

As executive director of Capital City Development Corp., John Brunelle has significant influence on the built environment and economic growth of Downtown Boise. Leading the city's redevelopment agency is a responsibility he does not take lightly, and he knows that the best way to seize the opportunity is through a team-oriented approach.

His collaborative and inclusive leadership style is clearly working. CCDC recently topped \$1 billion in construction value via the public-private partnership program that Brunelle implemented in 2013. But the true measure of success is not so much the million-dollar partnerships and thriving local economy, which are impressive and have attracted attention nationally; rather, the most important accomplishment is the dedication to constant improvement and professional growth by the people at CCDC who, Brunelle says, "come to work ready to assist others."

"Every employee at the agency plays a crucial role, and they know it," he says.

"Internally we have an ongoing commitment to maintain the foundation of trust and teamwork that enables us to serve our stakeholders. It's our job to help make great things happen for our community, and we're at our best when every team member understands what is expected, feels empowered to take on the assignment, and is confident that they have the support necessary to be successful."

In a sector that requires intense, high-dollar negotiation with private developers—always in the public eye and often involving other public agencies and changing political dynamics—CCDC has effectively helped redevelop almost 500 acres of urban landscape. "It helps to be competitive, but it also helps to know that your agency has the power to perform and do its part. Our board of commissioners is always engaged, insightful, and supportive of the work we do," Brunelle says.

Partnerships with local, regional, and national development firms have led to new hotels, a surge in residential buildings, and enhancements to the city's streetscape,

stormwater, fiber, and geothermal infrastructure. CCDC's significant investment to enhance The Grove Plaza, Boise's most celebrated public gathering place, coupled with agreements to construct mixed-use and hospitality facilities adjacent the plaza, marked the completion of Idaho's original urban renewal district. The ambitious project resulted in Brunelle accepting the prestigious Gold Award for Public Private Partnerships, the highest honor given annually by the International Economic Development Council, at its 2018 conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

"It was a privilege to tell the Boise story of community collaboration and represent our city that day," he says.

The principles of determination and teamwork were ingrained in Brunelle at an early age. Growing up in Boise as the youngest of five children in an active, sports-minded family seems to have influenced his approach and attitude in his career. The nightly competition in the family's big Depot Bench backyard varied with the seasons, with football and whiffle ball the year-round staples that attracted up to a dozen neighborhood kids of various ages.

"You learned that getting knocked down meant it was time to get back up," he says. "As we got older the rules changed a bit, and hitting the ball over the hedge was an out rather than a home run. We switched from tackle football to touch when a friend snapped a collarbone. We were still kids, but we were becoming big kids."

He also honed his leadership skills early; at Bishop Kelly High School he served as student body president and, as quarterback of the varsity football team, helped BK earn its first 10-0 season. When he graduated in 1979, it was the end of a 20-year era for the Brunelle family, which had at least one child in Boise's Catholic school system every day beginning in 1960.

Brunelle went on to Pacific University in Oregon, where he continued as a student athlete, worked for the school newspaper and university relations offices, and met his

future spouse, JoJo. (They have now been married for more than 35 years.) Internships at Portland's Gerber Advertising and writing at the *Forest Grove News-Times* were packed into that period as well. In addition to being named Outstanding Senior Athlete, Brunelle was recognized as the university's Humanities Division Student of the Year.

From there it was on to Downtown Portland, a city redeveloping itself in the early 1980s, and his first job in the marketing department at The Benj. Franklin Savings and Loan. That is where he got real-life training for public outreach, community partnerships, and coordination of marketing and sales disciplines. The company was deeply involved in efforts to revitalize the city's central business district and gave him the chance to closely observe those working with the renowned architect Michael Graves, who designed and oversaw the Portland Municipal Services Building. The landmark 15-story structure, which opened in 1982, is known as the Portland Building and is regarded as Graves's best piece of work.

Other aspects of Portland's downtown built environment caught Brunelle's eye and made a lasting impression. "Creation of Pioneer Courthouse Square was a huge placemaking effort; my name is on one of the thousands of personalized bricks down there. The walkability of downtown and the waterfront park made working in downtown Portland in those days a true pleasure. There was a lot of energy and exciting new things happening every day in that city."

Which led to his next career stop as director of public relations for the Portland Breakers in the fledgling United States Football League.

"That was a rollercoaster, a real thrill ride to be part of what was essentially a startup professional sports franchise," he says. "My bosses were competitors and great leaders – Jack Galmiche, John Ralston, and Dick Coury. Every day seemed like a monumental challenge to run an effective front office and promote the team, which changed rosters almost daily. And every (game) night was an adventure."

Brunelle got to travel to many USFL cities, work in gameday operations in notable stadiums throughout the county, and meet and work with the media and ownership notables of the new league: Lynn Swann, Keith Jackson, Paul Maguire, Jim Simpson as on-air announcers, and a variety of players and front office types, including the owner of the New Jersey franchise, Donald Trump, and former NFL coach Marv Levy. “The stories are endless and best captured by Jeff Pearlman in his book *Football for a Buck: The Crazy Rise and Crazier Demise of the USFL*,” Brunelle says.

The end of the season coincided with JoJo’s graduation from physical therapy school, followed by the couple’s wedding and a move home to Boise.

“We went to work at good, challenging jobs and really liked the changes occurring in downtown Boise at the time,” he says. “It was similar but on a smaller scale than the Portland experience, with business and political leaders here finally focused and motivated to redevelop a suffering central core. Sadly, many wounds in the central business district had been self-inflicted during the Johnson and Nixon presidential administrations, when federal monies were funding demolition of many downtowns. But positive change was taking place.”

During this time, the Brunelles welcomed their first child, Jeff. They also faced a significant health challenge.

“I was working advertising and PR for a local firm, W.R. Drake & Co., led by one of my most treasured mentors, Bill Drake,” Brunelle recalls. “He believed in me and included me in key projects, and I loved it. But it was also a time when I was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, not a good type of cancer to have. Between surgery and various chemotherapy and radiation treatments, I missed nearly a full month of work in early 1988.

“We had amazing family support to help us through, but on the career side I have to say Bill Drake was incredible, an absolute rock who counseled me on work-life balance and

kept me going through the entire process. I came back healthy, and we had some solid successes together, but I will always be indebted to Bill for showing me how to treat people when real-life challenge enters a professional business setting.”

The mentoring extended beyond his employer to include a key client, River Run Development Company. “It was a tough real estate account, and Bill kept me on it. The main client was Pete O’Neill, who was demanding, visionary, intense, and inspiring all at once. His team was the same way: hard-charging but with great humor. As I completed chemo and my hair started growing back, they gave me the nickname ‘Fuzzy.’ And they used our agency for all their marketing going forward. That was a milestone.”

The ordeal taught Brunelle that you cannot figure out everything about your life all at once. And it reinforced what he knew well from his personal and professional experience in team sports: that all of us is better than one of us. It also encouraged him to push himself out of his own comfort zone and seek personal growth.

So, following the birth of their daughter, Cassandra, the Brunelles were on to a new challenge in a new city: Seattle.

“We felt the urge to explore a different city and experiences, knowing we would return to Boise eventually,” he says. “The kids were young, we were still relatively young, and we were looking for something new and different. I joined an educational publishing company, The Wright Group, based in Bothell, which ultimately became a division of Tribune Inc. It was a blast to live in the Seattle area, where we had family and, thanks to the kids, had plenty of new friends in our community. Tribune was experiencing rapid, sustained growth, and the Mariners were winning.

“My eight years with The Wright Group were rewarding in many ways, but by then the four of us agreed it was time to come home to Boise.”

And a return to sports once again. A group of local investors, led by businessman Bill Illet, were bringing professional basketball back to Boise and searching for a general manager. Brunelle became an investor and took on duties as president and general manager of the Idaho Stampede, which played in the Continental Basketball Association and later the NBA Development League.

“It was a lot of late nights but a lot of fun to be in that position and be able to include our family and friends, including all the kids, of course, in being Stampede fans,” he says. “Game days were filled with excitement, and the franchise a true community asset. I will always be grateful for the eight years as part-owner of a professional basketball team and appreciative to Bill for providing the opportunity.”

With his youngest heading to college, Brunelle sold his ownership interest in the team and joined the City of Boise. His assignment in the office of Mayor Dave Bieter focused on economic development and generating revenue sources during a down economy.

A growing portfolio of achievements led him to apply for the top position at CCDC, a quasi-public redevelopment agency that often partners with private firms. He was selected by the CCDC board in 2013 and departed the City of Boise to take the helm at Capital City Development Corp.

“The board and agency have been on a positive roll for a number of years, and the pandemic did not slow us down,” Brunelle says. “We stayed true to our credo that ‘We Rise by Assisting Others’ to keep the momentum going with private sector and public partners through 2020.

“With new leadership at City Hall, the agency has increased its focus on Mayor Lauren McLean’s initiatives in the areas of housing, mobility, and sustainability. We’re especially pleased to be returning to our office space and collaborate in person.”

And when at CCDC's offices, where do some of those meetings take place? In Conference Room #15,806, named in honor of the ultimate assist provider of all time, NBA legend John Stockton. "Absolutely, the Stockton Room celebrates the fact that we are here to assist," Brunelle explains. "The employees here are happy to work outside the spotlight and cast light on others. We do challenge the status quo on a regular basis, but setting others up for success is our primary approach to public service.

"I have the privilege of leading an agency that does only good things for Boise, and that's an honor I eagerly embrace. Public service is in my DNA—my grandparents, my parents, and my entire family have worked on behalf of their communities—and for me this job is personal because it's my hometown. My own children and grandchildren will be here for decades to come, so I see it as my responsibility to make great things happen while I have the opportunity to do so."

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