

Pioneer Courthouse Square brings visitors back to downtown



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The Roots perform during The Square PDX's Summer Concert Series. SAM GEHRKE

By [Carlos Fuentes](#) – Contributing writer, Portland Business Journal
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Live music has always been an integral part of Portland's culture, even through a pandemic.

As the heat rose this summer, so too has downtown attendance, as crowds of visitors have hit Pioneer Courthouse Square for a slew of events.

Fostering a sense of community in the square, or "Portland's Living Room," hasn't been easy, but with new programs such as PDX Live bringing big artists such as The Roots and Modest Mouse to the heart of downtown, organizers hope Pioneer Courthouse Square can again become a thriving city attraction.

"People are looking for something to do downtown, and I think they are hungry to experience live music," said Theresa Vetsch-Sandoval, director of marketing for Pioneer

Courthouse Square. “I was at The Roots show and the energy in the square, from The Roots performing to the concert attendees, was just electric.”

The square operates as a nonprofit and attracts 11 million-plus visitors in an average year. Roughly 80% of the space's funding comes from Pioneer Courthouse Square fundraising and sponsored events, such as Flicks on the Bricks, a Noon Tunes Summer Concert Series, and Mondays on the Mall.

PDXLive is the spot's first collaboration with True West Presents, a live music promoter that produces concerts in the Pacific Northwest.

“I think people are really into it, overall, it's been a really positive vibe, and I think that there's a magical thing once the lights go up on the courthouse,” said Trevor Solomon, a talent buyer for True West Presents. “There's an energy you can't even describe that is so positive, and really just transcends how important this is for the city and how it's important for the people that live here.”

This summer brought 17 PDXLive concerts to Pioneer Courthouse Square. The series has sold well, with roughly 3,000 attendees at every concert, including three consecutive sold-out shows on opening weekend in June.

With businesses continuing to leave downtown Portland at high rates, Vetsch-Sandoval said businesses in the surrounding area have felt positive effects from square visitors.

“Keeping the square active is really beneficial for all neighbors around the square and throughout downtown,” she said. “I mean, it's kind of like a ripple effect. If there's something that is happening here at the square, we've heard from our fellow neighbors around us that it's definitely beneficial to them.”

The space further hosts such events as the Christmas tree lighting, the Holiday Ale Festival and cultural gatherings such as a Chinese Festival and India Festival, which bring in 17,000-plus visitors, according to Vetsch-Sandoval.

Prior to the pandemic, the square hosted more than 300 events every year. Even throughout the pandemic, the locale hosted programming that abided by Covid-19 regulations, such as Polka Dot Downtown, an art installation that attracts local artists.

The square's organization has also used social media to its advantage in reaching a wider audience. With 16,000 likes on Facebook and 12,000 followers on Instagram, the square has more than doubled its social media following on both platforms over the previous 15 months.

One of the square's recent Instagram posts went viral. As part of the World Domination Summit's weeklong programming, 380 individuals suited up in T-Rex costumes to break a world record: most people in one place dressed as dinosaurs. An event video posted on Instagram merited 121,000 likes.

As for the future, Pioneer Courthouse Square and True West Presents will likely continue collaborating on the PDX Live series. True West has begun scheduling acts for next summer.

“Our mission is to be a steward of the park, activate the city, and bring people together,” Vetsch-Sandoval said. “We are a group of a small team that really puts that square first and want to keep it healthy and active and vital for our downtown.”

Pioneer Courthouse Square

Executive Director: Jennifer Polver

Established: 1984

Number of PDXLive shows: 17

Annual visitors to the square: 11 million