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IDA ADVISORY SERVICES

PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

TOPEKA, KS
OCTOBER 2024

INTERNATIONAL DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION
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Background

The goal of IDA's advisory panels is to bring member practitioner expertise in the place management industry to address specific challenges in a community. From October 21 – 23, 2024, three panelists and IDA staff from across the country had the honor of visiting Topeka, KS, a city with rich history and promise for the future. Following a downtown tour, the panel conducted focus group sessions and interviews reaching over 40 people from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to hear downtown perspectives. The panel presented initial recommendations to staff at Downtown Topeka Inc/Greater Topeka Partnership, and the following report provides additional details to those observations and recommendations.

We greatly appreciated the preparations for this panel by the local organizing committee, and the dedication and energy from staff at Downtown Topeka Inc/Greater Topeka Partnership. Thank you for such a warm welcome into your community and we sincerely look forward to the future growth of your downtown and organization.

Panelist Biographies

Kyle Carter, LPM
Vice President, Place Management for the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce and Executive Director of the Downtown Davenport Partnership

With 19 years of experience in the industry, Kyle has developed a wide range of place management, placemaking, and Business Improvement District (BID) knowledge with a focus on three pillars of work: Business & Economic Growth, Infrastructure & Livability, and Advocacy & Promotions. Kyle earned his IDA Leadership Place Management (LPM) certification in 2022 and was recognized as a 2023 QCBJ Most Influential Leader Nominee. He is a current member of the Destination Iowa Scoring Committee and Figge Art Museum Board. A graduate of St. Ambrose University and Co-Founder of Analog Arcade Bar, Kyle remains a passionate advocate for developing quality of place.

Jeff Fluhr
President, Greater Wichita Partnership

As President, Jeff is responsible for leading economic development initiatives from Downtown Wichita to a ten-county region. The Partnership was created in 2015 to align and focus economic initiatives to increase the region's competitiveness through three strategic priorities – jobs, talent and quality of place. The Partnership is built upon teamwork and the idea that, when everyone is advancing in the same direction, the region can create a powerful force to effect change. Prior to moving to Wichita, Jeff served as the Assistant Executive Director of the City of Baton Rouge Downtown Development District. Jeff holds a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Kentucky and a master's degree in landscape architecture from Louisiana State University, with an emphasis on urban planning and business.

Lisa Sims
CEO, Venture Richmond Inc.
Lisa leads Venture Richmond, Inc., a non-profit organization that engages business and community leaders in partnering with the city to enhance the vitality of downtown through economic development, placemaking, marketing, promotion, advocacy, and events. Prior to Venture Richmond, Lisa held leadership positions for Richmond Region Tourism, and the Asheville, NC, Convention and Visitors Bureau. Originally from Nashville, she worked in tourism with Opryland USA, and the Country Music Foundation/Country Music Hall of Fame. She holds a bachelor's degree in communications/journalism and formerly worked as a reporter and editor for community newspapers in Tennessee. Lisa currently serves as chair of the board of directors for Richmond Region Tourism as well as multiple local boards. She currently is leading a $30 million capital campaign for improvements to Downtown's Riverfront and was recently named one of the Women Who Drive Richmond (2024).

David Downey, IOM, CAE, Assoc. AIA
President & CEO, International Downtown Association
As President and Chief Executive Officer, David is responsible for the overall strategic positioning of IDA as a world leader and champion for vital and livable urban centers. Prior to joining IDA, David served as the Managing Director for the American Institute of Architects' Urban Design Center and as Executive Director for the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association. David has been a city advocate since the 1990s having received his degree in Architecture and Design with a focus on Urban Design. He speaks frequently throughout North America on the intersection of place and public – private organizational leadership and has delivered talks in more than ten countries across the globe. David has served on numerous not for profit boards over his career including recently for the Mount Vernon Triangle BID and the Golden Triangle BID in Washington, DC; the Responsible Hospitality Institute in California and is currently on the Mobility Innovation District Advisory Board in Southwest Washington, DC. He served on the Downtown DC advisory board and is currently serving on the Urban Land Institute Vital Cities Advisory Group.

Cathy Lin, AICP
Director of Research, International Downtown Association
Cathy joined the IDA team in June 2018. She leads in-house research efforts to provide the most up-to-date information about IDA member organizations and the place management industry, including working with the Board of Directors and IDA's members to strategize research goals and directives. Prior to joining IDA, Cathy was a project manager at the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, and a planner on the strategic research team at the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore. Cathy has a Master in Urban Planning from Harvard University Graduate School of Design and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Geography from Northwestern University.

Executive Summary

Downtown Topeka is at a critical juncture. Waves of energy in the past decades had built momentum downtown and led to major successes such as high levels of investment for street infrastructure, inviting sidewalks and streetscapes, and the creation of a signature gathering space, Evergy Plaza, for major community events. These successes garnered IDA recognition, with Evergy Plaza winning an Excellence Award in 2021, and Downtown Topeka Events and Downtown Topeka Public Space acknowledged with Merit Awards in 2018.

However, challenges loomed for Downtown Topeka Inc (DTI). While merging into the Greater Topeka Partnership (GTP) has helped to bolster DTI financially, its identity has become fragmented. In the absence of a strong, professional place management leader, and faced with major global impacts like the pandemic, inflation and its extended effects on downtowns, DTI has struggled to reignite the momentum of the past. The selection of the next Executive Director of DTI is incredibly important for the future success of downtown, and urgent work should begin now to establish the strategies and priorities for the organization.

The IDA Advisory Panel worked with the local organizing committee to conduct focus groups and interview throughout a 48-hour intensive, reaching about 40 stakeholders across the public, private and nonprofit sectors. These sessions and conversations revealed a strong passion and desire to work towards a thriving, vibrant downtown, but that effort currently lacks an empowered, leading voice to unite scattered efforts.

The Panel recommends that the DTI (re)take that role, by refocusing on the downtown core, developing an organizational strategic plan, clarifying organizational governance to better leverage the DTI/GTP model to collaborate on large-scale initiatives that benefit downtown and the city as a whole.

Downtown Community Feedback

Throughout the panel's discussions and focus groups, it was apparent that there is a strong and collective community passion to see a vibrant, thriving downtown anchored by Kansas Avenue. These frank conversations revealed how downtown stakeholders are proud of the Kansas Avenue infrastructure improvements and the addition of Evergy Plaza. The resumption of monthly meetings between downtown merchants and DTI has also reopened lines of communication. These are seen as strong and focused tactics designed to bring more business to the area and very successful public/private partnerships in downtown investment.

However, there is also a persistent feeling amongst all stakeholder groups that the downtown momentum abruptly stopped with the improvements. The enthusiastically honest and forthright feedback from stakeholders revealed their sentiment that they had been neglected and disregarded, even lost, within the Greater Topeka Partnership model. Despite a number of events at Evergy Plaza and other venues downtown, a stark lack of marketing means that patrons are unaware of downtown businesses, and downtown businesses likewise are not aware

of events ahead of time to adapt their business. These elements, along with the loss of a true downtown management leader and the lingering effects of COVID-19 (e.g. more employees working from home, inflation, etc.), have resulted in limited pedestrian footfall. These factors, combined with the absence of energy on an entire downtown block have resulted in a downtown with no identity and the overriding feeling that DTI has been "missing in action" without a clear focus or vision. Nevertheless, the infrastructure and foundation of a strong downtown is in place, and DTI can once again become the empowered leader guiding downtown into the future.

Recommendations

Action 1: Refocus on the Downtown Core

Discussion with stakeholders and staff leadership points to the need for a laser-like refocus on the downtown core. While an extensive Downtown Master Plan exists and was only completed in 2021, it's clear that most are either unaware of the plan or do not have confidence in it. Several referred to the document derisively as "the city's plan" instead of a plan with stakeholders' input. At the very least, downtown market data must be updated so that the plan in place accurately reflects today's post-COVID realities and areas of opportunity. Alternatively, a new plan could be devised and implemented.

However, time is of the essence as small businesses are struggling, and stakeholder feedback indicated that many are on the verge of insolvency. In the face of what many small business owners described as an "emergency," it's crucial that DTI immediately focus on the needs of the small business owners on Kansas Avenue, from marketing to activations to filling vacant spaces.

It came as a surprise to learn that DTI was not only in charge of downtown, but also coordinating Riverfront planning and considering expansion into NOTO. Some focus group participants who were unsure how to describe DTI in recent years talked about its focus on the River and NOTO, while not mentioning downtown. While the Riverfront plan offers exciting and engaging possibilities to revitalize downtown and NOTO, this must not become part of DTI's focus. The Riverfront is a massive undertaking involving multiple agencies, and DTI does not possess the human or financial resources to guide the process while simultaneously reinvigorating the core. In attempting to do so, the core will become neglected at a crucial time for struggling businesses.

Like the Riverfront, NOTO provides an aspirational engagement area, but efforts to strengthen the core will again be hampered by looking across the river. Kansas Avenue must be reinvigorated and activated with all possible resources before DTI looks to either expand across the river or lead what could be a decades-long project on the Riverfront, which may be better housed in another part of the Greater Topeka Partnership, such as in Go Topeka. Within the Partnership, downtown could still play an important role on riverfront planning, but without needing to devote significant resources as a project lead.

Similarly in NOTO, there are significant opportunities to build a strong, collaborative relationship that strengthens both downtown and NOTO, and builds on their success in creating an identity that attracts vibrancy. Nevertheless, even if NOTO leadership might be ready to begin conversations about district expansion, DTI should take a cautious approach to ensure that, in the long term, it can provide measurable additional resources to NOTO without pulling resources from the downtown core. Greater Topeka Partnership's organizational structure with its four organizations as well as numerous volunteer committees can make it challenging to say "no" when asked to take on new responsibilities, but downtown requires a singular focus to strengthen its vibrancy across employees, residents, and visitors, and that core becomes the foundation for a stronger city, stronger neighboring districts, and a thriving region.

Place Management Industry – IDA Domains

Downtown Topeka Inc is one of many urban place management organizations across the nation. What distinguishes UPMOs is their singular focus on a specific district within their city, and the mandate to make their downtown or urban district a vibrant place to live, work, and play. How UPMOs accomplish this varies widely, and each organization may focus on different areas of work. IDA has summarized these pillars of work into the following seven domains. A brief description of each domain can be found in the Appendix. As Downtown Topeka Inc considers its focus for the future, consider the work in these domains.

Action 2: Develop a DTI Strategic Plan

Downtown stakeholders shared concerns about a DTI that has disappeared, and stakeholders struggled to clearly articulate the role of the DTI. To clarify and give direction to the DTI, we recommend that DTI create a multi-year (2-5 years) strategic plan, aligned with Momentum 2027. This work should be conducted by a third-party consultant with the goal of completion by the end of the first quarter of 2025.

<u>The strategic plan will have several components:</u>

Board Development – clear expectations for board membership, leadership and engagement with the DTI team. One of the specific items we heard discussed was Board terms; are they beneficial in this time in Downtown Topeka's development, are they potentially excluding members that could be helpful? If not serving on the Board, how are individuals purposefully engaged that may be term limited?

Organization – confirmation of mission and core values, identification of driving priorities and supporting strategies, and a corresponding organizational chart.

The Greater Wichita Partnership is affiliated with Downtown Wichita, and they jointly utilize an instrument known as the OFAA. What is it that we ***own, facilitate, advocate*** and ***avoid?*** The OFAA provides a guiding principle (and guardrails) for each organization's operations. Note that

the term avoid does not mean it is not addressed, but that it is directed to the community organization best positioned to address the opportunity/challenge. It is also a helpful instrument to determine what may need to be celebrated and sunset in order to achieve a new initiative that will further advance the development of downtown or the region, and to delineate what Downtown Topeka Inc focuses on versus the rest of the Greater Topeka Partnership.

Fiscal – clearly defining the organization's priorities and strategies will help provide an understanding of the realistic financial resources the organization requires to be successful. This process should also explore avenues to increase the organization's sustainability. While the Partnership model is beneficial to sharing resources, we were taken aback by the fact that the BID assessment was only about $200,000 while in many other place management organizations this assessment accounts for the largest share of the organization's funding.

To assist in increasing the financial resources of Downtown Topeka, it is recommended that during the strategic planning process that the steps to convert the BID from square footage collection to property value collection be determined and executed in a timely manner. Downtown Topeka is extremely under resourced, and this is a plausible avenue to help mitigate the funding gap.

CEO Job Description - Following the strategic planning process, the consultant should assist the Board or designated committee in developing a CEO job description and salary expectations. The description should list the qualities/knowledge/experience the individual needs to successfully implement the strategic plan.

Once defined, it is recommended the organization conduct a national search utilizing a firm with expertise in downtown development. In our experience, these firms have a strength in identifying individuals that may not be actively pursuing a new position, but would consider the right opportunity if it presents itself.

Furthermore, in the hiring process it is recommended that an instrument such as the Birkman Method be utilized to help analyze the individual's capabilities for the position. The firm utilized for the search will typically have an instrument of this nature to assist the hiring process. IDA can provide several firms the operate in this space.

Overall, the goal is to position the DTI as the organization leading downtown's development:

Based on the panel's visit, we believe that DTI would be well-positioned to:

- Be the keeper of the Downtown Master Plan's vision
- Take charge of Downtown Master Plan implementation
- Maintain current market data (residential, commercial, hospitality and retail)
- Market and communicate the downtown's vision and assets
- Maintain a clean and safe downtown environment
- Produce viable events to market downtown

- Proactively pursue private sector investment (residential, commercial, hospitality and retail) to achieve greater density
    - This includes a variety of downtown commercial uses as well as housing
- Serve as a convener and collaborator
- Serve as a liaison on behalf of the private sector
- Work diligently with the public sector to strategically invest to serve as a catalyst for private sector investment

Key Considerations for Internal DTI/GTP Model

Following clarification of GTP resources and which place management pillars of work DTI and its Executive Director will focus on, it's critical to establish positions for DTI exclusively dedicated to downtown marketing/communications and events.

While there is an opportunity to leverage the foundation's plaza event staff to execute both large and small activations across downtown with DTI leadership (more on this below), a dedicated DTI marketing/communications coordinator is needed ASAP to meet the mission and demands of its stakeholders. This immediate need was made clear throughout interviews at every level, from major property owners to small retailers, who felt that no one knows what's happening downtown, including themselves who don't know when or what events are happening. Ideally, this position would report directly to the DTI Executive Director due to the specialized nature and subject matter expertise of downtown communications.

Due to the unique shared services model of GTP, it's possible this position could be fulfilled within its overall communications team; however, it's crucial the position be dedicated exclusively to DTI work and not pulled into broader GTP functions. There is a significant workload for this position to manage with the DTI/GTP team. Clarity of reporting structure is equally important for both staff and the DTI Board to function at their highest capacity.

A dedicated DTI events person could focus on "tactical urbanism," which simply means doing smaller event activations, more cheaply, more often. Retailers need more events that put foot traffic directly in their businesses, which can be accomplished through more activations on the exquisitely streetscaped sidewalks downtown. These smaller events, which could include pop-up retail kiosks, temporary parklets, dog/pet-themed events, help to create more day-to-day vibrancy downtown, and could coax more employees to stay downtown after work. Larger festivals, like Alternating Currents in the Quad Cities, can be developed to make the businesses themselves venues for arts and entertainment, further building foot traffic. This can be done in tandem while using Evergy Plaza for headlining acts and other outdoor stages adjacent to key businesses.

Big or small, the mission of events should be to build revenue for businesses, build foot traffic, and build confidence in the vitality of downtown. "Party for a purpose" is a great mantra to avoid the habit of hosting events that do not serve the core mission and goals set by the DTI Board.

Concerts in local businesses for Alternating Currents in the Quad Cities

Action 3: Clarify DTI Organizational Governance and Collaboration Opportunities

The relationship between the Greater Topeka Partnership and Downtown Topeka Inc. is already yielding benefits. As a result of the relationship, resources of the Partnership may assist in furthering the economic development of Downtown Topeka due to a healthy/vibrant Downtown contributing to the overarching development of the region. However, the value of this model needs to be more clearly communicated with greater transparency to ensure that the value of the model is fully understood.

For instance, it's clear the GTP Economic Development team is highly talented and keenly aware of downtown projects, even going so far as currently investing in key downtown projects. The blighted 800 block is a great opportunity for the GTP Team to partner with DTI to help identify the funding gap and work with the property owner to expedite renovation of these key buildings. The ability to leverage the Economic Development team downtown more frequently and more strategically is a major and unique advantage for DTI that will show greater value of the GTP model, particularly with a new and experienced Executive Director.

In addition, there is an immediate opportunity to leverage the staff of Evergy Plaza to also function as the staff responsible for programming downtown-wide event activations. Furthermore, the Downtown Topeka Foundation owns the Plaza however, it was clear key Board members did not fully understand the mission of the foundation extended beyond the plaza, or its legal ties to DTI. Visit Topeka also did incredible work assisting funding of the plaza, but there did not appear to be an understanding for how rare that investment is nationwide. Educating the DTI Board on all facets of funding sources and uses that GTP has leveraged downtown will be helpful to build greater trust and effectiveness.

Through its strategic planning process, it's critical the DTI Board contemplate how it realigns its own interests with that of the broader GTP organization. Place Management is its own industry just like that of the Chamber, Destination Marketing, and Economic Development teams. There are significant opportunities that could be leveraged once DTI is aligned, funded, and staffed as strategically as the other GTP verticals. GTP is a powerful regional model worth developing further to serve downtown, and as a result, for downtown to better serve its city and region.

APPENDIX

IDA Resources

Several recent IDA publications provide case studies and examples on strategic planning, investing downtown, bold placemaking, and more in the Knowledge Center. A sample are below:

Strategic Planning for Your Organization (Webinar)

Strategic Visioning & Work Plan Management (Webinar)

Strategic Planning for Organizational Development & District Success (Conference PPT)

Investing Downtown (Report) and Investing Downtown (Webinar)

Bold Placemaking (Report)

IDA Place Management Domains of Practice Descriptions

Leadership Development

Leadership is the ability to positively influence those over whom we have no authority. Successful urban place management begins with successful leadership that inspires trust, inclusivity and vision. The place manager inspires a culture of leadership and vision that permeates the organization. In addition, they assume a leadership role in creating a long-term strategic plan for a managed place while building an internal team focused on implementing and promoting the mission, values and objectives of that plan. The urban place manager must build meaningful relationships with various stakeholders including, but not limited to, board members, property owners, nonprofit partners, government officials, residents and business owners. Place managers are proactive, industrious and creative community leaders.

Organizational Management

Place management harnesses and captures the value and growth potential that unique places have. It is the role of the place manager to uphold the strategic plan, implementing a sustainable revenue stream, working within the confines of local and state legislation, establishing and maintaining various taxing and levy structures, and managing a diverse and inclusive staff. Place managers focus on consensus building and negotiating to effectively manage relationships and solve complex place-based problems.

Economic Development

A primary objective for place managers is fostering a healthy, sustainable, diverse and prosperous economy for the managed place. The place manager collaborates and works closely with various levels of local and regional economic development organizations, developers, real estate brokers, private firms, philanthropic foundations, destination management organizations,

non-profits, and state and federal government agencies, while representing the specific and unique needs, challenges and trends of the managed place.

Additionally, the place manager will work to recruit and retain businesses, conduct market research, encourage a strong local workforce, maintain a diverse mix of commercial and residential development, and facilitate a built environment that is accessible for all users to live, work, play, visit and invest.

Policy and Advocacy

The urban place manager advocates for resources and policy in support of the successful management of equitable and inclusive urban places. Ensuring the success of a managed place requires identifying and implementing the appropriate policies representing the values, mission, and objectives of a place's strategic plan. While seeking to maximize a user's experience within a place, the urban place manager acts as a convener and facilitator for various stakeholders including, the private sector, local and regional government, community organizations, and everyone who interacts with the place. The place manager is tasked with the ability to win the trust and confidence of a diverse group of stakeholders, understand the issues confronting the urban district from a multitude of perspectives, and manage complex partnerships to focus on the district's issues, projects and initiatives.

Public Space Management and Operations

Operations of a place requires the daily management of the physical space, whether publicly or privately owned, that encompasses cleaning, beautification, wayfinding, infrastructure maintenance, outreach, green space, and parking. Place managers address both the actual and perceived safety and security issues of a place by providing services, outreach and facilities. Place managers foster relationships with local and regional providers to share resources and information with the goal of cultivating safe and vibrant communities. Clean and safe teams have evolved within some districts to include engagement and intervention for those in need within our urban places.

Planning, Design and Infrastructure

The urban place manager emphasizes efforts on the built environment because of the significant impacts they have on the quality of life and one's authentic experience of a place. Every place is different; therefore, place management strategies should respond to a myriad of place-based identifiers including, the place's specific scale, status, culture, climate, community vision, goals, and mission, keeping at the forefront considerations of sustainability and resilience.

Through numerous approaches, such as land and real estate development, zoning and land-use, streetscape improvements, transit-oriented development, multi-modal connections, sustainable infrastructure, attainable housing initiatives and historic preservation among others, place managers enhance the quality of life for all stakeholders of a place.

Marketing, Communications and Events

Place managers narrate and communicate the identity and outward facing mission of the place to residents, tourists, businesses, and other stakeholder groups, thereby communicating the place's unique brand. By expressing the identity of the place, the brand should invoke a sense of place, leaving individuals with the intangible feelings that one gets when engaging with the authenticity of the place.

The brand is used to market the place to these various stakeholder groups, attracting and inviting them to live, work, play and invest in the place. A diversity of tactics are used to market a place ranging from events, messaging, online engagement, street-level activation and more.