

Iowa City Downtown District
ADVOCACY STATEMENT
Approved September 2019

The ICDD provides a voice for downtown businesses, nonprofits, cultural entities, and residents. We believe that when the downtown thrives the whole community flourishes.

The Iowa City Downtown District provides vision, leadership and influence on a range of issues impacting downtown. Our work includes welcoming public spaces, drawing business interest and visitors downtown and shaping the downtown landscape through our influence.

Advocacy is an important tool for this work. We work closely with City and local leaders, community organizations and government agencies to ensure issues important to our members – and our urban core – are heard, understood, and acted upon.

The economic viability of the downtown is integral to our community’s well-being. A vital downtown with growing property values helps build the City’s tax base, which is used to support community parks and recreation, police and fire services, and health and human service agencies to name a few. A healthy downtown can also increase and protect property values in surrounding residential neighborhoods. A strong downtown supports the community in many ways. Therefore, we believe that when the downtown thrives, the whole community can flourish.

1.0 Welcoming Urban Experience

We believe the downtown is the heart of our community. The Downtown District works to ensure that there is solid, sustainable infrastructure and functional, appealing space for living, learning, working, and playing within the geographical boundaries of the Downtown District. We are leading several public realm initiatives that are crucial to the vitality, cleanliness, and friendliness of our downtown.

ICDD Positions:

1.1 Welcoming

The Downtown District is the economic and cultural engine of the Iowa City community. It is home to a wide variety of national and independent, locally-owned boutiques, cultural venues, hotels, and some of the very best in dining and entertainment, and is a place where University and local business innovations merge. To sustain this engine, the ICDD partners with the City to support a welcoming environment for all residents and visitors.

We advocate for the following to enhance these efforts.

1.1.1 Welcoming Community - The ICDD supports inclusion and creating a community that prospers because everyone feels welcome. This means ensuring downtown is accessible to our residents as shoppers, workers, residents, and business owners. This includes support for the City of Iowa City’s designation as a “Welcoming City” to visitors that reside or visit from around

the globe and advocacy for the creation of inclusive policies and practices such as making it easier for entrepreneurs to start a business or having wayfinding and public signage available in multiple languages.

1.1.2 Iowa City Better Bridges - Continued support for the University of Iowa Better Bridges program downtown. This program includes City support from the Human Rights Coordinator and provides an educational setting for our businesses to encourage diversity in hiring, best business practices, and confidence to challenge disparaging comments to one-day eliminate racial bias within our community.

1.2.3 We support the expansion of the City of Iowa City's financial assistance for current and emerging minority-owned businesses and property owners. The ICDD encourages and can offer support for these targeted businesses, including recruitment to be on the Board of Directors of the ICDD.

1.2 Clean & Safe

Input from our 2019 Community Input Survey suggested that Downtown Iowa City needs additional cleaning services to meet business and community standards and safety should remain a fundamental priority. We advocate for the following to enhance these efforts.

1.2.1 ICDD members and staff are available in the downtown to observe and support the management of downtown spaces and places. As an organization, we would like to manage our own clean and safe team that includes an ambassador program and integrated janitorial and maintenance services with existing City funds currently used for downtown maintenance. We would like to explore contracting for these enhanced services through the ICDD.

1.2.2 We support the Iowa City Police Department's placement of a daytime and nighttime police officer who proactively support downtown businesses and venues. The ICDD will continue to invest in these services where impact is seen. These officers assist with issues of shoplifting, counterfeit money, and a variety of safety issues businesses may face. We believe the ICPD's community-based approach pays dividends for local-problem solving related to serving those underserved and experiencing mental illness, addiction, and/or homelessness.

1.2.3 We support the ICDD's call for State legislative action to change the law that permits guns in public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and high traffic public plazas such as the downtown pedestrian mall.

1.3 Support for Community Services

Downtowns are often the last refuge for individuals experiencing mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness. We advocate for the following to enhance these community services.

1.3.1 We advocate for the continuing Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for police, fire, and emergency staff to help support a less confrontational environment and to de-escalate

events with offenders that may lead to violence or further crisis. As a stretch goal, we support CIT training community-wide where those going through the training open up the opportunity for others to attend as possible.

2.0 Shape the Urban Landscape

One of the constants about downtown is that it is ever changing. The ICDD is an organization that values our history and helps guide its next chapter. We recognize that change is hard, yet necessary for growth—both in density and diversity of offerings downtown. We acknowledge that there are challenging discussions ahead regarding height, density, redevelopment, and historic preservation; and there is no consensus on these matters in the community or amongst ICDD membership.

The ICDD supports a planning strategy that places focus on a larger area, versus looking at individual properties, to **increase predictability**. Ideally, there are clear delineations of what decisions are policy driven and therefore, made by the city council, and which are administrative, and delegated to staff.

We need to design the ideal downtown of the future, taking into consideration an increasingly diverse population, climate change, creating experiential retail, changes in technology, and ensuring gathering spaces are malleable and programmed for various purposes and safe for all.

The ICDD wants to play a role in facilitating and leading these discussions in a concerted and thoughtful manner.

The ICDD's approach to our built environment is to listen, conduct research, educate, communicate, and innovate. Hosting forums that inform best practices that shape a quality downtown built environment and access to it is a great way to provide opportunities for strategic learning.

ICDD Positions:

2.1. Urban Character:

The ICDD takes a “smart growth” approach to sustainable downtown development and regional growth. This approach encourages compact and more dense development in the City's commercial core, with a mix of building types and uses, diverse housing and transportation options, development within existing neighborhoods, and community engagement. The juxtaposition of old and new provides a rich analogy of our community that we hope to maintain and steward.

The following statements guide our advocacy.

- Our urban character includes an integrated mix of contemporary structures and historic buildings that are both highly valued by our organization.
- “Infill” projects help financially support the downtown ecosystem by bringing additional customer base to businesses in older buildings that often struggle with higher maintenance costs. It is recognized that most development over 3 stories is viewed as increased downtown density .
- We support land use policies and regulations that encourage sustainability and foster and encourage downtown reinvestment.
- Thoughtful downtown development can grow the City’s tax base, which in turn provides support for City services throughout the community. When the downtown thrives, the whole community flourishes.
- Well designed taller buildings that have a positive impact on the streetscape have a place in the downtown.
- Alleys are an opportunity to be used not only for solid waste, recycling, and deliveries. Our alley ways can become a destination, utilized as outdoor retail and seating areas, as place to view and participate in public art, and to become beloved walkways connecting other downtown destinations.

2.2 Land Use Regulations:

The City conducted a Downtown and Pedestrian Mall Streetscape Update Plan in 2014 (www.icgov.org) to support the revitalization of and reinvestment in Downtown Iowa City. The ICDD advocates for continuing the implementation of the 2014 Streetscape Update Plan. The City of Iowa City is exploring a Form Based Code (FBC) approach to zoning land use for several neighborhoods (www.formbasedcodes.org) including the Northside Marketplace. The City has also identified a FBC approach to downtown in the future to help streamline development and preserve character.

We advocate for:

- A Form Based Code approach for the Northside at similar neighborhood scale as CB-5 zoning, or a roughly five story building.
- A zoning approach for the downtown core proximate to the pedestrian mall that allows the market to express demand for buildings at a variety of heights and uses.
- Review of impediments such as parking regulations to downtown renovations and investments to support infill projects and additional housing opportunities for long-term community members.
- Adoption of the co-sponsored City and ICDD Design Guidelines that support a positive street character and well designed storefronts.

2.3. Housing for the Community

We support the City's goal of increasing the affordable housing stock, including in the downtown area. Affordable housing is defined as a household spending no more than 30% of their income on rent/mortgage and utilities. We similarly support mixed-use development that incorporates residential units targeted towards long-term tenants as a particular need of downtown neighborhoods. Increasing the supply of residential units targeted at a variety of income levels will support the community's overall need for additional housing stock.

2.4 Access and Mobility

We support study of the Iowa City area's mobility systems to assess and address the growing demand for safe, clean, green, reliable, accessible and affordable transportation options that serve businesses, residents and visitors alike. We advocate for:

A New Vision for Transit for the Iowa City area that:

- Provides electric buses to support the economy, provide a cleaner alternative to automobiles and diesel engines, reduce road congestion, and to continue to provide a safe, reliable, and equitable mobility service.
- Creates consistent and timely public transit schedule.
- Expands busing on Sundays and exploring "on demand" transportation options
- Fosters public transportation solutions through Transportation Network Companies (TNC) pilot opportunities.

Street Design Downtown, that:

- Considers input from downtown stakeholders before modifications are made.
- Changes Market Street from one way to two-way to support accessibility to the Northside from Dubuque Street. This change is critical to the success of this retail neighborhood.
- Support for street design and parking changes to increase mobility and safety for both motorized and non-motorized traffic while ensuring there is sufficient parking for visiting shoppers.
- Carefully reviewing safest locations to support new bike lanes downtown that do not conflict with critical operations (deliveries, utilities, and visitor parking.)

Addressing Parking Needs, such as:

- Adding street parking on streets with capacity.
- Prioritizing parking in ramps for visitors and business employee permits above others (residents / students) by requesting this information when providing permits.
- Advocating to the University of Iowa to encourage student to leave cars at home and instead of driving utilize free University and City bus/shuttles, E-bikes, zip cars, Uber/Lyft, bicycles, and walking.

Addressing Aging Parking Facilities by:

- Installing systems to help patrons know when garages are reaching capacity

Creating a bike friendly environment that:

- Expands bike trails and lanes to encourage safe biking options to and from downtown
- Increases bike parking and bike shares in downtown and across the area.

2.5 Historic Preservation:

In 2018, the City of Iowa City commissioned a Downtown Historic Survey to document the history of the buildings, the people, and the area and to gain recommendations for its preservation. The ICDD supported one of the Survey's key recommendations, which was the City of Iowa City's nomination to register Downtown Iowa City as a National Historic District. The Survey has many other recommendations that are more complex and could require regulatory changes related to zoning.

The vitality of properties and their tenant businesses are crucial to the success of downtown, and achieving a common ground between what is appropriate for the contemporary retail environment and what contributes historically should be considered. The public process for establishing next steps for historic preservation downtown should include the ICDD and these stakeholders. Those who steward these properties currently have valuable information to share and exchange that will help support a robust conversation about preservation and how to achieve it.

The goals of the ICDD will be to explore ways to achieve balance between incentives provided by the City and any possible requirements of owners with historic properties. The ICDD advocates for public financial support (such as tax relief) to ensure the costs of historic preservation and its importance to the entire community is shared.

2.6 Strengthen a Diverse Economy Inclusive of the Arts

2.6.1 Support for Retail

Business retention and recruitment is important to the ICDD and we strive to achieve a balanced mix of community-serving versus visitor / student-oriented retail. This requires City support and attention from other economic development organizations. We advocate for:

- Financial incentives to help attract and recruit retailers that meet the co-sponsored City-ICDD 2014 Retail Strategy and 2019 Retail Strategy Update for community-based soft retail goods.
- Financial or TIF assistance for building improvements that would support improving the accessibility of older properties.
- City support for ICDD-led retail initiatives that enhance the built and regulatory environment.

2.6.2 Support for Local Arts Industry

Local art and culture venues supports the success of our authentic place and ICDD mission. ICDD initiatives deliberately serve to foster a local arts industry that appreciates a range of both locally driven, national, and international art. As public art administrators, the ICDD is committed to working with downtown stakeholders and the City of Iowa City to facilitate the installation of work that is of artistic and civic worth, with a strong, but not exclusive, focus on involving local artists. (See section 3.1). Specifically, we advocate for:

- Restoration of a meaningful financial commitment to the City's Public Arts Program.
- Fair pay for artisans and the development of paid art opportunities.
- City commitment to support the preservation of existing cultural venues and operations as needed.

2.7 Create a Hub of Integrated Neighborhoods

Public input from the 2019 ICDD community survey suggests that the community places a high value on Downtown Iowa City and the operations of the ICDD and would like to see more opportunities to connect Downtown with other neighborhoods of the City. As an organization, the ICDD advocates for the following as a means to support our larger vision of serving as a hub connecting all Iowa City neighborhoods and our surrounding cities together.

2.7.1 Connections through Public Art

The ICDD advocates for the City or other public art programs to invest in and carry themes that serve to connect downtown and other community neighborhoods or local communities together. The ICDD will similarly invest in public art programming that demonstrates our shared history, education and pride between downtown and the larger neighborhood system as one community.

New and updated downtown improvements are a perfect opportunity to incorporate public art into our infrastructure.

2.7.2 Reinvest in The Center as a Premiere Asset of Downtown Iowa City

The ICDD's 2019 community survey expressed a want for more access to cultural offerings. The Center (or the Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center) located at 28 S. Linn Street, has been offering a full array of classes, activities, volunteer opportunities, services and special events for community members, in particular those age 50+, to stay active, curious, and connected. The Center's building character and location in the heart of downtown Iowa City could attract public private partnerships that generate revenue or grant funding to support a more robust cultural attraction to downtown while maintaining the integrity of its mission. This historic landmark requires additional investment and out-of-the-box thinking to bring the building back to life and to explore new innovative opportunities.

We advocate for the development of a thorough study to review opportunities for The Center's underutilized lobby and kitchen that could be updated to support events, cultural activities, and intergenerational programs for Johnson County community members.

2.7.3 Support for University of Iowa and Local Community Economic Development & Community Advancement.

Strengthening the town-gown relationship continues to be a priority. The University of Iowa and community leaders from across Johnson County must work together in a more intentional and strategic way. Because downtown is a prominent destination and a recruitment tool for local workforce, we advocate for a supportive town/gown relationship to advance the health of the downtown and the entire community.

The Downtown District supports:

- A formal organizational structure with partner organizations to advance opportunities to address campus and community-wide challenges and long-term opportunities with trusted partners. This type of collaboration will benefit the Downtown District area and support the vision for economic development, community development and cultural endeavors.
- Advocating on community-wide issues to the State of Iowa that generally benefit the ICDD where the ICDD voice can add to those of other municipal, University, economic development and/or other local leadership in the region.
- The coordination of maintenance and construction projects with and between the City and UI to reduce the number of disruptions to downtown pedestrian and vehicular traffic.
- Support for collaborative downtown events with these partners to help familiarize, welcome, and promote local shopping, employment, participation in the arts and culture scene, and welcoming of new, long-term community members.

2.7.4 Foster New, Expanded SSMID Development, and/or Neighborhood Partnerships that Encourage Collaborative Planning

Input received during the 2019 Strategic Plan Update from the ICDD Board, larger community, and City Council suggested that the ICDD's services could be of value to other neighborhoods. Property owners proximate to the Downtown have sought input on how to be included in ICDD services and events. Currently, there is no clear path for how to best work together.

Because many stakeholders agree it is within the ICDD's benefit to work collaboratively with emerging areas and new businesses that may impact the downtown market and City and ICDD service areas, the ICDD advocates to support new neighborhood organizations such as Self Supporting Municipal Improvement Districts (SSMIDs.)

Specifically, the ICDD supports the encouragement of a new neighborhood organization for part or all of the 500-acre Riverfront Crossings area (or others). Property and business owners in this area are not organized to take advantage of a united marketing message, neighborhood branding, enhanced services, or a united voice. ICDD leadership and staff will make a pointed effort to inform other interested neighborhoods of its own story, the path toward successful organization, and the legal and other considerations to encourage a united voice that would serve as a sister organization and co-collaborator with the ICDD. Neighborhoods working together, instead of apart, will build a stronger, healthier Iowa City area community.

3.0 Draw Visitors and Community to Downtown

The Downtown District aims to be a place where people of all backgrounds and ages are drawn; a community where people feel welcome in an environment of mutual respect, in which they collaborate and make connections with one another; and where a shared community identity can flourish at the same time that differences and variety are valued.

ICDD Positions:

3.1 Bring to Life Underutilized Spaces (Placemaking)

We support activating underused areas of downtown to ensure their safety and to promote the relevance of our downtown as a dynamic place to engage with community. We advocate for support to continue and grow our placemaking efforts downtown. Specifically:

- Continued, predictable annual financial support from the City to activate the north end of the Pedestrian Mall known as Black Hawk Mini Park and other areas in need of activation. If the funding was predictable and secure, the ICDD could plan for traveling national exhibits that are enjoyed in other cities. Without predictability of funding, this type of art will likely not visit Iowa City.
- Implementation of a simple and flexible City approval process for temporary public art projects that use or otherwise activate public spaces.

3.2 Draw Feet in the Street (Events)

The ICDD advocates for events that draw people downtown, supports the downtown economy, and fosters art, music, and literary advancements. Recognizing that the Downtown landscape is a living and breathing ecosystem of businesses in need of customer traffic, utility access corridors, and pathways for people and deliveries, events require a thoughtful approach in order to keep business operations from being significantly disrupted. Collaboration with our local businesses and properties is an easy way to encourage diverse, integrated and successful events for the entire community.

We advocate for:

- Minimal requests for street closures that have significant negative impacts on soft-good retailers.
- Prioritization of support for downtown businesses over outside vendors.

- Communication and accommodation of brick and mortar businesses when planning the event layout to minimize, where possible, the blocking of businesses by vendors or entertainment.

3.3 Foster a Vibrant and Fun Nighttime Atmosphere (Nighttime Initiative)

In 2017, the ICDD invested in a new Nighttime Mayor position to support nighttime businesses and to serve as a support for nighttime businesses and as a community concierge for residents, visitors, college students, and area employees. The ICDD is working to activate public spaces downtown that are inviting to people of all ages to change the image of downtown at night. However, we need support from the City and UI to explore best practices from other cities, a review of local regulations, and ultimately the development of a program that will encourage an evenly robust downtown environment for all visitors, students, residents, businesses and cultural entities.

The following items are opportunities to support a healthier nightlife economy.

- Address the unintended nuisance calls related to intoxication, bathroom usage, and altercations related to a “spill out” crowd effect of under-21 individuals leaving bars at 10:00pm on the pedestrian mall.
- The State of Iowa is reviewing whether more local control should be granted to local municipalities of liquor licenses. We support local City control of liquor licenses so that a simpler regulatory environment could be explored that would allow for more flexibility for restaurants to open past 12am and to ensure liquor license holders are accountable for nuisance or emergency calls for service.
- Explore opportunities to mitigate potential nuisances related to noise, music management, and alcohol license abuses through the use of an “Entertainment Management Plan” that could replace the rule that excludes a bar within 500-feet from another bar and that precludes restaurants from being open past 12am.