

Written by Kathleen McCarthy  
Tuesday, 17 July 2001 18:00

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As readers can see, our cover story this week features the first anniversary of DavenportOne. While congratulations are definitely in order, it was somewhat shocking for me to note the enormous weight DavenportOne gave to the City of Davenport's deal with Sentry Insurance as somehow being a feather in its own cap. With other meritorious accomplishments to boast of, touting the debacle of awarding Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to Sentry Insurance as an incentive to build an office facility in Davenport along 53rd Street, where development is occurring at break-neck speeds, is almost an insult to those other accomplishments.

The Sentry Insurance fiasco was nothing short of an economic development ruse perpetrated on the taxpayers of Davenport. To claim that creating a TIF for Sentry retained jobs in the community is pure spin at its very worst. It only further emphasizes the criticism of DavenportOne as an organization that operates primarily as a front group for the same old power brokers and their narrow agendas, which clearly reflect the interests of their individual bottom lines rather than the collective prosperity of the community as a whole.

Maybe D1 wants to take so much credit for Sentry Insurance to temper the criticism its had from certain circles for focusing too much on downtown Davenport. DavenportOne should be lauded for its consistent backing of redevelopment issues regarding downtown Davenport, even to the degree that it has caused them criticism from members not as dedicated to downtown. DavenportOne has followed the lead of the City of Davenport that made downtown redevelopment one of its top five priorities two years ago and understands the fundamental global circumstances that, as a city's core goes, so goes its whole.

From such a commitment to downtown came one of the accomplishments DavenportOne should be proud of, and that is that D1 was instrumental in shepherding the city council through the process of approving the construction of two much needed parking ramps. The next question that needs to be answered is how will all of this new parking be allocated? Once the big-ticket projects such as the Ag Tech Venture Capital Center (with a planned phase two that calls for a high-rise office tower atop the city-owned parking ramp), the River Music History Center and the Figge Arts Center are accounted for, how much parking will be left over for the incremental service and retail businesses surrounding such projects? And if the goal is 250,000 newly rented square feet of office space in downtown, will we have enough parking for that

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influx with the two new ramps? And what portion of that 250,000 square feet is to be filled by independent building owners who have their own investments and currently pay SSMID taxes in the downtown? And what about incremental development in downtown Davenport?

When one examines the redevelopment plans of Moline and Rock Island that so heavily include retail, residential, loft, and condo amenities, one has to wonder where such efforts are with regards to downtown Davenport? Without incremental, small business, and residential support in our downtown, DavenportOne's economic development agenda seems to mirror the development projects of a handful of developers, who coincidentally sit on the economic-development committees and boards of DavenportOne.

While incremental development and housing are clearly the current agendas for these developers in Moline, evidenced by Moline One Place and Bass Street Landing, similar development agendas have not been targeted for Davenport. By eliminating these same kinds of projects from Davenport's riverfront, a skeptic might make the connection that this also eliminates any competition that might dilute the marketplace and increase the developers' risk for their Moline projects. Why incremental small business development and housing are considered appropriate for Moline, East Moline, and Rock Island, not to mention Bettendorf, but not for Davenport, should be considered in this context. Regardless, class-A downtown office space is still the predominant focus for many involved in DavenportOne – a narrow formula that has consistently failed this community since the sixties.

The last real prospect for such class-A commercial space, which ideally would have housed a corporate headquarters, was John Hancock Insurance Company. As alluded to in this week's feature story, business leaders were able to get the company to take a look at downtown Davenport, but couldn't close the deal. Allegedly, John Hancock declined our fair city because it didn't see local investment occurring, no incremental development happening in our own downtown, and decided it did not want to be the only tuna in the sea, so to speak.

While the pie is only so big, there is little riverfront property remaining for such projects. Interestingly, these same developers, who are behind class-A office space in Davenport, pulled their involvement in the development of class-A office space for East Moline's Quarter because studies showed the lack of a market for such space. So why is this lack of a market not also true for Davenport when both cities are part of the same metropolitan area? Could it be that any new class-A office space in downtown will generate displacement rather than genuine growth – in other words, existing tenants will just move from one spot to another from within the community? And perhaps this will be acceptable for DavenportOne. As the story points out, D1 and its board are willing to change the benchmarks by which their efforts are measured. So, should there be an office shuffle in downtown Davenport, members would do well to keep their eye on the original goals.

If anything, the members of DavenportOne, city officials, and the taxpaying public need to determine how DavenportOne's goals are arrived at, and to what extent they are viable. What kind of real growth is represented in a one-percent growth rate increase in property taxes or sales tax? Are such goals ambitious enough? The annual report for DavenportOne lacked any financial data by which to begin any process of measuring. How can the meaningful questions

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be asked if the information isn't available to analyze? How can efforts be measured against goals without the basis clearly understood from the start? It is time to be done with the vague "speak" of the past. The community demonstrated enormous faith in DavenportOne as evidenced by the considerable amount of money raised via the D1 Initiative. What must be prevented are the mistakes of the past, in which the benefits of such initiatives are directed to the more narrow interests of those in a position to gain from such resources. Instead, let's endeavor to reach the entire community through real economic expansion, job growth, and an ever-improving quality of life by sound planning, sensible allocation of resources that includes measurables and accountability for successes and failures, and an increasing sensitivity to the needs of the business community as a whole, including small, medium, and large businesses alike.