

First Avenue Uptown College District Meeting

April 17, 2008

Coe College

8 a.m.

Present: Scott Crosby, Lt. Tim Daily, Craig Erickson, Jeff Frese, Erin Lenninger, Alex Michaud, Betsey Newman, Kevin Platz, Rod Pritchard, Matt Teply, Bruce Vander Sanden, Monica Vernon, Andrew Visser, Phil Wasta, John Wasta.

Agenda items:

- 1. Guest speaker – Monica Vernon: president, Vernon Research Group and member of Cedar Rapids City Council.** Monica was elected last fall to the represent District 2 on the city council. Vernon Research Group is a member of the First Avenue Uptown College District (Uptown). She spoke on recent business the Council is working on and took questions from Uptown members. The Council has been discussing logical and fair ways of assessing people and businesses for improvements to the roads and streetscapes. It is possible to bond for those funds, but assessing is also on the table. Monica believes that residents and businesses should take ownership of their neighborhoods and provide some of the funding and much of the initiative to play up the unique character within that area. The Council is concerned about “total streets,” meaning how the road and sidewalks look, feel and perform for vehicle, pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Monica said “buy in” is important as well. In the Czech Village revitalization, the city funded a \$1.2 million streetscape project but there has been little action by the business owners to continue positive upgrades on their private property. Many of the buildings have deteriorated since the project. Monica understands that it can be extremely hard for small businesses to have money available for beautification efforts but also believes that it is those very investments that can be most helpful to their own success and that of the whole area. These self-investments are also viewed very favorably by agencies granting additional funds.

Rod Pritchard asked about the need for the city to find additional funding sources to increase city revenue. Monica replied that Cedar Rapids does tax its residents quite a bit but the money tends to go to Des Moines for state government expenditures and not return to Cedar Rapids. There are many, many people who live in other counties and drive in to work during the day in Cedar Rapids. She said that the daytime population is around 250,000 though the official population is 120,000. Many of these people are utilizing Cedar Rapids services but not paying taxes to the city. There is a bill in the legislature (Rep. Tyler Olson) that would open up a variety of ways that cities might collect revenue. The bill will likely not pass this session, but if it did, it would include a menu of tools that the Council would debate and vote on. Cedar Rapids does not have any gambling revenues or a city 1 cent local option sales tax. One solution would be to try and recoup some of the funds that are being paid in to the state. Some sort of “wheel tax” on the commuters would also be an option.

Monica shared that she is 100 percent on board with the city’s priority vision for a more vibrant downtown but agreed with Uptown that First Avenue is the main street of Cedar Rapids. There are distinct areas along First Avenue between Marion and downtown Cedar Rapids and those individual areas need to become unique, walk-able, livable and/or historic assets for the city. Monica encouraged continued communication with the city council, she mentioned that once the Council is aware of Uptown’s ideas, commitment and passion, they will better be able to spread the word and assist in our goals. She thought that a presentation by the Uptown group to the city council sometime during the summer would be a good start to the process.

- 2. Update from Cedar Rapids Police – Lt. Tim Daily.** Lt. Daily reported that the search for a new police chief is coming along nicely and they hope to make an announcement soon. Currently, there are two local officers, Capts. Bernie Walther and Steve O'Konek, among the five candidates. Lt. Daily said that community policing efforts are underway and all neighborhoods have been visited by officers and agency personnel to develop those relationships and ensure there are no “hot spots” that are repeated problem areas. He was pleased to announce that the Cigarette Outlet had three calls for service in the last month. They see 700-800 customers each day. The police will also be watching closely as the Cigarette Outlet extends their hours until midnight on Friday and Saturdays. He reported that the Road Ranger had two calls for service and 50 officer-initiated visits in the last month. Bike patrols are also out in the district, Coe College noted seeing them on campus recently. Lt. Daily introduced Bruce Vander Sanden from the Department of Correctional Services who presented information on the Weed and Seed program (W&S). W&S consists of programs meant to “weed” out crime and “seed” positive behaviors. W&S partners with local agencies to provide these programs to local neighborhoods and residents, each neighborhood has a central location for these programs. Mound View’s location is Echo Hill Presbyterian Church and Wellington Heights is Wellington House. Some of the programs administered by W&S include Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, NA/AA meetings, clothing closet, employment skills/job search assistance, BRIGHTEN (neighborhood revitalization) and many more. W&S has funding for five years with the hopes that the programs continue long after that initial money is gone. These programs have grown tremendously since the first year of funding (fall 2005). It is the hope of the Cedar Rapids Police Department that Uptown might provide a member to join the W&S steering committee. There are definite parallels between the goals of the W&S program and that of Uptown. Mutual support can only help both organizations succeed in the future. For more information on Weed and Seed, please contact Erin Lenninger at elenning@coe.edu.
- 3. Membership Drive Efforts.** The steering committee understands the importance of maintaining an accurate membership/First Avenue database and the need to grow membership to ensure future viability of the organization. When the weather (and schedules) permits, members of the steering committee will revisit businesses in the district and share information from the market study. Special events should also help in this area. Every member of Uptown is asked to keep accurate contact and business information on file with the steering committee.
- 4. Meeting Frequency.** The steering committee wanted to get some feedback from the membership on the desired meeting frequency. We currently meet monthly, but if there is no business needing attention, we could meet less frequently. However, it is hoped that the information from the market study will provide action items for the group and the planning of a special event in the fall will certainly ensure the need for continued monthly meetings. If any member has an opinion on this matter, please contact Erin at elenning@coe.edu.

Next Meeting

Our next meeting will be **Thursday, May 15 at 8 a.m.** in the Lynch Room, Gage Memorial Union, at Coe College. We hope to present the results from the market study.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Erin Lenninger at 319-399-8581 or elenning@coe.edu.