

Dear Council Members and Staff,

In reviewing the agenda for the July 15 meeting, it appears that there are two economic development ideas – Main Street Grants and Economic Gardening.

While I wholeheartedly encourage attention to our business community and beautification of Main Street, it seems that these two proposals should be used in conjunction with one another. They both need concrete goals and measurable outcomes. In the past, Council spent money (approximately \$500K) with Craig Litwin and Laura Hagar Rush for “economic vitality” which amount to nothing. The town has been in economic decline because these efforts did not address the street conditions for businesses, consumers and residents. In fact, the street conditions have eroded since the money was spent.

Council and the Chamber need a clear plan for economic development which should follow a timeline as such:

- 1) Downtown Beautification – removal of stickers on poles and utility boxes, removal of graffiti, power wash the sidewalks, paint the gazebo, give stores money for window washing and holiday window paint;
- 2) Get a Blight Ordinance in place;
- 3) Address the homeless numbers. Currently, Sebastopol has more homeless people per capita than any other city in Sonoma County. This is a huge problem for our community and our business community. Please read this public comment.  
<https://www.cityofsebastopol.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Sebastopol-Generous-With-Homeless-High-cost-to-Taxpayers.pdf> It notes that Cloverdale has less than 10 homeless people. Sebastopol has over 100! Council needs to get a plan;
- 4) Survey businesses on what would help them. Use a simple Survey Monkey survey;
- 5) Connect Main Street to downtown.

Until these basics are accomplished, other ideas will not be successful because Sebastopol is not attractive to business owners, especially compared to other locations like Petaluma, Cloverdale, Windsor, Sonoma and Healdsburg – all of which are cleaner, have less homeless people, no downtown Homekey projects and more business friendly.

In addition, Council needs to ask the City Attorney about a blight ordinance. Perhaps the Chamber and Council Member Carter could work on moving this through Council? A Council Member needs to move this forward with urgency as the RITE AID lot will be vacant by the end of August. That is less than two months away.

If Rite Aid becomes the site of a homeless encampment and drug dealing spot, it will be horrible for all downtown businesses. I urge Council and the Chamber to work to get a blight ordinance in place ASAP so that the City Attorney can start to do outreach to landlords, including the corporation that owns the RITE AID lot.

In drafting the blight ordinance, this is what I would list for all occupied and unoccupied commercial structures

- 1) Graffiti clean-up with 72 hours;
- 2) Remove of all trash, debris, and fire hazard materials within 72 hours;
- 3) Remove any illegal camping materials within 72 hours;
- 4) No camping on any commercial property unless permitted by City;
- 5) Enforce No Trespass Laws on any vacant property;
- 6) No overnight parking on any commercial or city owned lots;
- 7) Landscape maintenance to prevent fire, excess debris and overgrown lots;
- 8) No laying down or sitting on exterior of buildings or parking lots unless permitted by City;
- 9) No consumption of alcohol on property unless licensed by the State and permitted by City;
- 10) No consumption of drugs on property unless licensed by the State and permitted by City;
- 11) Building must be kept up to code in order to prevent fire and safety issues;
- 12) All properties that do not have a local landlord must file a No Trespass Action Letter with the Sebastopol Police Department on July 1 every year and keep an updated copy on record so SPD can enforce trespass, parking and camping violations;
- 13) Post No Trespass, No Overnight Parking and No Panhandling Signs in Commercial

I urge the Council and the Chamber to attend to these basic needs before investing significant tax funds into new programs.

If the Main Street program can help clean up downtown, connect Main Street to the Barlow, power wash the sidewalks and help businesses decorate their storefronts for the holidays, I would say that meets the foundational needs of downtown and should be pursued.

I ask Council to act quickly in regard to RITE AID. Please have the City Council contact the landlord to make sure that there is a no Trespass Action on File, that no Overnight Parking, No RV Parking and No panhandling Signs are installed to prevent any encampments on the property.

In addition, Council might want to pursue a lease with the RITE AID and owner for the parking lot to make the parking available to shoppers on Main Street.

RITE AID is an urgent situation for downtown and needs to be addressed immediately. Have the City Attorney contact the land owner and at minimum request 1) No Trespass Action put on file with SPD, 2) No Overnight Parking, No RV parking and No Panhandling signs posted. This is the bare minimum and will allow police officers to remove illegal campers and trespassers from the lot. If the City does not negotiate parking with the land owner, then the land owner should be asked to install a small chain fence or some other barrier to establish lot lines.

Best,  
Kate Haug