

JEDO approves funding for downtown Topeka plaza, NOTO parking

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The Joint Economic Development Organization on Wednesday cleared the way for completion of a public plaza in downtown Topeka, granting more than a million dollars to the project and sparking debate on how countywide sales tax funds are distributed.

In a 4-3 vote, JEDO members approved recommendations made by a panel of community volunteers to award \$2 million in economic development money to four projects out of 16 applicants.

One of those projects will invest \$644,000 in the NOTO Arts District, assisting in efforts to add parking and establish Redbud Park.

Mayor Michelle De La Isla rebuffed criticism over pouring the bulk of available quality of place funding into jewels in the heart of the city, saying feedback from the community makes it clear residents want to make the city more attractive.

Both projects are integral to objectives laid out in Momentum 2022, the master plan for making the community a better place to work and live.

“We’re never going to get the workplace we want if we don’t provide these amenities the community is craving,” De La Isla said.

Lazone Grays challenged whether decision makers were being inclusive of minority needs. If you aren’t downtown or part of the clique involved with administering public funds, he said, you don’t even know what Momentum 2022 is.

He asked for at least \$50,000 to support his organization, IBSA, which provides employment and training service, youth development and small business training. The money would have allowed IBSA to buy a vacant building at 1196 S.W. Washburn to better serve residents in central Topeka who need help.

He said the constant conversation about downtown Topeka sucks all the energy out of the room. The plaza and NOTO projects were going to be completed no matter what, he said.

“These guys don’t sit in a room and think, ‘What can we do for central Topeka,’” Grays said.

Kurt Kuta, president and CEO of CoreFirst Bank and Trust who serves on the GO Topeka executive committee, led a panel of volunteers who aren’t involved with those working under the Momentum 2022 umbrella. They considered 14 projects — all of which deserved funding, he said.

To narrow the list, they decided to focus on projects that could be completed within 12 to 18 months and included private funding.

“Not everything was going to get funded, right?” Kuta said. “So we had to go through a process.”

Under questioning from Shawnee County Commissioner Bob Archer about whether the panel’s meetings were open to the public, Kuta said they weren’t announced. None of the recommended projects, Archer said, was approved by a public vote.

Archer, Councilman Mike Lesser and Councilman Mike Padilla advocated for sending the matter back to the panel for more work.

De La Isla pushed the issue to a vote, securing support from Commissioners Shelly Buhler and Kevin Cook and Councilman Brendan Jensen to approve the funding.

With millions already invested in the downtown plaza by private businesses, the addition of \$1,250,000 in public funds puts the project on pace to be completed as early as December 2019. The plaza will span lots at 618, 630 and 632 S. Kansas

Ave. and feature a stage with a 30-foot-tall digital screen. A splash pad will double as an ice rink during winter months.

Two other projects will get \$53,000. The funding allows Jayhawk Theatre to connect with city sewer and water services. In Auburn, the money will pay for equipment at an exercise park.

Among the projects that won't receive funding were proposals to support a Japanese garden project at the Topeka Zoo, riverfront development and amenities at the Kansas Expo centre.