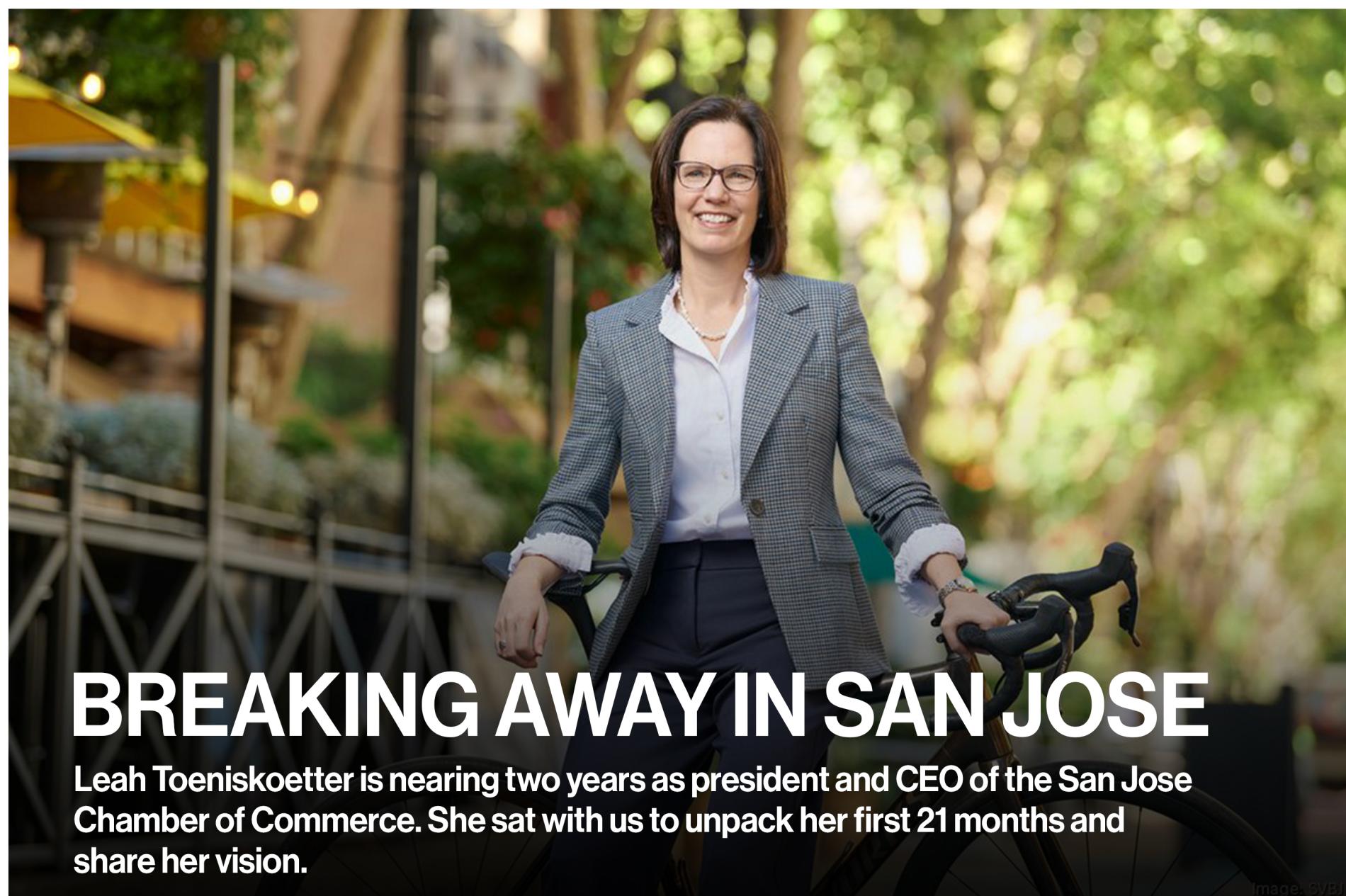


SILICON VALLEY BUSINESS JOURNAL



BREAKING AWAY IN SAN JOSE

Leah Toeniskoetter is nearing two years as president and CEO of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce. She sat with us to unpack her first 21 months and share her vision.



By [Gary J. Boulanger](#) – Editor-in-Chief, Silicon Valley Business Journal
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Leah Toeniskoetter became the 12th president and CEO of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce in early January 2024, a mere walk from the Silicon Valley Business Journal's office in downtown.

Previously, Leah was a senior manager at Deloitte and the founding director of SPUR San Jose, a nonprofit public policy organization. Working for the family business taught her the most about business, relationships and gaining traction in Silicon Valley.

Toeniskoetter has sat on a few Business Journal panel discussions, and we've shared a couple of bicycle rides, so it was time to formally unpack her first 21 months. This interview was edited for clarity and length.

Describe your first month as president and CEO.

"Curious" is the nice word. Curious as in asking questions. The first several months was spent talking to the other leaders in the community who had had challenging relationships with the Chamber, then understanding and listening to what those were, acknowledging them, understanding how we could drive in a different way and set a new direction.

If you look back on the almost two years in this role, what have been the highlights so far?

First, the dedication of the board, which is so important to an organization and its leader.

The second is finding brilliant, experienced and driven team members.

The third is learning four months in about San Jose's potential to grow its sports and entertainment economy, what an entertainment district is (and isn't) and how we can be a driving force around that opportunity for economic development in our city.

The S&E [sports and entertainment] economy is much broader than the entertainment district in the spotlight. We want to bring both to life, but in terms of the grander scheme of things, it's understanding the S&E economy that will set us in the right direction for future investment into an entertainment district, new convention center, new hotels, entertainment venues, etc.

We need to quantify it, demonstrate the areas of opportunity for investment and have access to the resources that can help make it happen. We're thrilled to work with a mayor and city that sees our potential in this economy, in the same way we see it in manufacturing or artificial intelligence.

What would you have done differently in the first 12 months?

Hindsight is always easier than what was in front of a decision at any given moment. When I started, I was the fifth CEO (counting interims) in four years. There are three organizations under this role: the Chamber, our community foundation and our building preservation foundation. We had three employees, only one had been there more than a year.

I took it day-by-day for a good while, staying curious, working to balance humor with 'oh wow' moments. That didn't always work. Finding the right team takes time, and I didn't have the liberty of building one at first.

Balancing the organization's needs with the needs of the business community was (and still is) a chicken and egg scenario. Business has told us what they need and where the Chamber can provide value. Businesses joining the Chamber is what enables us to hire the team to provide the services and support. It's a slow growth when those two aren't rising at the same time (membership and staff).

It was a year of discovery and reorganization. That's exactly right. For the first full year, I was uncovering and discovering the organization, my own leadership style, and the true needs of the business community, which helped in the second year.

There are still systems that must get worked out and everyone must be on the same page and we know that that takes time. Admittedly, patience was not an option in the first year.

Floating above your daily routine, do you think that San Jose businesses understand the importance of membership or is there a need for a rebranded new messaging?

We're setting — or resetting — the brand.

Feedback says the Chamber's not only in a better place but it's more effective and more valued than it was when I started. As we continue to show our presence with honest conversations like this one. It also helps when the Business Journal contacts us for our opinion, and we have policy positions and programs to support business and places to direct people when they need help. It's really starting to take off.

When I started in early January 2024, we had an event set for third week of January, so it was a little bit of 'I hope this works!', you know, but our first barbecue, which was always the Chamber's biggest event of the year, was a really big success my first year and I credit staff for that.

And then this last year, our annual dinner was a success and then our barbecue again was a success. That's where folks, me included, feed off the energy of getting back together, of being with that network of seeing new people and folks you've always seen again, realizing that being together is important to the community and we can offer that; this has really shown up as a place of value for us.

What does a typical day look like for you?

I love it because there isn't one — no day is typical.

You could say you're a crack-of-dawn bicycle rider, right?

I am. I work better in the morning than at night. I leave my house about 5:30 and then I'm back by 7:30. The group I ride with are all professionals in different types of Industries. Most have kids, so the goal is to do our cycling outside of work and responsibilities and get our exercise in.

I'm always up a little bit before 5, and if it's not a cycling day by 6 I do the deep think work at home before the day starts and then I'm in the office. I have a lot of meetings and they're all over the board on topics which I love.

If it's variety that you're after, you can have it every day.

That's right. It might be a heavy load, but it's still a variety. Not everyone's day is filled with variety. I learned that at SPUR; I loved being all over the place on policy issues. It was so fun. For me, the only way to sustain long-term is to build into the staples of the day — exercise and deep-think space — and then the variety can take over.

How's the professional chemistry these days and how are you able to get everyone together to attend each meeting?

Great question. I'm grateful for an active board and executive committee — both meet once a month. At this point in the Chamber's growth, that's how often we meet because it's a working board. Working boards enable an organization to reach an elevated place.

What I most appreciate about the board is we had a very real dialogue with existing and new [members] about board responsibilities and the importance of truly showing up. And everyone agreed: this amount of time investment and this amount of membership investment is what's needed to catalyze our growth and opportunity to serve the business community.

You've taken sports and entertainment district fact-finding trips to SoCal and Atlanta. What did you learn and how much do you think that San Jose can adopt as its own and then share with me your vision for San Jose?

What we learned in Los Angeles is that they look at sports and entertainment as an economy that needs investment, so it isn't a venue, it isn't a team. It isn't even LA Live. The local economy is impacted by all of that together and that ripples between pro teams, concert venues, college teams, conventions, development teams, to youth soccer tournaments; that was the number one takeaway.

Number two is that the experience economy, as our mayor rightly says, is truly something to pay attention to. Folks don't want to pay a high amount for a ticket, drive into a parking lot, go to the event, go back to the parking lot and leave.

There is a big miss of opportunity to impact and improve the experience of the fan or the concertgoer that not only benefits the city and the economy, but just the person and their experience here.

Number three is creating the physical places that make an entertainment district. If you do that right, it becomes a magnet for activity seven days a week, which is what downtown San Jose needs. We know our capacity by what we see with Nvidia's GTC, an event at SAP, Jazz Fest. We'll see it all year with the NWSL Championship, Super Bowl, March Madness and the World Cup.

How do we move these highs into consistent activity and entertainment in our downtown? Another opportunity I've had is to join Team San Jose's board, to learn and understand how important these events are to the hospitality industry, and why the convention center needs to have as much attention as our sports venues.

They both bring in global audiences and have a striking impact on our economy, so efforts to tie the expansion of the convention center together with the goals of a downtown entertainment district is important.

When did you get the idea to go visit The Battery Atlanta?

I'll credit that to Chris Shay and John Poch, who are two of the people most attuned to what every other city is doing and why every other city is attractive for business and sports. I've spent time in Denver, my next visit is to Austin, then Milwaukee and Chicago. I'm very lucky to have family near these often talked about entertainment districts.

I'm focused on what we can bring back to San Jose with a broader, more open perspective. The real breakthroughs don't come from looking within — they come from getting out and exploring what's happening beyond our own community.

We're also planning to bring in experts who've looked at San Jose to offer their thoughts on what we could do here. They are the experts that have designed, financed, leased, managed entertainment districts all over the U.S. — they can show what is possible.

I believe this is something we talked about on our recent bicycle ride; the additional caveat comes when you bring folks from the outside. We're hoping to glean expertise from the outside because we only have people from the inside talking about it which means we're just going to end up where we've been.

I attended an event at the Battery, a symposium around real estate development and arenas proximity to sports. Beyond learning so much, and making wonderful connections, when I raised my hand to ask questions, saying I was with the San Jose Chamber of Commerce, describing what's coming our way via the Super Bowl, the World Cup, I had folks coming up to me, giving me their business cards because they were excited about everything I had just said, because they were curious.

I found that fabulous because I think that's what makes it fun — to have this wide horizon in front of us. It's a reinforcement to our vision and the opportunity others see for our city.

Last question. What legacy would you like to leave as the 12th president and CEO of the San Jose Chamber and its second female leader in its history since 1886?

I'll let you know when I get there.



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