



Downtown Partners Board Retreat

Sioux City Career Academy

January 27, 2022

In Attendance: Alex Watters, Anne Westra, Erin Kuehl, Jeff Carlson, Sgt. Jason Allen, Katie Towler, Brad Newton, Carly Howrey, Doug Fisher, Chris Jackson, Alexcia Boggs, Angela Rogers, via Zoom: Julie Schoenherr, Angie Schneiderman, Lisa Kalaher and Ragen Cote

The purpose of the retreat was to provide focused opportunity for the following:

1. New board members to integrate and network with existing board members
2. Identify points of pride to highlight during SMID renewal campaign
3. Clarify vision and future focus points

### **New Board Member Integration**

The retreat provided opportunity for newer board members and selected community stakeholders to interact with existing board members in a purposeful way. Appreciation was expressed for the opportunity to learn some history of the accomplishments of Downtown Partners and the scope of activity the organization spearheads or supports. The facilitator observed positive interaction between all individuals in attendance making it difficult to determine who was new and who had previously established rapport.

### **Point of Pride**

The group easily identified many points of pride when reflecting on the past 3-5 years. Observation was made at conclusion of brainstorming, that the Hard Rock decision to invest in downtown may have served as a catalyst to the momentum now existing. It was also noted that upon reflection it is amazing to realize all this has been done with only two full-time employees. The work of Downtown Partners staff in their role as project directors, maintaining focus on vision and serving as ambassadors within and outside of downtown and the city cannot be overstated.

The three points of pride mentioned most frequently were:

- Residential Options in Downtown, creating variety of age demographics in the area
- Investment in Buildings, shift from demolish and rebuild to focus on rehab and update creates environment of opportunity
- Quality of Life in downtown including murals, arts, lighting, green spaces, trees, street scaping, safety, etc. "Feels more modern"

Additional pride points mentioned were:

- Entertainment options including performing and static arts in a variety of venue sizes with diversity of genres
- Increase in businesses located downtown, including coffee shops and unique boutiques
- Infrastructure investment and completion of I-29 project
- Wayfinding signs to support tourism and walkability
- Quality of investment “Doing it right”, even if it takes a little longer, has generated more pride
- Collaboration of businesses to support events, draw tourists, provide options to locals, etc.
- The Career Academy has increased downtown traffic with a younger demographic
- Hotel options at both “ends” of downtown increase the potential for a weekend getaway destination
- Riverfront project beginning provides potential for more downtown connection

## **Future Focus**

Utilizing individual and group brainstorming techniques, the group identified four major projects for focus in the near-term future (1-3 years). Participants then selected a project group and engaged in preliminary action planning. Discussion was also held around alignment of these projects to the current work of the organization and the committee/workgroup structure in place.

### *Project #1 – Targeted Business Recruitment*

Goal: Encourage small businesses to move or start-up downtown by ‘connecting the dots’ to get them resources, increased sense of community and access to rentable spaces.

Why: Providing a variety of shopping, dining and employment options downtown increases the traffic to existing businesses and supports long-term residency in downtown.

Primary Challenges/Barriers: Access to education, resources and money for the small businesses or start-ups.

First Steps:

- Needs Assessment – understand needs of
  - potential businesses
  - potential landlords
- Generate Collaborative Supports
- Promote/Recruit

Who Should be Involved: Realtors, downtown partners, business owners, city & state officials, workforce component, young professionals (SCGO), small business marketplace, anchor tenants

Project Co-Chairs: Jeff and Jason

### Project #2 – Aesthetics

Goal: Continue of focus and develop the first and lasting impression of our downtown region through the use of visual aesthetics.

Why: Appealing outdoor spaces and exteriors increases stakeholder value, traffic through the approach and the livable space of downtown.

Primary Challenges/Barriers: Large number of people to bring on board, large area in downtown district and large initial and continued financial investment.

First Steps:

- Acknowledge what we're working on already
- List projects available by priority
- Develop action plan or project outline

Who Should be Involved: Property owners, stakeholders, downtown partners, city

Project Co-Chairs: brainstormed list of potential project chairs: Lisa Kalaher, Julie Schoenherr, and Jeff Carlson -(note: Lisa, Julie and Jeff were absent at this point of the discussion so were not asked about interest/willingness to chair)

### Project #3 – Farmer's Market as Cultural Draw

Goal: Revitalize the Farmers Market by making it bigger and moving to a more "street market" type location.

Why: Shifting to a street centered approach supports the work of other projects by encouraging walkability, exploration of quality-of-life features and patronage to brick and mortar establishments along the market corridor.

Primary Challenges/Barriers: Knowing who the players are, understanding the need, articulating ROIs, getting buy-in from ALL stakeholders, legal considerations, support from city for logistics, education on parking options.

First Steps:

- Identify the right players to involve in market research
- Define what the market is and what we want it to be
- Recruit vendors, business partners, etc.
- Rebrand/Promote "Sioux City Street Market", "Market SUX", look at other downtown events and synergize with them

Who Should be Involved: City, current vendors, sponsors, Farmer's Market board members, Downtown Partners, Chamber personnel, surrounding business owners

Project Co-Chairs: Doug, Angela and Carly

#### Project 4 – Walkability

Goal: To create a more connected downtown.

Why: People won't come downtown if it is not a safe and easy experience.

Primary Challenges/Barriers: Homeless population, infrastructure, owners of space by businesses (street level and skywalk level), lack of continuity from owners, empty storefronts.

First Steps:

- Review studies of walkability, bikeability and lighting
- Review assets: sidewalks, lighting, safety & accessibility

Who Should be Involved: Condo owners, MercyOne, Angela Drent (SDHD), Skywalk and Parking Board rep, Downtown Partners lighting committee, City Engineering, Ho-Chunk, Inc.

Project Co-Chairs: Katie and Anne

## Part Two: Observations and Recommendations

The facilitator observed several behaviors and undertones throughout the event that are worth noting. These are thematically summarized below along with recommendations for managing or maximizing these sentiments.

### Observations

1. Awareness of capacity and need for consistent momentum focus.  
As debrief of project action plans occurred, several questions were raised that brought to light two concerns of board members. First, the concern of adding an additional project committee to the existing committee and workgroup activity of board members. Second, a concern that shifting away from current committee structure after realigning last year may be perceived as changing direction too quickly.
2. Challenge with decision-making regarding existing programs/initiatives.  
As noted above, discussion was held to encourage decision-making related to committee alignment being strategic-concept or project-based was attempted during the retreat. Additional discussion was attempted related to evaluating current projects/activities for continuation. There appeared to be strong reluctance of members to engage in the discussion, express opinion and/or make decisions related to past/current work. The future-focused brainstorming discussions were energetic, animated and passionate.
3. Board members are engaged and passionate about continuing progress in downtown.  
Positive words were consistently used to express the accomplishments, activity and experiences of the board and staff. There appears to be true appreciation for the contributions of each person.

### Recommendations:

1. Articulate current commitments of board, staff and organizational members.  
The board is conceptually aware of the extensive amount of work required of staff members, while also expressing desire to continue to expand impact of the organization. Having a document that clearly outlines the high-level 'asks' of each stakeholder group could clarify where engagement capacity remains and where decisions may need to be made. Articulating, in one category, the 'day-to-day' tasks staff perform can help the board to remain cognizant of the many operational demands that need attended. Similarly, articulating how board members and organizational or community members engage in strategic or project activity can highlight the important role they play in accomplishing the goals espoused.
2. Articulate ongoing activities and the engagement level of Downtown Partners stakeholders.  
The participants indicated appreciation for the consistent presence and forward progress Downtown Partners has generated. Many of these are now expected projects or services of

Downtown Partners. A visual representation of those activities indicating the engagement level of staff, board, etc may further serve to focus discussion on value of continuation.

3. Create a safe mechanism to discuss change to current state.  
As noted above, there appeared to be a reluctance of board members to engage in critical evaluation and discussion of current activities. For a board to fully function as a team, there needs to be enough trust to disagree, knowing that it is not personal, discuss candidly then reach a decision to move forward in one direction or another. Utilizing the DISC results can help to guide the board members in self-realization that, while it may be uncomfortable, there are times when behaviors must be adapted to achieve goals.
4. Craft action plans with timelines and specific assignments.  
Closely related to the challenge with decision-making, there was a bit of a challenge within groups taking 'ownership' of some projects. For those projects with co-chairs or no chair identified, it is recommended to identify specific tasks to be completed, with a timeline and person responsible for leadership toward completion. Staff being the lead for all activities is strongly cautioned. Seek out board members who will commit to being lead or actively engaged liaison for each project, articulating the need for that board member to report activity at each board meeting. This will generate ownership as well as model the level of engagement required for future board leadership.
5. Continue periodic board retreats.  
The participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in focused work for a longer than usual time frame. Continuing to have periodic board retreats serve to maintain focus, confirm alignment and fuel passion for involvement.

**Conclusion:**

The board retreat achieved the communicated expectations and resulted in clearly articulated goals and alignment of board members around those goals. Next steps of identifying leads, liaisons and continuing to develop safety within the group is vital to progress toward those goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you and the board for strategic planning. If Groundswell, LLC can further support the execution of the work identified, please reach out.

Sincerely,

*Dr. Cyndi Hanson*