

# Residents, developers differ on BID

Business Improvement District hailed for growth potential, others worried about changes it brings

Robert Bell Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

**L**uticha Doucette loves all the quirky people she encounters living in downtown Rochester. The sense of community makes her feel safe. That's why she's against a potential Business Improvement District. • "It's going to chill the vibe," Doucette said about the idea for a BID. • For Doucette, the vibe is accessibility and neighborliness.

The 38-year-old small business owner uses a wheelchair to get around and says downtown is the most accessible section of the city for her. Getting in her car and traveling elsewhere for events or shopping "makes things more complicated."



Doucette

Doucette fears BID's impact on downtown will mirror her experience with a rent hike at her current downtown apartment building near Sibley Square. In that scenario, residents who made her feel safe and included were pushed out after a reported rent increase. Her sense of community vanished.

"When those folks move, it's destabilizing," she said. "Some of the different folk are not the vibe."

Suddenly, the new residents were full of complaints. The quirky people Doucette treasured and the noise they made around the Liberty Pole was now a nuisance to the newest tenants.

"Who are those people? They don't belong here," she remembers overhearing.

That brand of profiling is what Doucette fears if the city council helps usher in a downtown Business Improvement District. She admits that downtown needs to be enhanced, but doesn't believe a BID is the answer.

Like many downtown residents who oppose a BID, it is the cautionary tales from other cities that implemented BIDs that have her nervous about what the district could mean for small business owners and renters. Word on the street, accurate or not, is that those two groups will be pushed out of downtown Rochester while developers and landowners reap the monetary benefits of downtown's new vibe.

It has happened elsewhere in America.

## Making a BID work for everyone

Those fears are what Galin Brooks, president & CEO of the Rochester Downtown Development Corporation, hopes to quell in 2024 as the Partnership For Downtown Rochester pushes to establish a BID.

"With a BID, the right tools can be in place to grow jobs, support small and local businesses, and reinvigorate the magnetic and bustling heart of Rochester," Brooks said.

The partnership is a public-private collaboration between New York State, Empire State Development, the City of Rochester and RDDC.

The partnership says its goal is to increase private sector participation to activate public spaces better and help guide the revitalization of Rochester for the benefit of downtown stakeholders, visitors and the overall community. It represents a collaborative effort involving New York State, Empire State Development, the City of Rochester and RDDC, blending public and private sectors.

Its board members include Mayor Malik Evans, Monroe County Executive Adam Bello, former Mayor and President & CEO of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce Bob Duffy and City Council President Miguel Meléndez.

Ultimately, the City Council will vote on the proposed plan. But the big names behind BID leave people like Luticha Doucette skeptical of how much the voices of everyday people in Rochester will matter in the final decision.

## What is the Rochester BID?

This is how the Partnership for Downtown Rochester describes a Business Improvement District:

Business Improvement District:

*At the intersection of people, place, and economy, BIDs leverage new resources to generate activities and services that strengthen local economies, stimulate vibrancy, and create inclusive communities. BIDs can provide a wide range of services designed to meet the needs and priorities in each individual community. BIDs operate within defined geographic areas (districts) and are formed when the majority of property owners in a given area choose to pitch in and pool resources to fund new programs and services that cities are often unable to fund.*

## Who will pay for the downtown BID?

This is who they say will pay for a BID:

*BIDs are funded through an assessment which is charged to property owners within a defined area. This assessment generates new funding to implement new programs and services that are supplemental to city services. In the current proposal for a potential Downtown Rochester BID, residential owners of buildings with less than four units are exempt and will not be charged an assessment.*

## What is the next step for the business improvement district?

The Partnership for Downtown Rochester says this is what's next in the process:

Community input received will inform revisions to the draft district plan by the BID Formation Committee. A revised district plan will need to be presented to property owners for petition and, if there is a majority of support from property owners, to the Rochester City Council for review in 2024. The City Council will then need to vote on the proposed plan. If it advances, City Council will hold a public hearing to receive feedback on the proposal, as well as complete several more steps in the process before a Downtown Rochester BID could be established.



Galín Brooks

President & CEO of the Rochester Downtown Development Corporation

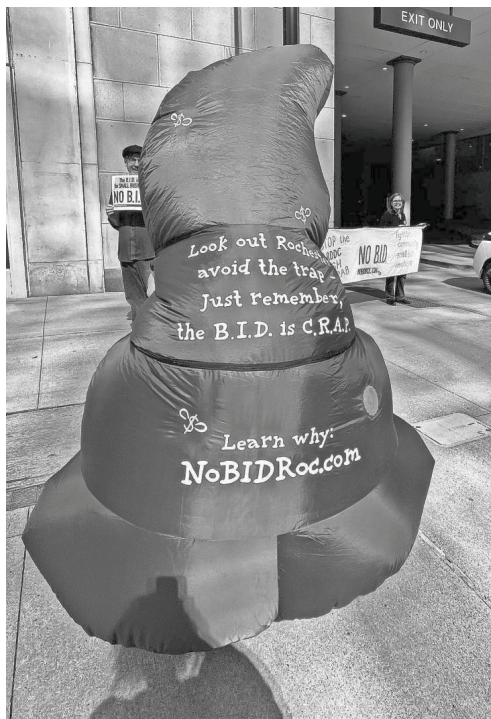
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## Word on the street about the BID — the skeptics

Skepticism is a sentiment echoed by Abby Lupi, a community advocate, at a meeting discussing the initiative. "They have intentionally tried to make the messaging confusing," she said concerning the city power players' description of a BID.

How is the rollout of BIDs going in



Local artist Zie Stauffer stands outside of the Hyatt Regency on Oct. 2, in support of No Bid ROC's protest of the RDDC's Business Improvement District efforts. PROVIDED BY GENAE SHIELDS

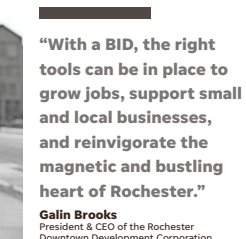
other cities?

Last year, the Council of Racial Equity did a racial equity impact assessment of the Friendship Heights Business Improvement District in Washington, D.C. The assessment concluded that a BID would likely exacerbate racial inequity in D.C.

The report says the Friendship Heights BID wouldn't worsen racial inequity uniquely but expand a system that causes Black displacement, lacks Black representation, wields unchecked power over communities, and serves wealthy, white interests over those of the unhoused or low-income Black and other residents of color.

In response to the study, the Washington D.C council said:

*"The hearing record reflects that BIDs are organizations in our community that provide a wide range of services that assist businesses, residents, and visitors. BIDs provide employment services, outreach to the unhoused, additional street and public space cleanings among other services. Some BIDs explicitly include residents within their boundaries as members. CORE's determination that the Friendship Heights BID "would not uniquely worsen racial inequity in the District" should have been reflected in the RELIA's ultimate conclusion."*



Galín Brooks

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## What is the positive vision of the BID?

Before coming to Rochester to lead RDDC, Galin Brooks worked for two of those Washington, D.C., BIDs mentioned in the CORE report.

Brooks was vice president for planning and economic development of the North of Massachusetts Avenue BID and director of planning and placemaking for the Downtown DC BID.

Before the calendar flipped to 2024, Brooks worked in a conference room at Rochester's Central Library during a community open house on Dec. 13 to

## About this series

The Democrat and Chronicle will be writing a series on BID plans. Do you have a question? Something you are looking forward to about the district idea? Or a concern? Reach us at rbell@gannett.com and use "BID comment" in the subject line of the email.

clear up any confusion or concerns community members had. 76 people attended. An additional 364 community members were engaged through a survey.

Brooks says RDDC has hosted seven tabling events and engaged over 140 people at those events since the release of the initial draft plan and has received 1500 community responses in one form or another.

"We've reached as far and wide as we can," she said. "We are always open for conversations."

At the library pop-up, giant white pads were stationed throughout the room for the residents to write questions and talk to experts and Partnership for Downtown Rochester board members.

## What happens to rent with a BID?

One of the biggest concerns of a potential BID was written on a pad near a station with Joe Stefko, president of ROC2025 and chair of the Partnership for Downtown Rochester. *Will the landlord pass the extra tax (property owner assessment) on to the tenants?*

Stefko explained how the already too-high vacancy rates in downtown mitigate the risk that increased costs would be directly passed on by property owners.

Downtown property owner Patrick Dutton offered more transparency.

Dutton is a re-developer who owns downtown commercial and mixed-use residential and vacant buildings. "Is my rent going to be higher because of this? It's not a definitive yes," he said at the pop-up event.

Dutton supports a BID in Rochester and believes downtown needs to be marketed and supported to attract development and foot traffic to make it a booming city center.

"There's hundreds of thousands of square feet vacant on our ground floors," he said. "We have no identity. There's nowhere to go. I want the community to be clamoring to be part of this district."

The city council will ultimately decide the fate of the BID.

Robert Bell is a multimedia journalist and reporter at The Democrat & Chronicle. He was born in Rochester, grew up in Philadelphia and studied film in Los Angeles. Follow him at @byrobbell on X and @vrobbell on IG.