

Synopsis of Downtown Strategy Proposal January 2015

Business owners, property owners and community members who attended the “all downtown” meeting on December 4 agreed to work together to design a business model to manage the long-term priorities to support a healthy and vibrant Downtown. The Mayor’s recent survey to Downtown stakeholders helped to identify what those priorities could be.

As a follow up to the December meeting, the Mayor, the City’s Economic Development Director and representatives of the Chamber’s Downtown Business Committee have drafted a proposal to Downtown stakeholders to help outline a process for developing the long-term Downtown management solution while maintaining essential programs for 2015.

The proposal to Downtown stakeholders is to form a 12-15 member volunteer Downtown Task Force responsible for developing a long term business model, with a goal to complete formation of the business model by September 1, including commitments to fund services and administration. The City and the Chamber are able to provide administrative and other support to the Downtown Task Force, as needed. We also recognize that the Task Force will likely include in their business model a recommendation for the City and Chamber’s on-going responsibilities.

Composition of the Downtown Task Force

We suggest that the leaders of the process and decision making represent the range of stakeholder groups and the variety of perspectives offered at the December 4 meeting. It was clear from the comments at that meeting that property owners and business owners have differing opinions about responsibility, funding, priorities and management.

The composition of the Task Force will be critical to ensure that these stakeholder groups believe their voice is represented:

- Downtown Property Owners (variety of commercial & mixed use)
- Retail and Restaurant business owners
- Business owners representing the professional services, social services and other business types in Downtown
- Downtown resident
- Community Leaders
- Representation from the arts community
- Downtown Property Owner/Business Owner located outside Downtown
- Representation from the City
- Representation from Smith College

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These characteristics and abilities of the Task Force members will be important to reaching agreement on a long-term strategy:

- The ability to bridge divisions;
- Open-minded; willing to work in honest collaboration
- The responsibility to be an ambassador of outcomes
- Willingness to be informed by the broader community
- As a group, to be recognized as a fresh leadership group composed of leaders with new interest and ideas.

The Process

One of the key objectives of the process will be to bridge the variety of perspectives and opinions into a solution that can be widely accepted and supported.

The other criteria for a successful outcome are:

- An open and inclusive process that involves input from a broad cross section of Downtown stakeholders.
- Respect for differences in opinion.
- An open-minded approach able to consider a wide variety of outcomes.
- Able to develop a *coalition of the willing* who will accept responsibility without 100% agreement or support.
- Representation that includes the next generation of leaders from the new Downtown investors and business owners.
- Include broad community representation
- Investigation of successful models and best practices from comparable communities.

The scope of the process would include:

- A timetable and process that is announced to all Downtown stakeholders.
- A plan to engage Downtown in a variety of ways to seek opinions and test ideas.
- A strong communication plan to keep people regularly informed about the progress of the Task Force.
- The specifics of the plan and process should be decided by members of the Downtown Task Force

2015 Programs and Services – Short Term Plan

For 2015, the Chamber is willing to support a “gap year plan” and administer the program. Downtown stakeholders can identify what services and programs are essential for this year. With this in-hand, the Chamber can propose a plan and budget for Downtown stakeholders to fund, and work with partner organizations to implement the program.