



**Downtown Somerville Alliance, Inc.  
December 11, 2023, Meeting Minutes  
6:00 PM - In-Person Office Evolution**

Mike Kerwin called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm on December 11, 2023.

In the absence of Kevin Sluka, Natalie Pineiro conducted roll call the following Board Members were present:

Present: RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre

Late: Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

Absent: Alison Massick

Excused:

**Approval of Meeting Minutes**

Michael Kerwin Stated that since we get money from government, he thinks it is important that the org. be transparent. One of the ways we can be transparent is staying up to date on the minutes and agenda. So, if anyone has any questions about what we're up to, they can go on the website and pull those directly.

Mike wants to make sure that we're up to date by the next meeting.

Natalie Advised that all of the meeting agendas are up to date on the website and that all but September Minutes will be up to date after the current meeting.

***Vote to Approve October and November 2023 Meeting Minutes***

MOTION: Chas Stevens

SECOND: RanD Pitts

Vote to Accept:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre

**Nay:** None **Recuse:** None **Abstain:** None

**Chairman Remarks**

Mike Kerwin commented on the buzz around town commencing the Holiday Season. He commended the Firemen's Lights Parade and noted that we will be ending the year on a high

note. Over the Holidays he would like to work on Finalizing our goals/objectives for the new year.

He mentioned that next year we can anticipate continued redevelopment and investment in downtown Somerville and that the second/latest phase of the Edgewood project is scheduled for completion June or July. And even though it's not in the district, right around the same time the emergency services complex on Gaston Ave will also be completed in 2024.

These things considered; he reiterated that 2024 promises to be a big year.

He took the moment to thank Iris and Alison for their service to the Board.

Iris commented that it has been a pleasure to serve and that she has grown immensely thanks to the opportunity.

### **Executive Directors Report**

Natalie called attention to the weekly reports from CDS that are included in the Board Packet from 11/18 – 12/9. They have been working on a lot of leaf pickup/blowing. DSA Hired a supplemental Landscaper to assist with leaf removal.

Natalie commented that since CDS hired Dwayne as a supervisor, that there has been a marked improvement in cleanliness in the district.

Mike Kerwin suggested that we make a note of that since we've not hesitated to criticize them when there is a lack of service.

Rick St. Pierre asked to put on the record that Dwane and Shanice have upped the game and hit has made a big difference. As we look to change the Clean/Safe contract or bring on a new vendor, they are both a great asset to the district.

RanD Pitts asked if property/business owners are being notified/cited for instances of illegal dumping in the district.

Natalie advised that a formal round of notifications has not gone out, however when CDS finds illegal dumping, they try and go through the garbage to see who it belongs to they do have like a standard form notice that they'll leave.

She continued that as far as the **borough** actually notifying property owners or residents that are doing the dumping, she recommends doing another formal round from the borough.

Ed Rebenack asked if the dumping has improved, worsened or stayed the same?

Natalie advised that she believes it has gotten worse. She mentioned that together with the Borough they put a dumpster in the back of lot four to try and give CDS place to put any overflow garbage. It seems that while the situation has improved because CDS can more efficiently walking the street and pick up any trash bags that aren't picked up by the garbage collector, residential tenants and business owners continue to put out even more garbage.

She mentioned that her and Kevin spoke earlier in the week about working with CDS or another company to try and alleviate some of the overflow trash collection in order to remove

the dumpster from Lot four. She mentioned that CDS is a certified garbage hauler. But the problem with that is that obviously that would change the price of our contract with them because we are adding a new, expensive service.

The other option is driving overflow garbage directly to DPW, but the DSA doesn't have an in-house truck that can be used to do that. The plan is to meet with DPW as we move into 2024 to rediscuss the scope of work that we're going to be hiring our cleaning company to do.

Kevin Sluka mentioned that garbage collection has been a borough-wide problem this month. He attributes it to the fact that it is getting dark earlier. They have notices garbage dumped in front of Borough Hall, the Wallace House etc.

Rick St. Pierre commented that he we have to engage the Somerset County Health Department. They have a lot more services and a lot more employees for this particular issue. He doesn't believe we're engaging to enforce the responsibilities of business and property owners.

## **A. Old Business**

### **a. Update on Budget Presentation to Council and Budget Process**

#### **Budget:**

Natalie reiterated that the budget was presented to the DSA board at the November meeting and then to the Borough Council at their December 4<sup>th</sup> meeting.

We are now in a 28-day waiting period before the DSA can hold a Public Meeting and then – provided no major changes are to be made – the organization could then formally vote to adopt the budget at the January meeting.

Prior to jumping into the next agenda item, Natalie gave some statistics that she was able to glean from Placer AI? She mentioned that in the special improvement district, we had 4.6 million visits in the past 12 months.

The average dwell time in the district was 111 minutes.

The district is also up 46.3% in visits over three years and up 16.1% over two years.

### **b. Update on Holiday Items: Free Parking, Jubilee/Tree Lighting**

### **c. Review SOW for 2024 Grant writing Services**

Scope of work for grant writing services for 2024 from Greener by Design.

Natalie advised that Greener has given us a not to exceed budget of \$20,000 which includes the initial round of grant research.

She mentioned that the DSA has worked with Greener by Design to get the grants that were received from both the county for the Robeson Grant and the State Tourism Office to assist with the Marketing of Jazz Fest.

She advised that she met with their leadership team and discussed the DSA's goals. Part of the objectives discussed were pursuing grant funding for our public art program with a focus on supporting the Paul Robeson sculpture; funds to implement the Streetscape capital plan; funds for further strategic planning for the DSA, and also General Operating Support as a way to supplement the SID assessment.

The organization will charge the DSA a flat rate for the grant research and then charge us hourly thereafter for the actual grant writing services.

Rick Requested clarification on what was spent in calendar year 2023 considering we did not get any grants for the 2024 grant cycle.

Mike Kerwin commented that our relationship with Greener should not be a loss leader. But the fact that they have a positive track record of funding from two years ago is good. He thinks the momentum we're on now plus the streetscape plan gives them the tools they need to find significant grants.

Natalie advised that the DSA paid them less than \$5,000 in 2023.

***Vote to approve***

MOTION: RanD Pitts

SECOND: Chas Stevens

Vote to Approve:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** none **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

***d. Update on Assistant Downtown Manager Position***

Natalie highlighted that we received a number of resumes for the ADM position. She did eight interviews on her own and narrowed that down to a top three group of candidates, two of which were no shows for their interviews.

The Final candidate was interviewed by Natalie, Chas and Mike and they had a wonderful meeting with her. Her resume was included in the meeting packet and will be further discussed during the executive session.

***e. Update on Effort to Support Performing Arts Center in Downtown Somerville***

Update on our effort to support bringing the art center to downtown Somerville. At the November meeting the Board talked about the public information session held by the Borough on the East Main St. Redevelopment Plan and the overwhelming support to bring an art center downtown.

At the meeting the Board talked about pursuing a feasibility study to support the Borough's efforts in this area, as well as supporting with additional data

collection and even using the DSA grant writer to support the effort as well.

In Natalie's conversation with Greener by Design, they actually mentioned Asm. Jim Kennedy, who she is familiar with from her time in Union County. Kennedy is the brain behind the Union County Performing Arts Center. She is reaching out to him for a meeting to discuss this initiative and get some feedback on who to engage for a feasibility study.

## **B. New Business**

### **a. Recommendations from Nomination Committee**

The nomination committee met November 30th to discuss the group of resumes that was received to fill the DSA board vacancies. Between 10 and 12 resumes were received.

Chas elaborated on the process undertaken during the nomination committee meeting and highlighted the qualifications of the three candidates for the seats:

Tania Althoff - recommended for a three-year term, to fill the seat of the Somerville Resident (outside the SID)

Natalia Kleyman – recommended for a three-year term, to fill a SID Business/Property Owner/Resident seat.

Andrianna Popowych – recommended to fill the one-year unexpired term, representing property owner and developer DGM Management, to fill a SID Business/Property Owner/Resident seat.

#### ***Vote to approve***

MOTION: Chas Stevens

SECOND: Michael Kerwin

Vote to Approve:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** none **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

### **b. Discussion on Dates/Location for Nomination Committee Meeting**

Natalie mentioned that we really had a wonderful experience at Village last year, but in the spirit of moving things around the district a couple of locations came to mind.

Fresh Restorations:

Capacity is approx. 45. Utilize their space and cater in from any of our restaurants downtown.

Savor:  
Since we've not done any events there as of yet.

Alfonso's:  
They had to do significant repairs this year. Bringing the meeting their way might be a good way to drive add'l business to their establishment.

And so, considering that the beginning of January is kind of the tail end of the retail holiday season and people are still getting in some other holiday dinners and doing a lot of purchasing and returns, we figured that, you know, a good time to, you know, potentially do this would be closer to the end of January.

Board reached consensus to host the meeting at Alfonso's on Jan 29<sup>th</sup>.

### **C. Other New Business**

- a. RanD Pitts Commended Rick St. Pierre and Joe Clancy for fixing the lighting in the Giardina Walkway. He commented on its beauty and also commented that it feels much safer. Rick mentioned that it also makes that walkway more "Instagrammable."
- b. Rick Provided an update on the Reginal Center Partnership meeting and the 2024 Challenge Grant. Advised that Somerville presented the theme of signage, wayfinding, tourism etc. If we can have that theme that can facilitate additional digital kiosks for each municipality through the Regional Center

### **D. Finance Reports**

#### **Vote to approve**

MOTION: Rick St. Pierre  
SECOND: Chas Stevens

Vote to Approve:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** none **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

### **E. Payment Authorization**

Natalie commented that a lot the bills for the month are reconciling expenses from small business Saturday and the upcoming, printing, signage and purchases for the holiday Jubilee. She pointed out that the bill for speedpro was quite high this month, but that's because the window covering job that went up in the month of November at a cost of \$7,000.

Natalie mentioned that she is looking forward to doing more window coverings in 2024. There are new business owners that need to be photographed and some

businesses that have changed over that need to get new photos. So, the plan is to start off 2024 getting those done and covering the rest of the vacant windows from Grove St. to Park Ave.

Ed recommended that we reach out to RVCC art program to continue to expand the window covering initiatives.

Kevin requested that Natalie send him all payments for Jobs4Blue

***Vote to approve***

MOTION: Michael Kerwin

SECOND: RanD Pitts

Vote to Approve:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** none **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

**F. Comments from the Public**

Mayor-Elect Brian Gallagher touched on the following during his remarks:

1. Transformation of Downtown Somerville: 20 years ago, downtown Somerville was struggling, with a lack of activity and vacant residences along Division Street.
2. Comprehensive Planning: The city invested two years in planning to determine the future direction for downtown Somerville, resulting in the successful revitalization seen today.
3. Continuation of Investment: During a significant economic downturn, the city maintained its commitment to investment and development to stay ahead of the competition.
4. Upcoming Economic Challenges: Mayor-elect Gallagher foresees potential economic challenges in the coming years but believes the city is well-positioned to overcome them.
5. Impact of COVID-19: The pandemic had a significant impact on downtown, but the city's strong business foundation helped mitigate the damage.
6. Ongoing Challenges: Despite the success, there are still challenges at both the borough and district levels.
7. Public Involvement: The public will play a crucial role in shaping the city's future, with their input influencing downtown and the district.
8. Speed of Government: Mayor-elect Gallagher acknowledges the need to address the perceived slowdown in government responsiveness.
9. Master Plan and Redevelopment Plans: These documents need to be updated to reflect the current needs and goals of the city.

10. Focus on Smaller-Scale Development: While large-scale redevelopment has slowed, there's a shift towards smaller-scale infill, rehab, and redevelopment projects.
11. Understanding Council Relationship: The Mayor-elect aims to understand the evolving relationship between the council and his office.
12. Safety and Security: Addressing challenges related to safety and security downtown, especially concerning mental health and addiction issues.
13. Video Surveillance: Proposing increased video surveillance in public areas to address issues such as improper garbage disposal and holding landlords accountable.
14. Resident Engagement: Encouraging new residents to engage with the community, become volunteers, and participate in local committees and commissions.
15. Maintaining Downtown Identity: Emphasizing the importance of preserving downtown Somerville's identity for all residents.
16. Planning for the Future: Collaborating with the Downtown Somerville Alliance Board to determine the next steps and future direction for downtown Somerville.

## **G. Executive Session to Discuss Personnel Matters**

Motion to close public session and enter into Executive Session: Michael Kerwin

SECOND: Chas Stevens:

**Yea:** RanD Pitts, Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** none **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

## **H. Adjournment**

- a. Prior to adjournment Board returned from Executive Session and voted to give Natalie authorization to engage Tiffany Goodman for Assistant Downtown Manager position within budgeted salary range.

### ***Vote to Authorize***

MOTION: Michael Kerwin

SECOND: Chas Stevens

Vote to Approve:

**Yea:** Ed Rebenack, Sejal Sharma, Michael Kerwin, Chas Stevens, Rick St. Pierre, Iris Frank, Kevin Sluka

**Nay:** RanD Pitts **Recuse:** none **Abstain:** none

- b. Michael Kerwin made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:16PM

