

Probationers carry through clean sweep of Downtown

By Jennifer Shubinski
El Paso Times

Downtown may still seem like an Olympic obstacle course because of construction, but the track is much cleaner than it used to be.

A unique partnership between the Downtown Management District and the West Texas Adult Supervision and Corrections Department is helping combat the image of a dirty Downtown.

For almost a year now, probationers have pressure-cleaned sidewalks, painted over or pressure-removed graffiti and collected trash from streets and alleyways.

"I can tell you I see a great improvement," said Y.I. Santoscoy, president of National American Investment, 204 N. Oregon. "You can see that Downtown is a lot cleaner. Once they get all the construction done, you'll really see the difference."

The Downtown Management District began the cleanup project in November of 1998 to deal with concerns that Downtown was dirty and a turn-off to tourists and shoppers. Since then 461,450 square feet have been cleaned and 23,092 bags of trash have been collected, according to Downtown Management District figures.

Through a contract with West Texas Adult Supervision and Corrections Department, probationers work off their community service hours by cleaning up Downtown and removing graffiti.

"The good part is for the taxpayers," said Mike Breiting, Downtown Management District executive director. "These people have cost the community money with their crime, now they can pay back time through services."

Sergio Alcantar, 24, was one of the probationers cleaning up Downtown last week. He is working off 120 hours of community service, and is glad he is able to give back to the community for his past misdeeds.

"I've always disliked tagging," Alcantar said. "What better way to give something back."

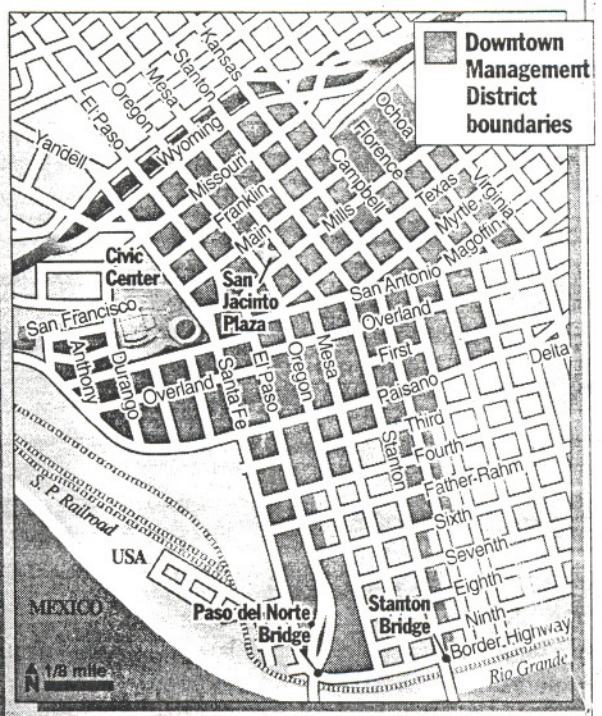
Stephen Enders, executive director of adult probation, said probationers stay on their best behavior. The only problems that have arisen are when proba-

Work detail



Probationers clean up Ochoa Street as part of the Downtown Management District's contract with the West Texas Adult Supervision and Corrections Department.

José J. Gardea / El Paso Times



Here are some facts about the Downtown Management District cleanup program from January to August of this year.

Number of probationers	2,458
Community service hours worked	26,122.50
A closer look	
Pressurized graffiti-removal locations	112
Sidewalks washed	490
Painting projects	216
Trash-bag collection	23,092
Cardboard-box collection	27,146
Trailer loads of trash collected	163
Total sites cleaned	10,407
Total square footage cleaned	461,450

Source: Downtown Management District

Details

► **If you see** graffiti or trash that needs to be removed from Downtown, you can call 533-2656.

► **Public and nonprofit** agencies interested in working with probationers can contact the Adult Probation Office at 546-8120.

tioners don't show up for their assigned hours, Enders said.

The Downtown Management District is a public entity that uses a self-imposed property-tax assessment on Downtown commercial properties — 12 cents for every \$100 of assessed valuation — to pay for programs aimed at keeping Downtown clean and safe while attacking parking and transportation problems. About 600 commercial property owners pay the nonvoluntary assessment, Breiting said.

"It is kind of like living in a school district, you are in it by virtue of ownership (of) property," he explained.

The district's 1999 budget totals \$258,000 of which \$115,000 is used for the cleanup

program. The city also has pledged a total of \$180,000 over a three-year period, Breiting said.

Funds are used for equipment and to pay the salaries of three professional probation staffers who supervise the daily cleanups. Enders said the program is good for Downtown because of the cost-effectiveness.

"It's free to taxpayers and that's a positive thing," he said. "We're looking at a way to save taxpayers' dollars."

Not only does it save tax dollars, it is a way people can show they care about their community.

"I guess I like to make a difference and make an impact on Downtown," said Manuel Lucas, one of the field supervisors. "I love my city and community and I want to keep it clean for the community and tourists."

Before crews started the massive cleanup project, litter, such as cardboard boxes, couches, air conditioning units, garbage and waste, clogged alleys and covered streets.

Before and after pictures taken by the Downtown Management District attest to the

amount of work men and women probationers have completed.

"My alley is so clean, it's wonderful," said Rachele Nedow, owner of Rachele's Perfumeria, 106 E. San Antonio.

"Because of construction it's still messy, but it's not dirty. When the construction is finished, Downtown will shine."

One problem the Downtown Management District has encountered in the cleanup program is homeless people who use alleys, parks and storefronts as shelters. And because there are no public facilities Downtown, the homeless are using the alleys as toilets.

"We're now even disinfecting areas to keep the smell out," Breiting said.

An hour before the sun rises, probationers, using pressurized sidewalk washers, hit the streets. But in the months the program has been in existence, Breiting said he sees a change of heart sweeping many Downtown merchants, as well.

"We get out there and people are already cleaning the sidewalks," he said. "We're changing the mindset of not cleaning up."