



Tony Fiorito, Chairman
Merike L. Treier, Executive Director

DOWNTOWN COMMITTEE OF SYRACUSE, INC.

March 21, 2023

**The Post
101 North Salina Street**

3:00 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

Attendance

- Members:** Chairman Fiorito, Mss. Angrand, Gagliano, Katzoff, Zell, Messrs. Dunn, Tascarella
- Staff:** Mss. Reed, Schroeder, Sherlock, Szejbka, Treier; Messrs. Campanie, Travers, Pham, Rockhill
- Guests:** Mayor Ben Walsh, City of Syracuse
Mr. Brian Balash, Pyramid Brokerage Company
Mr. Jake Dishaw, City of Syracuse
Mr. Matt Funicello, JF Real Estate
Mr. Chris Gorman, National Grid
Mr. Cory LaDuke, JF Real Estate
Mr. Nader Maroun, City of Syracuse
Mr. Jim Knittel, in-Architects
Ms. Debbie Ruthven, Money Federal Credit Union
Ms. Nicole Samolis, The Events Company/SKY Armory

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Fiorito called the meeting to order and welcomed Mayor Walsh and guests present.

II. PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION – CHANGES WITH THE CITY’S PERMIT PROCESS

Mr. Fiorito and Ms. Treier introduced Mayor Walsh, City of Syracuse, and Mr. Jake Dishaw, Director of Codes to give an overview of the changes with the City’s permit process.

Mayor Walsh shared that the City is working to improve its permit process to make it more efficient and effective by automating the process and re-aligning staff. The Mayor acknowledged that the City has already done a significant amount of work over the past five years and thanked Mr. Dishaw for his help to improve the process. He is aware that there are still some shortcomings in the process that need to be addressed.

Mr. Dishaw agreed and noted that a more efficient and streamlined plan is needed. This is important to encourage citizens and people to invest in Syracuse and have a business and family here. He noted that new

project management teams have been established and a robust project management system is in place. A point evaluation system is in place to help move applications through the process faster. There are teams of people set up to directly review commercial permits. The building code reviewers and fire code reviewers work on an assigned projects together from start to finish, along with the building inspectors who sit adjacent to them. The goal is to serve constituents the best they can and to keep the city safe by ensuring code is followed and improving their processes.

Mr. Dishaw announced that the City's permitting offices will relocate this summer to One Park Place from City Hall Commons, which will help them expand from their current services to handle all permitting needs. He noted 4,000 permits are issued annually. They took a hard look at their commercial review team processes and he commented on how the team here will expand to meet your one-stop shop needs. The team is now fully digital and plan review happens on screens. The office has adopted weekly huddles as a new management tool to help the team share status of current projects and what needs to get done. A new planning software called EPlan will be implemented soon to support the backend. He noted that there are current staff openings in their offices. Mr. Dishaw also noted they welcome business's engagement for input on its plans for improving the process, and recommended to contact him or Ms. Treier. For the anticipated influx of projects coming into the area over the the next few years, the permit and zoning office are working to continue to digitize their processes and hopefully bring back a third-party plan review when they are at capacity or for other needs.

Mayor Walsh commented on the challenges and limitations in hiring and retaining talent in the current job market environment, and the City is working towards solutions. He also noted that third-party plan review is not the silver-bullet solution, as firms they are contracting with also face these staff challenges and in some previous cases, had hindered the permit approval process timeline.

Mr. Dishaw announced that the City is creating new positions and improving the process overall. They will bring Zoning under city administration as a function directly within the central permit office. Zoning administration will be under Mr. Dishaw's direction, and a new director that they need to hire. He asked the board if they knew anyone who is interested in that position to contact him. Other open positions include an assistant director and executive assistant for the office. The City is also hiring their own commercial zoning and residential planners to administer ReZone Syracuse. The residential planners will be located on the first floor at One Park Place. The commercial planner will work alongside the fire code reviewer and building code reviewer on the seventh floor. Their job is to facilitate, administer and approve applications and plans so construction can begin sooner.

Mayor Walsh emphasized that the current departments fall under different systems and staff are inventorying their role in the permitting process and are looking to streamline and eliminate any redundancy in the process to make the system more efficient (without usurping departmental city charter authority) and all departments would have the same set of priorities and be part of the same system. He specifically touched on zoning, which falls under SOPCA (the Syracuse Onondaga County Planning Agency) and that these are County employees. They fall under a different system. These County employees will now become city staff. Full-time staff will be dedicated to performing reviews rather than 25% of four (4) employees' time.

Mr. Dishaw noted that the Landmark Preservation Board will become a function directly within the Central Permit Office.

Mayor Walsh added they are currently briefing the Common Council on two pieces of legislation: 1- City Charter Changes given the new level of additional responsibility in code enforcement. The City is creating two new Deputy Commissioner positions with the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development (NBD) – Deputy Commissioner of Code Enforcement, and Deputy Commissioner of Planning and Sustainability. The second change is a change to the inter-municipal agreement to account for shift in staff out of SOCPA, and into the City NBD office. SOCPA will cease to exist in its current form, but the City will pay for one planner in the County's new planning office to maintain a connection to County planning initiatives.

Mayor Walsh wants to continue to engage the development and design community and welcomes any ongoing input including any challenges or opportunities that still need to be addressed. He also encouraged board members to share their thoughts with the common councilors regarding these changes.

Ms. Samolis commented on how impressed she was on the amount of work that is going into the changes and looks forward to the new system.

Ms. Zell shared her concern with the timing of the process. It can take up to 10 days to set up an intake meeting with the Code Enforcement office and it is taking longer in some cases to get projects started.

Mr. Knittel suggested the City staff review submitted plans before the intake meeting happens so the meeting itself will more productive. It can take up to two weeks to schedule a meeting and then more time is lost because the reviewers are seeing the plans for the first time. Mr. Dishaw noted no plan to hire a third plan reviewer and noted currently no residential reviewer exits. Staff will also be cross-trained and cross-certified. Mr. Knittel also asked that project management take on more of a management role and less of an administrative role. Mayor Walsh responded that these will be easier when all staff are under the same system.

Mayor Walsh thanked Ms. Zell for her comments and stressed that the City is focusing on measuring its progress within the system and encouraged everyone from the developers, the design team to city staff to be a part of the solution and continually provide feedback to help the City improve the system.

Mr. Dishaw commented there are currently no residential plan reviewers and the commercial reviewers doing that work.

Mr. Fiorito thanked Mayor Walsh and Mr. Dishaw for their presentation.

III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM JANUARY 24, 2023

Chairman Fiorito asked the Board if there were any questions on the Minutes of January 24, 2023, and there were none. Chairman Fiorito noted that the motion to approve the minutes will be held due to lack of quorum.

IV. FINANCIAL REPORT AS OF FEBRUARY 28, 2023

Ms. Treier reported that financial statement is currently showing a surplus of \$30,000, which is reserved for the implementation of the Downtown Committee's different programs. Under Income and Expenses she highlighted that sponsorship expenses for Dining Weeks came in and expenses will be reflected in the March-April statements. Under Environmental Maintenance, Special Projects funds are starting to be spent on beautification initiatives for downtown. She noted that there is a large surplus under Advertising and Marketing, where there has not yet been any spend down on the advertising campaign. The Downtown Committee is currently working with creative professionals to help develop the concept behind the Downtown Committee's advertising campaign and she expects expenses to hit that budget target at the end of the year.

Ms. Angrand inquired if there is a regular budget line for "Legal" and Ms. Treier noted that that this fiscal year's budget had not established a sufficient line for legal expenses and costs are being incurred in the category. The recent legal expenses were presented as part of the budget projections meeting in January. There will be a more sufficient line established to reflect legal fees in the next fiscal year's budget beginning in July 2023.

Approval of the financial report was held due to lack of quorum.

V. ADMINISTRATION

A. ARPA Commercial Corridor Improvement Fund (DSF)

Ms. Schroeder reported that the City has awarded \$100,000 of ARPA Commercial Corridor Improvement Funds to the Downtown Syracuse Foundation. She thanked Mr. Dunn and Ms. Samolis as board members of the foundation for their support of these initiatives. The Downtown Syracuse Foundation has contributed an additional \$25,000 for a total of \$125,000 towards these improvements. The idea is to create welcoming connectivity in downtown particularly between Armory Square, Salt City Market and the Marriott Syracuse Downtown district (300-400 block of Salina, 100-200 block of Jefferson, 300-400 of South Franklin, and hopefully the 500 block of South Clinton). In order to create a high-impact, lower-cost improvement, EverLast Lighting strands have been purchased for the street trees in the target area and the lights come with a four-year maintenance contract. The Downtown Committee will be working with the City arborist to coordinate the lighting installation. The lights have a low-level energy draw and will be visible at night. The goal is to have the lights installed by the fall. Ms. Schroeder will confirm if the lights will be running continually or can be turned on and off with the streetlights.

The second component of the ARPA funding will be used to bring more awareness to entering downtown with new gateway signage. Of the 21 entrances into downtown Syracuse, currently only two have signs. The funds will support up to eight additional gateway signs. The Downtown Committee will be going through a design process and will identify a fabricator to make the signs. Ms. Schroeder also provided a map that pinpoints the destinations where the new signs would be installed. The signs are planned to be installed on city-owned streets before the I-81 bridge demolition and construction happens.

Ms. Angrand asked if traffic patterns will be changing for any of those designated streets. Ms. Schroeder confirmed they are no plans she is aware of, though they do want to get those locations marked before the I-81 demolition and construction happens. As these signs will be installed in the city right of way, she will be coordinating with the city. Ms. Angrand also asked if the signs would all have the same design, and Ms. Schroeder noted that has not been determined yet, but she believes uniform signage is better for branding and recognizability. She encouraged the board if they had any design ideas to send an email to mail@downtownsyracuse.com. Ms. Zell asked if any Syracuse University art students could be involved in the design and Ms. Schroeder noted it could be something they could look into once the program gets underway in summer.

Ms. Schroeder noted that the final component (if funding permits) is for kiosk improvements throughout downtown. The kiosks are currently used for the Syracuse Poster Project and for rented advertising space. Up to six new outdoor digital kiosks could be purchased. The potential kiosk locations were identified based on the results of the SMTC pedestrian count numbers in downtown.

B. Farmers Market Resiliency Grant

Mr. Rockhill announced that the Downtown Committee was awarded a \$41,400 grant from the NYS Farmers Market Resiliency Grant Program. The funds will go towards boosting the market's resources and customer base for the Downtown Syracuse Farmers Market this year, including expanding marketing and advertising efforts; the addition of a mobile market (the Downtown Committee will be partnering with the CNY Regional Market and Onondaga Food System Alliance to restart the mobile market van which buys surplus product at the end of the week and resells it throughout the city. This will have a spot at the Downtown Farmers Market this year), and the Downtown Committee will also hire a part-time seasonal Farmers Market Liaison employee to support the delivery of a successful market.

Ms. Treier congratulated Mr. Rockhill for securing the funding for the resources for the market. This program was created to support the farmers market eco-system and help draw more attention to those farmers who participate in the market. She noted that the Downtown Committee is still awaiting the contract as it is a new reimbursement program. Ms. Treier will ask the board for authorization to execute that contract once it is received.

VI. PROGRAM REPORTS

A. Dining Weeks Report

Ms. Reed was happy to report another successful Dining Weeks promotion that ran from March 1-15. She acknowledged Visions Federal Credit Union for being the Title Sponsor. She noted that a record 53 restaurants participated. After the promotion, a survey will be distributed to the restaurants to get feedback on the program. The Downtown Committee conducted a heavy advertising campaign condensed within a three-week period which was very effective. It was supplemented with a strong PR campaign.

Ms. Szwejbka reported there was strong earned media coverage – 25 Dining Weeks stories promoted across broadcast channels, radio and digital. She highlighted that between February 15 and March 15, the Downtown Committee website had over 120,000 page views, which was well over the number of views from last year's promotion.

Mr. Pham added there was a Dining Weeks photo contest where people were encouraged to tag us at #DiningWeekSyr to enter to win a \$100 gift card to a favorite downtown restaurant. Winners have been notified. Mr. Pham shared some pictures from the photo contest that generated a high social media boost for many of the restaurants. He also noted that eight new restaurants participated in the promotion this year.

B. Progress Breakfast Event

Ms. Szwejbka announced that the Spring Progress Breakfast is scheduled for April 20, 8:00 a.m. at the Marriott Syracuse Downtown in the Finger Lakes Ballroom. She thanked Mr. Bianchetti of National Grid for being the presenting sponsor. The theme this year is “Destination Downtown” and it will focus on a series of transformational projects that helped activate under-utilized spaces, and call attention to the power and attraction of a downtown location. There are a very limited number of seats available, so please contact Kristine Sherlock at ksherlock@downtownsyracuse.com to directly to assist.

C. Earth Day Cleanup

Ms. Szwejbka announced the Earth Day Cleanup, sponsored for the first time by AmeriCU, is scheduled for Saturday, April 22, and she expects about 250 participants. More information can be found on the Downtown Committee website.

D. Website Accessibility

Mr. Pham announced that the Downtown Committee website now has an Accessibility icon feature which provides additional support for people with health impairments that could prevent them from experiencing all the features on the website. Mr. Pham gave a demonstration of one of the visual impairment enhancer features.

Ms. Treier added that this app is has been an inexpensive add-on to the Downtown Committee website to make it accessible to all people.

VII. OTHER BUSINESS AND ADJOURN

With no other business before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 4:10 p.m. and a tour of The Post followed.

Next Meeting

Tuesday, May 16, 2023 - 3:00 p.m.