

City reviews funding for business booster program



Michael Rose, Statesman Journal 8:08 a.m. PDT May 27, 2014



(Photo: TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ / Statesman, TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ / Statesman Journal)

The city's attempt to promote downtown business with hanging flower baskets, a sidewalk cleanup crew and special events will face critics Tuesday at a public hearing.

Salem City Council will take testimony about continuing, or dissolving, the Downtown Economic Improvement District. The EID provides money for downtown promotions and other programs to make the area more inviting to shoppers.

Downtown property owners pay assessments, totaling about \$200,000 annually, to support the EID. Roughly 16 months ago the city took over administration of the EID after terminating a contract with Salem Downtown Partnership, a private group.

Salem City Manager Linda Norris and a 16-member steering committee have since directed the use of EID money. Downtown promotions, such as First Wednesday, have continued under the city-manager led group. The Downtown Clean Team, a sidewalk cleanup crew, was formed to spruce up the area.

If the EID is killed, marketing and beautification programs would fade away by the end of summer, Norris said.

But some downtown property owners have objected to the city's oversight of EID. Critics contend the city's marketing efforts are ineffective and not worth the cost of the assessment.

City ordinances mandate that the EID must be re-authorized by city council every three years. And property owners have means to end what a city report calls "self-imposed taxation."

If the city receives written objections from downtown property owners on which more than 33 percent of the assessment is levied, then the assessment cannot be levied.

Commercial building owners within the EID pay an annual assessment equivalent to 7 cents per square foot of real property holdings. Owners of unimproved property and parking lots pay 2 cents per square foot.

In 2008, Salem City Council agreed to create the EID. Go Downtown Salem was the first group awarded a contract to use the EID money for downtown promotions.

By fall 2011, Go Downtown lost the contract to Salem Downtown Partnership. It held the contract for about one year before the city manager and her steering committee took charge and began directing the use of EID funds.

In other city business:

Salem City Council also will take public testimony about a planning commission decision to change zoning on property at 2630 Church Street NE.

Neighbors have complained that the property, a former nursing home converted into a boarding house, has become a magnet for crime. The zoning change would allow the facility to legally operate as a boarding house.

Neighbors want the planning commission's decision to be overturned.

A city staff report says police have "responded to over 140 calls and made 23 arrests at the site in the past two years."

The staff report, however, also says: "If properly managed, there is no evidence that crime is inherent in room and board facilities."

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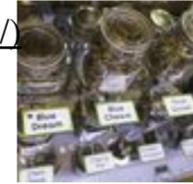
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