

City Council Candidate: _____Shawn Harmsen_____ Date: _____9/27/2021_____

2021 ICDD Questionnaire for City Council Elections / November 2, 2021



Introduction

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

[ICDD Advocacy Statement](#)

[ICDD Strategic Plan Update 2019](#)

[Downtown Recovery Brief](#)

Please share your knowledge and position on the following questions to help inform the community.

Questions:

1. Please share your general thoughts about your experiences downtown, if/how the downtown functions as a community hub, and what you see as important for the area.

Downtown Iowa City is undeniably a jewel, a source of entertainment, dining, shopping, play, city services like the library, and outdoor spaces to enjoy. I am one of countless people who enjoyed downtown Iowa City in different ways over the years, from the time I was a college student to the present day. And whether it was watching them playing in the water when my kids were little or more recently hitting downtown festivals with my teenagers, downtown is one of my family's favorite places.

2. 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 and the largest contributor of the [general tax base](#).

There is an old saying: a rising tide raises all boats. I was reminded of that saying when I was reading through the Advocacy Statement, Strategic Plan, and even the Recovery

Brief. Each of those documents spoke about the ways growth and prosperity in any neighborhood need not detract from others. Quite the opposite – vibrant neighborhoods feed each other rather than starve each other out. I would expect to work with that sentiment from the ICDD and other stakeholders in the community to strike what balances need to be struck.

3. What role do you think downtown plays in the community--economically, socially, and financially as Iowa City strives to recover from the coronavirus pandemic in a manner that makes us better than before? How does this fit in with your ideas for commercial areas and neighborhoods throughout the community?

I think we are all learning together what roles we are playing in the recovery from the ongoing pandemic, especially since we are far from out of it. As far as the downtown is concerned, the economic and social recovery from the worst days of the pandemic are evident but from the data provided by the ICDD we are still not where we could be. I imagine many in the ICDD feel the similar kind of hope and frustration many of us do as we see pathways toward a return to pre-COVID activity levels (with masking and vaccinations), gratification that locally we are doing better than the rest of the state, and vexation because we know we could be doing so much better. The reticence of those in our state and society to take simple measures to fight COVID are hurting businesses, hurting healthcare workers (another vital part of our local economy), and hurting lives.

For downtown and for every part of our community, I believe we keep supporting our mayor who has helped the problem with his mask mandates. One only has to spend time in a grocery store and Iowa City and then go to a neighboring community and go to a grocery store there to see the stark difference in mask wearing.

Bottom line, if we fail to keep addressing the ongoing pandemic striving for economic recovery will be like striding with a broken foot.

4. There are several upcoming council considerations and other recent developments that are important to Downtown stakeholders and the larger community. The timing of some of them is uncertain. Help us understand your position on each of these actions and the approach you would take in considering them for approval/disapproval.
 - a. **Support for new development at [21 S. Linn Street \(US Bank parking lot\)](#).** A proposal was submitted by CA Ventures to develop a 13-story mixed use building on this vacant lot. In order for the development to fit on the lot without tearing down other buildings, the developer requested a reduction in parking requirements which was [denied at the Board of Adjustment](#).

ICDD Position: ICDD supported proposal. ICDD advocates for an update of the comprehensive plan to remove an outdated “desired heights map” that was cited as the reason to reject the project.

Your Position: **Having not been in all of the council work sessions on this issue, I can't offer a fully informed opinion on this exact plan. That said, I think there is a compelling case that the property in question is underdeveloped and of limited value as an open parking lot, and so that's something I would weigh strongly when I almost certainly will be called upon to vote on other proposals for that property.**

- b. **Support Historic Preservation through "Opt In" Program.** The Historic Preservation Commission and ICDD both agree that support for incentivizing historic preservation downtown would be a powerful and collaborative tool to reach multiple community-wide goals, including building preservation, sustainability, reduction of tax burden on key properties, and cultural opportunities. (See ICDD [Advocacy Statement 2.7](#))

ICDD Position: ICDD supports "opt in" program versus a local ordinance mandate and advocates for staff time to be devoted to developing the program.

Your Position: **While I'm certainly looking forward to hearing more about this before making a decision, I am concerned that "opt-in" programs are vulnerable to being undermined by those who never plan on opting in.**

But having voiced my concern about why I'm not yet at a point to "opt in" to opting in, neither am I at a point of opting out.

I do see a value in preserving the historic feel of the downtown, one of the indefinable but undeniable things that make the area special. I am generally a goals-oriented person, and so I look forward to working with ICDD, the HPC, and others to reach this shared goal of preservation alongside growth and development.

- c. As a Self Supported Municipal Improvement District, the ICDD has a partially sustainable revenue stream from a voluntary assessment on downtown property owners. The ICDD believes SSMIDs can benefit other areas of the community and support improved collaboration city-wide. As a City Council member, a South District SSMID may be brought to City Council for approval. While this is not a political vote, rather an obligation of Council to approve the SSMID if the requirements of [Iowa Chapter 386](#) governing SSMIDs are met. What are your general opinions related to additional SSMIDs in Iowa City.

ICDD Position: The ICDD supports and has been collaborating with South District partners to set up this improvement district. We advocate for the South District SSMID and a collaborative relationship between the two.

Your Position: **I agree that the South District SSMID is a good thing for that district and would support both parties if they wanted a collaborative relationship.**

- d. This year, City staff [removed a line item from the Capitol Improvement Plan \(CIP\)](#) that was voted on by previous Council members without alerting them or stakeholders like the ICDD to its removal. The project, a change of the one-way street to two-way of Market Street that would benefit safety in the Northside Marketplace, was first discussed in the [2013 Downtown Streetscape](#). At that time, the two-way conversion was lauded as beneficial to the community and was estimated at \$500k. Since then, costs have changed and staff came to the conclusion that Jefferson and Market Street corridors are lined with 1970s vintage traffic signals that have been deferred replacement among other issues and so removed the project from the CIP for other critical priorities.

The CIP is something that stakeholders rely on once they are voted on by Council and changes to it are important to communicate. The ICDD is a strong supporter of the Market Street two-way conversion that downtown stakeholders have been waiting on for what will now be almost a decade.

ICDD Position: We advocate for Council to vote the Market Street two-way conversion back on the CIP when it comes up for Council vote and for City Council to advocate for its immediate prioritization to keep confidence in the City's processes.

Your Position: **I agree. It shouldn't have been removed from the CIP, and should go back in for reasons of public safety and business promotion. I am new to the normal process of prioritization of CIP projects, but I don't think it should by any means start over at the end of the line.**

5. One of the biggest challenges facing the City and downtown today is dwindling service levels in spite of rising service needs with an increased residential and visitor base. Downtown has a growing number of people experiencing homelessness with severe mental illness on most corners and no agency to specifically support the challenges of harassment of downtown patrons and lack of basic code enforcement. The ICPD has not re-assigned a downtown liaison - a proven solution - to address working with this population and to support education on basic code enforcement (parking on the pedestrian mall, riding bikes on sidewalks, etc). As a Council member, does prioritizing an officer or another type of staff with code enforcement authority to this role align with your philosophy on supporting community safety? What else should the City be doing to increase service levels and basic code enforcement?

I really see two different things going on here. The first is a concern by the ICDD with people without homes, and the other deals with code enforcement.

While ICPD has been a leader among law enforcement departments with training to help people in various kinds of crisis, I am unconvinced that a true public safety response for the vast majority of those without homes is primarily a policing response. It is my understanding that the ICPD is hiring/contracting with professional social workers, with a goal of responding to public safety and community welfare needs that don't really need a law enforcement response.

I understand that the ICPD is currently understaffed, something which I've been told they are working on. Assuming the ICPD chief is on board, once staffing levels have

gotten more stable revisiting the liaison position makes sense. But again, part of this picture should be that officers are handling basic code enforcement and trained social workers are interacting with those suffering from housing insecurity.

6. 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 resources towards downtown cleanliness and/or placemaking?

Placemaking is such an interesting concept, and one that ICDD already does well – to the community’s benefit.

One type of placemaking that I found particularly intriguing, and this relates to the pandemic recovery discussion, was looking at expanding the use of outdoor spaces into winter months. Before moving to Iowa City, we lived for five years in Hayward, Wisconsin, a town in the Northwestern corner of the state, surrounded by the north woods, 45 minutes from Lake Superior, and where winter lasted from October to April or May. One thing I learned was that it is possible to enjoy outdoor activities on all but the coldest and nastiest days. So it can be done, and I would look forward to seeing more details on how this would work in Iowa City.

7. Downtown Iowa City is the economic center of the City and a front door to the University of Iowa. In the current economic recovery climate, for many Downtown businesses, the margins are increasingly strained by limited labor, 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?

First of all, the city should continue to work with ICDD to support a variety of initiatives to help small businesses, BIPOC owned businesses, and other programs to help retain and keep these retailers, especially as we continue to deal with COVID.

The city should also continue its work partnering with ICDD on improvements and maintenance, promotion of events, and other services.

Another important way the city can help ICDD businesses, and other businesses in the city, is to do things like improve transportation in Iowa City and with Iowa City’s neighbors, capitalizing on ICDD’s position as a hub for the city and the region.

And as discussed in the advocacy statement and earlier in this questionnaire, the city should be supportive of other neighborhoods outside of the ICDD, such as the South District, so that healthy and vibrant areas can contribute to each other.

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

One of the things the advocacy statement discussed was the need for smarter gun control laws, an issue of shared concern for all neighborhoods in our city. There is no need for anyone who isn't a licensed law enforcement officer to be carrying a weapon through the crowded downtown streets and pedestrian mall. Like the rest of society, ICDD is a victim of the ever increasing number of guns on our streets. But unlike the rest of society, ICDD may be able to advocate from a business perspective why more responsible gun laws are necessary for the healthy economy of the area.

Another thing the ICDD should be supporting is an increased minimum wage. Businesses that pay closer to a living wage typically don't find it as hard to find and keep employees. But if a small business has a competitor that can legally pay a sub-living wage, that small business is at a competitive disadvantage. A minimum wage that is a living wage removes this problem, and we stop economically punishing business owners who want to treat their employees well. It also puts more money in the pockets of all the minimum wage workers in a community, money which studies show flow back into the local economy.

This is another example of the rising tide that can raise all boats.

Are there any other comments would you like to provide or suggestions for the ICDD?

Thank you for the opportunity to learn more about the ICDD and to be able to share my thoughts. I look forward to working with Nancy and the other members of the ICDD to continue learning about this amazing Iowa City neighborhood.

Thank you for your responses!