



Cedar Rapids Downtown SSMID Commission Minutes

September 25, 2024 | 3:00-4:30 p.m.

Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust

Present: Joe Ahmann, Wendi Cigrand, Graig Cone, Jon Dusek, Jared Hanlin, Ted Kepros, James Klein, Sarah Madsen, Randy Rings (Zoom), Jake Ryan, Craig Stephan, David Sorg, Fred Timko, Dannette Tobin (Zoom)

Absent: David Sorg

City Liaisons: Jennifer Pratt and Noah Zeker

Staff: Jennifar Bassett, Peggy Degnan, Doug Neumann, Phil Wasta, Audrey Wheeler

Welcome, Introductions & Call to Order

Klein called the meeting to order at 3:02pm and welcomed Hanlin to the commission. Hanlin introduced himself and shared he's been Chief Risk Officer at GreatAmerica for 15 years and has lived in Cedar Rapids for 20+ years.

Consent Agenda/Approval of May Minutes

Madsen moved for approval of the July minutes with Kepros seconding. The July minutes were unanimously approved.

Downtown Executive Director Search Update

Klein said three candidates were interviewed. Some SSMID commissioners met with the top candidate this week and agreed the person would be a good choice. The Overture Group should be getting an offer letter together this week to present to the finalist. Klein thanked the selection committee for their time and dedication. The committee was Kepros, Klein, Neumann, Pratt and Timko.

Implementation Committee Report

Bassett and Pratt presented to the City Council yesterday as they both have been attending the Implementation Committee meetings as has Klein. The committee meets monthly and was formed for accountability to keep the Downtown Vision Plan moving forward. The committee is made up of representatives from each City department who lead or support the major initiatives and use a reporting dashboard to stay up-to-date on details. Three catalytic projects are as follows:

Embrace the River:

Pratt talked about how to leverage the space with the floodwall so residents don't feel cut-off from the river.

- New design for Tree of Five Seasons Plaza and adjacent riverfront - to be reviewed this November or December.
- Accentuate open space on May's Island
- Create delineation of the 3rd Avenue Bridge bike lane to keep it safe other than planters as they have operational issues.

Activate Downtown

- Two events coming up—one on each side of the river: Blocktoberfest III and OktoberFest.
- Collaboration with Five Seasons Lights
- Façade Improvements – uplighting projects, 24 self-watering planters and 10 Big Belly trash receptacles and sculpture on May's Island. (SSMID sponsored uplighting on Foundation 2, Sokol Building and "Humanity" mural)

Improve Connectivity of Adjacent Districts and Neighborhoods:

- 4th Street SE quiet zone upgrades completed in mid-November
- Replace existing 4th St. trail in Spring of 2025.

Dusek asked why 3rd St. was not addressed. Pratt said Public Works is looking at options for 3rd St. and doing the groundwork to give them something to react to it. Bassett said there's an opportunity for street art, especially at 3rd Street and 8th Avenue SE.

Kepros commented district connectivity needs consistent signage. The Metropolitan Planning Organization is starting to work on trail signage. Cone asked for more information about the quiet zone with Pratt saying she will provide a timeline of the quiet zone to Bassett for her to share.

Klein asked about the City Council's feedback on their presentation. Pratt said the Council recognizes the alignment and the Mayor said the SSMID is "putting the polish on" the projects. They wanted more information on the day-to-day and the unhoused population, but other than that they were pleased.

2025 Budget

Neumann previewed the process, which will involve the Executive Committee and then the full SSMID at its next meeting. A series of expenses are already pre-committed obligations, but the SSMID will have some discretionary dollars to consider how to prioritize.

2024 Action Plan Updates

Sculpture on May's Island

- The sculpture will face 2nd Avenue Bridge.
- OPN will do second rendering with "Cedar" stacked on top of "Rapids."
- An all CAP font will be used instead of what is shown on the slide.

Events Update

- Blocktoberfest III - Friday, Sept 27th downtown by Need Pizza.
- OktoberFest - Saturday September 28th in Kingston Yard.

Beautification

- Flowers/planters - summer flowers will come out next week. Fall flowers are being tested in front of GTC and Economic Alliance.
- There were 257 planters with 90 on the bridge, so 20 cement planters were removed.
- Big Belly Receptacles - adding 10 for a total of 50.
- Holiday lights - going up in November and will extend to the west side. They are collaborating with Parks & Rec to add lights to large trees in Greene Square Park.
- Yard Rules Signage - Ahmann said they will have Yard Rules signs posted soon in Kingston. The QR code has been added to the signage.
- Bridge Lights – poles #6 and #8 are not getting power. Alliant is going to check into it by the end of next week.

Downtown Conference Updates

Iowa Downtown Conference 2024 in Cedar Rapids:

The conference was held in Cedar Rapids this year in August with 285 attendees. Bassett shared many attendees were from rural towns, so they thought our city was clean and safe. During tours they loved the murals, big bellies, etc. All feedback was positive. Next year's conference will be held in Muscatine. She noted Debby Durham was speaker and stated, "Iowa doesn't dream big enough."

International Downtown Association Conference 2024:

Bassett attended this conference in Seattle with 1,500 attendees. She heard of retail vacancies in all downtowns. Seattle has 94% of visitor traffic is back so they are almost at pre-pandemic numbers. She noted Seattle has 337,000 downtown employees with 55,000 of them at Amazon. Thus, one in six work there. She also learned Amazon didn't lay off any employees during the pandemic. They have required all employees to be back to work in the office. In addition, Bassett mentioned Seattle has 156 downtown ambassadors who have a broad scope of responsibilities.

Bassett shared how a Seattle stadium built in the 1960s had fallen down, but the roof remained standing. They built down into the ground so they could use the same roof to rebuild the stadium which is now home to the Seattle Kraken (ice hockey team). It is named the Climate Pledge Arena because it is the most sustainable and carbon friendly arena in the world and will be carbon-free by 2040. Therefore, Bassett asked why can't Cedar Rapids lead the charge and have the least carbon footprint in the state of Iowa?

Other items Bassett shared from the conference:

- Re-imagine Vacant Spaces - 5,000+ sq. ft. empty spaces are being occupied by big box stores like Target, Kohl's, IKEA, Whole Foods, Hobby Lobby and international retail.
- Technology – touch screen Kiosks, downtown app.
- Students and International - tap into the college student and international demographic.
- Trolley – Bassett said with Google Data Center coming, they could sponsor the trolley and advertise on the outside and tell their story on the inside.

The trolley spurred a group discussion about who is managing the project, who would own/lease/run the trolley, liability insurance, route, hours, etc. Pratt said if the City ran the trolley it would be cost prohibitive at \$1M. [Klein and others would like to see the SSMID possibly sponsor some type of trolley or bus in December-January-February for a pub crawl and/or holiday light tour to test interest and demand.](#) Cone said the new casino would help fund a transit route, but the vote doesn't occur until February and the casino won't open for two years after that. The feasibility of a trolley will be part of an upcoming parking study.

Bassett presented data from the 2022 Census supplied via PlacerAI, showing pre and post pandemic numbers with a shift of daytime traffic declining and nighttime traffic increasing. (Employees: pre-pandemic = 17.2K; last 12 months =12.3K. Visitors: 746K pre-pandemic vs. 753K last 12 months.) [Klein recommended Bassett share her graphs with the Mayor and City Manager.](#)

Some commissioners shared how their companies are functioning post pandemic:

GreatAmerica: All to work in office 50% over a 2-week period and being in the office every Tuesday, with the exception of field staff. Hanlin said if a job candidate is offered hybrid, they will take that job over being in the office every day.

UFG: Madsen said they are 50/50.

Alliant: Cigrand said all call center jobs are remote, but people leaders are to be in the office three days a week if live within 50 miles of an office.

Van Meter: All employees back to work in person.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:29pm.

/pd