

MEETING MINUTES

City of Mesa
Downtown Vision Committee
City Council Lower Level Chambers
57 E. First Street
Mesa, AZ 85201

Date: February 24, 2015

Time: 3:00 P.M.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Jo Wilson, Chair
Marco Meraz
Charles Huellmantel
Steve Chucri
Debby Elliott
Rich Marchant
Lorenzo Perez

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

STAFF PRESENT

Natalie Lewis
Jeff McVay
Sara Sorensen

GUESTS

Vic Linoff
Ron Peters

• **Chair's Call To Order**

Chair Wilson called the February 24, 2015 meeting of the Downtown Vision Committee to order at 3:02 P.M. at 57 E. First Street, City Council Lower Chamber, Mesa, AZ 85201.

• **Approval of Minutes from the January 27, 2015 Committee Meeting Minutes**

Chair Wilson called for a motion to approve the minutes from the meeting held on January 27, 2015.

MOTION: Rich Marchant made a motion to approve the minutes.

SECOND: Debby Elliott

DECISION: Passed unanimously

• **Presentation, discussion and feedback from Mesa Preservation Foundation by Vic Linoff. President and Board Member Ron Peters regarding the downtown history, heritage and development goals and suggestions.**

Mr. Linoff and Mr. Peters presented and shared a binder of historical pictures and information of Downtown Mesa, a newly published walking tour guide and sketch up drawings showing what these historic buildings could look like after restoration, added canopies, with the light rail, streetscapes and spaces between the buildings covering alleys with canopies or glass to emulate Britain and European marketplaces for incubator spaces for artist and innovative businesses.

Mesa was settled in 1878. What little remains of its commercial history is concentrated in a couple of blocks in downtown from Morris to Center Street. If for any reason those commercial buildings are lost we have no history left to tell of how this City evolved. Mesa is larger than Kansas City, Minneapolis, Cleveland and Orlando. Anyone of those other cities that you name has a substantial amount of its history intact. Mesa has very little. We do better with neighborhoods than we do with commercial buildings.

The Preservation Foundation is working with the Mayor, staff and is requesting support of a proposed plan to bring back the historical value of downtown Mesa and surrounding areas. The proposal is a complex two-part project. The first part is the removal of the colonnade, the second would be to create

the historical district. The goal is to recognize these historic buildings and create a commercial historical district. The City can go about that in two ways. One is an ordinance which creates historic districts, a zoning overlay. That would be the first and only commercial district in the City of Mesa. In order to create the district we must be able to showcase the buildings that are there. Regrettably, they are all covered up with the colonnades.

Mr. Peters provided a history of the downtown area study, the connections report from 1995. It was a very intensive community led and directed study. The colonnades were a part of the study. The colonnades are freestanding and can be removed without damaging the facades of the buildings. A cost estimate has been prepared and provided to the City to remove the colonnade and restore the streetscape in the amount of approximately \$450,000 - \$500,000. The property owner's commitment is needed to restore the facade of the buildings to their historical value, add canopies and remove stucco to the original brick.

There are a lot of things in the downtown area that would help to build a really strong economic engine for Mesa that draws a lot of people to the community. One of the major economic engines we have in this community is the city center. If we are going to encourage infill back into the older parts of Mesa it really has to start with downtown. The light rail is in itself good yet troubling. It is going to and is already creating a much greater market interest. This puts historic properties at risk, if people think they can sell their property and development, interests may possibly try to assemble properties. We are arguing that a restored historic district will have relatively higher property values than a comparable new building. The illustrations show how distinctive downtown was with plenty of shade, variations and individual features. It was a dynamic place to be with plenty of people and things to do.

The next step is to have a public meeting and a presentation to all the property owners. The Foundation will share photos of the history and the possibilities after restoration. Discussions are taking place for tax credits and meetings with Flagstaff to talk about their overlay district for their town square and obtain feedback.

Several Board Members provided feedback. Mixed reactions of removal of the colonnades have been heard during the Downtown Vision Committee outreach meetings. The Board inquired what will happen if there is not a unanimous decision. Mr. Linoff advised that it depends on the property owners. Education is a key to provide a better understanding of the value of how these properties will be enhanced with the removal of the colonnade and provide visualization. With the light rail and restoration of these historic buildings we have a huge opportunity for heritage, tourism - it becomes an investment and not a cost.

- **Staff presentation, discuss and direction related to the February 26 open house format, roles and responsibilities.**

Jeff McVay reviewed the open house format, overall timeline and setup that was presented to the Board Members. Mr. McVay requested Board Members to assist in several areas of the open house. Staff has reached out to the community via a news release, several sources of social media, Visit Mesa, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Downtown Mesa Association to announce the Open House. Staff also encouraged the Board Members to post on Facebook, Twitter and spread the word. There is no formal presentation, attendees are welcome to attend at whatever time is appropriate and convenient for their schedule. The meeting will be held at the Benedictine University Community Room, 225 E. Main Street from 5:30 P.M. to 7:30 P.M.

There will be three stations for the attendees to visit.

- The first station will be "History" with a banner that is 15 feet long and it traces Mesa's history from its Incorporation to today. The banner will be interactive so that the attendees can make notes of what a particular point in history meant or means to them.
- The second station will be "Initiatives Underway". This station will have several substations that will incorporate such areas as downtown restaurants, the City Center design proposal, central main plan and form-based codes, plans for downtown holiday 2015, Mesa Arts Center 10th Anniversary, transit-oriented development 101 and light rail update.

- The third station will be “Envision Downtown’s Future”. This station will have a thought bubble and Post-its. There will be questions that participants can respond, provide feedback and thoughts on Post-its.

The attendees will then have the opportunity to provide direct feedback electronically via a survey on laptops.

- **Staff presentation, discussion and feedback on the draft “Community Outreach Dashboard”.**
Natalie Lewis provided and discussed the draft to the Board Members that compiles the feedback into a reference tool. The dashboard has three elements; the group name, their key messages and their common theme contributions. Natalie requested feedback from the Board.

Board Member Marchant noted two items; 1) For the RAIL meeting, add a linear park to connect people to the downtown. Natalie Lewis advised she will add this to the dashboard. 2) Mr. Marchant advised he has heard inquires whether there will be any additional group homes and halfway-houses downtown. Mr. McVay advised the social service facilities that exist are the only ones that will exist, unless the majority of the City Council Members vote for additions. Board Member Huellmantel inquired if the City has control of recycling centers as these tend to be attractive and a source of revenue for certain populations. Jeff McVay advised that the City does have control.

- **Staff presentation, discuss plans and areas of focus for the March 10th facilitated, electronic brainstorming session.**
Natalie Lewis requested that all Board Members attend this two-hour core interactive meeting to pull together their comments and recommendations to create a focal point and key messages to go forward. The City has agreed to fund a facilitator, Doug Griffen of Advanced Strategy Center. Board Member Marchant has advised he will not be able to attend so staff will work with him to find a way for him to participate virtually or offline to be sure his comments and recommendations are incorporated. At the least, Mr. Marchant will join the meeting dialog via conference call. Each board member will have a laptop to type their anonymous comments. An associate from the Advanced Strategy Center will work and create the common themes and narrow things down. Chair Wilson will meet with the facilitator prior to the meeting to prepare the meeting guide.

After the session Natalie Lewis will forward the feedback from the electronic brainstorming to the Board Members to review and finalize recommendations.

- **Staff presentation, discuss and provide direction on an updated Committee calendar and timeline.**
Natalie Lewis reviewed the timeline provided to the Board Members for the balance of February through April. Chair Wilson noted that the City Council presentation could be postponed if the Board needs additional time to prepare. Natalie Lewis will update the meeting announcements.
- **If time allows, hear committee discussion and possible direction to staff or committee assignments relative to: 1) Downtown boundaries; 2) Parking and way finding; 3) Unique and creative development opportunities, particularly transit-oriented development for housing or mixed uses; 4) Restaurant/Bar opportunities and 5) Committee discussion about adding other categories for later discussion and/or follow up by the Committee at future meetings.** In response to this agenda item, Chair Wilson requested feedback from the Boards’ perspectives.

- Board Member Perez stated that he found the community outreach meetings to be very inspiring, hearing of the desire for vibrancy and what Mesa can be. He loved the passion of the Mesa Preservation Group and totally agrees that heritage tourism is an exciting opportunity. He is excited about the education and cultural adversity in downtown Mesa. Mesa has all the pieces and he is excited to see what happens. Chair Wilson inquired if you could be king for a day, if you could do one thing to give Mesa a jump start what would it be? Board Member Perez suggested a full fledge social media campaign and educational program that could be a dedicated resource to let people know what is already here and celebrate existing assets and build from that.

- Board Member Churci would like to see restaurants downtown. He noted that they are celebrations of birthdays, weddings, and special occasions. All the right ingredients are here with great leadership and great staff. The energy and passion is here to develop; however, it is important to do it right.
- Board Member Elliott shared the feeling of excitement and possibilities. The time is now and the energy needs to be harnessed. The students and property owners are becoming excited that Mesa can be what it used to be and pleased with the new and exciting things happening at the Art Center. Debby's word she has chosen for downtown is "compelling".
- Board Member Marchant has heard a lot of opposite opinions for the vision of downtown. Part of the Board's task is to make sure to incorporate what everyone is saying. Also, to concentrate beyond the couple of blocks of downtown, think about the whole area, all the connecting points. It is important to get past and overcome the stigma of downtown.
- Board Member Huellmantel feels a lot of things are great about downtown Mesa. One thing that is not-so-great is getting here. Street improvements are needed to make the journey to downtown more attractive, inviting and exciting. The younger generation lifestyle is evolving; they like to dine, visit the arts, and want unique experiences. The homeless is a big issue and it may work itself out. It will take time to expand and change perceptions and images. Be prepared when the light rail happens, changes will happen rapidly.
- Chair Wilson also hears that Mesa has the bones and also realizes the structure is here. But also knows that perception is as good as reality unless you change that perception. It is imperative and critical that the change occur sooner rather than later to meet the needs of the increasing student body at Benedictine and to draw new students. The students will tell you that the housing issue is important, entertainment and night life including, theater, bowling alley and study places. Everything closes down at night, they will get on the rail and go to Tempe. Chair Wilson wants the designation to be Mesa, not out of Mesa, bring people here. If she could be Queen for a day she would want everybody to fly into Phoenix and say we have to go to Mesa at least one day while we are in the valley. We need something unique and we need to build on the arts, culture and history that is already here. What is different enough to keep people coming? What would keep you returning to downtown? My image of what I want downtown to be considered, is the heart of Mesa, the destination, the center, the heart. I like the concept of heart, that it's beating, vibrant and ongoing. Communication is also needed, there is not a common way to communicate.

Chair Wilson requested each Board Member to list their key elements and vision for downtown for the upcoming brainstorming meeting. Elements such as branding, marketing, housing, maintaining our historical preservation while infusing newness into it.

Board Member Perez shared that he likes how the Benedictine students have expressed pride and excitement about being part of something new. He stated that one student noted it would be fun to come into downtown Mesa flourishing with Benedictine colors. Mr. McVay referenced the impact of the cities that have embraced their colleges.

- **Confirm next meeting date** – Tuesday, March 10, 2015, 3:00 P.M., Visit Mesa Conference Room, 120 N. Center Street, Mesa, AZ
- **Discuss and provide direction on the primary agenda items next meeting.**
Tabled to future committee meeting.
- **Items from citizens present**
No items presented from citizens present.
- **Adjournment**
Chair Wilson called for a motion to adjourn the board meeting at 4:35 P.M.

MOTION: Charles Huellmantel made to adjourn meeting.
SECOND: Steve Chucri

Submitted By:

Jo Wilson, Chair
(Prepared by Beth Ann Moore)