



# CITY OF IOWA CITY MEMORANDUM

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Date: May 30, 2024

To: Mayor and City Council

From: Rachel Kilburg, Economic Development Coordinator

Re: 21 S. Linn Street Public Input Summary

## Background

In 2023, the City purchased the vacant lot at 21 S. Linn St. with the intent to lead a mixed-use redevelopment of this prominent downtown corner through a public/private partnership. The project will be facilitated through a Request for Proposals (RFP) process that identifies City goals and project objectives and invites project proposals from prospective partners.

In December, staff completed a review of past RFP redevelopment processes with City Council. Staff next presented a plan for the initial public input period at the February 20, 2024 City Council work session. This public input phase employed a two-pronged approach of education and input. Through the education component, the City sought to (1) establish a transparent, shared understanding of the City's objectives and intent behind the mixed-use redevelopment project; (2) reinforce existing established plans and priorities; and (3) communicate the importance of long-term property tax revenue generated by the project. The goal of collecting public input was to understand the community's "user experience" in the downtown as well as specific desires for the redevelopment project. The results are intended to inform both the City's RFP goal-setting and the proposals submitted by development teams.

Incorporating Council's feedback from the February 20<sup>th</sup> work session, staff employed the following strategies to collect public input from March 27 – May 1, 2024:

- **Online survey** - available in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Mandarin.
- **Open House** public input sessions held from 6-7:30pm at the Iowa City Public Library on April 15, 2024 and the Pheasant Ridge Neighborhood Center on April 23, 2024.
- **E-mails** - residents encouraged to submit messages in their preferred language.
- **Mail/drop-off** of written comments to City Hall.
- **Hello Lamp Post** - interactive public input opportunity via text message, initiated from a QR code or texting a code posted at the site of 21 S. Linn St.

Opportunities to provide input were promoted through official City channels, including news releases, social media platforms, and Cable TV programs. Flyers were posted on City buses and disseminated through City partners (Iowa City Downtown District, South of 6 Business District, Think Iowa City, and Greater Iowa City, Inc.). Per City Council's request, input opportunities were also shared directly with the City's equity & diversity outreach list, the University of Iowa media office, and UI Student Government for further promotion with their target audiences.

## Public Input Participation Summary

Total public input responses received between March 27 – May 1:

- 1,482 participants in the online survey, representing 5,928 responses to the four open-ended questions on the survey. (Includes 3 surveys completed in Spanish and 1 in Mandarin).
- 9 emails and 2 written comments
- 296 Hello Lamp Post respondents.
- Approximately 20 attendees at the Library Open House and five attendees at the Pheasant Ridge Open House

Across all public input opportunities, four core questions were posed to encourage thoughtful and productive feedback. City staff manually analyzed all public comments submitted via survey, e-mail or letter, in-person events, and Hello Lamp Post. Insights are compiled and summarized below (open house/mailed/written comments are incorporated into the Q4 summary only due to their nature of being more “open-ended”). For full transparency, the raw survey results, Hello Lamp Post comments, and emails/written comments are available online at [www.icgov.org/21SLinn](http://www.icgov.org/21SLinn).

## Public Input Response Summary

### Q1: Do you visit Downtown Iowa City? Why or why not?

Of the 1,414 survey respondents and 151 Hello Lamp Post respondents who indicated they do visit downtown (approximates):

- 529 visit downtown for restaurants, coffee shops, and drinking establishments
- 446 like to shop downtown, with 66 specifically mentioning local/small business
- 393 mentioned they visit downtown for arts, cultural, and entertainment venues, programs, festivals, and events (including the Farmer’s Market).
- 212 work downtown
- 172 mentioned they visit the Library downtown
- 121 shared that they live downtown
- 105 noted they engage in general recreation downtown, such as hanging out in public spaces, using the pedestrian mall playground, or visiting public facilities such as the Senior or Rec Centers. 82 respondents also mentioned the downtown is great for socializing, people watching, and meeting up with friends.
- 73 respondents mentioned they visit downtown for educational purposes, either to attend classes, study, or participate in educational/academic-focused community events.
- 119 respondents highlighted the value of walkability of downtown and/or mentioning they enjoy taking walks downtown for exercise or leisure.
- The survey results demonstrated some level of age diversity in the responses, with 20 mentioning they use the senior center, 64 identifying themselves as University students, several sharing how they use downtown as a family/with children, and a handful suggesting ideas for those in the 30s age range.
- Other uses mentioned at lower numbers included attending church, banking, fitness/yoga, medical appointments, nightlife, visiting salons, and running errands.

Of the 71 respondents to Q1 who indicated they do not visit downtown, or do not visit as frequently as they like, comments included:

- 32 expressed frustrations related to parking
- 16 felt the downtown is too student-oriented and/or that there is not much to do for older adults.

- 11 felt the downtown was not safe or clean
- 9 mentioned downtown did not have shops that attracted them
- 8 shared that establishments focused on alcohol and vaping were too prevalent
- 7 felt the downtown is too crowded

Q2: What is 'missing' in our Downtown that would encourage you to come more often or stay longer?

Frequently mentioned themes include places that are open late and on weekends but are not alcohol-centered, more free and inexpensive activities, and more options in general that are less student-focused.

Public seating and greenery were the most commonly mentioned amenities. Other common amenities requested included bike and pedestrian facilities, expanded bus service, safety and cleanliness, public art, and dog-friendly amenities.

Of the 1,461 survey responses and 69 Hello Lamp Post responses, approximately...

- 355 mentioned park, green space, and gardens.
- 226 suggested shops or specific types of retail, with 51 mentioning a year-round market offering both produce and craft or boutique goods. 30 mentioned grocery stores, with full-service grocery stores and affordable groceries common themes.
- 220 suggested additional places to eat and/or drink, many shared specific restaurants or types of bars/restaurants they'd like to see. Outdoor patios and rooftop patios were a common theme.
- 164 mentioned non-alcohol focused interactive recreation or entertainment options that appeal to many ages; ideas included mini golf, skate rinks, pickleball, escape rooms, museums, arcades, athletic courts, yard games, pottery/candle/painting activities, etc.
- 129 commented on the need for additional, improved, or cheaper parking.
- At least 110 (others likely fall into this category but were not explicit so staff did not make assumptions) mentioned community spaces, social meeting places, and "third places" that are not bars and do not require spending money to use.
- 110 respondents requested more activities or options catering to families and children.
- 103 mentioned small- to mid-size music and entertainment venues.
- 64 mentioned housing, with affordable and missing middle housing a common theme.
- 59 mentioned an arts-focused use such as a gallery, studio space, maker space, or community arts space offering classes.

Q3: When you come downtown, how do you spend your time or where do you like to go?

Q3 responses were substantially similar to Q1 responses, with most respondents mentioning eating/drinking, shopping, running errands, or participating in entertainment and recreation activities such as visiting the library, attending a show, festival or event, or just hanging out.

Q4: Please share any other thoughts or desires you have for the future development at 21 S. Linn St.

Q4 responses largely reflected Q2 responses. The most common suggestions staff heard throughout the surveys, written comments, and open house sessions are listed below in order of most to least frequently mentioned (only includes suggestions with at least 20 mentions):

- Green space, park area, or gardens
- Housing, with the vast majority specifically mentioning affordable housing
- Micro-retail spaces, incubators, or “NewBo” style markets, with a focus on local and independent business
- Mixed use development
- Protection of the existing mural on the adjacent property
- Restaurants, bars, coffee shops, food courts, or food truck area
- Interactive recreation or entertainment attractions (i.e. mini golf, arcade, etc.)
- Parking
- Flexible community center or public gathering/event space
- Music or arts and entertainment venue
- Art-focused spaces such as galleries, studios, classrooms
- Family and kid-friendly elements
- Density
- Well-designed, character, and blends well with surrounding area
- Affordability remained a consistent and recurring theme throughout all suggestions.

The most common uses that respondents wanted to avoid in this development are listed below, again in order of frequency (only includes those with more than 20 mentions):

- Bar, vape shop, or liquor store
- Housing, with just over half specifically mentioning luxury or expensive housing
- High-rise/large building
- Parking

## **Key Takeaways**

Staff is appreciative of everyone that took time to share feedback. Based on the wide variety of input, it is clear we cannot achieve everything that the community desires on this one site downtown. However, using important takeaways from this public input, we can pursue a project that both adds something new and of value, contributes to the long-term health of downtown in multiple respects (financial, built environment, opportunities for new uses, etc.), and leverages and enhances the strengths and assets that downtown already has.

It is important to note that there are many additional comments and ideas submitted that may not be clearly reflected in the summary above. This summary of public input responses focused on the most common responses in an attempt to summarize the wide array of input received. While consensus was neither anticipated nor achieved, staff’s ultimate goal for this phase of public input was to collect insights that could (1) inform the RFP document; and (2) inspire responding development teams to incorporate community desires.

Additionally, there were many other comments received which fall beyond the scope and goals of this redevelopment project. Through the education component of this public input phase, staff sought to be clear about types of uses that would and would not be considered at this corner. For example, although park and green space was a common response, the City’s stated goal for this redevelopment is a mixed-use building. Any input which falls beyond the intent of this

project is still valuable feedback in the context of general long-range City planning but will not be prioritized in the discussion of this particular project.

Instead, the key takeaways identified by staff consist of the *most common public comments that are also in alignment with the City's intent of a mixed-use redevelopment and the City Council's and Downtown District's strategic priorities*. Accordingly, staff have identified the following concepts as key takeaways which will inform the RFP goals:

- **Inviting to the public:** Foster an inclusive urban experience, in which the general public feels welcome to access space in the new development. Appeal to a variety of ages and increase options for spending time downtown.
- **Space for new opportunities (without compromising our strengths):** People come downtown for the arts and culture, fun public spaces, and wide selection of food and drink. However, they also desire new and unique opportunities which fill the “gaps” – retail; dining, entertainment, and other experiences that aren't alcohol-centric; and housing options that diversify the everyday users of downtown.
- **Authentic urban experience:** Achieve a redevelopment where the Downtown's character meets modern amenities; prioritizing economic viability, walkability and multi-modal transportation, safety and cleanliness, and interesting and engaging street-level design.
- **Consider geographic assets:** 21 S. Linn's shares close proximity with many key assets that were valued through the public input: the Tower Place Ramp for parking, the Library and Senior Center for civic connection, and the Englert, FilmScene at the Chauncey, and Studio 13 for arts and culture opportunities are all examples.

While these may be lofty objectives, staff is confident our community can achieve such a project since we have prior experience doing so. For example, the Chauncey development was designed with a strong pedestrian-level experience, created new, engaging spaces that welcome the public (both indoor and out), added new value (bowling, movies, coffee shop) while lifting up existing assets (FilmScene), and generated new modern office spaces, hotel units, and public housing and market-rate units, which all put feet in the street and contribute to the daytime vibrancy of the downtown. A similar example is the Hotel Vetro development, which again added modern office space, hotel units, and housing stock while also contributing a unique, new dining concept that serves for many as a social/public space and complements the pedestrian mall, Library, and playground area well.

## Next Steps

Staff will present more on the RFP development at your June 4<sup>th</sup> work session. We welcome the Council's input at this time and will also present a draft RFP later this summer for full review and feedback before issuance.

### Proposed Timeline for the Redevelopment of 21 S. Linn:

- December 2023: City Council review of past public-private development processes - *completed*
- Feb – May 2024: Conduct public engagement - *completed*
- June – Aug 2024: Develop Request for Proposals (RFP) document
- Sept – Oct 2024: Issue RFP
- Nov – Dec 2024: Begin proposal review process
- 2025: Selection of project partners and development of final project details