

Downtown director talks rats, parking and blocked traffic

Pressing issues facing business district addressed at First Ward meeting



by **Alex Harrison**

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Andy Vick, the recently-hired executive director of Downtown Evanston, said he's hit the ground running in his first few weeks to address issues hampering businesses and customers alike in the city's center.

"That's really what we're all about here, is to really help to make the downtown as vibrant as possible," Vick said.

Vick fielded questions and comments from residents at a virtual First Ward meeting Thursday evening, along with First Ward Council Member Clare Kelly and City Manager Luke Stowe. He began his new position on Aug. 6 after previously serving as executive director of arts agencies in Maryland and Colorado.

Early in the meeting, an attendee asked Vick for his thoughts on the use of paid parking throughout downtown, which has been cited by some merchants as a deterrent for customers to shop in Evanston instead of neighboring communities with free parking. Vick said he understands the concern but views it as "a reality of urban living" that other suburbs like Winnetka and Wilmette have the luxury of avoiding.

"We're a different creature, it's apples to oranges in terms of the kind of community we are living in," Vick said. "Not only is it good for the city's finances, but it's also very important for the churn of patrons who are going to be supporting the businesses in downtown."



Downtown Evanston Executive Director Andy Vick speaks at a virtual First Ward meeting Thursday evening. Credit: Alex Harrison

Kelly disagreed and said the parking system should be changed to make Evanston more competitive with its neighbors. In discussing this, both Kelly and Vick voiced support for an idea to reduce or eliminate downtown parking fees at certain times to encourage more patronage, such as on Friday and Saturday evenings.

Speaking later in the meeting, Stowe said he liked the rate-reduction idea, and shared that the city had actually declined a recommendation to increase parking fees in a study performed in fall 2022.

“(The study) looked at other communities in comparison to us ... and they actually encouraged us to increase parking rates,” Stowe said. “But from a staff perspective, we felt that that was a non-starter, that we wanted to hold flat on our parking rates, especially as we were coming out of COVID.”

Reeling from rodents

Another attendee raised the issue of rats, as city staff report the city is seeing an influx of rodent reports to 311 around the city. They suggested that shifting downtown trash pickup from the current morning timing to the evening could deny rats an ample overnight food supply in the district’s garbage cans.

Vick said the timing shift is a “suggestion worth exploring,” and promised he’d pass it along to his connections at Streetplus, the city’s business district sanitation contractor. He added that the district is buying and installing “rat mesh” in more of its planters to prevent rats from burrowing inside.



Credit: Julianna Zitron

Local landlord Tina Paden commented that another major driver of rats is discarded furniture, which she said has piled up around Northwestern University’s campus from students moving in and out of dorms and apartments. She said the university seems to have not assisted the city with bulk trash collection as it did in years past.

“This is how the rats find a home, in the mattresses and the furniture that’s left outside,” Paden said. “I hope that you talk to Northwestern again and try to do this bulk trash pickup, because a lot of the students have come in now and the trash is horrible.”

Kelly told Paden she'd contact Dave Davis, the university's community liaison, to figure out what NU "did or didn't do" to help with trash pickup as students returned to campus.

Construction on Orrington

Vick and Kelly also addressed the dual construction projects partially blocking Orrington Avenue north of Davis Street. Vick explained that the west project (next to Fountain Square) is only maintenance work on the building and is expected to wrap up Friday, while the east project (next to the Chase Building) is replacing underground infrastructure and will need more time to conclude.

Kelly added she was "very frustrated" the projects happened simultaneously and blocked traffic and exposure to the businesses on that block, and said she's asked staff to avoid approving construction permits for projects in close proximity in the future.

Later in the meeting, while sharing updates and upcoming events, Bookends and Beginnings owner Nina Barrett shared the burden the bookstore is facing due to the projects. The bookstore recently moved from its original alleyway location off of Sherman Avenue to a storefront at 1620 Orrington Ave., directly adjacent to the dual construction work.

"To be perfectly frank, that has been devastating for us in the month of September," Barrett said. "It really is doing real damage to a lot of businesses, and I'd like people to be aware of that. We'll get past it, (and) I hope we are building a better downtown together."