

Farmington merchants get their say about DDA post

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Some Farmington merchants got the chance Tuesday to give input about what they'd like to see in a new Farmington Downtown Development Authority director.

DDA Director Judy Downey retires by the beginning of next year. The board expects to make an offer of employment by late October.

Deezy Burns, co-owner of the Farmington Bakery, Laura Osborne, owner of Spare Parts, and Mike Nowak, who owns Legato, stayed after the regular DDA meeting to describe a director's best qualities.

Some merchants complained they never had a chance to describe that criteria. Burns and her husband, Jeff Pavlik, said when they wanted to do so, Farmington Assistant City Manager Bill Richards said it was too late because the job

advertisement was already developed and posted. Richards has since withdrawn, citing philosophical differences.

"I would have like to have had that done a long time ago," said Frank Gerstenecker, the newly hired search consultant who works for the Michigan Municipal League. "Usually when I do this, I generate a profile before anything happens. I have a checklist with everything under the sun."

Board members Joyce Cornwell and Craig Grace were absent from the regular meeting.

DDA Board Members Suzanne Paul and Bob Heinrich are part of a three-person selection/search committee with Cornwell entered the discussion with merchants.

Wish lists

Burns wants a good commu-

nicator with an open-door policy. She'd also like a clear understanding of what changes can be asked of a DDA director personally and which need a more formal approach to the DDA board. Downey can't always be reached immediately on the phone but she returns phone calls, Burns said.

Heinrich wants a coalition builder. "We need a creative person."

Empty businesses are Osborne's concern, and she wants someone who will recruit new businesses. A Trader Joe's store would be a draw, she said.

"The DDA doesn't own any of these businesses so we are capable to what they want," Heinrich said. "We can tell them about our objective."

Over the years, the DDA's goals centered on infrastructure and now on marketing, Heinrich said.

The director should have good interpersonal skills and be

persuasive enough to sell new ideas to the board, Gerstenecker said.

Though the DDA doesn't lend money, Burns said she'd like to see the director hold an annual seminar or informational meeting about what loans are available to businesses. Burns also suggested a "market master" for the weekly Farmer's Market held during summer.

Parking is a problem, and people are reluctant to walk downtown, she said.

Merchants observe frequent speeders and insensitive drivers along Grand River. Farmington Public Safety Director Gary Goss and Bob Heinrich of the Farmington Traffic and Safety Commission are expected to speak about traffic at the 8 a.m. Oct. 2 DDA meeting in the council conference room.

Osborne, who wants a high energy person, also wants someone who lives in or near

the Farmington area. Downey lives in Lapeer.

"If you live in a community you are exposed to many more things," Heinrich said. "There's a danger here that some applicants may look at this as the last stop on their career path. That would concern me."

Paul wants someone who is sensitive to the long-time Farmington residents. "We have to give them their say," Paul said.

Paul and Burns suggested art films at the historic Civic Theatre on Grand River.

Nowak is a third generation Farmington resident. "The downtown director's position has reached a critical crossroads," he said.

Needed is a liaison between the business community and potential tenants. "There is a clear need for national chain-type merchants to bring traffic and notoriety," Nowak said. "The formation of

a master plan for a retail mix is critical. Starbucks is a wildly successful operation which doesn't have any small town charm at all."

He wants someone who can walk in with "a chestful of medals already."

"The DDA should not be putting on sidewalk sales," Nowak said. "That's the function of the merchants association. It should be putting together marketing strategies. Let the merchants do scarecrows, candy and sidewalk sales. You can liken this to remodeling. You can't turn an arts and crafts ranch into a Victorian home."

Because no active merchants association existed, the DDA filled that void by default, Heinrich said. "It took away from our main tasks."

The lack of identity resulted in a variety of discount stores, Nowak said. (248) 477-5450

DDA semifinal interviews opened

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

The first round of interviews — the semifinalist phase — for the Farmington Downtown Development executive director position will be open to the public sometime during the week of Sept. 23.

The time and date will be confirmed by Friday, Sept. 20, according to Ron Oglesby, board president.

Judy Downey, who will retire by the beginning of next year, has held her position for 10 years. The DDA district is bounded roughly by the Burger King/Benchmark area to the east, Sluicum to the south, and Oakland Street north.

The position will pay \$47,000-\$53,000.

Frank Gerstenecker, the newly-hired Michigan Municipal League executive search consultant, met with the full DDA board at a special meeting Sept. 10.

Gerstenecker was Troy City Manager for more than 25 years. He served on the International City and County Management Association Executive Board and has also served as president of the Michigan City Management Association.

The search firm was selected Sept. 4. "I can tailor this anyway you want," Gerstenecker said. "You have to keep in mind this has some age to it. My experience is that the longer time it goes on the better ones get picked off and take other jobs."

The number of semifinalist candidates is now down to six, after the Farmington City Manager's office recently asked

each of the seven candidates whether they wanted to continue if the entire process is open to the public. Interviews will be with 10 or fewer candidates.

Gerstenecker will also look at the original 31 applications. The oral examination board will consist of Gerstenecker, Teri Arbenowske, assistant Farmington Hills city manager and a former Royal Oak DDA director, and a DDA manager who hasn't been named.

"I've worked with a 26-member group wide open, televised, even in the resume screening process," Gerstenecker said. "The people knew that and they understood the risk."

In a Battle Creek city manager search, he worked with 25 community leaders including the media and everything was videotaped.

Interviews will be an hour each at Farmington City Hall.

"We want to introduce an openness to the process which will allow public observation," said DDA Member Bob Heinrich.

The semifinalists will later be pared down to a finalist number determined by the board. Those interviews in mid-October will also be public and before the full board.

Background checks will be done prior to that time.

DDA board members last month suspended the process after Assistant City Manager Bill Richards withdrew, after some downtown business owners said they wanted interviews open to the public.

Richards, who works as an MML consultant in addition to his day job, was willing to oversee the search at no cost to the city.

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