

St. Louis Business Journal 2.3.2021



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a day ago

A longstanding feud over control of millions in downtown St. Louis tax money is escalating.

Downtown's current taxing district, which expires at the end of this year, acknowledges it does not yet have the signatures of property owners required for renewal, an effort that's been underway **since 2019**. But the Downtown St. Louis Community Improvement District says it's "very confident" it will eventually reach the goal, ensuring it continues to collect some \$3.5 million in annual tax payments for beautification and safety.

Meanwhile, a citizens group that's **long been critical of the CID** says it's now looking to create its own taxing district.

The group, called Citizens For a Greater Downtown St. Louis, said its community improvement district would raise roughly the same amount of money and include the same boundaries as the current CID — excluding Laclede's Landing — but would be managed differently, said **Les Sterman**, spokesman for the group. It hopes to finalize its plan in the next 30 days, after which it can begin its own signature gathering effort.

Sterman said his group's district would look to continue popular programs including police officers on bikes and workers who clear streets of garbage. But he said it would also engage in efforts dealing with liquor license applications, problem properties and overflowing dumpsters.

"These are all things the CID could be addressing," Sterman said. Even if it doesn't have control of those issues, "it can mobilize the downtown community to deal with this stuff."

"We envision a more energetic, engaged organization," he said, adding that it would be governed by a no more than 19-member board, with no fewer than 20% of directors owning and residing in downtown property.

Sterman said Citizens' CID would also set metrics to judge success or failure on safety, security, cleanliness and economic development. It would hire its own staff, and has

published information indicating that staffing would cost no more than \$1.4 million, including \$165,000 for an executive director.

The Citizens' CID would also be organized as a political subdivision rather than a nonprofit. The current CID, a nonprofit, has long claimed it is not subject to state open-records laws.

The current CID **in April said** it would move to a similar model after long contracting for staff with nonprofit Downtown STL Inc. Having lost a large chunk of its budget, Downtown STL merged with four other economic development organizations to **create Greater St. Louis Inc. on Jan. 1**. Downtown STL's leader, **Missy Kelley**, joined Greater St. Louis Inc.

But before that, in October, the current CID **hired** another Downtown STL staffer, **Kelli McCrary**, to be its executive director, leading to criticism that it will "keep doing the same thing they've always done," Sterman said.

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The current CID, though, **has pushed back on criticism** that its efforts have been ineffective during the pandemic, when downtown has suffered from a lack of workers and visitors. It pointed, in part, to street **barricades** that had been installed to deter street racing.

Though the current CID previously indicated it would look to finish collecting renewal signatures by the end of 2020, it released a statement Tuesday through public relations firm FleishmanHillard saying "we remain confident that we'll receive the signatures necessary to pass the amended CID," and that the organization has an "enhanced focus on safety, beautification and infrastructure."

It also called its effort "the only viable approach to provide supplemental services for Downtown St. Louis."

"As any organization working toward a goal, the CID set internal deadlines to be sure they're giving the organization the time needed to be successful," it said. "Conversations with the City Assessors office and other stakeholders have resulted in adjusting those internal goals."

The processes for approving a new CID or renewing the existing one are similar. Both require gathering signatures of property owners representing more than 50% of assessed value in the district and more than 50% of all owners. Once they gather those signatures, the initiative gets put before the Board of Aldermen.

A Downtown CID spokesman didn't respond to a question about its current goal for collecting signatures.

Sterman said downtown lawmakers previously indicated a bill approving the CID's renewal would need to make its way through the Board of Aldermen before new lawmakers are sworn in this year. The city has elections March 2 and April 6, including for mayor.

Sterman's effort is facing a similar timeline if downtown wants a taxing district in place at the beginning of 2022.

"Maybe just going through the process will cause the CID to come to the table" to create something both sides can live with, Sterman said. "If they don't, I think we're pretty committed."