



Monroe County Legislature

RACHEL BARNHART
LEGISLATOR – DISTRICT 21

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COMIDA Board of Directors
City Place
50 West Main St.
Rochester, NY 14614

Dear Board Members,

Earlier this month, I visited downtown Oakland, California for a conference. Wondering where to dine, I used Yelp, even though I'm sure I could have asked someone at my hotel's front desk for a recommendation. I picked a place, plugged in the directions on Google Maps and started walking.

No one needs downtown "ambassadors" to tell them where to go and what to do.

But you know that already.

At the July 18 COMIDA board meeting, supporters of the proposed ambassador program for downtown Rochester made it clear they want the guides for reasons that have nothing to do with giving people directions.

Galín Brooks of Rochester Downtown Development Corporation stated, "This program offers an opportunity to really get friendly faces on the street."

Don Jeffries of Visit Rochester said, "It's a friendly face downtown, somebody they can recognize."

Are the people currently walking around downtown Rochester not "friendly faces?"

Even though downtown is among the safest areas of the city, you just approved \$300,000 on six to eight ambassadors whose sole purpose is to make sure visitors see people who look like them and not our neighbors struggling with financial hardship or mental illness.

Jim Brown of the Convention Center admitted as much, saying downtown's problem is that people think downtown has a problem. "We have a number of challenges, mainly perception driven, I believe those can be fixed in part through the ambassador program."

Developer Andy Gallina told you we need ambassadors because of "the sense of urgency we've never had before in this city."

Gallina, who has done incredible work revitalizing and repurposing outdated office space, obviously wants to protect his investments. But his sense of urgency – and yours – is misplaced.

For years, we've been told that downtown must be healthy for the rest of the community to be healthy. I've come to believe the opposite. Despite hundreds of millions of tax dollars poured into downtown over the last 25 years, Main Street is still desolate after 5 p.m. The pandemic didn't help, as Ms. Brooks shared that foot traffic is only 30% of what it was pre-pandemic, and only half of workers have returned to downtown offices.

Downtown continues to struggle for one major reason: one-third of Rochester residents are still experiencing poverty. We do not make the necessary investments in people and their communities. Agencies like COMIDA shovel money into politically palatable “workforce development” programs which have limited success because all levels of government ignore barriers related to childcare, affordable housing, transportation, jobs with low wages and bad benefits and the “cliff effect.” It's a lot easier to approve an ambassador program than it is to change systemic inequities.

Rochester *as a whole* has a perception problem – and it's rooted in the sad reality that we ignore deep challenges while embracing the status quo.

Given all our community's needs, it's mind-blowing that a bunch of well-connected people can waltz into a COMIDA meeting and get awarded \$300,000 from general operating funds after a 20-minute briefing, while most nonprofits serving people truly in need of help must jump through a million hoops to ever see that kind of cash.

The ambassador program (and the BID) is a desperate attempt to paper over poverty and make downtown something it isn't – and will never be – unless we focus on the real problems. Meantime, visitors have Yelp.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rachel Barnhart".

Rachel Barnhart – Legislator District 21

cc: Rochester City Council
Galín Brooks