

Howard Street & Jarvis Square Special Service Area #19
Factory Theater -1623 W. Howard St
Wednesday, March 19, 2025 at 9 am

Commissioners present: Tim Amos, Dave Skora, Charlotte Walters

Others present: Sandi Price & Cindy Plante, RPBA
Kyle Ryan, 49th Ward
Jenni Smith - Pending commissioner

1. Call to order

Meeting was called to order at 9:06am

2. Approve meeting minutes from February 2025

Tim moved approval, Charlotte seconded.

Approved 3-0

3. Financial update

Sandi presented YTD financials as well as draft year-end financials from 2024. SSA19 took in about \$20,000 in February 2025, but there were several negative amounts from prior tax years in the report. For FY2024, SSA19's budgeted levy was \$452,000, but we only received \$375,000, leaving a gap of about \$77,000. We don't know why this is happening - it could be due to people successfully appealing their tax bills, vacancies, or people just plain not paying. We'll cover this again next month at the audit meeting, but in the meantime, this SSA should proceed with the expectation that we're not going to get our full levy this year either, and will probably need to cut some things that we included in this year's budget.

Kyle asked if other SSA's are also having this problem. Sandi reported that SSA43 in West Ridge received 97% of their budgeted levy last year; we're not sure about SSA24 or 54 yet but will get a number for you.

Sandi has been in favor of dropping snow service, as SSA19 is one of the only SSAs in RPBA's service area that still does it, though we did achieve savings this season by switching to per-occurrence rather than a yearly contract.

Charlotte asked how much we've paid for snow service. Cindy reported that it's about \$9,000, though snow season isn't officially over until the end of this month, but we haven't had much snow this year. Even so, that's less than half of what we were paying for annual contracts.

Sandi added that our other big contract is with A5 for social media maintenance at about \$2,000 a month. They used to do website maintenance also but we brought it in-house. We've reached out to them to try and negotiate a new contract and are awaiting a proposal from them.

Charlotte feels this is too much.

Sandi asked Jenni who does social media for RPH. Jenni said she does it herself and it's very time consuming.

Cindy reported that this is comparable to what SSA43 spends on social media maintenance with another company for a similar scope of work, which is 3 posts per week on facebook and instagram, including stories.

Sandi said that SSA19s' other major expense each year is Chalk Howard Street, which brings us to...

4. Chalk Howard Street

Cindy received 2 responses to the RFP and shared the winning proposal with commissioners via email. The cost was \$68,000 - we haven't signed a contract yet because no vote was taken at the February meeting, and because of the funding uncertainty.

Charlotte feels that \$68,000 is too much for a single-day event.

Cindy said it's not inconsistent with expenses in previous years - the first year 2019 it was closer to \$75,000; post-pandemic we achieved pretty significant savings when we shifted to Star Events, but that's no longer an option since they've closed. Even before that happened, we actually put over \$100,000 in this year's budget for special events, but as we've discussed, just because it's in the approved budget doesn't guarantee that we'll actually receive the full levy amount. If we have a gap this year like we did in 2024, we'd be in trouble.

Dave is somewhat conflicted; the event has been good for PR, and has drawn positive coverage on local TV news, but doesn't think the benefits are enough to justify such a high expense.

Could we do something lower cost, like smaller events, or year-round decorative lighting? Dave favors taking a pause to rethink the event and focus on implementing One Howard Street recommendations.

Sandi reminded commissioners that we're not allowed to leave lights on trees year-round and have to take them down in spring to allow trees to grow and leaf out. Sandi asked Cindy if she's reached out to Illuminight about doing rope lights on poles like Devon Avenue has.

Cindy has had a conversation with Illuminight about this, and he raised the concerns that vandalism would be a concern on Howard, and that it would look weird if the lights weren't installed on Evanston side of the street too. In any case it's a fairly large cost to purchase and install these. The most recent contract for this work on Devon was \$26,000 to replace parts and do maintenance.

Sandi isn't concerned about vandalism and is willing to bring this up with our counterparts in Evanston.

Jenni acknowledged the fact that she's not officially a commissioner yet, but said she really prefers the look of the tree lights over the color changing year-round rope lights on Devon. It makes more sense there because the area has fewer vacancies and is always busy.

Kyle cautioned against tying the potential cancellation of Chalk Howard Street with One Howard Street projects as Dave has suggested, and asked when's the deadline to make a decision on this?

Cindy hasn't been given a hard deadline, but needs to make the call soon. If we were to sign a contract and start tomorrow we'd be getting a late start - in past years we'd already be booking artists and starting the permit process by now.

Kyle shares the concern about receiving 80% or less of the annual levy and asked if there's a list of properties that are delinquent. He plans to reach out to the assessor's office about this. He asked how receipts in February of 2025 compared to the same period last year.

Sandi said there is a list but its usefulness is limited because it only says what was paid for each PIN, not what they owed. Sandi checked last year's records and reported that SSA19 didn't receive any money in February 2024 - the first disbursement we received for the year was in May of 2025 for \$125,000. We knew we'd get more after the second installment deadline but weren't sure how much.

Cindy added that she has been in contact with at least one building owner that we know who was on the tax sale list and he was working on fixing it. Generally the 2nd installment bill is larger than the first installment - 45% vs. 55%.

Sandi raised the possibility of moving Chalk Fest to Devon Avenue this year, since that SSA has been looking to host a festival and has the budget to do so. They balked at a previous proposal for \$100,000, but could take on \$68,000.

Dave asked about the potential impact of upcoming developments at Ashland and Paulina.

Sandi and Kyle acknowledged that it would have an impact on property taxes for the area eventually, but not anytime soon.

Sandi acknowledged that there's consensus against cutting holiday lights or snow removal, and she understands why snow is important to people even though she would still prefer to cut it.

Charlotte moved to cancel Chalk Howard Street.

Dave proposed amending cancel to pause. Others agreed. Dave seconded the motion as amended.

Approved 3-0.

Cindy said that we might be able to still pursue smaller events, or a series of lower-cost events using grant funding.

Tim asked what can be done to encourage new businesses to open in the vacant spaces.

Sandi reported that we've been hosting broker open house events in each of our SSAs on a rotating basis. These events get brokers and landlords together with businesses that we know are looking for space. Our most recent one was on Morse and the next one is scheduled for Clark Street. The last time it was done on Howard was when we had the pop up arts space at 1609. We could plan one for Howard Street, but cautioned that these things take a while to move the needle. Sandi pointed to one example of a business owner looking for space who attended several of these over two years and is only now getting close to a lease for one of the vacant spots on Sheridan. Sandi asked Cindy to include an agenda item about smaller events on next month's agenda.

Dave pointed out that other organizations hold community events on Howard Street and would like to support those in order to bring people to the neighborhood.

Sandi asked Kyle about movies in the parks for this summer. Kyle reported that the schedule isn't out yet for movies, but the 49th Ward is planning to do another series of community kickball and softball games at Willye White. Ald. Hadden does have some funding available to support community events, but not a \$68,000 one. He suggests saying that this year's cancellation is due to circumstances beyond our control, which is true due to the property tax situation.

Dave pointed out a recent news article about the property tax burden shifting to the neighborhoods due to high vacancy rates downtown since the pandemic and suggested this may be related.

5. Jarvis egg hunt funding request

Cindy said that the discussion of support for smaller events is timely due to this agenda item - Jarvis businesses have requested \$532 to sponsor the annual childrens' egg hunt. In previous years this has been paid with money from the alfresco grant, which has ended. This will pay for candy and eggs, and for a kid-friendly live musician.

Tim moved approval, Dave seconded.

Approved 3-0.

6. Caribbean Carnavel

Tim asked about the request for Caribbean Carnaval sponsorship. Cindy included it on the agenda after several exchanges with Ashaki from A Just Harvest. Although they have said several times that they do plan to pursue SSA sponsorship, they have yet to submit a written request or any sort of documentation.

Kyle has also been in contact with the organizers and will reach out to his contact to ask about this.

Sandi asked how much we gave them last year. Cindy will have to double check but thinks it was about \$2,000.

Dave is concerned we haven't gotten anything from them since the event is scheduled for April

26 and they're already promoting it with posters and ads, which don't include the SSA logo.

Cindy shared this concern, especially given the long lead time needed to get PR involved - it won't be an option here but could have been a good opportunity. Cindy said that if we do get anything from them in the meantime, it could be paid out of grant funds rather than the SSA and wouldn't need a vote as a result.

7. Jarvis landscaping

Cindy presented the request for \$11,000 for seasonal planting rotations in the large wooden planter pots on Jarvis. Similar to the egg hunt event, this was paid for out of alfresco grant funding in previous years, but we'd planned to shift it to the SSA this year at the conclusion of the grant.

Charlotte noted that not doing Chalk Howard Street frees up funding for smaller projects and events like this one and moved to approve it.

Tim seconded.

Approved 3-0.

8. Public Comment

Dave asked who has the keys to the glass display kiosk on Jarvis. Cindy has one and asked Jenni if Renee had passed hers on to the new management team. Jenni says she thinks the Charmers owners have it, but we haven't been putting posters under the glass because it gets tagged regularly and then the posters are unreadable. Taping them up on the front of the glass ensures that they're readable and discourages the tagging.

Sandi asked about the Chicago Sculpture exhibit installation that was approved at the end of 2024 - do we want to still move this forward or cut it? Cindy reported that she's received an invoice for it but hasn't paid yet. The invoice didn't specify a due date, so she reached out to ask about this and said they can pay later in the year and still move forward. Sandi asked about putting a portion of this project into the grant rather than the SSA. Cindy might be able to do this, but only for the Howard Street sculpture - Jarvis will still have to be SSA since the grant only covers Howard Street. The commission wants to move forward with both sculptures.

Kyle shared updates on development plans for the Ashland and Paulina sites and the Howard Street upzoning. The upzoning ordinance is at council and is moving forward. It will upzone most of the Chicago side of Howard to B-3.

Charlotte asked if the upzoning will increase property taxes. Kyle says it shouldn't.

Kyle added that DPD has received two proposals for the Ashland site. He's unable to share them yet but was impressed with both. The developer for the Paulina project requested \$8 million from the city for affordable housing and was awarded \$12.2 million. They're still waiting on a decision on their state funding application, but the project is expected to move forward.

Cindy reported progress on One Howard Street implementation items, including two murals and meeting with Evanston regarding decorative lighting under the CTA and Metra viaducts, which they'll be funding with ARPA dollars. Also in the works is an RFP for design of intersection art at Paulina and Rogers/Greenview, and wayfinding kiosks, which will be grant-funded.

Meeting adjourned at 10:11

Next SSA Commissioners Meeting: April 16, 2025