

**Georgia Downtown Association
Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
March 25th, 2025**

The Georgia Downtown Association (GDA) Board of Directors held its March meeting on Tuesday, March 25, 2025, at the Jones Building in Canton, GA. President Aundi Lesley called the meeting to order at 11:11 AM.

The following Board Members were in attendance: Aundi Lesley, Jason Ford, Abigail Strickland, Emily Hopkins, Velinda Hardy, Taylor Smith, Jeffrey Fowler, Abbey McLaren, Cassidi Kendrick, Jessica Payne, Bethany Strickland, Tonya Parker, Lequrica Gaskins (virtual), and April Norton (virtual).

The following GMA/GDA Staff Members and Partners were in attendance: Renée Coakley, Cindy Eidson, Cherie Bennett, & Clark Stancil.

Review and Approval of Minutes: The meeting minutes were not provided in advance. Jason Ford motioned to move the approval of February Meeting Minutes to the April Meeting. Bethany Strickland seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Review and Approval of Financial Report: Renée Coakley presented the financial report. Renée reviewed the staff spreadsheet first:

A. Board Financials

- The Consolidated Summary reflects data from three reports.
- Membership dues have increased, with new payments received as of March 21.
- No additional income reported.
- Expenses include all actuals for March, including travel expenses for CDP in Tybee.
- Requests for expenses are being broken out by month to better compare with finance reports.
- Meeting meal expenses for the board retreat are still being clarified, likely to be recorded under February.

B. Annual Conference

- No new financial activity recorded at this time.
- Lingering meal cost still being assessed.
- Facilities credit was incorrectly applied to meeting meals but has been corrected and should reflect in the December statements.

C. CDP Program

- Registration income has been recorded due to attendees rescheduling from the Tybee session to the next classes in Atlanta.
- Additional income recorded from Canton classes.
- Travel expenses for March included lodging from Tybee; all Tybee-related expenses should now be finalized.
- Meal expenses recorded for Canton.

D. November Financial Statements from GMA

- November statements sent out in advance.
- The membership dues issue on the board sheet was corrected and will be reflected in upcoming December statements.
- Other revenue items includes round 2 of Showcase your City Box sales.
- Expenses include:
 - Lunch at the Sandersville meetup under Travel & Entertainment
 - Gift & Awards: Donation to Newtown.
 - Commercial Printing: Showcase Your City box for GDA and Legislative Cards.
- Annual Conference Expenses: Lingering meal costs from conference and there is a credit in Facilities will show corrected when December Financial are available.
- CDP: Income for October Classes in Canton, Expenses for Meals.

Jason Ford made a motion to approve the November Financial Report as presented. Cassidi Kendrick seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Renée will pull bank statements moving forward for financial reporting accuracy.

Discussion Items:

- **GMA Contract**
Aundi informed the board that the executive committee met with GMA staff to discuss the contract renewal and potential updates to the contract. The contract auto-renews annually, and is vague in language. GMA staff has provided a list to outline all the duties and benefits that GMA provides to GDA. The notes from the committee/staff meeting were reviewed:

Contract Considerations

- Consider **not** having an auto-renew contract.
- Set a clear **term limit** with an **auto-payment schedule** that includes structured increases.
- Ensure **clear communication** between both parties to avoid misunderstandings.
- Noted a shift in tone from September—initial discussions aimed at preparing for increases, but now it feels like payment is being forced.

Financial Oversight & Reporting

- **Treasurer/Executive Committee** should review preliminary reports before meetings to request changes/clarifications.
- Three new finance positions at GMA with one for managed organizations.
- Consider an **audit for GDA expenses only** to ensure transparency.
- **GMA Audit & Benchmarking**
 - Need to determine available cash to make informed financial decisions.
 - Revenue does **not** go through GMA's general fund—only expenses.
 - Need access to **bank financial statements** for verification.
- Explore the possibility of appointing an **ex-officio CPA as Treasurer**.

Financial Requests & Next Steps

- **Quarterly financial reports** – Confirm expected delivery schedule.
- **Monthly bank statements** – Ensure regular access.
- **Staff-prepared financial spreadsheet** for tracking.
- **Semi-annual invoice transfer** of funds between GDA and GMA.
- **Preliminary financial reports** should be reviewed by the Treasurer/Executive Committee before becoming official.
- **GMA audit** – Obtain details.
- **Adopt a policy** allowing staff to make purchases up to a certain limit, per budget guidelines.
- **Meet with the new finance staff** for better understanding and communication.

Staff Spending Policy

Aundi presented a draft spending policy to establish guidelines for discretionary spending by staff, ensuring financial responsibility and efficiency. The policy proposes allowing staff to make discretionary purchases up to \$1,000 per transaction without prior approval, with anything exceeding that amount requiring approval from the GDA President or Treasurer. All expenses must align with organizational goals, be within budget, and have receipts and justification submitted within five business days. Prohibited expenses include personal items, unauthorized travel, and non-business-related purchases. The Treasurer will periodically review spending for compliance.

During discussion, Renée questioned how this policy applies to conference expenses, given their higher costs. Aundi noted that in previous years, conference expenditures were reported to the Secretary/Treasurer. Jason raised concerns about whether \$1,000 was the right threshold, while Bethany asked if the policy could be adjusted later. Tonya and Cherie sought clarification on whether approvals should come from the Treasurer alone or both the Treasurer and President. Jason suggested a clear hierarchy: Treasurer first, then President. Taylor supported the \$1,000 limit, citing hotel stays, while Emily recommended a separate review for conference budgets. Jeffrey proposed creating a distinct policy for conference-related spending.

Aundi will revise the policy for clarity and draft a new policy for conference expenses. The updated policy will be reviewed and voted on next month.

Committee Reports:

- Executive - Aundi Lesley

The Executive Committee discussed the treasurer position, noting that the bylaws were amended last year to allow for an ex officio treasurer if needed. Historically, the secretary has also been considered the treasurer, but the role has never functioned fully in that capacity. The committee considered potential candidates, including board members or individuals with financial expertise, such as a CPA or accountant. If a CPA were appointed, compensation might be necessary. The goal is to have someone in place by the end of the year.

Aundi proposed Jeffrey, who has a background in banking and finance, as an interim treasurer. Jeffrey agreed to serve temporarily but does not want the role permanently. Tonya questioned whether the position must be filled by a CPA, and Jeffrey responded that while a CPA would be ideal, the right fit is more important. Tonya suggested Jennifer, an accountant but not a CPA. Jason noted that the treasurer does not need to be a voting member and that the role is not necessarily a year-over-year position. Jeffrey emphasized the importance of setting up the position properly and ensuring a smooth transition for a future treasurer. Taylor suggested opening the opportunity to the broader membership. Jason made a motion to appoint Jeffrey as interim treasurer. Taylor seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Aundi made a call for volunteers to serve on an adhoc committee for our updating the categories of the annual achievement awards. This was something GDA partners worked on during our board retreat in January but has not been worked on since. Emily Hopkins and Abbey McLaren volunteered. The awards adhoc committee will have something for the board to review in the April meeting.

- **Education & Training – Jeffrey Fowler**

Jeffrey provided an update on the Certified Downtown Professional (CDP) program, highlighting that by March, 40% of the projected income had already been achieved, with additional revenue expected from upcoming sessions in June, August, and November. Expenses were also well managed at only 20% for the first quarter. Registration numbers were strong, and interest in the program extended beyond the state, with an organization from Michigan reaching out for insights on its structure. Jeffrey attributed this visibility to the program's broad, non-state-specific name and its affiliation with the University of Georgia.

He then introduced the proposed Capstone Project, developed by the Education Committee. This final component of the CDP program includes a written report, a PowerPoint presentation, and a public presentation before a council or board. The goal is to make it applicable to a wide range of

projects, from small park renovations to large-scale developments. The guidelines were designed to be clear and structured, unlike previous programs that lacked defined expectations. Participants would present their projects first to the board for feedback, similar to a dissertation panel, before making their final presentation.

Aundi emphasized the flexibility of the project, allowing participants to apply it to any downtown initiative. Jeffrey noted that while the first group might require adjustments, the structure aimed to provide meaningful feedback, which was missing in past programs. Abigail inquired whether the entire board would review presentations or if a smaller panel would be responsible. Clark asked if the presentations would be public, to which Jeffrey responded that they should be open sessions to help participants develop public speaking skills and share ideas. A follow-up requirement, such as a one-sheet summary with photos, was suggested for accountability.

Taylor proposed turning the Capstone Project into a competition where CDP graduates could qualify for small seed grants from the Georgia Downtown Association (GDA) to kickstart their projects, adding value to both the program and GDA membership.

Jason motioned to approve the Capstone Project with proposed changes, including:

- Adding Georgia Power branding
- Clarifying projections
- Defining a three-to-six-month timeline (pending UGA confirmation)
- Adding language on the final proof requirement (photos and documentation)

Emily Hopkins seconded the motion, the motion carried.

Marketing and Membership – Velinda Hardy

Velinda shared a quote from The Stamp as a social media manager to manage Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn content, taking some responsibilities off the staff's plate. A quote was provided outlining basic and premium packages, with the premium including four posts per week and content creation using existing photos in Dropbox. Abigail expressed concerns were raised about relying on communities to submit photos, leading to the suggestion of hiring a photographer for events. The committee agreed to seek additional quotes before making a final decision. The importance of reels for growth was emphasized, along with the inclusion of message communication management. The particular vendor, The Stamp by Ryan Strickland, was mentioned, with acknowledgment of a personal connection to board member Bethany Strickland..

The newsletter format was also discussed, with suggestions to improve professionalism by embedding images with clickable links rather than sending PDFs as attachments. Different email marketing platforms like MailChimp or Constant Contact were mentioned as potential solutions. A test was proposed to determine the best format before the next newsletter release.

Lastly, conference swag ideas were reviewed, including T-shirts, sweatshirts, mousepads, umbrellas, spiral notebooks, cleaning spray with microfiber cloths, chip clips, and lunch bags. Pricing research was underway, and there was a discussion about modifying previous T-shirt designs. The meeting concluded with plans to finalize merchandise options and continue refining the social media strategy.

- **Legislative – Taylor Smith**

Taylor reported covered several key updates. The Governor signed the budget, which recapitalized the DCA DDRLF program. Efforts are underway to secure a matching contribution from the Woodruff Foundation for Georgia Cities Foundation DDRLF.

House Bill 531, concerning municipal court reform, is a major focus, aiming to equalize city fees with state and county levels. The committee supports treating cities equitably in terms of liability, as counties currently enjoy immunity in joint projects.

Truck weight legislation is expected to pass, capping agricultural commodity loads at 88,000 pounds and imposing a 150-mile delivery limit. Discussions are ongoing to secure funding for downtown and public safety projects impacted by increased truck traffic.

Public Works bidding is also under review, with proposed increases in project cost limits due to inflation.

Local government audits were discussed, particularly their impact on small communities. Proposed changes would provide alternative reporting methods for cities with budgets under \$2.5 million, ensuring compliance and eligibility for state funding.

Emily raised concern about the CDFI Fund being scrutinized by the federal government. Advocacy efforts are ongoing to protect funding for Georgia's local CDFIs, which play a crucial role in economic development.

Additionally, there are plans to develop a legislative ambassador training program to educate participants on advocacy strategies. The committee also discussed increasing GDA's presence at events, including the New Officials Orientation and the Small Cities Conference, to raise awareness of its programs. Lastly, participation in the ECG Conference was highlighted as an important opportunity to advocate for downtown development, with suggestions for potential sponsorship and outreach efforts.

- **Governance - Abbey McLaren**

Abbey announced the selection of eight members for the inaugural GDA Ambassadors class. Headshots and biographies are being collected to share with the Membership and Marketing team. Cassidi is creating a flyer highlighting upcoming opportunities for Ambassadors to get involved.

- **Conference - April Norton**

The conference committee has finalized the schedule of events, closely following the survey and work plan. This year, four mobile workshop opportunities will be available, including a Dragon Boat experience, a session on the power of public art, a trolley tour showcasing Gainesville's downtown master plan, and a hands-on downtown classroom experience focused on business collaboration. Each workshop will have multiple time slots and can accommodate 50 to 100 participants.

An invitation-only Georgia Economic Placemaking Collaborative alumni event will be held on Monday, coinciding with training sessions such as Main Street 101 and legislative advocacy training. The traditional after-party will take place at Big Daddy's, featuring karaoke and line dancing.

Key conference deadlines include the opening of education session proposals from April 1–30, with selections finalized by May 16. Conference registration will open on June 2. Additionally, Mary Helmer Wirth, President of Main Street Alabama, has been confirmed as the keynote speaker for the opening session.

Other updates include ongoing work on conference awards, swag, and marketing materials. Nicole is developing a digital dining guide and discount guide for conference attendees

Business Manager Report (Renée Coakley):

Renée has collaborated with Kelly to ensure the Education Session form is user-friendly and ready to go live on April 1. She will share the form with the board for review and feedback as soon as possible to avoid any delays.

As of March 21, 2025, registration numbers for the Spring Regional Meetups are:

- Avondale Estates: 21
- Griffin: 37
- Macon: 31

In April, Renée will attend the National Main Street Conference in Philadelphia, where she plans to distribute Save the Date announcements for the conference to vendors in the expo area.

Partner Updates

- **Cherie Bennett (DCA)** – Wrapping up annual assessments for Main Street accreditations. She reminded the board about the upcoming training in May at the Fox Theatre: "Unlock the Power of Generational Diversity with Gen-ergy", led by Kristen Scroggin of genWHY Communications. This engaging session is designed for Main Street managers, helping them bridge generational gaps, improve communication, and strengthen relationships with business owners, board members, volunteers, city officials,

and community members. Attendees will gain practical strategies to foster collaboration, recruit volunteers, market effectively, and build an inclusive downtown community.

- **Clark Stancil (CVOIG)** – Currently working on new projects across the state. He will provide share notes with the adhoc Award Committee from the brainstorming session at the board retreat in January, including findings and recommendations for awards.
- **Cindy Eidson (GCF)** – Expressed appreciation to Larry Hanson for advocating for downtowns at the state level regarding the refunding of the DCA DDRLF. GCF will soon meet with the Woodruff Foundation to discuss DDRLF refunding. The **GMA/GDA contract** has been finalized by legal and is now awaiting Larry's review. GMA is hosting the Small Cities Conference in Tifton from May 7-9. Additionally, starting April 14, Tara Bradshaw (formerly with the city of Dublin) will be joining their team.

Other Business: Nothing to report

Meeting adjourned at 12:46 PM.