

**CITY OF ROCK ISLAND  
CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION  
November 14, 2022 - 5:00 p.m.**

**City Council Chambers, City Hall, 3rd Floor  
1528 Third Avenue, Rock Island, IL**

11/14/2022 - Minutes

**CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Thoms called the meeting to order at 5:00 and welcomed everyone.

**THIS MEETING WILL BE CONDUCTED BY AUDIO AND VIDEO CONFERENCE WITHOUT A PHYSICALLY PRESENT QUORUM OF THE ROCK ISLAND CITY COUNCIL DUE TO THE DISASTER DECLARATION ISSUED BY GOVERNOR PRITZKER.**

**ROLL CALL**

Mayor Thoms asked City Clerk Samantha Gange to call the roll.

Present: Alderpersons Moses Robinson, Randy Hurt, Judith Gilbert, Jenni Swanson, Dylan Parker, Mark Poulos, Bill Healy, and Mayor Mike Thoms.

Absent: None.

Staff: City Manager Todd Thompson, City Attorney Dave Morrison, City Clerk Samantha Gange, and other City staff.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

Mayor Thoms asked if anyone in the public or virtually wished to speak.

Rock Island downtown resident Robert Burke addressed Council. He said he wished to speak in opposition to the Special Service Area proposal for the downtown area. He noted a correction to a comment he made at a previous City Council meeting noting that the regressive tax is one that does not take other factors into account and burdens everyone equally, but not equitably. He noted that the tax will affect the poorest people in the area, but a local large business was able to select their rate and also decide the allocation of the money.

Mr. Burke said the exclusion of renters from the conversation is unjust considering the socioeconomics of the area. He said by doing the minimum public engagement, the City is leaving out the voices that will be impacted the most severely. He said the City has gone in the opposite direction with regards to neighborhood planning based on previously completed reports in 2013 and 2015, where locally-led efforts were suggested. He asked that Council hold this proposal and start over with the right people involved, and focus on building up neighborhood associations.

Downtown business owner and Rock Island resident Nicole Watson-Lam addressed Council. She said her original intent in speaking was to express how the SSA was necessary as both a stakeholder and resident. She noted that although the opposition has key points, they are misinformed, as the proposal was formed over two years, and was not behind closed doors. She said it was her understanding that there were specific guidelines for the proposal formation, and in hindsight should have reached out to renters earlier. They did, however, meet the guidelines to come before Council, and there was no malice or intention to deceive. She said the downtown needs to move forward, as the older plans have not bore results. If there are people like herself that wish to invest dollars to see if the SSA will work, Council should be in favor of it.

Jack Cullen, Downtown Rock Island Director for the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce, addressed Council. He said positive action requires positive vision, and Council and staff deserve praise for considering the SSA proposal for revitalizing the downtown area. He said the SSA is a vehicle to move everyone in the same positive direction. He noted that concerns are being heard, and the proposal is a mechanism to address them.

Mr. Cullen discussed the funding streams for the SSA, stating that it is only one source that would support the work of the place management organization along with grants and partnerships. He added that the budget was a draft only, and based on calls for services and activities by downtown stakeholders. Every dollar gathered through the SSA would be returned downtown via programs, services, and capital improvements. He said the proposal calls for a five-year duration of the SSA, and results will be measured regularly through stakeholders, and adjustments can be made. He added that the City has more money now than in a generation to make improvements and investments in the downtown, and the timing is currently good to bring an SSA into action.

Rock Island resident and President of the local Association of General Contractors Steve Tondi addressed Council. He said his residence is right on the end of the downtown district area that would be serviced by the SSA. As a not-for-profit, the Association would not benefit directly from the SSA. He noted he has been a member of the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce for 27 years, and has seen proposals like this work in other proximate municipalities. He said he cannot identify a downside to the proposal, and it would give the City an opportunity to recruit and keep businesses. He encouraged everyone to support the proposal.

Rock Island property owner Julia Ware addressed Council. She said her goal is to make things better for her renters, and is willing to be a part of the SSA to do so. She added that residents were not meant to be excluded, but rather improve the downtown for all. She said she has never seen this type of program fail in her experience, and encouraged Council to give it a chance.

Downtown Rock Island property owner Katie Riley addressed Council virtually and stated her support for the SSA proposal. She said investment is necessary to draw positive things in the City, and other local municipalities that currently have SSAs are ahead of Rock Island in many ways.

Downtown Rock Island property owner Patrick Sallee addressed Council. He has previously received funding assistance from the City and the Development Association of Rock Island (DARI) in the form of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds, façade funds, grants, and low-interest loans. He said public-private partnerships work, and he is in support of the SSA. He noted that the return on the investment of the SSA is worth the cost.

Rock Island resident Stephanie Nunez addressed Council virtually. She directed people to the City website, where information on progress regarding the Downtown Steering Committee meetings is located. She said the minutes of those meetings show the research involved in the SSA process.

Aldersperson Gilbert noted that the following day begins the official 60-day objection phase of the SSA process, which is required by state statute, ending on January 13, 2023. She noted that two classes of people are able to object, with one being property owners and the other being registered voters residing in the proposed SSA. Objections need to be returned to the County or City Clerk by the aforementioned end date, and it would take 51 percent of property owners and 51 percent of registered voters signing objection petitions to successfully stop the SSA process for two years.

**MAYOR THOMS WILL CLOSE THE STUDY SESSION MEETING AND OPEN THE CONTINUATION OF A PUBLIC HEARING FOR PUBLIC INPUT ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SPECIAL SERVICES AREA (SSA) IN DOWNTOWN ROCK ISLAND.**

Mayor Thoms closed the Public Hearing and reconvened the regular meeting to entertain a motion.

City Attorney Dave Morrison noted that language needed to be included that this would be the final Public Hearing regarding the SSA proposal.

**MOTION:**

Aldersperson Parker moved to close the Public Hearing and reconvene the Study Session; Aldersperson Swanson seconded.

Mr. Morrison reiterated that language needed to be included in the motion that this would be the final Public Hearing regarding the SSA proposal.

Aldersperson Swanson and Aldersperson Parker withdrew their motions.

**MOTION:**

Aldersperson Parker moved to adjourn the final Public Hearing and reconvene the Study Session meeting; Aldersperson Swanson seconded.

**VOTE:**

Motion passed on a 7-0-0 roll call vote. Aye: Swanson, Parker, Poulos, Healy, Robinson, Hurt, and Gilbert. Nay: None. Absent: None.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM PRESENTATION**

Economic Development Manager Tarah Sipes addressed Council. She said she wished to relay the same base of information to not just elected officials, but also City residents, as well as discuss economic development strategy. She said the definition of economic development is creating the conditions for economic growth and improved quality of life by expanding the capacity of individuals, businesses, and communities to maximize the use of talents and skills to support innovation, job creation, and private investment.

Ms. Sipes discussed why communities invest in economic development and partnerships to

bring new resources to residents and businesses. Best practices include asset-based community development, and development that is community-driven. These strategies focus on positives and strengths in the community. She noted there are many local, state, and national organizations working to help Rock Island, and explained the various aspects of what goes into economic development.

Ms. Sipes introduced Denise Bulat, Executive Director of the Bi-State Regional Commission. Ms. Bulat said their organization does create a comprehensive economic development strategy and intersects with infrastructure and quality of life matters. This helps them come up with plans that do not usurp those of municipalities. They do not perform all activities of economic development, but instead rely on other partners and organizations to provide information and do their part. She said Bi-State also works through the Economic Development Administration to provide revolving loan funds and gap financing to businesses that retain or create jobs. The gap financing is provided at a lower interest rate for 4 to 10 years depending on the purpose. She noted some loan projects in the Rock Island area that have been affected, including the Small Hands Big Hearts childcare facility. Ms. Sipes added that these loans can help projects stay viable.

Ms. Sipes introduced Liz Tallman, Director of the Development Association of Rock Island (DARI). Ms. Tallman noted the three-year agreement between DARI and the City that was signed in 2020. Ms. Tallman said their focus has been on City-wide development and being a provider of many services for local businesses. She reviewed previously discussed DARI workplan program areas, which were based on Council goals at the time of development. She said the first task for DARI in the partnership was to get information and financial resources to local businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic through the FORWARD online platform. This platform has allowed DARI to develop a business directory for the City, of which there are currently details for more than 850 local businesses. She noted that the DARI team is looking toward the next steps and strategies on what can be done with the collected data.

Ms. Tallman said DARI is currently working on or managing 83 projects within the City. This includes various events for which they are able to get the word out regarding sites for future development in the City. She said DARI is not involved directly with housing, but does promote housing programs and resources relating to quality of life in the City, such as the Live-Work Rock Island Program. She also discussed the Why Rock Island campaign during the past year, which produced two scholarships for Rock Island High School students. DARI has also hired MediaLink to assist with the next generation of communication tools. Ms. Tallman discussed a recent project that brought many different organizations together to assist a local business with growth.

Ms. Sipes introduced Julie Forsythe, Senior Vice President of Business and Economic Growth for the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce. Ms. Forsythe discussed the business and economic growth activities of the Chamber, noting they do outreach for business attraction, retention, and expansion, market the region, and generate leads. She said the Chamber's service area extends beyond Rock Island County to Henry, Mercer, Scott, Muscatine, and Clinton counties in the greater Quad Cities region. She added that the Chamber informs on a national stage about the Quad Cities and its' businesses, focused on specific targets within the five primary industries. Once leads are generated, they work with site selectors for business relocation or expansion purposes.

Ms. Forsythe discussed the stages of project management through the Chamber of Commerce, noting that generated leads are shared with local partners to develop the most competitive options possible in the Quad Cities area. She noted the importance of having detailed site data on their website, as site selectors will utilize that first to determine compatibility before contacting the Chamber. She said they work with public sector partners and have conversations with actual businesses to ensure retention and expansion in the area.

Ms. Sipes noted that the area is known for having a diversified metro economy as well as having economic growth, with five primary industries. These include advanced metals and manufacturing, agricultural innovation and food, logistics, defense, and corporate operations and support services. She said knowing this information is important to identify target industries as it pertains to economic retention, growth, and support.

Ms. Sipes discussed the City's economic development strategy. The goals include retaining existing Rock Island businesses and helping them grow, looking for new opportunities to complement the City's strengths, and searching for businesses that fit the area and provide mutual benefits. Sustainable development is the ultimate goal to achieve.

**MOTION TO ADJOURN.**

MOTION:

Aldersperson Gilbert moved to adjourn; Aldersperson Swanson seconded.

VOTE:

Motion passed on a 7-0-0 roll call vote. Aye: Swanson, Parker, Poulos, Healy, Robinson, Hurt, and Gilbert. Nay: None. Absent: None.

The meeting adjourned at 6:28 p.m.



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Josh Adams, Deputy City Clerk