

Consultants suggest ways to combine economic groups

By Jeanne Davant

A consultants' report recommends the creation of a working group to address the merging of Manitou Springs' economic organizations.

Kezziah Watkins, a firm that specializes in helping communities design and improve decision-making processes, presented the report Tuesday to City Council and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Council and Business Improvement District.

The economic groups have been seeking ways to combine their functions so as to save money and operate more efficiently. According to the report, the three organizations started talks on reducing duplication of services in 2009 but reached a stalemate in the fall. They pooled resources to hire the consulting firm.

"We were brought in to provide a slightly more objective voice," consultant Tweed Kezziah said.

After conducting interviews with 23 people from the EDC, Chamber, BID, Council and city staff, the consultants identified areas where there was agreement on what was most important to Manitou's economic health and uncovered issues that needed to be resolved.

"We are recommending that a working group be put together to review and resolve issues and develop an action plan," Kezziah said.

The working group could serve as the basis for a board of directors of a new organization that would embrace the current Chamber and EDC. The consultants recommended that the BID remain separate but said the new organization would need to work closely with the BID, Urban Renewal Authority, Parking Authority Board and the city.

The consultants suggested a board for the new organization composed of three Chamber members, three EDC members, one BID member and four at-large community members. They recommended the same composition for the working group, excluding the at-large members.

Funding the new organization would be a prime topic of discussion for the working group, especially since the city's financial resources have been increasingly limited.

"A conversation at the City Council level is needed to clarify whether the funding commitment of the City of Manitou Springs is contractual or discretionary," the report said.

The report also recommends the development of a comprehensive economic strategic plan. The board of directors would take the lead and work with the city, businesses and residents.

Other recommendations were that:

The city draw up a contract for specific services with the new organization and establish a system for accountability with specific requirements such as quarterly reports of services provided and expenditures.

The board and staff of the new organization, the BID and City Council explore new methods of communication, which was identified by interviewees as a significant issue.

The next step should be discussion by the working group to resolve issues and develop an action plan for putting together the new organization.

"We hope to have the support of Council as we come together as a business community," said Tim Haas, EDC chairman. "The Chamber has already made significant changes that almost mirror what's been presented today."

Haas said he hoped to get approval to proceed quickly from Council and the boards of the three organizations, since the business community's busy season is approaching.

Councilwoman Ingrid Richter said she would like to see a council member and city representative on the working group, and consultant Linda Watkins responded that the organizations could structure it as they wished.

Funding for economic development would have to be clarified as part of the overall plan.

"We are trying to make the city operate like a for-profit business," Mayor Marc Snyder said. "I've always envisioned (the city) continuing funding these activities to the level that we can, but that is not a guarantee year after year of funding."

A fair amount of discussion at Tuesday's meeting centered on parking, an issue repeatedly mentioned during the interviews and described by Haas as "one of the biggest issues, if not the biggest."

Haas said the EDC has proposed using some of its funds to provide seed money so the Parking Authority Board could hire a parking contractor.

"We're not trying to take over parking, but if we were able to provide seed money, it could make a real difference this year," Haas said. The contractor could help clarify and develop a detailed scope of work for the city's comprehensive parking plan.

Snyder noted that he has been getting complaints about increased parking enforcement and \$55 tickets.

While parking is "a huge untapped asset..., I would love to see a situation where a first offender would get a warning and there would be incremental charges, so the second ticket is \$55," Haas said.

"Our community is unique, and our parking solution can be unique, too," BID President Susan Wohlbrueck said. "The process can be very creative and very Manitou and yet solve the problems and generate more revenue. We don't have to pick a solution that matches anybody else."

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