Mansfield Downtown Partnership
Board of Directors
August 4, 2022
Virtual
4:30 PM
Minutes

Present: Ryan Aylesworth, Brian Coleman, Mario Conjura, Steve Ferrigno, Frank Gifford, Louis Goffinet, Rachel Goldberg, Toni Moran, Kyle Muncy, Ron Schurin, Colby Trembley, Sean Vasington, and Emily Wicks

Absent: Cara Workman

Staff: Cynthia van Zelm, Executive Director; Kathleen Paterson, Senior Communications Manager; Denise Kegler, Event Coordinator; Joshua Stern, Administrative Assistant

Others Present: Diana Pelletier, Board Member Emeritus; Larisa Ortiz, Managing Director, Streetsense; Joe Panella, Research Analyst, Streetsense

1. Call to Order

President Kyle Muncy called the meeting to order at 4:33 p.m.

2. Introduction of new Board members

New and returning Board members and staff introduced themselves.

3. Opportunity for Public to Comment

There was no public comment.

4. Approval of Minutes of June 1, 2022 Special Meeting

Frank Gifford made a motion to approve the June 1, 2022 Special Meeting minutes. Steve Ferrigno seconded the motion. The motion passed with Brian Coleman abstaining and all other members in favor.

5. Downtown Storrs Strategic Action Plan Check-in with Streetsense

Mr. Muncy first asked for brief updates on the work of the three working groups to date. He said the Sustainable Funding Working Group has had some success engaging in conversations with property owners to secure contributions. The group has also begun to shift some of its fundraising focus to the businesses that are the biggest contributors, encouraging them to give on an annual basis rather than an event basis or as-needed basis.
Sean Vasington said the Promotion/Public Spaces Working Group has brainstormed several initiatives tied to the strategic plan and is currently focused on prioritizing these initiatives for implementation. He specifically mentioned several physical improvements that were proposed for Betsy Paterson Square.

Mr. Ferrigno said the Business Owner/Property Owner Engagement Working Group recently held a mixer event at Hops 44 to enhance communication and networking among the Downtown Storrs businesses. The event had around 40 attendees and helped the Board members receive feedback on possible action items. The group has begun discussing plans for future networking events. Mr. Muncy noted that several attendees at the networking event expressed the need for more engagement from the property owners, as well as the vacancies downtown. Mr. Muncy added that he and Cynthia van Zelm have been meeting regularly with property owners and he has relayed concerns from the business owners.

Mr. Muncy then turned the meeting over to Larisa Ortiz of Streetsense. Ms. Ortiz reminded the Board that the strategic plan was completed with the intention that Streetsense would review it and provide feedback after six months. She noted that strategic plans are living documents, not set in stone.

Ms. Ortiz reviewed the sustainable funding strategies in the plan and the progress that has been made toward them to date. She reiterated the recommendation to establish multiple tiers of sponsorship and to use CRM software to collect data on past and present donors. She then gave the following recommendations for updates to this section of the plan:

- Continuing to build readership and engagement with the Business Digest
- Exploring additional communication tools such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and improving the Partnership website, including by adding a landing page specifically for businesses
- Developing a donor list and reevaluating the sponsorship approach
- Expanding on the Explore Our Town guide by creating a new welcome packet for residents

Ms. Ortiz recommended some CRM database programs. She noted that the welcome packet for new residents could sell advertising space to businesses, or it could remain an online resource. In response to a question from Mr. Vasington, Ms. Ortiz said many small business owners are more likely to use Facebook than other social media platforms.

Ms. Ortiz then reviewed the strategies in the plan relating to promotion and public spaces, and their implementation to date. She offered the following recommendations for updates:

- Continuing to explore adding signage to Betsy Paterson Square
- Initiating physical improvements to Betsy Paterson Square
- Considering a curbless street on Dog Lane as a way of expanding the Square for events
- Exploring adding awnings to businesses to increase walkability

Ms. Ortiz said storefront awning programs are fairly common and often come in the form of grants and loans. She displayed photos of a curbless street in Milburn, NJ, which was first implemented in 2017 and has since become an almost permanent feature, with the street closed most of the time. She explained how a curbless street can increase flexibility and blur the line between a street and a public space. Ron Schurin noted that some members of the Willowbrook Road community have concerns about how expansion of the Square onto Dog Lane would impact traffic patterns on Willowbrook Road. Ms. Ortiz said the goal would be for the expansion to provide flexibility but not a permanent closure.
Ms. Ortiz then reviewed the property and business owner engagement strategies in the plan and their implementation to date. She offered the following recommendations for updates:

- Continuing to hold networking events and to use the online newsletter to provide outreach
- Increasing outreach through flyers, online platforms, and radio advertisements
- Expanding and leveraging the Partnership website’s dedicated landing page for businesses

Ms. Ortiz showed examples of Facebook and WhatsApp groups that aim to connect property and business owners. Toni Moran asked Ms. van Zelm if the recommendations are feasible with the current staff. Ms. van Zelm said the plan is divided into tiers of implementation and that it would be key for the Partnership to partner with other organizations, such as the UConn School of Fine Arts. Ms. Moran also asked if the efforts that have been implemented so far have had results. Ms. Ortiz said there have been a number of successful outcomes, but the work is still very much in progress. Ms. van Zelm said that in the past, there has been a check-in about the implementation plan at each Board meeting.

Ms. Ortiz and Mr. Panella left the meeting.

6. Executive Director Report

Ms. van Zelm said she and Denise Kegler are still looking for volunteers to staff the Partnership table at the Celebrate Mansfield Festival. Mr. Muncy volunteered to co-staff the 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. slot with Mr. Gifford. Ms. van Zelm said she would like to add a game or activity to the table to help attract people. In response to a question from Mr. Coleman, Ms. Kegler noted that Festival activity booths cannot be used for fundraising.

Ms. van Zelm said that, weather permitting, Friday night will be the first of the three Moonlight Movies events. The rain date for each event is the following Wednesday.

Ms. van Zelm said most of the signs for the wayfinding signage plan have been identified. Consultant team Merje is working on locations and is expected to get back in touch in the next week or two. About $100,000 has been allocated for the first year of implementation, and Ms. van Zelm will likely work with the Town team to develop proposals, which she hopes will be out by the fall.

Ms. van Zelm said the Town Council approved several projects for the Town’s American Rescue Plan Act funding, including a local business relief program, which was promoted through a press release, the Town newsletter, and other avenues. She said 21 eligible applications were received and 15 have been approved so far; some applicants still need to submit tax returns or letters of good standing from the State Department of Revenue Services. Seven of the applicants were in Downtown Storrs, and Ms. van Zelm feels the applicant pool represents an accurate cross section of all areas of Mansfield. There is some leftover funding, and Town Manager Ryan Aylesworth will discuss with the Town Council whether a second round is warranted. Ms. van Zelm also noted that an agreement between the Town and the businesses to allocate the funds is in progress.

Mr. Aylesworth expressed his appreciation for Ms. van Zelm, the Partnership staff, and the committee that reviewed the applications for funding. Ms. Moran asked whether The Pour House is open. Kathleen Paterson said it is open on a limited schedule of two days a week for the summer. The landlord expects it to open on a fuller schedule soon, likely when school begins.
7. Report from Committees/Working Groups

Updates from the working groups were given under item 5.

Celebrate Mansfield Festival
Chair Emily Wicks said the Committee has recruited area captains and has begun volunteer recruitment; they will begin reaching out to student groups soon to recruit volunteers. The Committee also received approval to use reusable bowls and plates on a test basis and to use the middle school to wash them. Ms. Wicks said sponsorship of the Festival is where it should be and the budget can move forward as planned. She said booth recruitment is going well, with 23 booths as of the last Committee meeting; there have been up to nine applications for craft booths, and the Committee has been looking to add more food booths. Ms. Wicks added that Joshua’s Trust had expressed interest in holding an electric car rally and that the Festival may also include a scarecrow decoration contest.

There were no updates from the Executive, Finance and Growth, and Governance committees, as they had not met since the last Board meeting.

Mr. Gifford and Mr. Muncy encouraged all Board members, particularly the new student representatives, to attend or get involved at the Festival and spread the word about the Festival.

8. Correspondence and Communications

No correspondence or communications were discussed.

9. Adjourn

Mr. Coleman moved to adjourn. Ms. Moran seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 5:31 p.m.