

**CITY OF ROCK ISLAND
CITY COUNCIL MEETING**

City Hall

1528 Third Avenue, Rock Island IL

City Council Chambers, 3rd Floor

10/8/2020 - Minutes

1. Call to Order

Mayor Thoms called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and welcomed everyone.

2. As part of his Executive Order in response to Covid-19, #2020-07, section 6, Governor Pritzker announced provisions of the Open Meetings Act requiring in-person attendance by members of a public body are suspended, specifically the requirement that a public body must be physically present and the conditions limiting when remote participation is permitted.

3. Roll Call

Mayor Thoms asked the Deputy Clerk to call the roll.

Present: Mayor Mike Thoms, Alderman Randy Hurt, Alderman Mark Poulos, and Alderman Dave Geenen.

Alderman James Spurgetis, Alderwoman Jenni Swanson, and Alderman Dylan Parker were present via remote connection in accordance with Governor Pritzker's Executive Order.

Absent: Alderman Ivory D. Clark.

Staff: City Manager Randy Tweet, Deputy Clerk Josh Adams, Information Technology Director Tim Bain, and other City Staff.

4. Pledge of Allegiance

Mayor Thoms led in the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance.

5. Moment of Silence

Mayor Thoms asked for a moment of silence. A moment of silence was observed.

6. Public Comment

Mayor Thoms asked if anyone in the public wished to speak on a topic

7. Downtown / District Discussion

Mayor Thoms asked if anyone present or via remote connection wished to speak.

Rock Island resident John Callas introduced himself via remote. He thanked the Mayor and Council for convening the meeting, and said he has owned a business in the downtown area for over 20 years. He said he didn't know what would work in the downtown, but a plan is needed. He said he would help do whatever it takes to make a plan become reality.

Rock Island resident Jay Pearce introduced himself via remote. He said he had previously been a downtown resident of the City, and is the Radio Manager for WVIK. He discussed his previous activities in the downtown. He said his wife is in a wheelchair, and getting down to Schwiebert Park is a nightmare. He said he wondered why there were no restaurants right on the river. He said there is a good opportunity there, but the City hasn't yet figured out what to do with it yet. He said he loves the downtown and the architecture. He thanked Council.

Morgan Milner introduced himself via remote. He said the City has a beautiful downtown with a lot to do. He said the homeless population is an issue with the downtown. He said he would previously go out for drinks in the downtown but eventually stopped because of being hassled while walking or eating outside. He said they are in need of help and he's not sure of a solution, but that it creates an atmosphere where people do not want to come downtown. He said whatever solution the City comes up with needs to incorporate this issue.

Dave Herrell, the President and CEO of Visit Quad Cities introduced himself via remote. He thanked the Council for having the meeting, and said it is a great opportunity to discuss the future of Rock Island. He said the City has incredible bones, and there is upside and opportunity. He said Visit Quad Cities has conducted a tourism master plan exercise, and found that there are specific recommendations to be made for the downtowns in the area. He said he is hoping to effectuate change across the Quad Cities, specifically Rock Island. He said the walkability, the architecture, and the ability to create a campus-type feel provides a chance to do many different things in the City. He said whatever part his group can play in making a difference, they would like to participate. He said Rock Island is in a position where more can be done and has a lot of upside.

Jennifer Verscha of dphilms and Rock Island resident, introduced herself via remote. She she agreed with Mr. Herrell about the structure of the downtown. She said she would like to see the downtown be more family friendly, as it now caters more to adults. She said the downtown needs more specialty shops, green space, and daytime activities. She said she would like to see more things to interact with or experience. She said she would like to see a main destination hub or draw for the City. She gave examples of what types of activities or events would be beneficial for the downtown area. She thanked Council and offered to help wherever she could.

Rock Island resident George Crouse introduced herself via remote. He said he moved to the City in 2019 and works at the Rock Island Arsenal. He said there is a stigma related to the downtown when it comes to crime, and possibly unfounded. He said those that do not live in the downtown can have concerns regarding the safety of the area, but he does not experience that. He said the area by Schwiebert Park is not a place conducive to walking due to the traffic and narrow sidewalks.

Ryan Orr of dphilms and Quad City resident, introduced himself via remote. He said he has worked in the downtown area for the past 17 years. He said it is time to question what the District is and what it should look like. He said working downtown makes him question what the City is creating in the area. He said the biggest question is how the City wants to redefine the District, and whether or not it should be larger. Mayor Thoms asked him if he had suggestions. Mr. Orr cited Ms. Verscha's example of St. Louis as well as Chicago for being places that have specific interactive draws for the public. He said that is the biggest missing element in the

downtown area, and a lack of balance.

Cynthia Clark, a resident of Longview neighborhood in Rock Island, introduced herself via remote. She said she uses the downtown area for walking and cycling. She asked what additional emphasis the City could place on that type of activity, including better maintenance of those paths. She expressed concern regarding safety in the area. She suggested bike stations with tools as other area cities have done.

Nicole Watson-Lam, owner of Ms. Brimani's, introduced herself via remote. She said she recently moved her business from the West End to the District. She said she remembered coming downtown as a child for various events, but as time passed, the atmosphere changed from a family-friendly atmosphere to an adult atmosphere. She said the nightlife has saved the District. She said she would like to know the plans for various buildings and spaces in the area. She said she does not have a specific suggestion, but would like to know more about the plans for the area. She said seeing the boarded up buildings indicates signs of distress in the downtown. Mayor Thoms said the space of the former Modern Woodmen building will be used as a parking lot for company employees. She asked what is planned for the Best building. Mayor Thoms said the developer has not been able to secure financing, and the TIF monies will be reappropriated to other places in the area. Alderman Hurt said information on plans for vacant buildings should be made available to the public.

Jessica Waytenick, Rock Island resident, introduced herself via remote. She said the upcoming Modern Woodmen employee parking lot could be used when the company does not need it for food truck festivals or other utilizations. She said a downtown beautification project is needed, including improvements to the sidewalks and band stage. She said the City's rich history in art could allow for an Artist's Market in the plaza area. She said a block-by-block investment in beautification with a unified vision is needed.

Vince Thomas, Rock Island resident, introduced himself via remote. He said one reason the City is in this predicament is the lack of attention paid to businesses over time. He said previous consultants recommended removing the mall area, but it has met resistance. He said he does not think the current downtown plan is working. He said if the City would help with things like rent, more businesses may come to the downtown. He said more minority businesses are needed. He said more information is needed on why certain businesses in the area have closed over time.

Mark Schwiebert, Rock Island resident and former Mayor, introduced himself in person. He thanked Council for holding the special meeting. He said he has watched with increasing sadness and a concern that it is not necessary. He said there is a strong, professional, financial, and service base in the downtown. He said there are many historical buildings that gives the City incentives that can bring businesses. He said there is a proximity to a great and accessible riverfront. He said the City needs to package these strengths in a promotional sense. He said the idea of a task force will help bring strategic thinking from the best minds to build on the strengths of the City. He said local organizations can also contribute ideas. He said he would be willing to join the discussed task force. He thanked Council for organizing the meeting.

Annika O'Melia, Rock Island resident, introduced herself via remote. She said she opened a business this year on 24th Street. She said she initially looked at downtown buildings as well, but found that it was not affordable. She asked what incentives were available to help business owners locate downtown. She said there is not an overarching vision for the area, and asked where residents could look to find what the vision was. Mayor Thoms said the City cannot take buildings away from owners, and it is difficult to control what an owner charges for rent. He said there are several tools to utilize to assist businesses. City Manager Randy Tweet said incentives are unique depending on the variables of the business, and gave examples. Mayor Thoms said there are parts of the City that are more difficult to acquire incentives than others.

Ms. O'Melia asked where residents can go to find what the strategic plan for the District is. Mr. Tweet said the website has the 2015 Downtown Revitalization Plan.

Mr. Thomas asked why there was a reluctance to follow up on what consultants have said regarding the removal of the Plaza Mall. Mayor Thoms said the City is looking into removing that space. He said the biggest problem with regards to implementing the plan is a lack of funds to do so. Mr. Crouse said as an outsider, the City has a visibility issue. He said an area of improvement would be increasing the visibility to bring people downtown.

Paul Rumler of the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce introduced himself in person. He said a lot of people are rooting for downtown Rock Island. He said the City is the regional leader in developing the downtown. He said the Chamber values their relationship with the City, and has a great partnership with DARI. He said they look forward to working with the City.

Alderman Dylan Parker introduced himself via remote. He said as a representative for the downtown, the unique characteristic is that there is no formal institution dedicated to developing the area. He said there is no independent and responsible entity for event planning, cleanup, or looking for developers. He said the City has tried to take care of some of these, however the resources aren't always available. He said that is not a way to sustain the area, and hoped that it is a direction towards which the City can move.

Ms. Watson-Lam asked Mayor Thoms to explain the privatization of 2nd Avenue and what that means for the downtown area. Mr. Tweet said DARI had pursued privatization for a short time, but is no longer doing so.

Rock Island resident Charlotte Morrison asked what challenges the City is facing as a result of the pandemic to bring businesses to the downtown area. Mayor Thoms said financially the City was already tight on the budget, and it affected the ability to invest monies in the downtown. He said perception of safety is currently an issue as well, which the City is fighting to amend. He said many of the former businesses may have failed because of a lack of succession, as well as the effect of big-box stores. He said coming up with financial resources for entrepreneurs is also an issue in bringing business to the downtown. Mr. Thomas said many of the owners of closed businesses said neither the City nor Council reached out to them. He said there is a lack of communication with the downtown businesses. Mayor Thoms said a number of Council members including himself have visited with the businesses in question, but do need to improve, which is a goal of the City.

Kyle Carter, Davenport, Iowa resident and Executive Director of the Downtown Davenport Partnership, introduced himself in person. He discussed his experience with the downtown Rock Island area. He said something to remember is that the work is hard, and every downtown across the country are struggling. He said while all of the answers might not be clear now, the fact that the City cares is the most important. He agreed with Alderman Parker that an individual group needs to be focused on the downtown, as the City cannot do it alone. He said Rock Island has a huge advantage regarding the style of buildings the downtown has, and thinks a lot could be done in downtown Rock Island.

Daiquiri Factory owner Kyle Peters introduced himself via remote. He said he looked through former strategic plans from the City. He said they are all similar, and many things have been identified already. He said his number one goal is to have sustainability and growth is reputation and perception of the downtown. He said there were great ideas in the plans, but budgetary issues are often the concern.

Sarah Myers, Rock Island resident and teacher at Rock Island High School, introduced herself. She asked if there was a way to advertise what the future vision of the City is. She said many

people would like to spend their time and money downtown. She said a video series would be good to get people excited about the downtown area, and the vision needs to be made clear to both residents and visitors.

Ms. O'Melia said Governor Pritzker has allocated 4 million dollars for work around racial healing to Illinois cities and groups. She said others have asked if she had concerns about safety within the City. She said the Quad City area needs to work on racial healing with regards to how people view Rock Island. She asked if there were dollars available to help do that work. She said part of the reputation issue is tied to racial prejudice. Alderman Geenen said funds have been directed to the Martin Luther King Center in Rock Island as part of local philanthropic efforts to promote racial equality. He said they are aware of the State funds, and will follow up with MLK Director Jerry Jones. Mr. Crouse said bringing this up is an important point. He said some have previously told him not to live below the hill in the City.

Monta Ponsetto, Rock Island resident, introduced herself via remote. She said there had been a distinct personality to the City, and the potential task force could look closely at bringing that back. She said embracing and celebrating what the City already has is a good idea.

Mr. Thomas referenced Mr. Crouse's comments regarding living below the hill. He asked who would say those comments, because it is easier to live closer to the downtown. He said he has been told by realtors that it is easier to sell one house in Bettendorf, as it would take three sales to get the same commission in Rock Island. He said one problem is the loss of affordable housing in the City, and a reluctance to have people that need that housing living here. He said this is one of many issues that should be discussed by the task force.

Jon Keim, Rock Island resident and owner of Huckleberry's Pizza, introduced himself via remote. He said as long as the downtown is connecting with people, the City can reinvent itself. He said the community is strong, and the downtown can connect with all other neighborhoods in the City, as well as other cities in the area. He said the City should focus on celebration, showcasing the City's talents, and the City's residents. He thanked Council for their time.

Mr. Crouse said one of the draws to Rock Island is his commute to his job at the Arsenal. He said Mayor Thoms has participated in bus tours of the City, but the time spent in Rock Island was minimal. He said there is untapped potential in doing more to introduce the City to newcomers. Mayor Thoms said he got involved with the bus tours for the purpose of giving visibility to the City.

Julie Heber introduced herself via remote. She said she is happy to hear about the possibility of the Plaza being removed. She said she would love to see all music in Schwiebert Park instead. She said she would like to see more specialty shops in the downtown area.

Alderwoman Swanson said she appreciated everyone's time in discussing this issue. She said there are still image and safety issues with the downtown. She said the City also needs a family-friendly reason to come there. She said as a Council member, she will push for a task force to be formed by the end of October. She said it should be made up of a broad range of people with interest in the downtown area. Mayor Thoms asked if she thought the task force should be implemented by the end of October or just developed. She said there is already a good plan, but she wanted to see what could be done to begin with before the task force is implemented.

Alderman Spurgetis said he supported what Alderwoman Swanson said. He said he was blown away by the number of participants in the discussion, and that it was productive. He said everyone should be congratulated, and his remaining time on Council would be used to steer this in the right direction.

Alderman Poulos said one idea that comes up often is rebranding the City. He applauded the contributions of callers and the time spent by other Council members on this issue. He said whether it is downtown or another area of the City, bad things may happen, but the City should continue to work on creating a positive image. He said certain individuals will cause trouble wherever they are, and they need to continue to be held responsible for their actions.

Alderman Parker said he supports the notion of creating an entity like a task force to focus on the downtown. He said in addition to the task force, there should be concrete policy as to what it would be. He said the City needs someone on staff whose job it is to focus on this issue, and a SSA is needed as well. He said the City has never been able to have a self-sustaining entity that generates its own revenue and can do the work that needs to be done. Mayor Thoms said the issue is that a SSA is a long-term issue and cannot be put together right away, possibly years to be established with funding. Alderman Parker said at some point this Council needs to be the one that sets up the downtown for long-term success. Mayor Thoms explained to listeners that a SSA, or Special Service Area, is a private group in a given geographic area that property owners contribute money to annually, which is used in the area. He said a SSA board decides where the money should be allocated.

Alderman Hurt thanked everyone that spoke at the meeting, and said he was impressed with the amount of contributions. He said there should be balance in the downtown area. He said this Council does have a vision, and that requires patience, vision and money to make it work. He agreed with Alderman Parker regarding short-term focus and long-term plans.

Mayor Thoms asked if anyone else wished to speak. No additional contributors spoke.

8. Motion to Adjourn

MOTION:

Alderman Hurt moved to adjourn until October 12, 2020; Alderman Poulos seconded.

VOTE:

Motion passed on a 6-0-1 roll call vote. Aye: Geenen, Hurt, Spurgetis, Swanson, Parker, and Poulos. Nay: None. Absent: Clark.

The meeting adjourned at 7:37 p.m.

Josh Adams, Deputy City Clerk