



## **Cedar Rapids Downtown SSMID Commission Minutes**

**November 15, 2023 | 3:00-4:30 p.m.**

**Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust**

**Present:** Joe Ahmann, Jon Dusek, Darryl High, Ted Kepros, James Klein, Sarah Madsen, Randy Rings, Jake Ryan, Craig Stephan, Joe Terfler

**City of CR Officials:** Mayor Tiffany O'Donnell, Jeff Pomeranz, Jennifer Pratt, Dale Todd

**Absent:** Wendi Cigrand, David Sorg

**Media:** Marissa Payne, Gazette

**Other:** Cale Henderson, Tim Kindl, Jessica Montgomery, Rocki Shepard, Fred Timko, Justin Zehr

**Staff:** Peggy Degnan, Doug Neumann, Phil Wasta, Audrey Wheeler, Nikki Wilcox

### **Welcome, Introductions & Call to Order**

Klein welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 3:04 p.m.

### **Approval of September Minutes**

Madsen moved approval of the September minutes with Terfler seconding. September minutes were unanimously approved.

### **Downtown District Program Manager position**

Klein and Kepros interviewed finalist candidates and will have a decision soon.

### **Holiday Lights Update and 2024 Costs**

The goal is to have the holiday lights up and on by Thanksgiving. Wilcox said Bladeworks is finishing up the final few streets and will begin testing the lights. Wilcox said Pratt helped pilot how to save money on lights by working together with the City Arborists on a plan to have sections of lights stay up for multiple, staggered years. There are over 200 trees that will be lit in the downtown district but roughly only a third need to be taken down in early 2024. In agreement with City Arborists, the downtown district and MedQ district have been divided into zones. Trees designated in zone 1 will be taken down in 2024, zone 2 in 2025, and zone 3 in 2026. With not having to take down all 200 trees in 2024, the SSMID will see a significant savings in future holiday lights budgeted line items. The usual budget was \$125,000, but now it will be down to roughly \$54K.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue Bridge Lights**

The bridge lights are not working properly. Parts needed to have the lights change colors are no longer being made. Timko said part of the problem was the installation and workmanship; and the other part is the current technology does not handle radio or Wi-Fi interference well. He explained a new communication system to redo the strips inside the lights is needed. For now, the SSMID will pay for a temporary solution to put in a controller so the lights can be static colors. More discussion to come on what the SSMID wants to do with the bridge lights going forward.

### **5<sup>th</sup> Street & 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Gateway Sign Updates**

The lighted *Welcome to CR* sign at the top of the parking garage at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Street will cost \$18K, which is included in the 2024 budget. Wilcox asked about any desired changes to the sign. Commissioners liked the sign and no changes were mentioned. Timko said the similar Kingston sign has one side completed and will be totally done in a few days. Pratt mentioned the mural on the same parking garage as the proposed sign will have some uplighting added to it, and she wants to double check to be sure the lights don't interfere with each other. Wilcox said she would add this to the agenda next time she and Pratt meet.

### **2024 Tax Rate Approval**

Dusek moved to approve a SSMID tax rate of \$2.75 per \$1,000 of taxable value for FY 25, the same rate that's been in place for many years. High seconded the motion, and the tax rate was unanimously approved.

### **Downtown SSMID Meeting Schedule**

The council agreed to follow a similar meeting schedule as the 2023 calendar.

### **Downtown SSMID Appointments**

Fred Timko has applied for one of the open seats on the Downtown SSMID. Nominees are appointed by the Mayor with the advice and consent of the City Council. Commissioners agreed more gender balance is needed on the commission, with several female leaders mentioned as potential candidates. O'Donnell said she wants to be included in conversations. Klein stated an email of the nominees will be sent to the commissioners and the Mayor. Dusek noted his support for more diversity on this board.

### **2024 Budget & Action Plan**

Neumann detailed a new format to the Annual Action Plan in response to SSMID requests for more transparency and better context of the full picture of finances and priorities as individual decisions come up. Neumann noted that more details will be added to the action plan if the Commission approves of this format.

The downtown tax base is growing with \$30K more coming in through SSMID for 2024. Because none of the funding sources are outside of downtown, the vision plan recommends soliciting funding from more than just downtown, such as Linn County, as well as private sector sources.

Another budget change Neumann noted is the expenses are now grouped into five categories: 1) Contractual/Legally Binding; 2) Existing Programs and Initiatives presumed to be continuing; 3) Staffing and Support; 4) New 2024 Commitments; 5) Potential/Proposed priorities not yet approved.

Overhead would be reduced and direct staffing expense increased if the SSMID decided to fund more fully dedicated downtown staff rather than support services from general EA staff. The communications position, in particular, will need to be decided early in 2024.

As items from the 'Potential / Proposed Priorities' section are approved by the Commission, those will move to 2024 Commitments and become part of the Budget. It's the hope this document brings clarity and transparency as it is a dynamic tool to use throughout the year. Neumann asked if this document accomplishes what the SSMID wanted.

Klein feels this is more specific, detailed and is what he promised to the City when they met this spring, so he feels good about the detail and accountability. Terfler and others added their support and enthusiasm about the new format. It definitely addresses the input/direction given by the SSMID.

Neumann then walked through an early draft of the Action Plan, which will attempt to better show the total cost of downtown initiatives, rather than just the SSMID's share of the cost that's included in the budget. This, too, should provide better content and more comprehensive information for the SSMID. The Farmers Market, for example, is a significant expense but is done with little or no expense to the SSMID. The Action Plan will reflect that type of information. Wilcox noted the Action Plan will be a live document, so the tasks listed on the action plan are continually updated to reflect the actual work being done and the staff person responsible for the execution of those tasks.

Mayor O'Donnell questioned whether there was enough information to approve a budget at this point. Neumann noted a budget never has all the information for the next 12 months, but this proposal has certainty in its revenues and in the vast majority of its known expenses, with plenty of context and flexibility for the SSMID to make decisions in future meetings. Klein added he doesn't know how we would get any more clarity right now, calling the draft conservative, flexible and a better roadmap than we typically would have at this point.

Dusek thinks we should be put in a bogey amount for other funding sources, which were included as line items but left at zero in the presented proposal. After Commission discussion, it was decided to put \$50k in for private contributions and \$50k in for "other" support, which might be Linn County or grants. Terfler noted the projects we prioritize will determine private funding.

**Dusek moved adoption of the budget, including the amended revenue line items, with Terfler seconding. The motion was approved unanimously.**

#### GreatAmerica Sidewalks

According to the MOU, the GreatAmerica plaza area is SSMID's responsibility for repairs. But if an area needs complete replacement, the cost would be well beyond what the SSMID could cover. Discussions are underway about GreatAmerica potentially assuming ownership of the property in question, and then how any repair/replacement projects would take place.

#### Future Marketing Manager

The position funded through part of 2023 is currently vacant, with a communications contractor covering social media posts and eblast communications. Wilcox asked if the Commission wants to decide now or to wait until the January 25<sup>th</sup> commission meeting to decide whether to hire a part-time or full-time position or whether to keep covering it with contract labor. Klein's opinion was to wait and the Commission agreed. Wilcox noted she received multiple job descriptions from PUMA and will share in the future.

#### **Downtown Vision Plan Update**

##### Taskforce

Klein explained the Working Group reviewed and unanimously endorsed the final version of the Downtown Vision Plan. One of the sections talks about the current SSMIDs structure, recommending the SSMID put together a taskforce to look at various operating structures. Rings volunteered to form and lead the taskforce and asked the commission to weigh in. He thinks the taskforce should have representation from the City, SSMID, downtown property owners and the Economic Alliance. He wants to get it organized and be ready to go once the report/plan is formalized and adopted by City Council, which will take place at the December 5<sup>th</sup> City Council meeting.

Mayor O'Donnell questioned why the Economic Alliance would be on the taskforce since they are so uniquely involved and could be affected. Rings said the EA staff and Community Development Innovation Council are closer to the work activities than the SSMID, so in theory, the EA would have one person out of nine on the taskforce. Wilcox stated she is not biased as she supports doing whatever is best for downtown. Klein emphasized no one should come into the taskforce with a bias, because we must do what is the best thing for downtown. Pomeranz said we can call in experts without all of them being voting members of the taskforce.

Mayor O'Donnell asked who puts on Market After Dark and the Saturday Farmer's Markets with Wilcox answering it is 100% the EA staff planning and executing all the markets. Kindl asked if the EA doesn't run Market After Dark who will run it? In addition, Kindl said he's been part of the Farmer's Market since day one and feels the night market (Market After Dark) is amazing. He does not want to start all over with another organization when all the ground work has been done already. Klein said the Downtown SSMID can always look for ways to improve but it's important to acknowledge that a lot of amazing things have been done and great progress has been made over the last few years.

Rings suggested the following framework for the taskforce: 5 members of the SSMID Commission, 2 downtown stakeholders not on the SSMID, 1 staff representative from the City of Cedar Rapids, and 1 staff representative from the Economic Alliance. The taskforce would forward its report / recommendations to the SSMID Commission, which would have the final say on how it wants to contract for downtown services/operations.

**Dusek moved to create a 9-person taskforce with the conditions outlined by Rings. Terfler seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.**

Todd said a timeframe should be set. Rings stated that until we have the taskforce in place, we won't know what resources we have, but it will be the first order of business of the taskforce.

It was also clarified that the taskforce is different and separate from the Vision Plan Implementation Committee, which may have members from the same organizations and also needs to get put in place.

#### December 5<sup>th</sup> Council Meeting Attendance

The downtown vision plan will be presented at this council meeting. Klein said It would be great to have SSMID members present to display we are committed to downtown. Wilcox mentioned a reveal reception will be planned to show the stakeholders the finalized plan. The Mayor asked to have the City Council invited to the reveal with Wilcox agreeing they would be invited.

#### **Other Business**

- Members shared information and/or news updates on what is happening at their respective companies.
- Dusek mentioned the SSMID should think about holding an Annual Meeting where they can address stakeholders and share all the accomplishments SSMID had that year. He said it would be a good idea to reach out to younger stakeholders and invite them to this Annual Meeting so they can learn more about what the SSMID does.

#### **Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 4:30pm.

/pd