of Trinity University has exposed that these measures effectively “designed” the inequities that shape the city today (Drennon, 2016).

By the 1930s and 1940s, federal housing policies institutionalized these barriers through the

Home Owners' Loan Corporation's (HOLC) redlining maps. Large portions of the West, East, and South Sides were coded as “hazardous” investment areas, cutting off black and Mexican American residents' access to mortgage financing and credit. Drennon and others emphasize that these maps actively shaped patterns of disinvestment, channeling resources away from communities of color and concentrating poverty across generations.

The 1960s era of urban renewal compounded these prejudices. Built during the 1960s, Interstate 37 became a physical and psychological barrier that isolated the Eastside from Downtown. Then, in preparation for HemisFair '68, the City of San Antonio demolished more than 1,300 buildings and displaced over 1,600 mostly minority residents from a neighborhood to make way for the World's Fair. The Fair site included the HemisFair arena, the first place the San Antonio Spurs would call home.

These layered historical decisions demonstrate that place-based poverty in San Antonio is not incidental but by design. This context offers insights into the mistrust voiced by the local community.



Does Location Matter?

A Comparative Lens on Stadium Placement and Urban Policy

Urban planner David Robinson Jr., who serves as Development Manager at Weston Urban, argues that stadium location is a decisive factor in whether a public investment promotes lasting development.

His comparative study of the Alamodome and AT&T Center uncovers the following pattern:

there was minimal community input during early planning stages, and decisions for the final location sites were often shaped by top-down political negotiations rather than long-term urban policies. Communities were engaged after site selection was finalized.

Robinson's analysis builds on national literature that positions sports venues as "special activity generators" (Robertson, 1995; Chapin, 2004) but distinguishes between downtown-integrated projects and those sited in auto-centric fringe environments. The Alamodome's adjacency to downtown created long-term benefits, including investment in St. Paul Square and infrastructure. However, it lacked an anchor tenant capable of maximizing its value and fulfilling its potential.

Conversely, the AT&T Center secured a high-profile tenant in the Spurs. However, because of its parking-dominated design and weak multimodal connections, it failed to generate a positive neighborhood impact. The relationship between anchor uses and urban context can weaken or strengthen a venue's ability to function as an economic engine or neighborhood catalyst (Robinson, 2023).

Finally, Robinson looks at San Antonio's stadium investments within the framework of regional planning and land use. He notes that the 2016 SA Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan identifies the Central Business District as a growth center while excluding the AT&T Center site, further emphasizing the missed opportunity to align public investment with strategic urban planning.

Historical Promises Vs Outcomes

The Alamodome

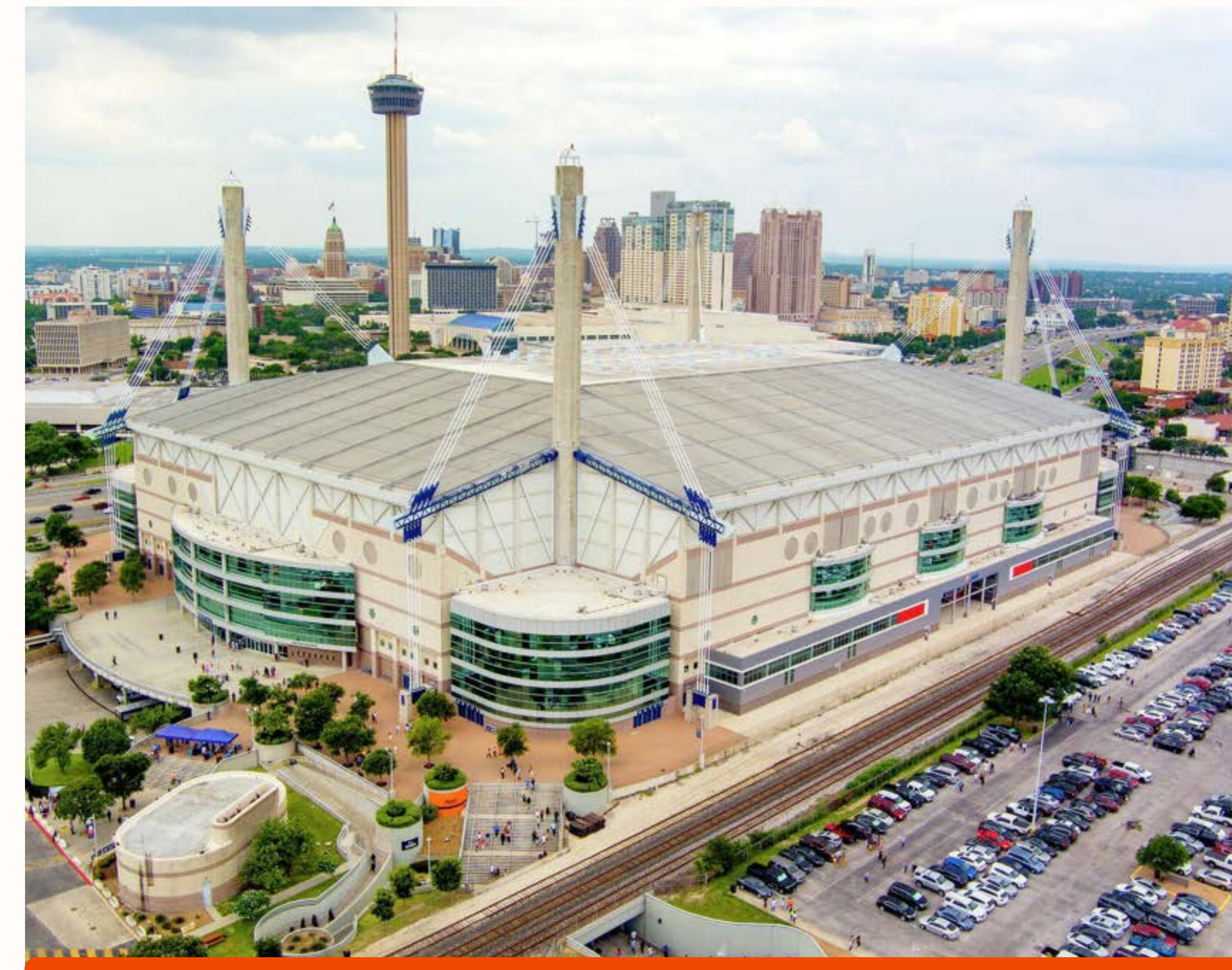
1993

Promises

Economic revitalization, expansion of the NFL franchise, and significant events.

Outcomes

Increased hotel development, as well as hosting NCAA Final Fours and Alamo Bowls – but surrounding neighborhoods experienced a 13% population decline between 1990 and 2000, with little direct revitalization spurred by the venue (Wolff, 2008). Despite briefly hosting the New Orleans Saints, the goal of attracting a permanent NFL team has yet to come to fruition.



The AT&T Center

2002

Promises

San Antonio Spurs team stability, revitalization of the Eastside, and expanded regional and national visibility.

Outcomes

A 25-year lease with the Spurs (including relocation penalties), national broadcasts, and a larger venue but with limited use by the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo. Meaningful activation around the arena never occurred, and additional infrastructure projects along the corridor between the Alamodome and AT&T Center did not create broad economic growth.



Together, the stories of both sports facilities reveal a common thread: technical benchmarks may have been met, but transformative community benefits were not.

Community Benefits Agreements

Past developments lacked enforceable community measures. That began to change in the early 2000s with the rise of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs). CBAs emerged as a formalized public policy and economic development tool where residents negotiate directly with developers to create binding commitments. These “benefits” include affordable housing, local hiring, or infrastructure developments. These incentives are in exchange for community support of significant development projects (Been, Gross, & Stein, 2005).

For example, the 2001 agreement tied to the Staples Center expansion in Los Angeles is often cited as a pioneering CBA model for equitable urban development. It introduced landmark commitments, but subsequent research has revealed mixed outcomes because the living wage clause was not legally binding and data limitations convoluted the assessment of long-term impacts, like whether job creation or housing developments could be directly attributed to the CBA (Marantz, 2021). Additionally, some researchers have noted that it failed to formalize oversight mechanisms, allowing developers to meet minimum standards without ensuring lasting community benefit (No Olympics LA, 2021).

Since the early 2000s, CBAs have increased in popularity and have been integrated into various projects across the nation, including sports arenas, transit-oriented developments, and technology campuses. CBAs remain an important new mechanism for defining and measuring success and providing additional accountability. While imperfect, CBAs provide a framework that gives the community leverage—something missing in San Antonio’s past stadium projects.

Measuring What Matters to Community

The San Antonio community knows this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It is a moment to learn from the past and put in place best practices from throughout the United States. For this report, Better Futures Civic Tech Scholars researched best practices and developed a framework to assess the community benefits and impact of sports venue investments. The following metrics move beyond narrow financial indicators to emphasize community outcomes:

1. Integration of mixed-use development

2. Year-round activation beyond team events

3. Employment and job creation (Quality and wages)

4. Local spending retention in adjacent areas

5. Community engagement through public space use and programming

6. Changes in property values

This framework could be valuable for evaluating the proposed Downtown Sports and Entertainment District in San Antonio.

The six core measures of success help expose gaps and offer a consistent structure for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of place-based investment. Using the framework, BFI scholars took a closer look at the Ball Arena in Denver, CO, and SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, CA.

Ball Arena

Denver, CO

Kroenke Sports & Entertainment and the Ball Arena Community Benefits Advisory Committee (BACBAC) negotiated a CBA over 12 months. We can summarize the arena's advantages and disadvantages using the BFI framework.

Integration of Mixed-Use

The project weaves residential, commercial, and public spaces together.

Year-Round Activation

The CBA stipulates that all public spaces remain accessible year-round and include cultural programming and multimodal infrastructure to support continuous activation.

Employment and Job Creation

The agreement includes a 20% hiring target for residents of low-income census tracts and funds a "community workforce coordinator" to enforce hiring equity.

Local Spending Retention

Discounted rent and business incubation support small local vendors and entrepreneurs, including pop-up retail, and help retain spending within the community.

Community Engagement

The Ball Arena CBA includes a Community Investment Fund governed by local representatives. The CIF was initially funded with \$16 million through a 1% retail and hotel fee. In addition, \$5 million was set aside for public art and youth programs.

Increase in Property Values

Although this metric is not directly addressed in the CBA, the structure of long-term governance and the 99-year affordability restrictions arguably serve as proactive strategies to mitigate displacement due to rising land values.



Overall, the Ball Arena, when framed by the six BFI metrics, offers a measurable, enforceable, and trackable public benefit model.

SoFi Stadium

Inglewood, CA

Spurred mainly by private funds, the SoFi Stadium development in Inglewood produced a substantial impact when viewed through the lens of BFI's six core metrics.

Integration of Mixed-Use

SoFi is just one part of a larger redevelopment footprint that includes retail, residential, and entertainment components. However, it is important to note the lack of binding commitments regarding affordability.

Year-Round Activation

Before opening, the development hosted 83 outreach events. Currently, the district includes public events, seasonal programming, and NFL games and concerts (ASCJ Capstone, 2021).

Employment and Job Creation

SoFi Stadium committed to 35% local hiring goals, which resulted in over 1,200 local apprentices and approximately \$26 million in wages. More than 95 minority owned, and historically disadvantaged businesses were awarded contracts (City of Inglewood, 2021).

Local Spending Retention

SoFi's lack of structured retail rent terms or small business incubation is a defining difference from the Ball Arena model.

Community Engagement

There is no formal community governance body. However, the developer pledged \$100 million, and the Inglewood Home Assist Fund was established, using \$75 million to lend to qualified developers for the acquisition, development, and preservation of affordable and mixed-income housing. (Capital & Main, 2021).

Increase in Property Values

The stadium has increased land values and investor activity in Inglewood. Protections against displacement were not codified.



Ball Arena and SoFi provide useful contrasts, but two cases alone cannot capture the full spectrum of outcomes. Further research is necessary to illustrate successes and failures of CBAs and those lessons could better inform San Antonio's approach.

When framed by the six Better Futures metrics, we can measure, enforce, and track large-scale projects' direct and indirect impacts on a community.

The framework's full power depends on its adoption as an embedded evaluation tool with clearly defined community benefits. While the framework sets measurable categories, CBA research shows that operationalized data collection and standardized reporting make long-term accountability more transparent. Developing a clear approach to independent data collection would strengthen San Antonio's process.

San Antonio Sports and Entertainment District



The Current Proposal

In the summer of 2025, a citywide effort to engage residents in San Antonio led to public engagement workshops in all 10 council districts, virtual sessions, and a youth forum. More than 600 residents participated in the workshops, which included partnerships with community-based organizations. Themes raised included: displacement and affordability concerns, Accountability of CBAs, multimodal access and pedestrian safety, cultural identity and placemaking, and transparency in decision-making.

Youth voices added strong calls for safe gathering spaces for teens and families, opportunities for mentorship, creative expression, and employment, and the integration of music, food, and culture reflective of the city's identity. Many also expressed skepticism of projects designed more for tourists than for locals.

When we examine the six metrics of success identified by BFI and compare them to the community's initial asks, we find alignment and elements that lay the foundation for our own evaluation model.

Building a Smarter, More Accountable Future

San Antonio, known for its collaborative culture, has an opportunity to lead in building a modern accountability infrastructure that links public investments to measurable outcomes. By drawing on its wealth of local resources, the city can align existing initiatives with this goal while ensuring that multiple stakeholders remain actively engaged in the process.

Civic technology plays a central role in this effort. It uses digital tools to

strengthen how citizens interact with institutions and with each other, creating more participatory, people-centered public services and decision-making processes. When applied effectively, civic technology helps bridge the gap between community needs and institutional capacity.

Several local initiatives highlight this potential. The Better Futures Institute (BFI), a regional think tank, engages STEAM programs in research and development to support public agencies and could collaborate on citywide data governance. SmartSA, which is led by the City of San Antonio alongside public agencies and community partners, integrates technology and data to improve resident services and offers a governance framework. Similarly, United Way, in partnership with UTSA researchers, helps local organizations meet their data needs, providing another model for how community-based collaboration can advance accountability.

By pairing BFI's evaluation framework with SmartSA's technical infrastructure or a similar program, the community can create a modern accountability system. Such proposed tools could allow for real-time tracking of outcomes like job creation, housing affordability, and displacement risk. BFI could provide independent, third-party evaluations to ensure public trust. This collaboration would also set a precedent for how cities can use data and governance to track outcomes made to the public.

Conclusion: Transparent, Accountable Public Investment

The six metrics offered by BFI provide communities with a starting point for measuring what matters, and modern technology presents an opportunity to enhance accountability and systematically monitor progress. Consistent governance data protocols for all public-private development agreements will empower San Antonio residents, public officials, and both the nonprofit and corporate sectors to make informed decisions and evaluate results.

The Ball Arena CBA in Denver provides a strong model that cities can replicate. We propose a framework integrating technology, standardization, and governance:

Establishing standardized data protocols across all publicly funded development projects.

Ensuring community-led design of engagement tools and transparency mechanisms.

Creating a citizen oversight board to monitor outcomes and serve as a long-term governance partner.

But vision alone is not enough. Community doubts, especially on the Eastside, remain rooted in history. Many residents still remember how promises with each new stadium move fell short. While the broader city may often move on, those directly impacted have not forgotten being left behind.

This project can be different. By embedding accountability mechanisms into this generational investment, city leaders can show that public dollars can build trust. Through the tracking of measurable outcomes and including citizen oversight at the forefront, this project could redefine how San Antonio—and other cities nationwide—foster community engagement and responsible data governance.

At its core, the proposed Sports and Entertainment District is more than just a shiny new arena. It represents placemaking at a city scale and an opportunity to reimagine downtown with local businesses, housing, parks, and cultural spaces that aim to reinvigorate downtown. It's also a test for San Antonio to finally deliver on transparency and real community benefits. If done right – and with appropriate, legally binding agreements – this investment can energize the experience economy, attract visitors, and restore local pride in an urban core that belongs to all San Antonians.

Timeline

April 3, 2025

the City, County, and Spurs signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to explore the district's objectives, funding capabilities, and capacities. (City of San Antonio, Bexar County, & San Antonio Spurs, 2025)

August 2025

The Bexar County Commissioners Court voted to place a venue tax question on the November ballot, while the City Council approved a non-binding term sheet with detailed Spurs, City, and County contributions:

- The City would contribute up to \$489 million (around 38% of the arena's cost) through bonds supported by project-related revenues such as lease payments, Hemisfair's TIRZ funds, and a state project finance zone. No general fund dollars would be used to pay for the district.
- Bexar County pledges to contribute up to \$311 million (25%) through venue-tax bonds (via hotel and rental car taxes). However, voters must approve this mechanism in the upcoming November 4, 2025, election.
- The Spurs will contribute up to \$500 million, including cost overruns, and sign a 30-year lease with a non-relocation agreement. The team also commits to help generate \$1.4 billion in new taxable development within the Hemisfair TIRZ over roughly 12 years to foment broader growth.
- The agreement requires a \$75 million community benefits package over 30 years to support local priorities like affordable housing, small business support, and youth programs.

These commitments aim to balance private development and public investment. Phase 1 of the community engagement efforts in summer 2025, spearheaded by firm Able City, included public workshops in all 10 council districts, virtual sessions, and a youth forum. More than 600 residents participated in the workshops, which included partnerships with community-based organizations.

February 2025

City of San Antonio leadership presented a vision for a Downtown Sports and Entertainment District. Simultaneously, Bexar County committed to redeveloping the Frost Bank Center, the Joe Freeman Coliseum, and adjacent sites. Local leaders have also pointed to the need for an expanded and upgraded Convention Center to recover an estimated \$465,000 in lost visitor nights and \$716 million in visitor spending from 2019-2024, and the need to attract major national events.

August 23, 2025

News outlets report that Mayor Jones will pursue a revenue bond election for the City's contribution. Texas does not require a public vote on revenue bonds; however, according to the city attorney calling for the election is legally permissible.

November 2025

Early voting for the Bexar County Venue Tax will be from October 20th to October 31st, with election day on November 4th. There will be two propositions on the ballot. Proposition A: Authorizing Bexar County to raise the county's hotel occupancy tax and continue rental-car tax to finance renovations and infrastructure for a new San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo District which includes the current Frost Bank Center and adjacent sites. Proposition B: would use the same tax increases to help build a new multipurpose arena and new downtown home for the San Antonio Spurs.

References

- ASCJ Capstone. (2021). *Community engagement and event programming at SoFi Stadium*. Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California.
- Capital & Main. (2021, October 4). *Inglewood Home Assist Fund: Financing development in Inglewood*. Century Housing Corporation. <https://century.org/financing/inglewood-home-assist-fund/>
- Chapin, T. S. (2004). Sports facilities as urban redevelopment catalysts: Baltimore's Camden Yards and Cleveland's Gateway. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 70(2), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360408976370>
- City of Inglewood. (2021). *SoFi Stadium employment and job creation report*. City of Inglewood. <https://www.cityofinglewood.org/DocumentCenter/View/12345/SoFi-Stadium-Employment-Report-2021>
- City of San Antonio, Bexar County, & San Antonio Spurs. (2025, April 3). *Memorandum of Understanding among Bexar County, the City of San Antonio, and the San Antonio Spurs*. <https://www.sa.gov/files/assets/main/v/1/initiatives/sports-amp-entertainment-district/memo-of-understanding-city-of-san-antonio-bexar-county-spurs-04-2025.pdf>
- Drennon, C. (2016, July 30). *San Antonio's school inequity rooted in city's history of segregation*. San Antonio Report. <https://sanantonioreport.org/san-antonios-school-inequity-rooted-citys-history-segregation/>
- Gross, J., LeRoy, G., & Janis-Aparicio, M. (2005). *Community benefits agreements: Making development projects accountable (Report)*. Good Jobs First. <https://goodjobsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/pdf/cba2005final.pdf>
- Marantz, N. J. (2021). What do community benefits agreements deliver? Evidence from Los Angeles. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 87(4), 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2021.1926954>
- No Olympics LA. (2021, July 23). *Reframing Community Benefits Agreements: Accelerated gentrification, negotiated defeats, and collective resistance in Los Angeles*. <https://nolympicsla.com/2021/07/23/cba/>
- Robertson, K. A. (1995). Downtown redevelopment strategies in the United States. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 61(4), 429–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944369508975655>
- Robinson, D. (2021). *Does location matter? A historical analysis of professional sports stadium development in San Antonio, TX* (Master's thesis). University of Texas at San Antonio.
- Wolff, N. W. (2008). *Transforming San Antonio: An Insider's View to the AT&T Arena, Toyota, the PGA Village, and the Riverwalk Extension*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press.



bfinstitution.org

Copyright © 2025 BFI

All rights reserved.

No part of this report may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and articles. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the email address below. Thank you for supporting the author's rights.

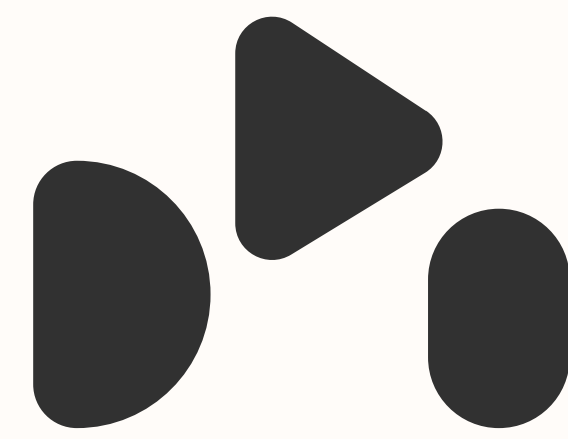
Printed by BFI in the USA.

First printing edition 2025.

Report design by Jon C. Rodriguez.

info@bfinstitution.org

Published by Better Futures Institute
www.bfinstitution.org



“This project can be different. By embedding accountability mechanisms into this generational investment, city leaders can show that public dollars can build trust. Through the tracking of measurable outcomes and including citizen oversight at the forefront...”

Edward Aaron Romero, CSO, Centro San Antonio and BFI Fellow

