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CONTENT

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SAN JOSE'S
INNOVATIVE &
CREATIVE CULTURE

EDUCATION



Vincent Kartheiser
SAN JOSE REP THEATRE

featuring:

*Vincent Kartheiser*_ACTOR

*Irene Dalis*_OPERA SAN JOSÉ

*Shea Salinas*_SJ EARTHQUAKES

*Leah Toeniskoetter*_SPUR SJ

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SPUR SAN JOSE

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ESTABLISHED IN SAN FRANCISCO IN THE EARLY 1900'S, SPUR COMES TO SAN JOSE BRINGING RESEARCH·EDUCATION·ADVOCACY

LIVING IN A BIG CITY HAS OBVIOUS PERKS:

the constant buzz of life, endless resources at one's fingertips, and stimulating diversity. But with the growth of a city comes important decisions that must be made, decisions involving things like transit systems, walkability, sustainable design, disaster planning and community building.

It's easy to focus on the everyday details, but what if you stopped, looked around, and really thought about what was best for the city of San Jose as a whole? This past year, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, SPUR, has expanded to San Jose. SPUR is a member-supported, nonprofit organization that began over one hundred years ago, originally called the San Francisco Housing Association, SFHA.

The organization's mission statement is, "Through research, education and advocacy, SPUR promotes good planning and good government." It started when a cadre of city leaders were concerned with the below standard housing in San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fires. Their involvement led to the State Tenement House Act of 1911, which was a change to state law. After remaining a solely San Francisco-focused organization for decades, working on things such as the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the promotion of compact growth patterns, and assisting in the planning of BART, SPUR decided to take its expertise to the largest city in northern California: San Jose. Leading the San Jose office is Leah Toeniskoetter, a native of California.


Not only does Toeniskoetter have a background in real estate development with Toeniskoetter Development, Inc. she was also a credit analyst at Comerica Bank in Detroit and San Jose.

Additionally, she worked as a project associate for the Brazilian-American Chamber of Commerce in New York City. On the world stage, Toeniskoetter speaks Portuguese, worked as a translator in Brazil and as a Peace Corps volunteer in a small village in Bolivia. Though Toeniskoetter did not anticipate a position like this, she was receptive to new possibilities. "My mind was open to leading an organization, working in San Jose and helping my city move forward," she says.

With a family history in community involvement, it is no surprise Toeniskoetter has taken on this challenge. Her father was a founding member of the Children's Discovery Museum and has served on countless nonprofit boards. Her mother also served on the board of the San Jose Museum of Art. "I believe in giving back to the community and want to have an impact on where we are going in the future," Toeniskoetter says.

SPUR's style when it comes to urban issues isn't about taking sides; they work through consensus and collaboration. "We are a policy organization. At the core of what we do, we are usually described as a think-tank," says Toeniskoetter. "The beauty of what we do is that we start with a question facing the city, bring in a group of engaged and knowledgeable people to help us come up with achievable solutions and move into action by saying, 'Now that we are all on board with what can be done, how do we actually make it happen?'"

In addition to their policy research, SPUR is constantly hosting programs to cultivate a growing number of 'urbanists' in the South Bay. "In our Urban Center in San Francisco, we hold three to five events a week, and that makes it extremely easy to really foster a conversation about the way a city ticks," Toeniskoetter says. "In San Jose, we've had the fortune to partner with many organizations



in downtown to hold those types of events so we can discover our city while at the same time talking about how we continue to foster the type of city we want.”

Since their San Jose launch party in March, SPUR has held many types of programs around issues like improving public transit, the fundamentals of good urban design, creating bike-friendly business districts and what comes in the absence of the Redevelopment Agency.

For Toeniskoetter, a few themes have emerged since her involvement with the organization. “San Jose’s future is urban,” she says. “We want to live in a walkable, active place with viable alternatives to driving, the ability to live close to work, parks and our basic needs.’ I think that is an attitude that’s been evolving.”

So what’s the aim for Toeniskoetter and SPUR in San Jose? “There are 500,000 people coming to San Jose in the next several decades. SPUR is excited to think deeply about where they will live, work, shop and play,” she says. “The city has said we don’t want to grow horizontally anymore. So the question is, how do we go vertical and how do we do that in a way that maintains and respects the neighborhoods that exist now?”

The real task at hand is to channel the energy and enthusiasm around SPUR’s work in San Jose into bringing meaningful change. She realizes that it is not going to be the same as it is in San Francisco. “SPUR has approached this expansion in a really open-minded way,” says Toeniskoetter. “While SPUR has long-standing urban principals at its core, bringing that expertise to the San Jose context is something we pay very close attention to. A hundred years of experience in San Francisco taught us that real change comes incrementally and sometimes takes a time. We have the leadership, the staying power and the patience to get there right,” Toeniskoetter says. “Now, comes the fun part of connecting our South Bay urbanists to our city’s future.”

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