

QUARTERLY REPORT

Q4 2020



VISION

The Greater Freeport Partnership is the place where organizations and people unite to advocate for the region, drive economic growth and champion a talented, workforce-ready community.

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

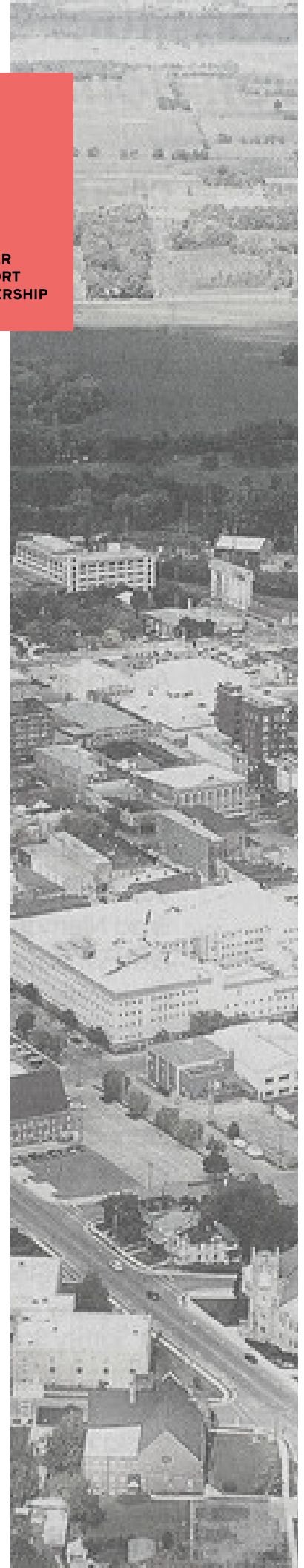
On behalf of the Greater Freeport Partnership, I would like to thank you for your continued support. I hope that you and your family are in good health and your business is holding steady in the face of the constraints and restraints caused by the pandemic.

Industrial Sector

- Hispanic Cheese Maker, Nuestro Queso, held a groundbreaking for their \$15 million investment which includes new processing and packaging equipment, expanded cooler space and additional capacity to meet demand for further expansion in the future.
- Coordinated a meeting at Kolb Lena with the president and CEO of Savencia Cheese North America, consul general of France, the region's director of trade and investment for Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to discuss growth opportunities at the Stephenson County facility.
- Introduced Mill Race Industrial Park to a national developer that has relationships with business clients and rail users.
- Follow-up meetings were scheduled with City of Freeport and Stephenson County officials to advance forward discussions on developing a cooperative effort to extend water and sewer infrastructure to Mill Race Crossing.
- Working with a solar energy company on a new proposed lease/option for Mill Race Crossing.
- Met with a local development team seeking to attract a competitive business venture with a value-added agriculture company.

Commercial/Retail Sector

In the fourth quarter, our region continued to be hit extremely hard by the pandemic through the forced closings, social distancing requirements and increased restrictions. Much of our work continued to be focused on providing current information on relief efforts and recovery assistance. We held webinars with DCEO on the Business Interruption Grant (BIG) and provided assistance to some of the applicants. DCEO announced that 59 businesses in Stephenson County received grants, totaling more than \$1.6 million in support.



We continue to meet with and provide information to owners and representative brokers of large retail centers in Freeport. Our work focus is to retain current retail operations, fill vacant space with new retail and explore adaptive reuse possibilities for different mixed uses.

Public Sector Partners

- Held bi-weekly meetings with the Freeport City Manager to discuss ongoing projects related to City economic development projects and provide support when needed.
- Met regularly with County Board Chairman to discuss County economic development projects and provide support when needed.
- Provided update and report on development options for Mill Race Crossing to the Stephenson County Planning and Development Committee meeting
- Presented Entrepreneurship Ecosystem with focus on Women and Minority-Owned Business to the City of Freeport Social Justice Committee.
- Presented 3rd Quarterly Report to City of Freeport Committee of the Whole.
- Participated as a Board Member on the Workforce Connection Annual Meeting, Blackhawk Hills Regional Council meeting, and Quad City Regional Economic Development Authority meeting.

Private Sector Partners

As Executive Director, I continue to hold scheduled meetings with Partnership Board members, partner-level members and business community leaders to introduce myself and learn about their businesses in our region.

Entrepreneurship/Innovation Ecosystem: Staff has been mapping out the existing entrepreneurship resource network and identifying the service gaps. Additional details on the expansion of services in Freeport Stephenson County are listed in the Economic & Data Resources section.

We will also have special focused area on disadvantaged business support for women, veteran and minority-owned businesses. We recognize there exists structural barriers to certain entrepreneur business support services that create racial and gender inequities – a focused area will need to be organically grown within the represented community. This was presented to the Mayor's Social Justice Committee with the assistance of the Illinois Office of Minority Economic Empowerment's African American Business Development Manager.

We are developing a regional entrepreneurship/innovation ecosystem framework for Stephenson, Boone and Winnebago Counties. Details of these efforts can be found in each section of this report.

Downtown Focus

In the fourth quarter, we began the process of exploring what full accreditation of the Main Street program would entail and what opportunities it would offer. We also began the process of inventorying redevelopment opportunities within Downtown Freeport along with cost reduction tools (incentives) available for each building and site.

The Quality Place Strategic Doing team plans to set up civic design popups that will provide information, concepts and best practices from successful communities that have developed quality places where a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship grows. Much of the focus will be centered in placemaking in the downtown. Freeport's core is the core of the region and needs a comprehensive approach to its revitalization.

*C. Mark Williams,
Executive Director*

Q4 PROGRESS ON KEY INITIATIVES

Workforce Development

- Due to COVID, Workforce Development efforts have slowed, but we were able to re-engage our Workforce Development partners for a planned reconvening in 1Q 2021.
 - Met with Stephenson County Probation Department to give input about restarting the Job Readiness Classes. Classes are intended to restart in early 1Q 2021. Currently, the Probation Department and HCC are adapting curriculum to an online format. The Partnership will still participate in the same capacity as before—connecting employers to class graduates.
 - Met with CareerTec and other representatives from the manufacturing sector to plan the next Manufacturing/CTE Career Day; discussed ways the event could occur virtually in 2021.
 - Connected the Workforce Connection Apprenticeship Navigator to a local manufacturer to discuss creating an apprenticeship program.

Economic & Data Resource

- **Entrepreneurship Ecosystem:** We have mapped the local existing entrepreneurial ecosystem, identified service gaps and are continuously researching resources to fill those gaps. We are finalizing purchase of the Gale Business Suite, an online business support software, that will be housed at the Freeport Public Library. The library is a public place with a low barrier to entry that would facilitate a broad reach to all entrepreneurs and small businesses.
- **Strategic Doing:** Additionally, we understand entrepreneurs thrive in a culture of innovation. To understand the connection between entrepreneurs, innovation and the place we call home, directors have been participating in a regional Strategic Doing process. In December, the Partnership's Development Director was able to record the first podcast, titled: *'Innovate and Create'*. The goal of the podcast is to support the entrepreneurial network, by providing awareness, discussing local and regional resources, and to hear from entrepreneurs and small business about their 'start-up' journey. The podcast will launch and be promoted in 1Q 2021.
- **Enterprise Zone:** Our Enterprise Zone nears capacity. To facilitate future development, the Partnership identified parcels within the zone that could not support future development because they are within the floodway. The goal is to delete these parcels from the zone, freeing up zone capacity for future development. To continue the deletion process, we met with various County and City Officials and held an E-Zone Board Meeting to illustrate what parcels we propose for removal from the zone. Additionally, to support a quick response time to questions pertaining to the E-Zone, we collaborated with multiple agencies to get an updated digital E-Zone map, which can be found on our website
- **C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy) Program** is a financing structure in which building owners borrow money from energy efficiency, renewable energy, or other projects and make repayments via an assessment on their property tax bill. This is another tool in the 'project financing toolbox', which the Partnership brought to the County's attention in 3Q. In October, the County approved an ordinance to enact the program, a requirement for program implementation. Program details will be forthcoming in 2021.

Marketing & Tourism

- Created and presented economic-impact study of Stephenson County trail system discussing the revenue generated by trail systems through sales tax, hotel/motel tax, property value increase and quality of life impact.
- Bikes & Brews social media campaign generated thrilling comments and shares from visitors who hope to travel to our area. The campaign reached a wonderful audience of potential visitors who tagged, commented and had discussions about traveling to Freeport and Stephenson County to visit our attractions.
- Reviewed vendor RFPs for 2021 Community Guide and chose local, member businesses to work with. The community guide is driven by ad sales and is printed at no cost to the Partnership. Advertising sales and copy have been completed for the guide with the expectation to be delivered in late February.
- More than \$3,000 was spent with various media to promote Mistletoe Walk and local holiday shopping between November 1 through the end of the year reaching audiences locally and regionally.
- Holiday Partnership Cash Program – After the success of the program earlier this year, the Partnership Cash program was renewed with some new rules and promoted a whole lot of local community spending! The program launched with in-person sales on Friday, November 20 in conjunction with Mistletoe Walk and then through online sales. Consumers received a 4:1 incentive. Over \$22,000 in Partnership Cash was purchased. Over \$7500 of the certificates have already been redeemed by local businesses.
- Published multiple social media posts daily promoting local events, programs, members and community successes. Posting tourism-relevant content twice each week and have promoted the pages to demographics and zip codes outside of Stephenson County with the goal of gaining a new audience.
- Wrote local shopping editorial and press releases. Featured on WREX, WIFR, Journal Standard, Village Voices, Northwest Quarterly and Rolling Stone.
- The new web site launched November 19 and we continue to make additions, corrections and other regular maintenance to the site. We have been able to integrate membership database information into the site for better assistance to our residents and visitors and more value to our members! The LOIS database was also embedded into the site for better access to possible developers and businesses.
- The weekly digital events guide highlights local restaurant specials, shopping and other events. Currently the guide has 831 direct subscribers with hundreds more on social media.
- Worked with Freeport Park District to implement Freeport Restaurant Bingo, a program designed to encourage people to patronize local restaurants during COVID-19 restrictions.

Stephenson County Visitor Center

- The Momentum Art Guild displayed again at the visitor center from September 16 - November 13. Several works of local art sold during the show and the artists were pleased with the turnout and publicity.
- The Holiday Gift Show was on display at the visitor center on November 20 - January 10, 2021 featuring 16 local artisans and five local merchants. The gift show continues to be a highlight for the visitor center each year bringing residents and visitors alike. This year was especially popular as many craft fairs were cancelled due to COVID-19 and vendors were not able to connect with customers regularly.
- With a very successful holiday gift expo season, the visitor center's 2020 sales have surpassed 2019 sales even with the center being closed from March 20-June 15 due to COVID-19 restrictions with 2020 gross sales of \$33,500.

Events

- Expanded hours for Mistletoe Walk had great success. Many businesses are requesting the extended weekend continue even after this year.
- The Hero Tree was lit at the Stephenson County Courthouse with the help of Sheriff Snyders, Chief Summers and Mayor Miller in a Facebook Live event on November 22.
- Called for content from local organizations and businesses and compiled for annual holiday guide co-produced with FHN.

COVID-19 Emergency Response

- Continue to share new grant opportunities on our web site and send to agencies they may apply to. Made phone calls to members who were given special designation during second round BIG.
- Transferred and cleaned-up all content for migration to our new web site.
- Weekly posts for Clean Hands campaign. Over 50 organizations now participate.
- Extended an additional invitation to all retailers again to sign on to the program to help promote safe shopping experiences before the holiday season.

Beautification & Corridors Improvements

During the last quarter of the year, beautification efforts have concentrated on minor grant administration tasks, and analysis of the Adams Street Corridor. Despite COVID, we were able to complete our downtown beautification goals for 2020: installation of banners, seasonal planting and maintenance and installation of Phase II of our Streetscape Furniture refresh program.

- **#FreeportReflections**, the Freeport Community Foundation grant funded downtown vacant window activation program started in July. The goal of the program was to attract attention to these underused spaces with hopes they would become leased. Two out of the five original installation locations have been leased. We were able to work with other building owners to relocate displaced installations to other vacant storefronts. Because of a promotional printing discount, there is a remaining \$63.00 of grant funds available. I have worked with Freeport Community Foundation to approve the use of the remaining funds for additional promotion of spaces not already leased. Promotion of leasable spaces will begin in 1Q 2021.
- **Corridor Beautification:** This year's corridor beautification work has focused along Adams Street. The City is in the planning stages of a major utility and road upgrade for the Adams corridor. Because of this work, the Partnership felt it would be strategic to focus our attention on the corridor while the project is in the planning phases. We completed parcel analysis, looking at vacancies, zoning and identifying areas that would be conducive to future redevelopment. To share information and coordinate efforts, we had on-going meeting with the City's Community Development and Public Works departments. The redesign of Adams Street will include sections of a multi-use path. The Partnership is looking at infrastructure needed to safely tie path users to the downtown and Tutty's Crossing Trailhead, further connecting residents and visitors to a larger network of trails.
- **National Main Street Accreditation:** The Partnership examined the National Main Street Program and intends to apply for accreditation in 2021. Over the past quarter we have communicated with the Main Street Organization to understand the resources the program offers, how that could support our current and future work; how the program structure aligns with our 2021 workplans and current staff roles and responsibilities. The accreditation process is long and will take most of 2021 to complete.