

BID-ING FOR MORE CUSTOMERS

Businesses Launch \$1.2M Improvements

Goal: cleaner, safer, more beautiful streets

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Yesterday

Beginning by month's end, downtown and Asylum Hill property owners will expect a big bang for the 1 percent tax surcharge they are paying to fund improvements in a newly formed business improvement district.

That 1 percent surcharge will generate about \$900,000. Combined with a \$225,000 city contribution, the total BID budget will be approximately \$1.2 million.

Contributed Photo



A new downtown street sweeping machine, made possible by the new Business Improvement District tax.

Property owners “expect a return on investment,” said Michael Zaleski, executive director of the Hartford Business Improvement District. “This is not a philanthropic contribution. This is an investment.”

The return on investment will largely rest upon the work of a nine-member security guard unit and a six-member cleaning crew beginning May 23. In addition, 200 new flower planters will be placed throughout the district and a small portion of the budget will be spent for marketing the district.

With a three-year sunset provision in the ordinance, businesses will expect proof that their tax surcharge is making a real difference, or they will not support the BID in the next referendum, Zaleski said.

Daily Cleaning

The difference should be clearly evident by the absence of litter and graffiti.

The BID's 23-member board contracted with Louisville, Ky.-based Block-By-Block, a niche organization that provides cleaning and security services for business improvement districts in 14 states. Block-By-Block's local crew will provide daily litter and graffiti removal, and sidewalk cleaning with the help of a power washer, pick-up truck, litter vacuum and a walk-behind sweeper.

The BID wants to ensure the cleaning and security crews are visible to the public and property owners, so the equipment is being painted in the district's electric blue color scheme, the same hue as the security guards' shirts.

While it will be easy to collect quantifiable data to substantiate the improvements, such as how many pounds of litter are picked up now as compared with three years from now, there should be a "wow" factor that can't be calculated on a spreadsheet, Zaleski said.

"This will be one of those ripple-effect things," he added. "There will be a non-tangible vibe or buzz."

Both the security and cleaning crews will work seven days a week.

Safer Streets

Zaleski said that in other cities with BIDs, the presence of uniformed security guards successfully reduced the incidents of crime, including vehicle break-ins. Police crime statistics will provide the necessary benchmarks needed to measure any improvements in that area.

The Hartford Guides, a 15-year downtown ambassador program with an established relationship with the Hartford Police Department, was contracted by the BID to manage the new security unit. It is hiring nine state-certified security guards to provide an increased authoritative on-street presence.

Property owners in downtown Hartford and Asylum Hill approved the BID, which resulted in a self-imposed tax increase in October 2006. The vast majority – 175 to 17

property owners with 78.3 percent of the assessed property values — voted in favor of creating a new business improvement district.

The BID's board is deciding how to spend its \$1.2 million budget, with the initial focus on increased security, cleanliness and beautification.

Board member Michael Grunberg, principal of New York City-based Grunberg Realty that owns 280 Trumbull, said that as a group, the BID gets to decide for itself the level of services it will provide that the city can't do.

The BID brings together the property owners, and therefore provides them with a stronger, more unified voice when addressing common issues with the city, Grunberg said.

He especially likes the autonomy of the bid. "We are not going to sit back and ask the mayor, 'where my money is?' I have a say with where the money goes. We are more empowered."

The district is the result of a long-running grassroots campaign that began in 1995, spearheaded by members of Business for Downtown Hartford.

"The reason the BID concept gained traction this time is because the city has changed," Zaleski said, noting that there has been significant development in the city during the past five years.

"There is a new faith and new hope and owners are willing to invest now," he said. "I've seen this thing work in other cities. I can't wait to have this operate in full force."

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