

**SOUTH MAIN REVITALIZATION PLANNING AREA
MEETING WITH BUSINESS OWNERS
January 11, 2005**

The sign-in sheet is attached. Also note, where comments were repeated, they are generally only included in these notes once.

Jim Ryan, who's in charge of the City's Capital Improvements Program, discussed the Morgan Street bridge project and proposed improvements to South Main Street itself.

Morgan Street Bridge

- ▶ Will cost about \$25 million, making it one of the most expensive projects ever done in the City.
- ▶ Current plans call for construction to start in 2007, end in 2008.
- ▶ Because federal funds are being used in the project, the process needed to get it built is very long.
- ▶ We are looking for design approval this spring, which will allow us to begin acquisition this year. Most of the acquisition will be on the east side of the river. On the west side, we will be buying the old Barrons Factory and one building to the west of the RR tracks.
- ▶ The design is something different for Rockford and should serve as a focal point for this area. It will include a multiuse path on one side that will tie it into planned improvements on South Main Street. These include a pathway going along the west bank of the Rock River to the 15th Avenue bridge..
- ▶ He hopes to have a public meeting to go over plans for the bridge in February.
- ▶ There will be a lengthy period for construction during which time there will be no Morgan Street bridge. We understand the concerns of business owners on South Main and will work with them on ways to get the word out to their customers on alternate routes to them. Fortunately, we have river bridge crossings in close proximity at Chestnut Street to the north and 15th Avenue to the south.
- ▶ The parking lot at the corner of Main and Morgan will stay but may be changed a bit depending on how much is needed for right-of-way.
- ▶ The question was asked if the City could at least clear the weeds out of the existing bridge for now so it doesn't look so bad. Jim agreed to forward that request to Public Works' Street Division to have it done.

South Main Street Improvements

- ▶ IDOT has a plan to improve South Main from the US 20 Bypass to Cedar Street. Because of funding limitations of the State, this will probably be done in pieces over a period of time. Right now the only thing that has been funded is the portion around Klehm Arboretum (Clifton at South Main) to give them a direct access point on South Main.
- ▶ What IDOT has produced is a plan for street improvements. We need to add enhancements to this to make this a real plus for this area – things like landscaping, signage, medians and lighting. The lighting Public Works is proposing to install should answer concerns of people in the area.
- ▶ When the street project is done within the business district, IDOT will remove all on-street parking. We need to start working now to find a way to replace this parking, either in back of existing buildings or along side them. The City will work with businesses to find the best solution to this.
- ▶ The City hopes to change the existing one-way pairs for IL-2 going through downtown to two-way streets so it will be much easier for people to get through downtown to and from South Main.

- The earliest date for any construction to occur here is probably 2007, although acquisition could begin this year if approved by the State Legislature.
- The only structure slated in this area for the project is the Main & Morgan building, and we are working with them to find a way to avoid even that.
- We need to find a way to improve the rear facades of buildings on this part of South Main so that they will look good enough for people to feel comfortably parking back there.

Questions and Comments

Roger Sexton: Regardless of where the parking ends up, we need signs directing people to public parking so they can actually find it.

Jim Ryan: We currently have someone working on a gateway plan for Main Street from US 20 to Sportscore. One member of the design team specializes in signs and will address that problem.

Rudy Campos: Where will public parking be? People can't park in front of the museums now which cuts down on the number of available spaces. We need to resolve this now. He also felt that additional policing and improved lighting don't have to wait for the street to be redone – they can be taken care of in the short term.

Ald. Bell: The City will need to sit down with business owners to at least open up some parking on the other side of the street. But we also need to come up with a plan for longer term improvements once the on-street parking is removed.

Elmo Dowd, the City's Economic Development Administrator, talked briefly about programs the City has that business owners can tap into. These include small business loans and possible TIF funds in the future once the TIF starts producing money. He said the City is will to bring in someone like Teska Associates, consultants who are currently producing a plan for improving the business district at Main and Auburn, to work in this area and come up with solutions for people.

Rudy Campos: Business people will invest in their businesses if there is good parking and good lighting. Until that happens, they're not going to put much money in their buildings.

Jim: We know that on-street parking is going to go. We need to find a way to make this an inviting area for people to come to with signage, lighting and off-street parking. He mentioned what had happened in a community he worked in before returning to Rockford in an area similar to South Main. Rather than just leave a vacant lot between two buildings vacant, they created a pedestrian plaza that gave the area added appeal and character. We could try something like that here if the same situation arises.

Rudy: Bringing in someone like Teska would only work if we saw something happen as a result, and saw it happen quickly. This area has been planned to death. We need to see something happen. We need storefronts up and going, especially next to Gray's IGA. Right now the City's all talk and no action. People in this area are entrepreneurs. Help them get started with new buildings and they will take it from there. As a realtor, people frequently ask him where they can locate a business along South Main and he has to tell them there is not much there. We need storefronts and we need them now, not 5 or 10 years from now.

Ald. Bell: One thing that's different now from the past is that City staff is trying to work with the existing businesses now. One area South Main owners can look to is 7th Street where Mid Town District has become a strong voice for the business district. We need to find a way to create something like that on South Main. We also need to find a way to get past the skepticism that exists and work together with the City and with SWIFTT. At the same time, business owners need to explain to the City exactly what it is they want. We have 5 years of prioritized spending in the South Main area right now – we need to find a way to make the most of it

Elmo Dowd: This part of South Main is part of a TIF district. This allows for the increased property value created by new development or redevelopment to be used there. The City has a low-interest loan program for businesses and a minority assistance program. Information on these programs is being translated into Spanish now. If someone has a project they want to do, our role is to fill the gaps in financing that may exist. We stand ready to assist – call us if you have an interest in business.

Roger: There may be concerns about strings being attached to these programs. Make your explanation of the programs as clear as possible so someone who's not used to working through this type of paperwork can easily grasp what they need to do. Consider altering the programs so they become a loan guarantee for bank loans someone may be able to get if they have that guarantee.

Rudy: We need to make South Main a place where people want to be, then people will begin to invest in their property here. You need to find a solution to parking.

Jim: What stops businesses from using the back side of their property for parking?

Roger: Asked if the City took the property behind the stores and made parking available there, then would people be interested in investing in their buildings? Rudy responded yes, who also went on to say that there is no policing in the area at night.

Deputy Chief Theo Glover, Rockford Police Department stated that he had read through the notes from the first meeting like this in December. He referred to complaints about how the police handled thefts at a jewelry store and pointed out that he would need to know the circumstances behind the thefts before responding to this complaint. He said it would be helpful to know what people in the area feel are problem spots so the Police can focus their efforts there. They don't have the manpower to saturate the area, but they do try to spend as much time as possible on South Main at known trouble spots.

Roger asked about panhandlers, one in particular who is very aggressive. Theo responded that there is no law against begging per se in Rockford; however, individuals can be arrested for disorderly conduct if they are aggressive or for loitering if they've been told to move on by the Police but fail to do so. If businesses sign a complaint against someone like this when they become aggressive, the Police can arrest them.

Jim Ryan: If we come back to this group with options for parking in the rear of the buildings, would that help in coming up with a solution for the parking problem? General consensus was yes.

Roger: We need to move to the next step. We've had a chance to discuss issues and problems; now we need to move forward to finding solutions. He suggested a session with pens and maps to do what Jim suggested, possibly at Montague Library.

Candelario Torres: We've seen plans; we've seen drawings. We need to see something happen. No one's going to invest in their building here until something actually happens.

Bill Johannes: He has 4 or 5 projects in the area in progress now. We don't have to wait until IL-2 gets rebuilt to do something about parking. He has worked it into his projects; it can be done elsewhere.

Ted Quinoñez: What was the rush in knocking down Torres' grocery? It's just empty land. There wouldn't be as many problems if the City had waited until something was ready to go in there before tearing it down.

Candelario: We need buildings for businesses to move into, not a lot of empty space. As long as all of this land is left vacant, no one's going to want to invest here.

Ald. Bell: Nothing will happen without the participation of the South Main business owners. We need to have reasons to have confidence in each other. We want input from the community; and we will initiate dialog on parking, lighting and other issues that are important to the people in this area.

Jaime Salazar: Has his own business and is looking for his own building. Does computer training in Spanish and is looking to improve and expand his business but he can't find anywhere to do it here.