



Cedar Rapids Downtown SSMID Commission Minutes

November 20, 2024 | 3:00-4:30 p.m.

Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust

Present: Graig Cone, Jared Hanlin, Ted Kepros, James Klein, Jake Ryan, Craig Stephan, Dannette Tobin

Absent: Joe Ahmann, Wendi Cigrand, John Dusek, Sarah Madsen, Randy Rings, David Sorg, Fred Timko

Guest: Loren Hartelt, CRST Transportation; Jeff Pomeranz, City of Cedar Rapids

City Liaisons: Jennifer Pratt and Noah Zeker

Staff: Jennifar Bassett, Peggy Degnan, Caleb Knutson, Doug Neumann, Phil Wasta

Welcome, Introductions & Call to Order

Klein called the meeting to order at 3:03pm and introduced Knutson to the commission and had him tell a bit about himself. Knutson said he sees Cedar Rapids as an innovative city and is excited to be here.

Consent Agenda/Approval of September Minutes

Ryan moved for approval of the minutes with Tobin seconding. The September minutes were unanimously approved.

Budget Planning & Action Planning 2025

A draft of the budget was reviewed. The final budget will be presented in January.

Bassett reported the holiday lights went over budget by \$30K because of the purchase of an oversupply of new lights that can be used over the next few years and reduce costs in the future. The lights in Zone 1 have been cut down (124 trees) and cost \$54K. She said Zone 2 has fewer trees and will be less expensive at \$35K for next year. We're in the process of replacing old planters with self-watering ones. Twelve more self-watering planters will be purchased before the end of the year.

A line item for public art maintenance has been added to remove graffiti, and maintenance for the 4th St. Trail has become a large enough project that we'll budget to contract that out to a landscaper next year. Bassett said she was contacted by some businesses to remove some of the benches due to the homeless using them. She mentioned the current pickup truck is on its last legs so \$50K had been allotted for a new truck. The Big Belly lease is through 2032 and is \$73K/year. Neumann thanked the City for upfronting some of the Big Belly cost.

The Community Development Innovation Council plans to hold a Race-for-the-Space in 2025 and projects \$40K will be needed, of which it would like to see \$30k from the SSMID. Knutson said this is an opportunity to leverage all partners in the region and statewide and imagined potential funding or resources partners such as the SBA and the IDA.

It was reported 2025 will be the last year of the contract with Blue Sky for the projector on the Armstrong Building which will be \$36K next year. Klein suggested it play holiday music when content is not showing.

Bassett mentioned she wants to keep the partnership with Willis Dady on some programming related to homelessness so there's some funding included but without specific ideas yet for what that will be.

Knutson said Placer AI is a great tool and will have a press release sent out by the end of the month about some of the data and reports we've been seeing. Knutson is working on getting people engaged and involved. He is working on a strategy to put together a podcast or reels about downtown to engage the younger generation.

The 7th St Gateway beautification project is delayed until Spring.

Knutson mentioned forming a "Friends of Downtown" program where individuals and businesses within and outside of downtown can donate at various contribution levels. Klein said we're carrying over about \$100K in funding, so even if proposed expenses are close to our revenue project for 2025, we will have some ability to consider new projects as well. Any success Knutson leveraging additional funding would only add to our chance to have a bigger impact.

Neumann noted for newer commissioners that the SSMID budgets on a calendar year but the City operates on a July 1st budget. Thus, we have to estimate future tax revenues and take the most conservative approach by estimating zero increase on July 1. If the tax base does increase, that also adds revenue for 2025 projects. The billed services to City incorporates their new contribution to the executive salary.

Bassett mentioned historically the SSMID has given \$15K to Venuworks for the downtown logo to be posted at their venues and in their collateral. That's not currently in the 2025 budget, but it was decided to discuss with Venuworks how to provide more benefit to us in 2025 so that line item could be reconsidered at a future meeting.

Approve Downtown SSMID Tax Levy

Hanlin moved for approval of the \$2.75 tax levy with Stephan seconding. The levy rate was unanimously approved.

Downtown SSMID Meetings Schedule 2025

This SSMID will continue to meet on a Wednesday every other month from 3:00pm - 4:30pm at Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust, per the proposed schedule that was distributed.

Programs & Projects

Holiday Lights/Banners

Basset reported all lights in all three zones will be turned on by November 29th.

Trolley Pilot / Horizon Partnership

The trolley's hours of operation will be on December 6 – January 31st on Fridays and Saturdays from 5pm – 11pm. The cost for two Horizon vehicles/drivers each night will be \$75/hr. For 7 hours = \$1050/night x 17 nights = \$17,850. A QR code will be created and the commission asked for a press release and marketing to start immediately. Neumann stated data will be collected during this pilot program in order to measure and provide results of the trolley experience. Bassett got permission to use the Guaranty Bank parking lot to serve as trolley stop for the central downtown area. With two trolleys, one should drive by every 15 minutes with the entire route being 30 minutes. Neumann shared the Economic Alliance could contribute up to \$5,000 to the trolley, bringing the total cost down to approximately \$13K. CRBT also might contribute. Kepros recommended authorizing \$15K, knowing the cost could come in under that.

Hanlin moved to approve the trolley pilot program at the cost of \$15K with Cone seconding. The trolley pilot program was unanimously approved.

Mays Island Sculpture Rendering

Bassett showed a rendering of the "Cedar Rapids" sculpture that will be 8' high x 20 ft long at a cost of \$65K. The letters will be made with 12-gauge steel and sprayed with an enamel coating. It will take 14-18 weeks from fabrication to install. The downtown maintenance crew will maintain and clean the sculpture. Basset reported Acme is interested in providing lighting in-kind. Pomeranz and Stephan asked about the back of the sign and Pomeranz asked about the orange color. Orange is one of the colors in the CR downtown logo and from a visibility perspective, Pratt said the backdrop of the sculpture will be green lawn and a lush tree canopy. It will be in located in the NE corner of Mays Island facing 2nd Avenue.

Santa's Café

This SSMID is sponsoring Santa's Café at McGrath Amphitheatre. The District CR restaurant is offering a free drink with the purchase of an entree if you show them a ticket from being at Santa's Café.

Annual Report 2024 Update

Knutson passed a rough draft around the room of the annual report that will be produced and distributed.

Other Business

- Pomeranz said he sees damage done by the private sector to bricks and sidewalks and said he's seen areas where someone has just poured concrete or some white substance into holes in brickwork or sidewalks instead of doing a proper repair to damage. The City Manager wants to see accountability and respect so if someone ruins or damages something, it needs to be replaced correctly. He said this has been a problem for decades, so he wants to see the quality of repairs improve. In addition, he mentioned the lighting on 3rd Ave between 6th and 7th Streets SE where no longer used light poles are still standing. It doesn't look nice.
- It was noted LP Street Food has expressed wanting to be in the SSMID, and that when the SSMID gets renewed in 2027 that would be an obvious extension opportunity.
- Knutson and Bassett reported downtown is back to pre-pandemic visitor numbers with Tuesday through Saturday being the busiest, but not as many people downtown during the day due to employees still working from home.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:14pm.

/pd

Action Items:

- Have holiday music played when content is not being shown on the projector.
- Purchase 12 more self-watering planters by the end of the year.
- Send Press Release and start marketing about trolley as soon as possible.
- Send Press Release by the end of the month about Placer AI data.
- Follow up w/ Alliant or the City re: light poles on 3rd Avenue.
- Complete the Annual Report.