

City Council Candidate: Megan Alter Date: 09/26/2021

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.**

As someone who lives and works outside the DD, I have been struck by how important the DD is as a destination for the community. With the opening up of activities this summer, it was a joy to have a place where people could gather outside, enjoy restaurants (thank you for expanded outdoor seating!) and activities (the Block Party, Summer of the Arts events). I appreciate how downtown presents a unique character and facet of IC while it has also worked hard to create opportunities for essentials in retail and healthcare. I think it is important to continue to preserve this balance. We need downtown to remain appealing to the community and visitors while also ensuring that people who live in this core zone (or will live here) have access to basics. I also am struck by the DD's goal to broaden and deepen its commitment to inclusion. As a destination and as an economic center for IC, this commitment is meaningful. I hope that groups like the MCP (Multicultural Development Center of IA) can collaborate to support underrepresented business owners, which in turn can attract more diverse groups to enjoy DD.

- 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](#).**

I consider this to be a “yes / and” question. As a counselor, my priorities would be to make sure that downtown is robust and welcoming for businesses of all types by supporting initiatives from Merge, the ICABP, ThinkIowa, and the DD as well as considering use and attractions. I would want to highlight the residential population in this core area as well--developers and economic recruiters need to take into account the availability of essential goods and services just as they do/should in other parts of IC. I am mindful of the DD’s centrality to the general fund while I am also a champion of strengthening other parts of IC. City Council can support both: I am impressed by the specificity of support services recommended by the DD to help with economic recovery, and I support infill projects to help preserve older buildings, for example, so that the DD can continue to iterate and sustain growth in a way that is right for the area. I see my often-stated priority of increasing retail (both soft goods and restaurants) in the South District as a complement to the DD--and to IC generally. By bringing retail to the South District and refreshing the IC Marketplace, we can create a geographically more balanced tax base. While most of the tax base will continue to be located in the downtown area, there is room for growth and different kinds of retail development to help grow our economy and many of the chief goals of the DD (inclusivity, allowing DD to remain a destination spot with its own character, and remaining a major economic hub).

- 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?**

It is exciting to see the DD serving as a resource for small businesses throughout IC, as it has been for the South District. The DD can be (and is) a model for brand-building, for self-advocacy and networking building, for strategic guidance and self-governance in starting a SSMID. In terms of recovery efforts, I think the DD can continue to foreground concrete actions to stimulate additional consumer traffic as outlined in the recovery amendment. I also support infill projects as the landscape of downtown evolves. Commercial space needs to be filled to make the best use of existing properties and Iowa City must also attract people to an unique locale that people enjoy visiting. In other words, the City should work with the DD to keep much of what’s identifiable about the buildings while also meeting developer and owner needs. In terms of working to recover from the pandemic and as a community, the DD’s commitment to pursuing and developing more inclusivity and support for BIPOC retailers and business owners is a meaningful way to address equity issues, one that helps provide a more welcoming environment for all. I think that the relationships with under-represented groups should continue to be a priority so that the DD’s goal to attract more diverse people downtown can be met.

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: The required heights standard has been used very inconsistently downtown. While I am not a huge supporter of the specific height proposed by the developer at this location, I am far more concerned by the alternative of tearing down an adjacent 19th-C building that is already occupied by local businesses to accommodate parking. The developer’s request for reduction in parking also aligns more with proposals to combat climate action. I support this DD position.

- 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: Because there are no local commercial guidelines and because the DD has many historic buildings, it makes sense to incentivize their preservation other than via TIF. Due to the complexities of historic preservation guidelines and navigating potential tax credits available to those who apply, having a staff person dedicated to helping this effort makes sense. Additionally, here is an instance where Council can feel comfortable relying on the expertise of two bodies of experts working together collaboratively to address urban change and need over time while preserving architectural and cultural history.

- 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 am a member of the South District Neighborhood Association and have been in favor of the South District SSMID from its initial conception. These Improvement Districts allow members to create a vision and improvement measures that are right for the area and its needs. It requires collaboration and conversation among property owners and a focused plan for an area's future. I fully support such efforts; it allows investment and buy-in to come from those who are already invested in the businesses, the location, and the needs of those who use them.

- 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 was an advocate for this conversion in 2019 and remain in favor of it as a priority. The longer the conversion is put on hold, the more expensive it will get.

- 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 believe there should be a liaison with experience working with people to de-escalate mental health issues and to help guide individuals to essential services, including temporary shelter if that is needed and wanted. I am also mindful of how under-staffed the police are right now. While the ICPD downtown liaison is a proven past solution, it may be that Council and the DD need to consider additional options to help. Much like the Fire Marshall attends to inspections, perhaps there can be someone to handle code enforcement in the DD. Perhaps this is a day officer, but I firmly believe that there needs to be someone trained in helping people with mental health issues as well. It is worth having a conversation with additional experts in the IC area to determine who best can fill this role.

- 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?

I am in favor of additional resources if this ask is outside of SSMID purview; as the major focal point of Iowa City for tourists and families, as well as native Iowa Citizens, it is important to keep the DD clean. I am also in favor of asking support from the University of Iowa since they, too, have a major investment in providing good impressions. A fully collaborative effort from UI and Iowa City could create additional pathways for future mutual support and collaboration.

- 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?

The DD suggestion to strengthen retail recruitment, especially by creating a network of local experts, is an excellent way to not only draw in retail to the area, but foster relationships, insights, and advocacy among local businesses. Activating permanent digital marketplaces and delivery services is no longer a COVID response only; it has become a disruptor in the retail industry. Iowa Citians love to shop local. Keeping and strengthening this feature will ensure loyalty and small business consumer participation. To better support the restaurant recovery efforts and maintain attendance, allow changes in codes to allow four weather seating. Reimagining Dubuque Street could have major positive implications for recovery efforts and the future vision of the DD. As with neighborhoods throughout IC with poor lighting, safety becomes an issue. To have a vibrant DD, people need to feel safe. Providing more lighting is one easy way to start. I also think the City should do as much as possible to financially support the efforts of ICAD, DD, and Better Together to invest in BIPOC and independent start-ups.

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

My suggestions align with much of what has been outlined in the DD Advocacy statement in spirit, if not actually stated. The DD is clearly invested in public safety, inclusivity, and creating an equitable community. Therefore, I believe the DD should support the following:

- 1) Allow local City control of liquor licenses so that a simpler regulatory environment could be explored to allow additional flexibility for restaurants to open past 12am while ensuring liquor license holders are accountable for nuisance or calls for service (taken directly from the Advocacy statement).
- 2) Reverse the permitless carry law for gun owners.
- 3) Grant expanded authority of local Community Police Review Boards so they can better carry out their investigations.

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

Thank you for your responses!