



Cedar Rapids Downtown SSMID Commission Minutes
January 21, 2026 | 3:00-4:30 p.m.
Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust

Present: Brittney Clarke, Graig Cone, Jon Dusek, Jared Hanlin, Loren Hartelt, Ted Kepros, Sarah Madson, Juliet Pae, Randy Rings, Jake Ryan, Robin Sempf, Fred Timko

Absent: Joe Ahmann, Landon Burg

Guests: Jim Engle and Jim Thompson; Iowa Economic Development Authority Downtown Development

City: Jennifer Pratt; City Liaisons and Jeff Pomeranz, City Manager

Staff: Jennifar Basett, Peggy Degnan, Caleb Knutson

Welcome, Introductions & Call to Order

Hartelt called the meeting to order at 3: 03 pm.

Approval of Agenda

Dusek moved to approve the Agenda with Madson seconding. The agenda was unanimously approved.

Approval of November Minutes

Ryan moved to approve the November minutes with Madson seconding. The November minutes were unanimously approved.

The commissioners went around the room introducing themselves to new members, Brittany Clarke and Juliet Pae.

Presentation: Iowa Economic Development Authority Downtown Development Team

Jim Engle and Jim Thompson explained how they are part of an 8-person team called the Iowa Resource Center that helps downtowns and communities. They work on statewide downtown development which usually takes them to smaller communities, but they have worked with Waterloo/Cedar Falls and Quad Cities, Clinton, etc. They shared Iowa currently has 54 Main Street communities which includes Marion. Main Street is a premiere program offering technical assistance and grant programs since 1986. The Jims feel one of the most valuable components of Main Street is it lessens the burden on City government. Main Street does not have any population limits, so it's not just for small towns.

Knutson took Engle and Thompson for a walk around downtown. They reported not seeing anything that surprised them. They did say we definitely have design, occupancy and parking-related issues, so they want to be a resource for us.

They talked about their Catalyst program, a \$100K grant, of which has never been awarded it to Cedar Rapids. Catalysts are for getting empty space to be occupied for housing. If your project approaches \$1M, you won't be approved for just \$100K, but they have other programs such as housing, income housing tax credits and bonus points. It appeared obvious to them we have many vacancies downtown.

When they looked at the upper stories, they saw boarded-up windows and vacant spaces. Given the right set of tools, they feel those vacant spaces could be filled. They stated ordinances could be put in place to not board up windows, etc.

For a large district, The Jims are impressed with our building stock and historical preservation-type of buildings. Thus, they wonder if people here know all the tools to help refurbish their buildings. They would like to shine a spotlight on some of them, and on some that have had inappropriate rehabs done.

When asked what top downtowns have, they listed the following:

- Upper story housing.
- Shared goals between City and Downtown organization.
- Activities and events.
- Parking signage with high visibility. Make it obvious where to park.
- Street-scapes make for a better experience.
- Feet on the sidewalks is critical.

They mentioned finding a move-in space is hard because spaces are often unusable. They shared how St. Louis and Kansas City are cleaning up storefronts and recruiting healthcare businesses/services to those storefronts. These two cities contacted their out-of-state property owners having them pay to reinvest in the City, and then the City re-acquired their properties, so now they can apply for grants. They feel appropriate design and appropriate incentives are crucial.

Engle asked how can they help us? He feels Cedar Rapids should consider the Main Street program because we've already jumped through many of the required hoops; and the benefits of the program could provide some much needed structure.

Madsen asked what could be done first and their answer was to fill the vacant upper stories, get rid of boarded windows, improve signage and find retailers for downtown. They suggested having a plan to cluster those together.

Engle and Thompson mentioned they perform a 3-day assessment by bringing four to six people along to access a downtown. The cost would be \$2,500. It was decided to move forward with them conducting an assessment. They believe they can offer some solutions.

REPORT and VOTE ITEMS

The budget was included in the agenda packet and distributed at this meeting. The Finance Committee recommended changing to a fiscal year to coincide with the City's budget. However, after discussion, the budget will stay on a calendar year aligning with the EA.

Ryan moved to remain on a calendar year with Rings seconding. It was unanimously approved.

Timko moved to approve with the budget with the stipulation of having The Iowa Resource Center do an assessment on downtown with Rings seconding. Having the assessment done for \$2500 was unanimously approved.

At the Executive Downtown SSMID Committee meeting, a long term strategic funding raising strategy was laid out, asking the Downtown SSMID to refrain from fundraising.

Per Hartelt, it is still in the concept stage, but it could be similar to a capital fund campaign. Dusek stated we need buy-in from metro companies, like Van Meter, who are in support of downtown. Many questions surrounded this discussion with the consensus being much more education, information and clarification is needed. Other items mentioned were:

- Community Development Innovation Council: Knutson is now staff liaison, Downtown staff transition into Innovation council member.
- 501c3 to allow applying for national and state grants (The Larned A. Waterman Iowa Nonprofit Resource Center at the University Iowa will work with us per Knutson to set one up).
- Fundraising or lack of ability to do so.
- “Friends of Downtown” as mentioned in the Vision Plan.

REPORTS

The Program Manager MOU Budget Summary 2025, Programming 2026, MOU & Maintenance 2026 and Winter Marketing Campaign Recap were included in the Agenda Packet.

Location Subcommittee

Knutson reported the space at the EA has achieved the goals laid out by the Location Subcommittee, during the process.

Sunshine Laws

Knutson strongly recommends taking the class from the League of Cities because it has better explanations and talks about quorums. Knutson will help get you into a class. Taking the class is currently required for new commissioners, but eventually everyone will have to take the class.

Program Manager

Bassett reported MOU expenditures are over budget because labor costs have risen and overspent \$30K in holiday lights. Winter marketing exceeded expectations with close to 70K views. Most social media engagement came from Marion, Iowa City and North Liberty.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

The Executive Director's Report was included in the agenda packet. Knutson shared Semph is now on the Executive Committee.

OTHER BUSINESS

- Rings requested a report to see how we are doing on our Vision Plan assignments. He would like to see the \$28K in the budget allocated to murals go toward the Vision Plan.

- Knutson shared May's Island is structurally sound and can handle live loads and art installations. He said the City is leading these efforts with the SSMID being secondary.
- Dusek said the retail consultant will be returning. His final report is expected in May.
- Pratt said 3rd St and 8th Avenue SE are being looked at in sections. She said if the curb lines are changed, it will be at a significant expense, but everything in the vision plan is still on the table. Restriping is an alternative. She said a discussion on how to proceed is needed.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 4:32pm.

/pd