

DOWNTOWN COMMITTEE OF SYRACUSE, INC.

September 15, 2026

**INSPYRE Innovation Hub
235 Harrison Street, Syracuse, NY 13202**

3:00 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

Attendance

Members: Chairman Tony Fiorito, Alberto Bianchetti, Brian Donnelly, Maarten Jacobs, Karyn Korteling, Ed Riley, Laiza Semidey, Cjala Surratt, Meg Tidd, Melissa Zell

Staff: Liza Bernard, Tom Campanie, Julia Fay, Becca Flint, Rachael Schaefer, Kristine Sherlock, Kevin Stanard, Merike Treier, Sarah Tietje-Mietz, Joe Violette

Guests: Joe Driscoll, City of Syracuse
Cory LaDuke – CBRE Upstate NY

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Chair Tony Fiorito called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m. and welcomed Board members and guests present. Chair Fiorito welcomed new Board member, Laiza Semidey, founder of Legendary Soul Studio and Director of Equity and Community Investments at Hueber-Breuer Construction. Semidey expressed enthusiasm for joining the Board and shared her desire to contribute to the significant transformation occurring within the City of Syracuse.

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM MAY 19, 2026

Chairman Fiorito asked the Board if there were any questions on the Minutes of May 19, 2026, and there were none. He asked for a motion to approve the minutes. Melissa Zell moved and Maarten Jacobs seconded. The motion was unanimously approved.

III. ADMINISTRATION

A. FINANCIAL REPORT AS OF JUNE 30, 2026

Board Treasurer Ed Riley presented the financial report for the fiscal period ending June 30, 2026. He reported that the organization concluded the fiscal year on budget with both revenues and expenses generally aligned with projections. Mr. Riley noted that funds had previously been reallocated from salary savings to marketing initiatives and events, consistent with Board-approved budget adjustments. He commended Executive Director Treier and the Downtown Committee staff for their strong financial management throughout the year.

Chairman Fiorito asked the Board for a motion to accept the Financial Report of June 30, 2026. Melissa Zell moved and Meg Tidd seconded. The motion was unanimously approved.

B. PRESENTATION OF DRAFT AUDITED FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

Executive Director Merike Treier reviewed the draft audited financial statements for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2026, prepared by FustCharles, the Downtown Committee's independent auditing firm. Treier explained that the only substantive revision from the version originally distributed to the Board involved the reclassification of certain grant revenue.

The Board was informed that the audit process proceeded smoothly despite staffing transitions within CenterState CEO's accounting department. The audit reflected a clean opinion, with no significant findings or concerns identified by the auditors. Variations in cash balances and receivables compared to the prior year were attributed primarily to timing differences involving grant reimbursements and City of Syracuse invoices that were subsequently paid in August 2026.

Chairman Fiorito asked the Board for a motion to accept the draft audited financial statement as presented. Brian Donnelly moved and Melissa Zell seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

IV. DISCUSSION: INTERSTATE 81 CONSTRUCTION IMPACTS

A. Staff Overview: Activities and considerations for supporting downtown businesses during construction

Executive Director Merike Treier explained that while the project presents substantial long-term opportunities for downtown revitalization, it will also create temporary operational challenges requiring coordinated support efforts.

Joe Driscoll, City of Syracuse I-81 Project Director, provided an update on the project schedule and construction contracts. He explained that work associated with Contract 6A, including installation of the major trunk sewer line, is expected to begin first, with significant activity occurring in 2027. Driscoll advised that more precise construction timing information was expected within the coming weeks.

Merike Treier noted that she, Joe Violette and Sarah Tietje-Mietz attended the recent International Downtown Association Annual Conference in September. Treier shared research conducted on downtown construction mitigation efforts in cities across North America, including Denver, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Saskatoon, and Calgary. Several key lessons emerged:

- Maintaining access to businesses comes before promotional efforts.
- Strong partnerships between public and private organizations lead to better outcomes.
- Businesses benefit from clear communication, consistent updates, and dedicated liaison support.
- Marketing initiatives should emphasize positive messaging and encourage continued visitation.
- Creative strategies such as wayfinding improvements, loyalty programs, and customer engagement campaigns can help sustain business activity during extended construction periods.

Joe Violette reported results from a recent stakeholder survey regarding awareness of the I-81 project. More than 50 responses were received. Results showed a roughly even split between respondents who felt informed and those who did not. Awareness and usage of existing information resources, including project websites, notification systems, and information centers, remained relatively low despite positive feedback from those who had utilized them.

Respondents identified the following information as priorities:

- Road closures and detour updates
- Construction schedules and timelines
- Parking and accessibility information
- Small business support resources
- Pedestrian and visitor wayfinding information

Treier presented five proposed areas of focus for the organization's response to the I-81 project:

1. **Advocacy** – Gathering stakeholder concerns and representing business interests with project partners.
2. **External Communications** – Disseminating accurate project information through digital platforms, public meetings, and stakeholder outreach.

3. **Education** – Providing businesses with communication tools, messaging guidance, and customer resources.
4. **Wayfinding and Activation** – Expanding parking information, signage, beautification efforts, and visitor activation activities.
5. **Marketing and Promotion** – Developing campaigns highlighting downtown attractions, launching a downtown gift card program, and promoting local businesses and events

Treier emphasized that the Downtown Committee's role should be that of a convener, advocate, facilitator, and educator rather than project manager as the Downtown Committee holds no authority over the contracts.

B. Board Discussion: potential roles, priorities, and next steps

Board members expressed strong support for the proposed framework and agreed that the Downtown Committee's greatest value lies in communication, advocacy, education, and business support.

Several themes emerged during discussion:

- The need for detailed, reliable construction schedules to assist businesses in planning operations.
- The importance of ensuring information reaches all businesses, particularly those not already engaged with downtown organizations.
- Opportunities to foster connections between construction workers and downtown businesses through promotional programs and incentives.
- The value of proactive and transparent communication regarding project disruptions.
- Recognition that downtown businesses may face challenges similar to those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that successful past initiatives, including gift card programs and coordinated promotional campaigns, may offer useful models.
- The need for the Downtown Committee to serve as a direct advocate for individual businesses facing construction-related issues.
- Continued emphasis on parking access, wayfinding, commuter considerations, and visitor experience throughout the multi-year project.

Board members also discussed the importance of maintaining accurate media messaging to counter misinformation and ensure public understanding that downtown remains active and accessible during construction.

V. OTHER BUSINESS AND ADJOURN

A brief discussion was held regarding reports that Upstate Medical University had requested modifications affecting Adams Street as part of future hospital expansion plans. Board members expressed concern that any changes should not undermine the connectivity goals of the community grid project.

Joe Driscoll stated that discussions remain ongoing and emphasized that any proposal would require significant public review and consideration by city leadership and the Common Council before action could be taken.

Driscoll reiterated his commitment to working with the Downtown Committee and encouraged business owners and stakeholders to contact him directly regarding concerns related to the I-81 project. He expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage with the Board and participate in future discussions.

With no other business before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 4:25 p.m.

Next Meeting

**November 17, 2026
3:00 p.m.**