

City Council Candidate: Janice Weiner Date: ___Oct 7, 2019___

2019 ICDD Questionnaire for Special City Council Elections / November 5, 2019



Introduction

The following questions are intended to further explore your understanding of the downtown environment and your willingness to support Downtown Iowa City while on Council. The following documents are available to you for your review and should be cited in your responses as appropriate:

Questions:

1. As one of seven Councilmembers, you will be tasked with representing every neighborhood in Iowa City. How do you plan to balance the needs of the broader city and your personal priorities, while also considering that Downtown is not only one of the fastest-growing residential neighborhoods in the City, but the job center of the region as well?

If elected, my priorities will be the city's priorities – I will continue to have personal views, of course, but my priorities will be what, after careful research, I (together with other members of Council, I hope) believe will benefit the residents of Iowa City and the city's future. The Downtown District has done an impressive job of organizing as a self-sustained municipal improvement district (SSMID) – I recognize and applaud the sustained organizational effort. They have created a funding stream and are able to advocate effectively for their District – working with the city, their own members and reaching out to residents. The ICDD will continue to advocate for the downtown, as it should. I believe that by reaching out to other areas that may be in need of organizational expertise, the District can lend a hand and simultaneously gain appreciation for its work.

2. What role do you think downtown plays in the community--economically, socially, financially? How does this fit in with your ideas for commercial areas throughout the community?

You stated it in your initial question – it is a job center and creator, a hub for the city, as well as a quickly growing residential center, due to increased density. It is a social magnet, with places

to gather – public, entertainment, entrepreneurial, The Center, and in the form of the blossoming coffee shop industry. The presence of the university – in particular the Voxman Music School – helps as well. It has again become a mall for all – especially with the addition of the modern-day version of the 5 and dime, Target, anyone who comes downtown can meet all their needs. It is a natural go-to for those affiliated with the university, whether students, faculty or staff, and the ability to find everything with one stop shopping is a plus for sustainability as well (a strategic plan goal, as is diversity). It is also, as noted above, well organized, and ICDD has continued to pursue worked with city and police to help ensure it is clean and safe.

I would like to see ICDD share its expertise with merchants in the smaller commercial hubs (or nodes), including Towncrest, the east side, Sycamore Mall, and the west side so those neighborhood commercial centers can expand their own ability to be smaller full-service shopping areas for contiguous and nearby neighborhoods. This would contribute to sustainability and residents’ ability to shop for basics close to home without having to drive miles to a large store, especially when partnered with improved public transit. The blossoming of smaller hubs will not detract from the downtown – people will still be drawn there – and lending a helping organizational hand, including by expanding programs such as Cosign, will build community.

3. There are several upcoming council considerations that are important to Downtown stakeholders and the larger community. The timing of some of them is uncertain. They include:

- a. [approval/denial of the preservation of Ped Mall buildings on College Street / 170-unit residential project](#) by the Tailwind Group that will support a non-profit cultural entity, preservation of existing historic buildings, and provide LEED Platinum residential units to downtown Iowa City. The project seeks \$9 million in TIF for public benefits.

ICDD Position: no formal position; stakeholder feedback has been very positive.

- b. [Local historic district](#) that may potentially include the downtown within an historic overlay that could include height limitations and historic landmark designations for portions of the downtown neighborhood.

No ICDD position as of yet.

- c. a recommendation by some Council members to **rezone the Northside Marketplace to a Form-Based Code** zone.

ICDD Position: see Advocacy document

- d. a recommendation by some Council members to **rezone the Downtown** area to a Form-Based Code zone.

ICDD Position: see Advocacy document

Help us understand your position on each of these actions and the approach you would take in considering them for approval/disapproval.

- a. I am still in learning mode on this project. I appreciate that it would include a non-profit entity, that there would be height set-back so it would not be noticeable from the PedMall, that the proposed project would exceed the city's new TIFF requirements by constructing to LEED Platinum standard, and that the current commercial bays in these buildings are too long and hence too expensive for most retailers, given the high per square foot cost of rent in the ICDD. I understand the units will be small. My current concerns include parking, and a clearer sense of how use of TIFF would provide a public benefit, including affordable housing.
 - b. On balance, I support the local historic district within an historic overlay for the remaining historic portions of the downtown. The city's historic character is one of its best draws, for which there is currently no level of protection (other than citizen activism). Creation of an historic district would allow those who want to modernize to draw on state and federal tax credits. It could also serve as a counterpoint to those residents who are not enamored of the new, tall buildings – an assurance that what is currently historic will retain its character. It would place some restrictions, to be sure – including on height and preventing historic buildings from being demolished. I believe those can be handled effectively without posing a risk to a healthy business climate.
 - c. I believe the ICDD supports this. It makes sense to me in order to maintain the general character of the neighborhood, which is almost a sub-hub of the downtown.
 - d. While I need to learn more, I am not supportive of a form-based code for the downtown. It is an eclectic mix of styles, both old and new. I see the historic district with local overlay as the preferable option (see above).
4. The ICDD supports a complex urban environment through tailored programs, clean and safe initiatives, events and “placemaking.” The City often financially supports our programs that fill a specific need upon request (examples include power washing, placemaking pilot funds, partnerships on retail studies, among others). We believe that with increased visitation to and tax generation off of

downtown properties, it will be more and more important to put additional resources towards improving cleanliness (bio matter, littered alley ways, etc.) to support stronger first impressions. As a council candidate, would you support providing additional funding to the ICDD to improve cleanliness?

I recognize that clean and safe are of enormous importance. If I understand correctly, city contributions are combined with ICDD contributions to keep the downtown clean. I know that, for festivals in particular, additional crews are hired (including a group organized by Shelter House). If more funds are needed, perhaps they could come, at least in part, from a modest increase in parking fees, and/or even a small surcharge (if permitted) on hotel rooms. I would be willing to look at other options for funding that don't draw on funds earmarked for other neighborhoods or smaller city hubs.

5. Downtown Iowa City is the economic center of the City and a front door to the University of Iowa. However, for many Downtown businesses, the margins are increasingly strained by limited supply of space driving up property valuations and taxes, paying living wages, and competition. The retail industry in particular is facing difficult challenges and flat or decreasing revenues in recent years. How should the City best support local retailers?

The state has largely tied our hands when it comes to issues such as rent control. Dividing retail areas into smaller spaces so the rent is not prohibitive may help, as would the increase in traffic that I believe the downtown will see as a "mall for all". Improved public transit will help bring more people to the downtown as well. If council approves some of the projects currently under consideration, and new construction already underway or completed is fully occupied, that should also help, as should the ICDD's strategic priorities of making the city a sustainable, four-season destination. The Center's efforts to draw in a multi-generational and increasingly diverse membership can also be a real plus.

6. The City is responsible for community-wide transportation and mobility. Downtown is a major transportation hub where buses, cars, bikes, delivery trucks, and pedestrians come together. The availability of transit, parking, loading zones, bike lanes and safe sidewalks are a constant conversation within the community. What are your top priorities for improving both motorized and non motorized transportation downtown?

- Bike share – get it launched and expand it as quickly as possible. It can bring more people in and out without needing more parking.
- Bus shelters – expanding the availability of bus shelters will help the hub function better.
- Bike lockers – for those who commute regularly by bike, this would be a boon and further relieve pressure on the roads.

- Take a good look at our on-street parking policies – I know the one-hour limit is meant to keep parking open for non-students. I would like to see us partner with the university to work on solutions so fewer students have (or feel the need to have) cars.
- Consider whether some limited areas – given the public transit/delivery/pedestrian congestion – should have street parking at all (thinking of the single block on Clinton).
- Use services like Lyft and Uber as a resource with their own designated spaces – they or a service like them, paired with vouchers or a related city program, may help expand hours and availability of public transit.

7. Are there City advocacy priorities at the State level that the ICDD can or should support? If so, what are they?

- Increased local control over liquor licenses.
- Increased local control in general – so municipalities across the state can be the incubators of democracy and ideas that they are meant to be; the legislature needs to stop tying the hands of the state’s engines of growth.
- ICDD strategic plan supports advocacy to change state policy on guns in public spaces, such as the PedMall. That is a laudable goal, but I don’t see it as an effective use of advocacy resources (many conceal carry and it would be unenforceable). Related to this topic, I would rather see advocacy to educate on gun safety and require stricter licensing and training.

8. Are there other initiatives outside of what is mentioned in our **ICDD Advocacy** that you believe are important to improve the downtown? If so, what are they?

An all-city effort to welcome and educate university students and their parents, so they know the rules of the road (literally). Improved consultation and coordination with the university to develop joint policies that, for example, reduce the presence of student cars, increase their knowledge of landlord-tenant law and remedies and recourse at their disposal, could be helpful to all, both town and gown.