

Downtown resentments, infighting trump Salem's needs

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(Photo: Thomas Patterson / Statesman)

The angry accusations directed at Salem's city manager and City Council on Tuesday were coarse and divisive:

"Dirty politics."

"The city came in and stole our money."

"I want to make it very clear the failure tonight is on your head, not ours."

Critics of the Salem Downtown Economic Improvement District were imprudently but giddily celebrating its demise at the City Council meeting. Under state law, enough downtown property owners had opposed the EID that the council was barred from continuing it.



Salem City Council learned in its Tuesday public meeting that the Economic Improvement District, or EID, no longer had a sufficient number of downtown property owners' support.

The EID had been formed to make downtown Salem more attractive, market it better and, as critics fondly pointed out, build a unified voice in civic affairs.

Property owners paid a small annual assessment to finance the EID. With the failure of two different downtown organizations – run by opposing factions – City Manager Linda Norris had taken over management of the EID funds a year ago.

It was a thankless task, given downtown's infighting, but Norris has done her best.

Improvements may have started slowly, but they now range from the colorful flower baskets to more consistent cleaning, litter pick-up and leaf removal. However, critics complain that First Wednesday and other promotions have not gone as well.

In addition, there is a lot of misinformation going around, such as the claim that only a couple of people on the city manager's downtown advisory committee represented properties that paid the EID assessment. Actually, eight people represent properties that would have paid the next round of the annual EID assessment.

Mayor Anna Peterson, Norris and city councilors kept their cool at Tuesday's hearing despite the accusations hurled by some critics. Peterson gave all interested people the opportunity to speak, regardless of whether they had officially signed up to testify.

Longtime Salem businessman and resident Paul Gehlar was among those who lamented the loss of funding for downtown improvement. "I think it's a terrible loss that we've now had three successive failures of how to run an EID in downtown Salem," he said. "It just really is devastating to me that it hasn't worked."

The EID assessment had been projected to raise \$235,000 for downtown activities next year. But much of the downtown acrimony has its roots in which faction or group would control downtown promotion and the related budget. Too often, pragmatic collaboration has taken a back seat to "we're right so do it our way."

Some speakers on Tuesday accused the city of "outright thievery" because it took over management of the EID money. That is a bogus accusation, as well as a dangerous one in our litigious society. The city always has been ultimately responsible for the finances. Every dollar has been meticulously tracked under the city's management, with that information readily available to the public.

Thus, it was shortsighted for supporters of the previous EID manager, the Salem Downtown Partnership, to treat the EID as a referendum on city management.

"The vote today, doing away with the EID, is not a vote against flower baskets and First Wednesday. It's a vote against essentially an authoritarian takeover of what was an independent, democratic downtown organization by the city manager and you guys, and you just let it happen," Brian Hines told the City Council, adding that he was giddy about the evening.

[The question left in most people's minds was, What now? \(/story/opinion/editorials/2014/05/24/popular-downtown-services-risk-salem/9542071/\)](/story/opinion/editorials/2014/05/24/popular-downtown-services-risk-salem/9542071/)

The downtown Clean Team and other programs won't end immediately. Norris and her advisory committee have spent the EID money judiciously, and enough remains to finance scaled-back services for a few months.

But for the long term, it's a sad commentary on Salem that festering wounds and lingering resentments trumped having a cleaner, nice downtown.

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Downtown resentments, infighting trump Salem's needs

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