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Downtown changes came amid 'valid criticisms,' lawmaker says

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An overhaul of how downtown St. Louis tax money is spent, revealed last week, came amid "valid criticisms" from some property owners, an alderman for the area said.

Starting next year, the nonprofit Downtown STL Inc. will no longer manage downtown St. Louis' taxing district, called the Downtown St. Louis Community Improvement District, which collects about \$3.6 million a year in assessments, or extra property taxes, used for beautification, safety, economic development and marketing.

"It's all public money and should be open and transparent," said Alderman Jack Coatar, who sits on the CID's board. Downtown STL, which gets the majority of its funding from the CID, has consistently claimed it is not subject to open-records laws.

"I don't think that's right," Coatar said. "There were valid criticisms."

But "I think there were some personalities who really just wanted (Downtown STL CEO) Missy Kelley gone," Coatar said. "I think she's done a very good job in this role."

Coatar said he will introduce a bill at the Board of Aldermen amending the current CID, so that starting Jan. 1 it can hire its own staff, to focus solely on beautification and safety.

Downtown STL said Thursday it will narrow its focus to implementing a new plan for downtown and marketing. It's not clear how the organization, which has seven staff members, will make up the funding gap created by losing CID revenue. Kelley didn't respond to requests for comment. Coatar said "they're going to have to figure that out."

Another member of the CID board, Restoration St. Louis President Amrit Gill, said he voted for the new plan because "it seemed like a lot of the constituents of the CID would prefer this structure," though he felt the current arrangement worked.

Gill also said Kelley indicated it could lead to cost savings for the CID.

"The reason I finally bought into it was that it's not creating yet another agency," he said. "Part of the problem in St. Louis is that we have way too many agencies duplicating efforts."

A CID critic, developer Brad Waldrop of King Realty Advisors, said the latest changes are "superficial."



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Downtown St. Louis

"(Downtown STL) wanted to wash their hands of the dirty work: keeping downtown clean and safe," Waldrop said.

He said the key will be to track the language of a new CID's bylaws. The current CID expires at the end of 2021, and an effort for renewal will involve a vote of property owners this year.

Waldrop and others want the CID's board to have no more than 19 members and be made up of property owners that pay CID assessments, among other things. Waldrop said he won't drop a lawsuit against the CID, claiming it spent illegally on consultants working on the renewal, until those demands are met.

The CID board this month passed a resolution allowing it to draft the renewal petition; in one change, it recommended the board have between 11 and 15 members, down from 31.

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