December 6, 2018

Dear Olympia Downtown Alliance Member,

In light of recent events surrounding the Olympia Downtown Alliance’s Safety Team, and the article published today in The Olympian, I felt it necessary to provide our members with information, updates and my perspective regarding these issues. Of particular interest, you will find an update about contingency plans of the Olympia Police Department and a path forward for the Safety Team. I apologize in advance for the length, but in a world of memes and soundbites, I continue to believe it is important to articulate the nuance involved in complicated issues.

In case you were not aware, in May the Downtown Alliance helped to coordinate a Downtown Safety Team to be present in the downtown “core” 7-nights a week, 4-hours per night. Seventy percent of the properties in that area voluntarily shared the cost of the program. In addition to the trespass engagement that has received the majority of attention, the Safety Team provided information about social services to those in need, was on-call to escort downtown employees to their vehicles, provided directions to downtown patrons, and communicated suspicious activity to the Olympia Police Department. In several instances, the Safety Team contacted 911 when individuals were non-responsive. These individuals were then provided transport to local hospitals.

In the last few months, a group called the Olympia Solidarity Network began protesting the program. This included large group visits to participating stakeholder offices, calls for boycott of program participants, phone zap campaigns, picketing of the Harlequin Theater, and pamphleting at Alliance events. Our organization respects the right of any individual or group to exercise first amendment rights.

Unfortunately, the effort did not stop there. On three occasions, this group, with 20-30 individuals wearing black masks and black clothing, confronted Safety Team members, surrounding them, screaming profanities and threats at them. On one of those occasions, they chased them back to the Alliance offices, where the Safety Team locked the door behind them. This group then pounded on the front, back, and side doors for forty minutes, while Safety Team members took shelter inside. Ultimately, this Monday, the company contracted to staff the Safety Team, Pacific Coast Security, informed the Alliance that given the imminent threat to the safety of their employees, they would suspend the contract indefinitely until measures were taken to assure safety.
Within this context, I feel it's important to acknowledge the health of our downtown is impacted by complicated and highly nuanced challenges. Unfortunately, I have observed during my short tenure with the organization a tendency for these challenges to be framed by polarizing forces in the community as either/or propositions. For example, groups such as the Olympia Solidarity Network present a narrative that the Downtown Alliance and Safety Team stakeholders are anti-homeless. I find these sort of polarizing narratives harmful to our community, unproductive, and simply untrue. Disappointingly, this polarizing narrative has been carried through in Olympian articles regarding the work of the Downtown Safety Team.

My expertise does not lie in homeless services. I do understand however, that those within our community experiencing homelessness have all entered into this situation with their own individual, nuanced experiences. I do not believe that stigmatizing these individuals as a population overall of bad actors is accurate or productive.

Many of us have had first-hand experiences with family or friends who have suffered from mental health or drug addiction issues, often leading to homelessness. My little brother experienced homelessness and ultimately passed away from a heroin overdose. It is something from which our family will never recover. I often think I catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye on our downtown streets. I do feel the importance of extending grace to individuals in crisis.

Similar circumstances are devastating families and communities across the nation, including our own. The scale of this issue is most appropriately addressed at the federal and state levels. Unfortunately, it seems that relief is not coming, and that our community is forced to go at it alone. While our small business community may not always agree with decisions made by our local elected officials, it is incumbent upon us to continue to provide them with feedback about their actions.

Having said that, I don't believe our most vulnerable are well served by seeking shelter in building alcoves. In increasing levels, our downtown business and property owners have experienced individuals camping in building alcoves, on private property. Many of these individuals, seeking shelter and respite, inhabit the space for the night, and leave the space in the morning, with no impacts. If this experience was universal, it is unlikely the concept of the Safety Team would have been implemented.

Unfortunately, often this is not the experience that plays out. So many downtown stakeholders have reflected back to me accounts of serious property damage, including: broken or etched windows, graffiti and tagging, destroyed planter boxes, fires that damage the property and stoke fears of burning down historic, wood framed buildings, remnants of chemicals that have ruined historic floor tiles, feces and urine on the ground and through
door cracks and mail slots, and used needles, some left pointing sharp end up in planter boxes.

In addition, business owners or downtown employees may be greeted by individuals that refuse to allow entry to the business and may become belligerent and threatening at the suggestion. In the evening, I have fielded concerns of downtown employees working late, when egress has been blocked to a single entry building, leaving them in a quandary about how to exit the building. The risk of individuals being trapped in the building in the event of a fire becomes a concern.

Having worked for other Downtown Management Organizations in Denver, Colorado and Long Beach, California, I would offer that the business community in Downtown Olympia is the most compassionate group of business owners I have observed. Historically, downtown Olympia stakeholders have invested deeply in both financial resources and time to assist Olympia's high quality social service providers helping those in need. It bears mentioning that our downtown business community, whether through philanthropy or tax generation, contribute significant resources to help those in need. The Olympia Downtown Alliance, while only a small non-profit with limited resources, has donated both financial and in-kind resources to groups such as Sidewalk, Family Resource Center, Community Care Center, and SafePlace. As business owners continue to feel the strain of the above mentioned challenges, their chances of success become compromised, as does their ability to do their part as a community member to support a population in need.

Given the limited resources available, the Safety Team endeavored to help mitigate the challenges referenced above. Safety Team members were intentionally not armed and wore polo shirts with a Downtown Alliance logo. They were trained to address all individuals with dignity and respect, informing campers in alcoves that they could not occupy the alcove. They were trained to allow the individual time to gather their belongs, checking back on their next trip around the area. If they encountered aggression, they were trained to walk away. The large percentage of the time, individuals moved on voluntarily, and the Olympia Police Department was not called. Since the Safety Team's inception in May, stakeholders within the service area have reported a significant decrease in the type of incidents and impacts referenced above.

I would like to point out that “Safety Teams” or “Ambassador” programs are employed in downtown's across the nation, facilitated by Downtown Management Organizations (such as the Downtown Alliance), and funded mainly by property owners, through self-assessment districts. These programs provide a wide-breadth of services including hospitality and ambassadorial services, homeless outreach, and trespass engagement.
It's also important to mention that contracted staff of the Safety Team, PCS, also provides similar security services for City Hall, LOTT Wastewater Treatment Plant, Timberland Library, Intercity Transit's Transit Center, and the Community Care Center.

In terms of the future of the Safety Team program, in the short term the Olympia Police Department (OPD) has informed me that they will provide additional staffing through the end of the year to enforce trespass violations that were being addressed by the Safety Team. During that time, the Downtown Alliance will be working with OPD on measures that will allow the Downtown Safety Team to be re-instated.

Longer term, into 2019, the Downtown Alliance will begin exploration of a voluntary, property self-assessment district that would allow significant expansion and evolution of the Safety Team concept. The evolution of the program philosophy will be shaped by the will of downtown stakeholders, including partners in the social service realm. As is the contemporary model in downtowns across the nation, this could manifest in the Downtown Alliance facilitating homeless outreach services, while still addressing trespassing on private property and overarching issues of safety.

I want to honor your commitment as a business or property owner downtown and thank you for your support of the Downtown Alliance. It's important that we don't lose sight of the opportunity and promise that our downtown holds. The Downtown Alliance stands with you, working to develop and implement programs to help unlock that promise and help you succeed as a business. While the challenges we face are daunting, our best chance at success is to find common ground and work together to make this the downtown our region is yearning for.

Thanks for your attention.

Sincerely,

Todd Cutts

Executive Director