

Memo

To: Melanie Johnson, Legislative Aide to Councilmember Johnson

From: Anne DeJoy, Consultant for ESNDC

CC: Darlene LaBelle, ESNDC Executive Director

Re: The proposed *Commercial Corridor Fund*

Date: November 10, 2024

1. What overall feedback do you have on this proposal?

This initiative is important:

The equitable renewal of commercial corridors in St. Paul, especially our inner-city neighborhoods, presents a clear test for City government and many financial institutions, corporations, and philanthropies that have committed to racial equity as a central component of the post pandemic economy.

These business districts are the front doors to our communities. When vibrant, they offer neighborhood residents walking and transit access to shopping, employment, social services and gathering places. When well-designed and maintained, they create a distinguishing quality of place and reinforce a sense of community. Many of the older buildings on these corridors are occupied by BIPOC businesses. Inclusive regeneration strategies can fuel the growth of local Black-and-Brown-owned enterprises.

With trillions of dollars in federal funds flowing, these small but dense geographies reveal whether the lives of city residents have been improved or changed for the better in recent years. This measurement does not require deep statistical analysis; it can be garnered in less than an hour by walking these corridors, talking to business owners, employees, and residents, and observing the collective sense of the place.

2. What would make this grant more workable for your organization?

The proposed *Commercial Corridor Fund* must **include funding** for a Program Manager. All too often, public funds are targeted at direct costs, with insufficient or no funds for administrative costs, engagement activities, and overall management, accountability and reporting.

The need to have someone direct the revitalization effort is critical. The result of not having a Program Manager to lead corridor revitalization is never good; and that person needs to be an advocate for the business community, a government worker should not be the corridor revitalization manager.

Do not try to match this program with a Business Improvement District (BID) fee assessment. I remember a recent effort to initiate a BID and it was opposed by business groups, saying that it was

another tax on business, and they opposed all taxes, even if it was a voluntary assessment earmarked to benefit their block.

3. What should be the maximum grant amount?

There needs to be more discussion/planning about the grant amounts for the different activities proposed. It depends on the scope of each corridor initiative. Public elements (benches, trash cans, infrastructure improvements) for streetscape design and land acquisition are costly. They cannot be compared with activities like marketing and promotional events.

4. What activities should be eligible for funding, aside from what is proposed?

There needs to be some resources for planning before implementation. Also for streetscape elements, a maintenance plan must be in place.

I suggest a proven model designed by Main Street America. The Main Street Approach is centered around Transformation Strategies. Each strategy is implemented through activities in the four broad areas of work represented by the Four Points: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization. Check out their website

<https://mainstreet.org/about/how-we-work/the-main-street-approach>

If St. Paul moves forward with this initiative, I recommend that the City sign up with Main Street America as a member and receive the tools and resources available during execution and implementation.

5. How should we ensure that the funds are distributed equitably, while keeping the application process simple?

My immediate thought is to gain buy-in through community engagement. But St. Paul has been involved in so much community engagement through transit planning, real estate development, anti-displacement, etc. Folks are tired of planning.

New engagement efforts could be implemented. Here is *just one* example:

- Partner with schools/universities to invite students to participate in visual preferences of community members toward historic urban areas. This could be done through photographs or artwork to bridge the gap between policy makers and stakeholders of historic urban corridors. Identification of visual preferences of stakeholders and their introduction to policy makers is a way of passive participation in the public process for students.
- I have other ideas . . . but I'll end it here for now.