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To: Ardmore Initiative Board of Directors

From: Donna Ann Harris

Subject: Observations and recommendations about SWOT exercise in Ardmore

Ardmore Initiatives (AI) is embarking on a new five-year Strategic Plan to accompany a Retail Market Analysis and Business Recruitment Plan to identify the preferred future for downtown Ardmore. The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) workshop is the second step in a four-step process to gather information from residents, shoppers, property owners, and other stakeholders to understand Ardmore consumer needs and wants. Donna Ann Harris of Heritage Consulting Inc. is working with AI on the new Strategic Plan, and facilitated the SWOT workshop held on the evening of June 15, 2017.

After review of the raw notes from the SWOT exercise, we are making the following observations and recommendations to solve some short-term concerns discussed during the meeting.

Most of the issues discussed at the SWOT cannot be solved by Ardmore Initiatives alone. The first part of this memo identifies opportunities where direct action by the AI board, committees, and volunteers can solve problems in the near term.

At the end of the memo, we offer a summary of the key issues discussed during the SWOT where the AI organization cannot control the outcome, but where expanded and strengthened relationships with the Township and other local organizations will help solidify recent successes and make further progress in the downtown.

We hope these observations and recommendations are useful and feed into the larger effort to identify a handful of strategic priorities for the organization's long-term future as part of the Strategic Planning process.

Internal issues (organizational matters that AI can control)

AI Board, Staff and Volunteers

Observations

- The SWOT attendees understood that the AI's designation as an accredited National Main Street community created additional benefits to the organization.
- AI staff members were praised as being effective.
- SWOT attendees understood the value of engaging in a new five-year strategic planning exercise because the previous plan had yielded results.
- Volunteers play a key role in the work of the AI, and volunteer recruitment and retention are ongoing activities.
- The Ardmore Business Association (ABA) is a long-standing organization and plays a key role for local business owners.
- Attendees acknowledged there were tensions between board and staff of the AI and the ABA.
- Some SWOT attendees seemed confused about whether AI was a public entity or private nonprofit organization and were seeking more organizational transparency, especially around budgeting.

Recommendations

- The AI board should review its current roster, especially after the Strategic Plan is complete, to identify board skills and experiences that it needs soon to implement key projects, and recruit board members to fill vacancies as they occur.
- We understand that AI regularly posts its annual audit and annual report on its website, but further efforts at organizational transparency would help. The AI board may want to consider posting a board-approved one page annual budget, all Board and Executive Committee meeting minutes, and its IRS 990 on its website.
- AI may need to do a better job of showcasing its successes and future plans, especially to stakeholders, so that they understand how the organization is funded, operated, and organized as a quasi-governmental municipal authority.
- We understand there are several AI board members who are also ABA board members. We encourage this cooperation and recommend improvements in communication between the two organizations.
- Continue to maintain the AI office as the *de facto* Visitor Center for the community.
- Develop a stable volunteer program, including upgraded efforts at recruitment, retention, and recognition activities to support committees and provide a potential pool for future board candidates.

AI funding

Observations

- As a municipal authority, the AI is fortunate to have a regular, predictable funding source for operations through the BID. SWOT participants understood that the current BID assessment does not produce enough revenue to support the current ambitions of the organization.
- SWOT attendees noted that the organization is hampered in its work by the general decline in grant

funds available for operations and for downtown revitalization projects.

- Giving by AI board members has been inconsistent.
- In the past, there was a residential fundraising program and AI staff has plans to relaunch this effort in 2017.
- AI has a long-standing sponsorship program, but board and staff are frustrated that sponsorships and charitable contributions are not an easy ask.

Recommendations

- Consider creating a board committee on fundraising to provide guidance to AI staff on development of an individual giving (“friends of”) program. After reviewing program ideas, launch the individual giving campaign to gather small donations for unrestricted operating funds, seek donations for specific projects or offer family or individual sponsorship opportunities for projects.
- The board fundraising committee should also assist in soliciting corporate contributions. The committee should identify, with staff, a list of likely corporate contributors and make appointments to solicit their support for AI projects.
- The AI board member agreement should spell out any board giving requirement, and the board chair should report on progress in collecting board gifts at each board meeting.
- Continue to review the current sponsorship opportunities being offered and adjust funding levels and advertising opportunities as needed.
- Review the BID assessment formula after the three new mixed use development projects are completed to assure that the BID budget has grown enough to support the larger ambitions of AI when the next BID renewal occurs in 2023.

AI events

Observations

- SWOT participants were generally positive about current AI produced events, especially events aimed at families and children.
- In general, SWOT participants wanted to grow most of the downtown events, especially ones that feature music.
- SWOT participants want current AI events to be better promoted, especially through social media.
- Some said that the Memorial Day parade was disappointing.

Recommendations

- Board should consider the current size of all its existing events and make strategic decisions about which events it wants to grow based on event and sponsorship revenue potential, crowd control, and event quality.
- The AI staff is small and volunteer committees help them implement events. Given current staff capacity, it is not possible to expand events much further without strong volunteer leadership and support.
- Some family friendly events may not benefit from explosive growth. Once these decisions are made, make stakeholders aware of your intentions, recruit additional volunteers, and execute.
- Utilize volunteers to implement events and work with more partners to bring additional volunteers.

External issues (AI can try to influence, but not control)

Lower Merion Township regulations, ordinances, and funding improvements

Observations

- SWOT participants recognized that AI enjoys a positive and beneficial relationship with the Township of Lower Merion, and there were opportunities throughout the year to educate elected officials about downtown issues.
- Small business owners cited the onerous paperwork required to open businesses, hang signs, and improve designated historic buildings in Ardmore under jurisdiction of the Historic Architectural Review Board (HARB).
- There were complaints that Township resources have been diverted to other commercial districts.
- No one at the SWOT workshop knew that the Township employed a part time retail recruiter.

Recommendations

- The AI Design Committee and staff provide a wealth of design assistance to small businesses. Small business owners who utilize this service to make applications to the Township for incentives or for physical improvements to their properties find faster approvals with fewer complications.
- This year the Township has allocated \$9000 towards repairing sidewalks and tree beds in downtown Ardmore which have been damaged by tree roots.
- AI Board and staff needs to continue to work closely with Township elected officials and staff on physical upgrades to downtown Ardmore and jointly agree how these critical improvements will be funded in the next five years.
- Upon completion of the Retail Market Analysis and Business Recruitment Plan, the AI Board should decide if it needs to hire a retail recruitment consultant dedicated to Ardmore to fill downtown vacancies based on these reports.

Business mix and the business climate in downtown Ardmore

Observations

- There was obvious excitement about downtown Ardmore's future from SWOT attendees and the variety and diversity of businesses, especially the 45 restaurants that make Ardmore a regional dining destination.
- There are pockets of non-retail uses in the commercial district. There are no anchor stores or arts institutions (movie theater, performing arts center). The Township government offices are located on the edge of the downtown core.
- The commercial district needs to service a variety of incomes and business ownership needs to be more reflective of the Ardmore community.
- Some believed that anchor store(s) were needed and that shops need to be open later in the evening at least one day a week.
- Convenience retail was lacking, and SWOT participants noted that there may be too many personal service shops.

- Suburban Square was viewed as a highly important neighbor, a draw for shoppers, and a potential marketing partner.
- There were a handful of businesses that seemed to be missing in downtown Ardmore based on SWOT participant comments.
- Some believe that construction disruptions will result in closed businesses.

Recommendations

- Despite the general appreciation of the current business mix, more can be done to tweak the mix by working with property owners and area brokers to bring in high quality tenants to current and anticipated vacancies due to retirements.
- Form an Economic Restructuring Committee to actively solicit new complementary businesses based on the Business Recruitment Plan. Likely committee members might include area bankers, business owners, or economic development officials. Write a job description and solicit for committee members.
- Some of the missing businesses might be viable business prospects. We defer to the upcoming Retail Market Analysis and Retail Recruitment Plan for guidance about which businesses the EV Committee should actively recruit.
- Some SWOT participants wanted more upscale restaurants, and the Retail Market Analysis will provide data to determine if these businesses could be viable in downtown.
- Determine if the organization wishes to encourage store owners to be open late one evening a week.

Public and private sector efforts to enhance the physical attributes of downtown, parking complaints

Observations

- The physical character of downtown Ardmore garnered the most comments during the SWOT workshop. Most of the problems identified must be addressed by the Township and in cooperation with AI.
- SWOT participants noted that there is a lack of money for streetscape improvements from Lower Merion Township.
- There were complaints about publicly maintained infrastructure such as pedestrian lighting, crosswalks, wayfinding, sidewalks, bike racks, pedestrian kiosks and trash cans.
- While some felt that current pedestrian lighting was adequate, the majority felt that lighting upgrades were needed.
- There are no public restrooms or universal WIFI downtown. There are few public benches, save for Suburban Square. There were also complaints about poor cell phone reception downtown.
- More needs to be done by the Township to address pedestrian safety, including better crosswalks, pedestrian lighting and pedestrian and traffic signals.
- SWOT participants noted there is a need for more and larger wayfinding, parking signage, and pedestrian maps.
- Parks in the area are well maintained but might be underutilized.
- Many felt the Ardmore train station was tired and needed rehabilitation.
- Parking is a shared responsibility between the public and private sectors in a downtown like Ardmore. No one thought that there was enough parking.
- Participants acknowledged that Lancaster Avenue (Rt. 30) is a state highway and is the main artery of the Ardmore commercial district. An ongoing relationship with the Pennsylvania DOT regional

engineer is critical to address better signaling, speed, and general maintenance that were called out during the SWOT.

- The layout of downtown Ardmore makes truck deliveries difficult.
- There were several calls for a community gathering space, such as a performing arts venue downtown.
- Construction of new multiuse use buildings is in full swing in Ardmore, and the proactive planning around this major disruption to pedestrians, commuters, and business owners seems to be working. There was only one comment about construction, saying “it’s not horrible.”

Recommendations

- After the completion of the Strategic Plan, the AI board wants to undertake a “walkability study” in collaboration with the Township to address the many dangerous crosswalks, need for more pedestrian lighting, benches, planters, wayfinding, and sidewalk concerns noted by SWOT participants. AI staff is working with the regional director of the Pennsylvania Department of Economic Development to identify funding for planning and implementation.
- Suburban Square is an enormous asset to downtown Ardmore. This shopping center is undergoing major construction now, as new parking and stores will be added. Suburban Square attracts hundreds of thousands of shoppers annually, who could potentially be drawn into downtown with the cooperation of the shopping center’s owners by using appropriate signage and joint marketing.
- Work with all restaurants to encourage them to create more outdoor dining to enliven the streetscape.
- Continue to work with the Township to expand both public and private parking options.
- Continue to work with SEPTA on Ardmore Train Station’s upgrades.
- Determine how AI wants to address lack of public restrooms and the placement of more bike racks.
- Adequate cell phone service and WIFI access throughout downtown is essential, and should be a joint effort with the Township.

Downtown marketing and public relations

Observations

- AI’s current marketing, branding, and PR efforts were not seen as a current strength, but there were many comments about the opportunities ahead.
- AI needs to expand its social media presence to meet the needs of the organization, the downtown in general, and to promote individual businesses. There were calls for a downtown app and other technology to drive sales into stores.
- The Retail Market Analysis and Business Recruitment Plan will help identify specific business that are likely to be viable in the downtown district.
- People miss a printed shopping guide; we understand the last one was printed in 2013. The AI www.DestinationArdmore.com site has an online shopping directory.

Recommendations

- The AI should strengthen and expand its own online marketing efforts for the downtown by adding Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms to complement existing efforts on Facebook and through a weekly e-newsletter.
- When funds are available, consider a wholesale review of downtown branding and marketing efforts.

- Widely distribute the Retail Market Analysis and Business Recruitment Plan. Consider hosting small workshops to explain key highlights for merchants and property owners.
- Determine if a printed shopping guide makes sense or if a downtown app is more likely to be used.

Impact of the internet on downtown shopping

Observations

- SWOT attendees understand that the seismic change now occurring in the retail sector will have a direct impact on downtown Ardmore.
- There were anecdotal comments about current downtown retailers without email, websites, or social media presence. No one knew how many downtown retailers had an online sales presence.
- Other than expressing anxiety, SWOT participants did not offer specific strategies or tactics to address the internet's effect on brick and mortar shops.

Recommendations

- AI staff does not have up to date information about how many Ardmore businesses have web sites that they use to sell products/services, or how many businesses have an active social media presence to showcase their products/services. Undertake a survey to determine current needs of local businesses related to online marketing and selling.
- Determine if AI wants to make a concerted effort to offer training, resources, or support to shop owners who want to expand their sales channels by beginning or bolstering their existing online sales efforts or to help them add additional sales channels to complement their existing brick and mortar businesses.
- Work closely with the local SCORE chapter, the area Small Business Development Center, and area consultants to develop business training programs about online and social media selling,

Other matters that do not fit into other categories above

Observations

- Downtown Ardmore is uniquely positioned because of its transportation links, Main Line location, and generally upscale demographics.
- Main Line attitudes called "old school" were viewed as preventing positive change.
- Most were proud of the diverse population of Ardmore as well as the diversity of shop and restaurant price points.
- The lack of minority owned businesses downtown and minority shoppers was noted as a district weakness.
- There were pointed comments about absentee property owners and non-involved business owners.
- Rents were perceived as high in downtown Ardmore, but this is not true.

Recommendation

- Affordable rents in downtown Ardmore should be promoted and may help offset current perceptions.

Ardmore SWOT

Raw Notes

June 15, 2017

All the comments made at the SWOT Workshop participants are included here. None have been omitted or changed.

Strengths green

Opportunities blue

Weaknesses red

Threats purple

AI organization

- Very active business district authority (AI)
- Runs as a business district authority (we have an assessment)
- Previous strategic plan has yielded results
- Great leadership of the Executive Director and Assistant Director
- Marie
- Main Street program equals destination
- Designed Main Street program
- AI provides marketing assistance to businesses
- AI promotes a sense of place
- More wealth on AI board
- Cooperation between organizations, especially AI and ABA, Rotary, etc.
- Involve residents more in AI
- Cultivate volunteerism
- AI feels private rather than public
- Grow the AI and ABA boards
- More transparency needed at AI
- Decentralized business management downtown
- Need new blood on AI Board
- Hidden agendas
- More better volunteer outreach and retention
- Not enough volunteers to support events
- Animosity between groups such as AI and ABA
- Need open board meetings at AI
- AI and ABA board staff relationships
- Transparency with budgets for AI and ABA
- Small staff at AI
- Diversity on various boards is weak
- Multiple organizations with the same goals

Funding for downtown and AI

- AI needs a larger budget for economic development
- Lack of money for projects
- Lack of grant funds

- No funds=obsolete
- New methods to get sponsorship
- Lack of grants
- Same people donate to fundraising campaigns
- Newer business downtown need to become sponsors
- Fundraising pressure on AI
- Availability of grants has shrunk tremendously
- Insufficient financial support
- Reliance on grant funds
- Not enough funds from the BID
- There is no specific opportunity for residents to financially contribute to AI

AI events

- Imaginative community events x 5
- Kids events
- Cricket Cringle
- Community events
- Fests and annual events
- Octoberfest, Cricket Cringle make them bigger
- Taste of Ardmore better promoted, larger crowds
- Money towards more large-scale events
- Free music events downtown
- Create a night market
- More events like bike race on Lancaster Avenue
- Poor execution of events
- Not enough events
- Lack/loss of people participation in evening activities downtown
- Improve the Memorial Day parade
- Memorial Day parade could be better

Township issues

- Fabulous commissioners
- AI's relationship with the township is positive
- Lower Merion Township has open minded management
- We can educate our local legislators
- Too much bureaucracy for approvals such as signs
- Insecurities prevent moving forward for both AI and township
- Overdevelopment versus comprehensive plan
- Diversion of resources to other LMT towns
- Roadblocks for businesses such as signage and HARB
- Communication between the township and business owners could be better
- Streetscape general maintenance, trash pickup, weeds
- HARB is a hindrance
- Not enough money from the township for streetscape
- Township signage restrictions
- Not enough money for streetscape projects

Our business mix and customer service issues

- Variety of businesses
- Thrift stores
- Downtown has potential
- Night life is here
- There is entertainment downtown
- Music hall
- Quirky
- Restaurants drive evening businesses and walking
- The number of restaurant
- Casual restaurants
- Restaurants
- FOOD
- Beer x 4
- More retail stores
- Need a convenience store, something between Wawa and Carlines
- Vacant stores are an opportunity
- Increase night life and entertainment
- Need more specialty retail shops
- Attract more diverse businesses
- Need more retail shops
- More BYOBs
- More restaurants
- A coffee shops
- More white tablecloth dining, more upscale
- Wine and Spirits
- Too many restaurants
- Clients that come to one business and don't shop elsewhere in the area
- Missing teeth in retail
- Poor customer service experience
- Too much separation between shopping areas
- Pockets of retail
- Lack of anchor stores
- Competition from Big Box stores
- Tired Hands take over, market to their customers
- No anchor store or institution (performing arts center for example)
- Not a strong business district
- 3 Ardmore shopping districts, not one
- Retail mix needs work
- There is no men's store
- No coffee shops
- Beer releases
- Little practical shopping, every day retail convenience shopping
- Need a tiki bar
- No toy stores

- No kids store
- Redundant personal service shops (too many nail salons)
- Vacancies

Physical attributes of downtown

PUBLIC SECTOR ISSUES

- Pedestrian lighting is good
- Train station
- Walkable x 6
- Traffic calming
- Suburban Square nearby
- Convenient x2
- Greenspace and playgrounds are well maintained
- Parks are supported and well maintained
- Not a one street town
- Unique attributes of Ardmere (train, walkable, diverse)
- Lack of public restrooms
- Pedestrian safety
- Need more bike racks
- Better crosswalks, signals, and signage
- Schaufele plaza is underutilized compared to its potential
- Better walking and driving signage
- Construction is not horrible
- Street lighting like Media
- More arts venues
- Central event space downtown
- Need a social community gathering space
- Performing arts center or community space
- Need more parking kiosks, update them
- Poor internet coverage in downtown
- Train station aesthetics
- Downtown is not attractive
- Not enough space for delivery trucks to make deliveries
- Infrastructure is old
- Construction disruption
- Not enough wayfinding
- Vehicle traffic growth
- Dangers to pedestrians and cyclists
- Construction delays
- Few places to sit outside other than Suburban Square, i.e. no benches downtown
- Construction mitigation
- Poor cell phone coverage in downtown
- Technology and signage is so far ahead—suburban square
- Old infrastructure sidewalks dirt etc.
- Pedestrian lighting

- Sidewalks
- Trash cans
- Route 30 is a state highway
- Need PA DOT in making any changes on Lancaster Ave.
- Route 30 encourages drive through traffic and not pedestrian safety
- Pedestrian safety
- Want an adopt a planter program
- More pedestrian lighting needed
- Pedestrian safety is a concern
- Perception that the train station is old and needs rehabilitation
- Too much traffic
- More or better wayfinding

PRIVATE SECTOR issues

- Amenities: shopping, dining, night life
- Ardmore's downtown is a historic district
- Sense of community
- Create more warmth through murals and public art
- Encourage more businesses to be involved in streetscape, planting, washing windows etc.
- Suburban Square and business district disconnect
- Suburban Square/downtown disconnect
- Suburban square
- Customers need change for parking meters
- Anderson Avenue
- More outdoor dining needed

Parking

- Lots more parking needed x 3
- Not enough residential and business parking locations
- Perceived parking times and place
- Parking x 3
- Lack of parking

Downtown marketing and PR

- Link downtown and Suburban Square marketing
- More marketing by AI
- More PR
- Engage Suburban Square in downtown
- Shops should coordinate to be open one night a week
- Advanced marketing Destination Ardmore
- Make the AI office into a visitor center
- More night time shopping
- Comprehensive social media effort from AI
- More use of Instagram and other social media by AI
- A more visible community calendar
- Attract people from Philly

- Increase in both business and property values
- More feet on the street from new residents
- Fill the gap that malls cannot
- Market to colleges nearby
- Cater to young families and young singles living here
- More cooperation among regional towns
- Attract more families downtown
- Pop up beer gardens
- More emphasis on creating a destination for Ardmore
- Better visibility for Ardmore
- Nothing to keep customers here after they have completed their task
- King of Prussia
- Branding issues, unclear KISS
- Making Ardmore more of a destination
- We know what kind of retail to recruit
- Marketing of existing businesses
- Differentiate from Suburban Square
- More promotions need
- Active retail coordination
- Marketing and PR are weak
- There is no printed shopping guide (there is one on the AI web site)

Attitudes about the business community in general

- Dedicated business owners
- Stores have reasonable rents
- We can correct misperceptions about downtown through education
- Business community outreach
- Business recruitment Heidi
- Business involvement in ABA
- Perception of high rent (rents are low downtown)
- Nonexistent property owners, some owners not local
- Will current businesses survive three years of construction?
- Focus on the new people coming to town
- New businesses choosing other towns
- Uninformed property owners'
- Disengaged property owners, 20-30% do not live in LMT
- Bring the business and community together
- Need more open house community affairs
- Lack of confidence by business to establish extended hours (nighttime)
- Lack of ownership by businesses
- Not all locals shop local, why? What are the barriers?
- Lack of evening hours by local businesses

Impact of the internet on downtown shopping

- More retailers starting on line sales efforts
- Access to custom web developers, small business can use improved web sites

- More retailers need to have online presence
- More social media needed
- Emphasis on modern technology for public relations
- Online shopping hurts brick and mortar retail
- Internet x 3
- Internet as alternative source for goods and services
- Online selling hurts brick and mortar stores
- Services and service options impact retail options— Amazon
- Internet is a brick and mortar threat

Demographics

- Upscale demographics generally
- Demographics
- Main Line has high disposable income
- Shops accessible to different income levels
- Changes to the fabric of the community— demographic changes

Diversity of residents and businesses

- Diverse business types
- Population diversity x 3
- Diversity of businesses x3
- Ardmore is diverse
- Missing a segment of the population, need to be more inclusive
- Lack of minority business downtown
- Diversity of businesses
- Lack of minority owned businesses
- Housing affordability, does it match the shopping services/retail
- Racial segregation

Ardmore has location, location, location

- Great mass transit, bus, train, Amtrak x 7
- Geographic location x 2
- Ardmore is the township seat, and it's in the district
- Strong township managing and staff
- Close to Philadelphia x 2
- Small town feel

High quality relationships

- Business networking
- ABA an active business association
- Family friendly x 2
- An active community is a safe community
- Community engagement
- Community involvement

Community attitudes

- Embrace change
- Many choices
- Not open to change
- Rumors
- Old school mentality
- Lacking flexibility
- Reluctance to change
- Complacency
- Old school mentality
- Old school Main Line attitude
- Need new blood
- Political malaise
- People are depressed
- General divisiveness

Other issues

- Rising prices and costs
- Higher property taxes
- Seniors not being able to afford school tax
- Uncertain economy highs and lows