



Cedar Rapids Downtown SSMID Commission Minutes

July 27, 2023 | 3:00-4:30 p.m.

Economic Alliance Conference Room A

Present: Joe Ahmann, Wendi Cigrand (zoom), Jon Dusek, Daryll High, Ted Kepros, Sarah Madsen (zoom), Randy Rings, Craig Stephan, Joe Terfler

Absent: Darryl High, James Klein, Jake Ryan, David Sorg

Guest: Jennifer Pratt, City Liaison

Staff: Peggy Degnan, Doug Neumann, Jesse Thoeming, Adrienne Tingba, Phil Wasta, Audrey Wheeler, Nikki Wilcox

Welcome, Introductions & Call to Order

Rings welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 3:03 p.m.

Approval of March Minutes

Rings moved approval of the May minutes with Dusek seconding. The May minutes were unanimously approved.

Jazz Night Recap and Future Events Discussion

During Thoeming's presentation he mentioned that event partner, Cobble Hill, had a good night and was a great partner. 115 tables were sold with approximately 700 in attendance. SSMID made a \$38K investment. Thanks to sponsors the cost was brought down \$25,500. The 2nd Street pocket park worked well and general feedback felt it's a good location for continued activation shared Thoeming. Blocktober II will be held on Friday, September 22nd with \$35K investment.

What is the direction this body plays in terms of future events?

Thoeming presented the idea of taking a similar budget and marketing it to all eight locally owned businesses that produce events. They would let the SSMID know if they wanted us to sponsor/incent part of their event.

There was discussion about alcohol sales, cost, risk and filing of license and dram shop insurance. If Economic Alliance handled it, they would have to file another insurance application since it's not our standard business and would need extra dollars and staff. Rings asked for follow-up on Dram Shop and if it's a problem that can be fixed by money, then maybe we should spend the money.

Terfler asked if the target audience was locals or non-locals with the group responding that all people are welcome at events. Terfler suggested if we market more outside the city, such events could be used as a recruiting tool to attract people to move and work here since new talent is needed. Terfler inquired as to how we can leverage this so that employers can engage potential employees.

Kepros asked what we learned from recent past events. Thoeming said Blues Night appreciated having a concert in Greene Square and the local blues society is trying to grow. Thus, perhaps they could take over Blues Night to increase awareness of their group. From an execution standpoint, Thoeming said the 2nd Street pocket park could be a real hot-spot for entertainment and eventually people would come to expect performances there, so we could invest in a stage and for repeated use of that space.

It was decided to talk about how to expand vendors before Blocktoberfest to see if more bars/restaurants can be involved. The possibility of utilizing CRBT's empty lot for other vendors to participate was mentioned.

Financial Overview of first half of 2023

Sidewalk repairs are over budget this year. Discussion occurred regarding holiday lighting. Lights go up October 1st. Going forward, only a third will be taken down, making it a 3-year process. Labor takes up significant cost and it will be cut by 2/3rds. A savings will not be seen this year, but it will be substantial in the coming years. MOA says SMMID will install holiday decoration. Per Wasta, an MOA is renewed as needed but it has to go in front of Council for approval. Money was spent on things the City would not pay for. Regarding sidewalks, Dusek feels downtown looks tired yet 15 years after the flood, compared to other areas in town.

Big line items this year are still TBD are alleyway and gateway projects. There is a new opportunity where Back Pocket Brewing used to be located. \$134,000 will be split three, or possibly four, ways for cumulative cost of down vision plan. There will be opportunities after the vision plan is revealed. More details are on the last page of packet per Neumann.

Update from City Hall

Pratt expressed her excitement of being the official City liaison for all three SSMID's. She said this will help us move forward to make sure we are all maximizing our opportunities. She gave an update on the City Council's priorities which will focus on continued and new priorities:

Continued priorities:

1. Flood control system and greenway - Needs state and federal funding.
2. Affordable housing – implement disaster recovery so \$9M used for multi-unit and \$2.5M for rehab.
3. Strengthen and stabilize neighborhoods, art projects, new trails and historic preservation.
4. Quality of life enhancements - tied to attracting and retaining workforce, park enhancements and public art. A new mural audio walk and lighting of "Together We Bloom" mural is happening soon.

New priorities:

1. Clean & safe – Activate neighborhoods and residents and make sure we invest in operations and maintenance. Includes expansion of Greene Square.
2. Business friendly - Use strategic plan to promote Cedar Rapids, find goals and processes for development and navigation tool for workforce resources.
3. Homelessness - It is a growing national trend. The City has hired the National Alliance to End Homelessness, whom has experience working with communities across the country. They help identify what we can do. Pratt stressed that we have amazing service providers; however, they need to work together instead of on an individual basis. If we work together, things can get better.
4. Align activities and interventions of the system around a common goal. Pratt stated "housing first" is a philosophy, not a program. There is a need for not just housing, but for all support services to be coordinated. Service agencies should work together to track data to see what resources are effective. Focus on the outcome and understand that all homeless can achieve housing stability.

Rings asked what city department works on this with Pratt answering that Community Development/Housing Services and that the contact person is Sarah Buck. Pratt said much of this work is not done by the County or City, but usually by the service groups. A working group of 20-30 people came to a consensus on the top three recommendations:

1. Establish a local oversight board
2. Reimagine the coordinated entry system
3. Invest in diversion - problem solved across the system. Data shows can decrease homelessness by 40%.

Rings asked about time-line with Pratt saying it will be coming soon as the County and non-profits are working on it. Pratt answered Terfler's question about goals by sharing that they are included in the comprehensive plan on the city website.

Kepros asked Pratt if they looked at similar communities. The National Group gave them references on who to look at for specific things. They were very complimentary of Cedar Rapids. For those who have re-occurring homelessness, 70-80 is a manageable number for homelessness.

Wasta asked about the unhoused/those that do not want to live in a structure, because they are not seeking housing or social services. We offer shelter and many people don't want congregational shelter. We don't have enough housing for everyone to have an apartment. Pratt said the support service providers will help with this process.

Vision Plan & Next Steps

Wilcox shared that the third site visit by PUMA will be August 15-17. She will send a meeting invite to the group tomorrow (7/27) inviting them to a working lunch. Also, PUMA will be holding two open houses while they are here. Thus, if some SSMID members can't make the lunch, they can attend an open house.

Sharing sneak peek – shared peer cities, Focusing on millennials. Online survey resulted in the #1 reason people come downtown is for restaurants/bars and entertainment. What people want to see downtown is an embracing/reactivation of the river such as roof top dining/bars and not turning our backs to the river.

Sneak peaks – 4 ideas from PUMA (**CONFIDENTIAL**– please do not share with public yet):

1. 8th Ave and 4/5th Street is viewed as a dead space. Attracting maker shops in this area such as a winery, chocolate shop, etc., would connect to Newbo. (connect district)
2. Turning 2nd Avenue into a pedestrian bridge since we don't need three bridges anymore. It would be a welcoming space and connect downtown and Kingston.
3. Turn 2nd or 3rd Street into festival street at certain time blocking off part of the street regularly for festivals.
4. Adding more hotel rooms/a new hotel to downtown.

The final plan will need City Council's support. Therefore, PUMA will return with the final plan in the Fall and will present it at a City Council meeting.

Rings asked about recruiting a hotel. It was shared that PUMA recommends another downtown hotel is needed. Per Dusek, U.S. Bank is a perfect property for a hotel with many agreeing with him. Wilcox shared that the Tourism Office still needs 250 additional downtown hotel rooms so they can be competitive when contending for conventions, tournaments, etc.

Neumann shared the reserves this group became accustomed to do not exist anymore. Currently unfunded, but big opportunity with PUMA's plan.

Terfler asked if we could still get a project done quickly. Brief mention of alleyway in the block north of Jimmy John's (old Back Pocket).

Dusek stated we need to go beyond our regular 3-4 sources of income and that Linn County should contribute. A grant for \$120,000 from the DNR has been applied for by Downtown SSMID, Med SSMID, City and Eye-380. Almann asked about reinvestment in district that was heavy on Czech Village, but where was the remainder of the \$10M allocated? \$6M is going to 1st & 1st. Dusek asked if the Greene Square ambassadors are funded by the City now with Thoeming respond that the City is funding them now.

Marketing/Communications Overview

Tingba shared the 2023 objectives of growing communications by 25%. Substack, a stakeholder-focused newsletter, was introduced and was well received. It has 220 subscribers that are sharing this newsletter. (Gave example of Klein receiving and sharing the newsletter/eblasts.) They will apply what is making Substack successful and apply that to eblasts. They need to decide who is a stakeholder so the newsletter can expand its reach. They want to take a more exclusive approach and include downtown businesses in eblasts. Stephen shared that he was interviewed and will be the upcoming featured downtown business so watch for newsletters and the website for his interview.

Tingba feels they are heavily reliant on organic content reach. We need our website to be a digital driver for downtown. A goal is to have our website be the premiere source for the community to go to when wanting to find out what is going on downtown. She concluded with the need for winter events and mentioned Venuworks is going to program the amphitheater the month of December.

Other Business

- Neumann stated that support and resources will continue to increase as the vision plan comes to light.
- Thoeming has been asked to speak at the Iowa Downtown Conference in Sioux City.
- Kepros asked about lighting under bridge. Dusek asked about entry gateways—7th/8th Streets appear to be next.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 4:36 p.m.