

Elmira Downtown Development Strategic Plan: 2024-2026





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Executive Summary

- Elmira Downtown Development embarked on a strategic planning process in 2024. This process was informed by their last strategic plan, from 2017.
- The five-month process included meetings with EDD's Executive Director and outgoing Board President, with the new Board Executive, with the Staff team, and also included two strategic planning workshops: the first for 13 stakeholder members of EDD, 3 Executive Team members, and 1 Board member, and the second for EDD's Board. This collaborative and iterative planning process generated data at each stage; data was then synthesized into the goals and priorities in the strategic plan report.
- In reflecting on EDD's organizational development, **community, change, clarity of identity, communication, and capacity** emerged as key themes.
- The importance of recognizing and supporting the process of organizational change, particularly during shifts to new leadership, was emphasized in this planning process.
- Five key areas of work have been identified for EDD's strategic plan over the next three years: Block Captains, Fundraising/Budget, Parade/Events, Capacity Building/Partnerships, and Marketing/External Communications. The fuller strategic plan outlines the specific objectives in each of these areas of work, as well as a provisional timeline.

Strategic Priorities:

- 1. Block captains**
Goal: To improve EDD's organizational communication and engagement by creating a Block Captain program.
- 2. Fundraising/ Budget**
Goal: With the support of a Budget Committee, to increase fundraising and capacity building by assessing and building on current fundraising efforts.
- 3. Parade/Events**
Goal: To document and evaluate current EDD event offerings with a view to sustainable long-term event planning, and to strengthen the planning and rollout of the annual parade
- 4. Capacity Building/Partnerships:**
Goal: To strengthen organizational capacity through Board and Committee development, and to convene a Committee to evaluate and strengthen current and potential partnerships.
- 5. Marketing and external communication**
Goal: To document current marketing strategies and to assess existing and potential marketing approaches in support of EDD's ongoing growth.



Introduction:

Elmira Downtown Development, (hereafter, “EDD”), completed its last strategic planning process in 2017; a brief summary of emergent findings from that process is included in the appendix. In November 2023, EDD’s Executive Director approached Heart Story Consulting (hereafter, “HSC”), to develop a new strategic plan. Dr. Mesner met with EDD’s Executive Director and outgoing Board President, (Dec. 23), and then with the new Board Executive (Feb. 24). He then designed and led two strategic planning workshops: the first for 13 stakeholder members of EDD, 3 Executive Team members, and 1 Board member (April 24), and the second for EDD’s Board (May 24). Dr. Mesner also consulted with Staff throughout the planning process.

At each step of this process, staff, board, and stakeholders offered substantive input in terms of ideas, perspectives, questions, and challenges impacting EDD and the wider Elmira community. The planning process was iterative, in that each stage generated data that fed into the next. Dr. Mesner then synthesized the data from these conversations and workshops, to generate the report that you have here.

Workshop Attendees: First Workshop:

Renee Wheeler and Judith Frisk, Chemung Canal
Jill Koski, STEG
Karen Cromer, Clemens Center
Bruce Whitmarsh, Historical Society
Andrew Roosa-Deciccio, Copy Express
Seth Adams, Warners Way
Barb Whitman & Danielle Baldwin, ILL Eagle
Mike Krusen, Capriotti Properties
Lisa Chalk, Arnot Art Museum
Jenn Herrick, Chemung County Chamber of Commerce

Elmira Downtown Development Board Members:

Kristina Cadwallader, Community Partner, Past President
Courtney Shaw, Community Bank N.A. (Board Executive, Property Owner)
Michael Mitchell, R+M Highland Properties (Property Owner)

Elmira Downtown Development Staff:

April Peris (Event Coordinator)



Workshop Attendees: Second Workshop:

Elmira Downtown Development Executive Committee:

Janis Witche, Empower Federal Credit Union (Property Owner)
Courtney Shaw, Community Bank N.A. (Property Owner)
Elizabeth Everett, Fennell Industries
Courtney Woods, Servu Credit Union
Kristina Cadwallader, Community Partner, Past President

City Of Elmira: Michael Collins, Corey Cooke, Emma Miran

Elmira Downtown Development Board Members:

Chris Coletta, Chemung Canal (Property Owner)
Emily Blauvelt, Patricks (Property Owner)
Michael Mitchell, R+M Highland Properties (Property Owner)
Nick Difasi, III Eagle (Property Owner)
Ben Fleishman, Steg/Ida/Arena (Property Owner)
Jessica Balmer, Perry & Carroll (Commercial Tenant)
Larry Parker, Elmira College. (Community Partner)
Dion Brown, Resident

Elmira Downtown Development Staff:

Kylene Kiah (Executive Director)
April Peris (Event Coordinator)

Elmira Downtown Development and Strategic Planning: the Wide View

As we begin with the “wide view” of EDD’s strategic planning process, five key themes emerge: **community, change, clarity of identity, communication, and capacity**. I’d like to touch on those themes first to lay the groundwork for the goals that follow.

Heart Story Consulting takes a strengths-based approach to strategic planning, believing that every organization has inherent strengths that provide an invaluable foundation for the process of creating and implementing a strategic plan. It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin with what I would suggest is one of Elmira Downtown Development’s greatest strengths: **community**. Throughout this process, the sense of community engagement, commitment, and passion for Elmira has shone through. It has been inspiring to witness this level of communal participation, and I believe that the level of care that stakeholders, board members, and staff bring to this work positions EDD well for the work ahead.

Change is a recurring theme throughout this process; historically, Elmira, and Elmira’s downtown area, have undergone tremendous change over the last ten years, including significant growth in businesses moving into the downtown area, as well as an influx of residences in the downtown area. Additionally, Covid has had a profound impact on Elmira’s downtown and businesses, and the extent of that impact is



still being determined; one such example noted by small business owners who participated in this process is the shift towards online shopping and dining during Covid that continues even as the world reopens.

While on the topic of change, I want to speak explicitly to change processes as they impact organizations and communities. In addition to the wider societal changes just noted, EDD has undergone a leadership change over the last couple of years, and as an organizational consultant, I would suggest that EDD is still very much in the midst of that change process. While I believe that it is important to address the questions and concerns that were raised in the (first) stakeholder workshop, I also believe that it's important to normalize the ways that any organization may sometimes experience some discomfort in the process of shifting leadership. Discomfort in the face of change is not always a bad thing—indeed, when it is skillfully addressed, it can be generative and productive. In our second workshop, EDD's Board indicated strong and enthusiastic support of its new staff and their growing vision, and I believe it will be vital to communicate that board support to the wider constituency.

Clarity of identity also emerged as a critical theme: what are EDD's priorities, and what falls outside their scope of work? What issues and questions can EDD realistically address and which concerns need to be fielded to other resources? What aspects of EDD's identity and vision still hold true, and what aspects are growing and changing in response to the socio-economic climate we are collectively navigating? I believe that this process touched on these questions, but that this core work of identity, mission, and vision, may warrant additional focus in the coming years.

Communication is another significant consideration—both as we create this new strategic plan, and as the plan is implemented. Here, I refer to the kinds of board communication referenced above—that is, making explicit the board's support of the staff, their leadership, and vision. I also refer here to the day-to-day internal communications between EDD and its stakeholders that can help EDD move skillfully through processes of change and growth, and I believe that some of the goals that follow, (and particularly the Block Captain initiative,) will support that dissemination. And finally, I refer more broadly here to external communication choices in terms of marketing and outreach—looking both at what has served EDD well in the past, as well as the ways that marketing strategies continue to evolve in our changing world.

Finally, (and not surprisingly,) **capacity** is a prominent factor in this strategic plan. EDD continues to work mightily to do the most it can with limited resources, and to find ways to fundraise and build capacity. I have been impressed with the depth and breadth of work EDD accomplishes with two fulltime staff, as well as with its dedicated board and stakeholders. I believe that community engagement will be vital in EDD's ongoing work in fundraising and capacity-building. I also believe that a successful strategic plan must be sustainable—that is to say that it must be built with goals that can realistically be attained without overstretching staff or financial resources.

This plan aims to factor in these wide view strengths, challenges, and questions. The following graphic offers a brief summary of EDD's strategic priorities, with a detailed breakdown in the pages that follow.





Strategic Priority Goals Overview:

As I mentioned in both workshops, our goal here is to create a strategic plan that is **clear, specific, accessible, and feasible**. To that end, we have identified five key priorities for EDD's strategic plan in the next 3-5 years: Block Captains, Fundraising/Capacity Building, Parade/Events, Collaboration/Partnerships, and Marketing/Communications. Note: the five key priority areas, and their respective goals, have been color coded on this overview, the detailed breakdown, and the Gantt Chart Timeline, to correspond with the graphic on p. 5.

Block captains

Goal: To improve EDD's organizational communication and engagement by creating a Block Captain program.

Acknowledging an earlier historical attempt to implement a block captain model, stakeholders and Board Members indicated strong interest in creating a new Block Captain program. This initiative will prioritize two-way communication, shared ownership and accountability for EDD work, as well as a spirit of inclusion over competition. EDD will strategically map the geographic areas they serve, and select and train co-captains for each designated Block area. The program aims to support mutual communication, by providing a mechanism for EDD to more efficiently disseminate information to stakeholders, and for Block Captains to gather and share stakeholder feedback with the EDD staff and board.

Fundraising/ Budget

Goal: with the support of a Budget Committee, to increase fundraising and capacity building by assessing and building on current fundraising efforts.

This goal acknowledges both the need for adequate resources to support EDD's work, as well as the exceptional work EDD already does with the limited resources they currently have available. In order to maximize resources within these constraints, this goal focuses on assessing current fundraising approaches and events, and building upon those already existing strategies. Formation of a Budget Committee can support both fundraising and budget timeline work. Finally, an exploration of potential collaboration partners for grant writing can serve to maximize EDD's grant writing capacity for the longer term.

Events/Parade

To document and evaluate current EDD event offerings with a view to sustainable long-term event planning, and to strengthen the planning and rollout of the annual parade

Given the size of the task administering the Elmira Holiday Parade, the Board agreed to create specific goals and timelines for the parade, as itemized below. We also discussed ways that events can support fundraising and also attract investment in the district. I noted the stakeholder question of whether to prioritize events *or* support to the BID, and I wonder if a useful reframe might be to recognize that these



two goals are not in opposition, but rather, support and strengthen each other. In the broader assessment and documentation of other events, I again emphasize the importance of working skillfully with organizational change as EDD's staff continue to implement their vision for events as part of this strategic work.

Capacity building and partnerships

Goal: To strengthen organizational capacity through Board and Committee development, and to convene a Committee to evaluate and strengthen current and potential partnerships.

EDD's internal capacity can be strengthened through intentional assessment of Board demographics through a diversity/equity/inclusion lens, as well as by surveying Board and Constituents for committee service participation. Collaboration is also a critical strand, and includes enhancing/exploring partnerships and potential partnerships with the city, the county, and a range of local organizations.

Marketing and external communication

Goal: To document current marketing strategies and to assess existing and potential marketing approaches in support of EDD's ongoing growth.

There were a range of perspectives on existing and potential marketing strategies in the planning discussions. With this in mind, taking the time to document current marketing strategies and to assess both existing and potential marketing approaches will serve EDD's ongoing growth. A Marketing Committee can support this work, by maximizing Board and Constituent skillsets.

The following outlines the specific objectives relating to each of these goals, and the Gantt chart that follows offers a possible (and editable) timeline.



Elmira Downtown Development Strategic Priorities: 2024-2026

Block Captains

Goal: To improve EDD's organizational communication and engagement by creating a Block Captain program.

KPI¹: number of geographic blocks designated, with co-captains identified and trained for each block.

KPI: physical and digital dissemination tools in place

KPI: number of Roundtables in each year

1. Mapping and Recruitment:
 - 1.1. Strategically map designated blocks for all of EDD's geographic areas of service, with an eye to geography, number of businesses, and diversity of representation. (Note: "Block" can be defined in whatever geographic region best serves these goals).
 - 1.2. Identify a Board Member Co-Captain to support each Block.
 - 1.3. Identify a Constituent to serve as Co-Captain for each Block. I would recommend considering whether EDD wants to put out a general call for co-captain volunteers, or strategically selects Constituent Co-Captains based on diversity of skills, identities, and businesses represented. It's possible that a mixture (of volunteers and invited captains) might serve this step well
2. Convening:
 - 2.1. Convene initial gathering of Block Co-Captains for first Small Business Roundtable; initial roundtable focuses on training in communication skills, physical and digital tools.
 - 2.2. Create a yearlong calendar of Roundtable gatherings.
3. Dissemination:
 - 3.1. Develop physical dissemination toolkit: flyers, welcome cards for new businesses, talking points,
 - 3.2. Develop social media dissemination toolkit: possibilities include Facebook group, listserv, online forums, etc. I would recommend utilizing both physical and digital tools to increase the reach of dissemination.

Fundraising/ Budget

Goal: with the support of a Budget Committee, to increase fundraising and capacity building by assessing and building on current fundraising efforts.

KPI: Formation of Budget Committee

KPI: Documentation of current fundraising strategies and timelines

KPI: Expansion of a (to be determined) number of current fundraising initiatives.

¹ KPI: Key Performance Indicator



KPI: Timeline of meetings with potential grant writing collaborators

4. Budget Committee:
 - 4.1. Identify and recruit budget committee members from Board and wider EDD stakeholder communities.
 - 4.2. Develop schedule of committee meetings that aligns with budget planning timeline for the fiscal year.
5. Documentation/Assessment/Expansion
 - 5.1. Document current fundraising events and strategies, with an eye to a) identifying said strategies and b) itemizing steps required for each event/strategy so as to build shared institutional knowledge.
 - 5.2. Assess all current fundraising events/strategies for places to increase scope/add on additional income generating approaches.
 - 5.3. Create timeline of priority expansions from this list in years 1, 2, and 3.
6. Grant Writing
 - 6.1. Explore collaborations with nonprofits and grant writers
 - 6.2. Consider reach-out to Amplify Equity and Alternatives (Ivy Peet as possible contact).

Events/ Parade

Goal: To document and evaluate current EDD event offerings with a view to sustainable long-term event planning, and to strengthen the planning and rollout of the annual parade.

KPI: Documentation of current events and respective timelines.

KPI: Expansion of Event/Parade committee by (to be determined number) of members

KPI: Documentation of parade administration tasks

KPI: Increase of volunteers and business participation by (to be determined) %.

7. Events:
 - 7.1. Confirm event/parade committee members and recruit as needed; consider mentorship, as well as invited participation for specific stakeholders for succession planning (See also 10.2 and 10.4)
 - 7.2. Assessment current events for relevance, take-up, and sustainability
 - 7.3. Documentation of all continuing events and timelines of respective action items
8. Parade: end of July/August
 - 8.1. Document and timeline parade administration tasks.
 - 8.2. Develop parade budget
 - 8.3. Confirm and implement building logistics
 - 8.4. Move floats/costumes
 - 8.5. Develop outreach strategy to expand volunteer pool and to encourage local business participation, (contest for business/best float)
 - 8.6. Develop opportunities for additional sponsorship. (Explore possibility of Community Bank sponsorship extension, as well as a new key parade sponsor for next 3-5 years).



Capacity Building And Partnerships

Goal: To strengthen organizational capacity through Board and Committee development, and to convene a Committee to evaluate and strengthen current and potential partnerships.

KPI: Surveys completed with Board and stakeholder memberships

KPI: Measurable increase in Board diversity over 3 year period.

KPI: Increase in committee membership over 3 year period.

KPI: Committee for partnerships/collaborations convened.

9. Capacity building

- 9.1. Completion of a structured survey of current Board demographics, constituencies represented, and skillsets.
- 9.2. Survey board for interest to serve on committees and stakeholders for interest in Board and Committee service.
- 9.3. Development of 3 year plan to increase diversity of Board membership.
- 9.4. Recruit for committees; designate roles on committees as needed. Consider mentors within committees to ensure institutional knowledge and succession planning.

10. Partnerships

- 10.1. Add a committee to evaluate and strengthen current and potential collaborations. (In addition to city and county partnerships, possibilities generated include: Chemung River Friends, OSFL, Clemens Center, Art Museum, Discover Chemung, TPA, Friends of the River, City, Churches and Christmas tree-lighting.)
- 10.2. Document EDD's "map" of partnerships, including interrelationships/impact between partnerships.

Marketing And External Communication

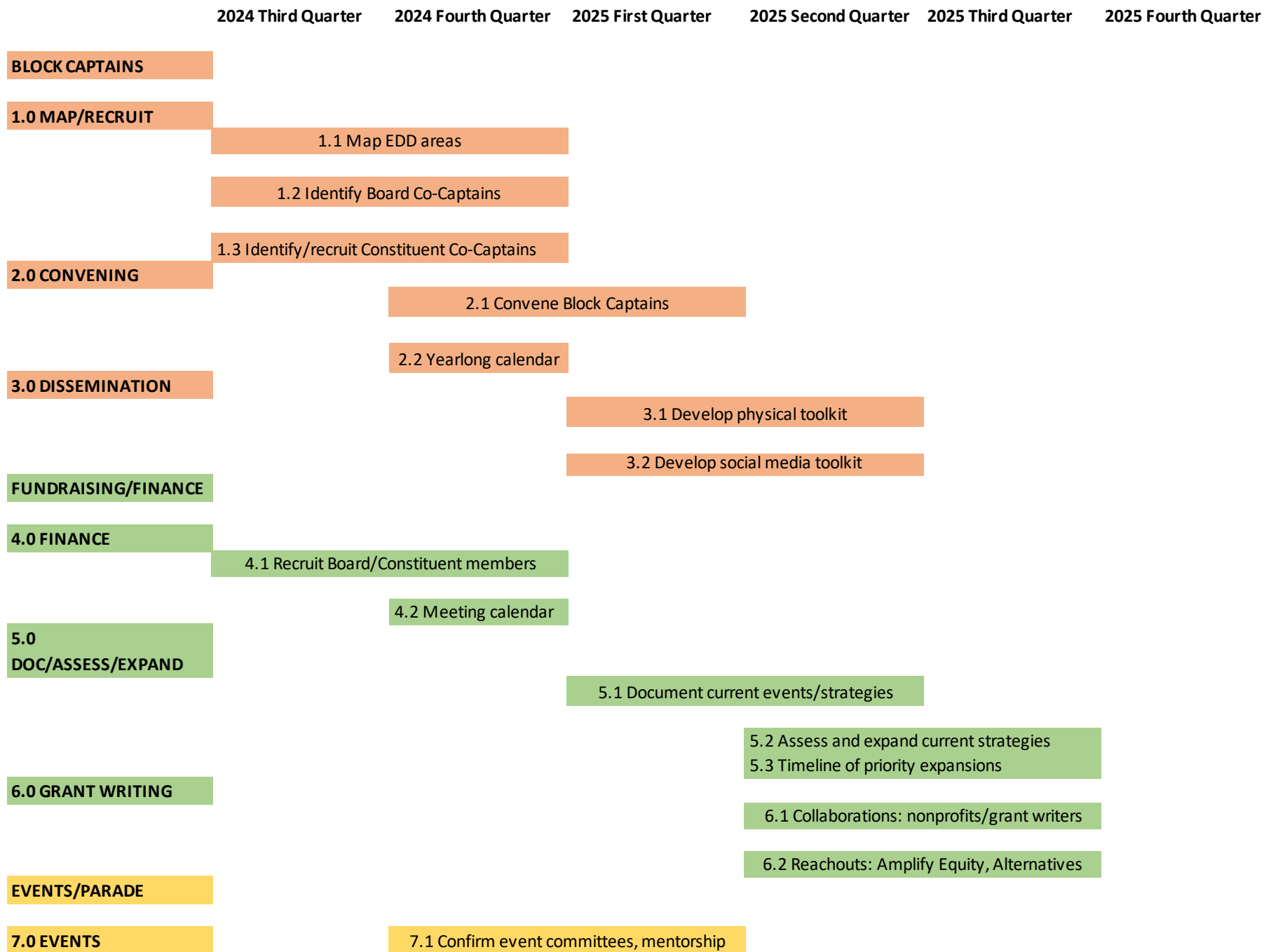
Goal: To document current marketing strategies and to assess existing and potential marketing approaches in support of EDD's ongoing growth.

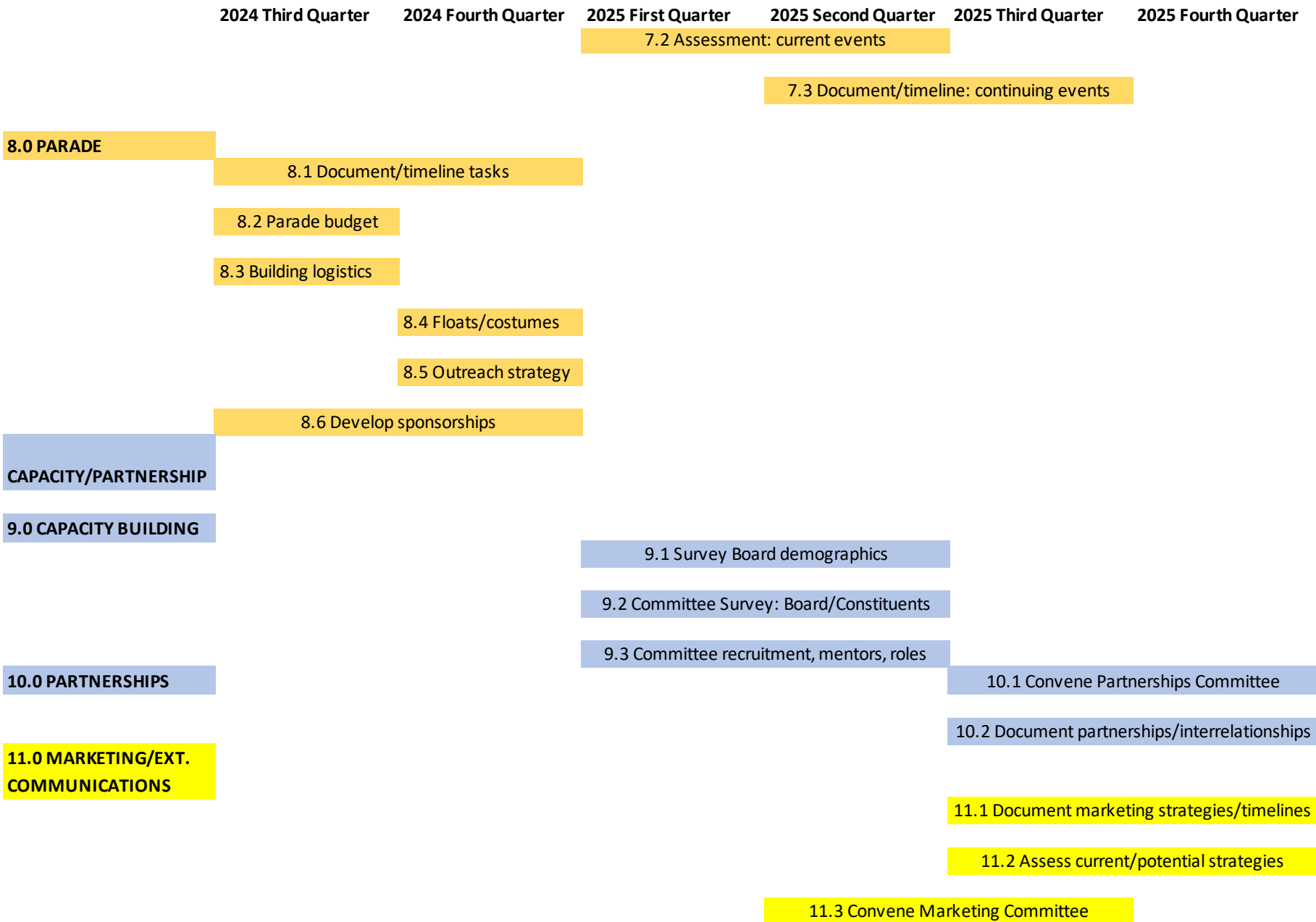
KPI: Documentation of current and potential marketing strategies

KPI: Convening of Marketing Committee.

11. Marketing

- 11.1. Documentation of current marketing strategies and their timelines.
- 11.2. Assessment of current and potential marketing strategies for efficacy, cost, metrics and cross-pollination.
- 11.3. Convening (or reconvening) of a Marketing Committee to maximize Board and Constituent marketing skillsets.







Concluding Thoughts

It has been a genuine pleasure working with Elmira Downtown Development in developing this strategic plan. Throughout the process, I've been struck by the depth of enthusiastic commitment Staff, Board members, and Stakeholders hold for Elmira and for the work of EDD. I am also impressed by the breadth of work EDD undertakes with a small but dedicated staff and limited financial resources.

This report is intended to serve as a "living document", and I heartily encourage EDD's Staff and Board to revisit and revise it as EDD continues to grow and thrive. If EDD would like support in an annual review and update of this plan, I would be glad to offer my services in this capacity.

I believe that EDD is in an exciting time of change and growth, and that its vital work will continue to have significant impact in Elmira and beyond. I will be excited to see how this work unfolds in the next three years, and beyond. It has been a privilege to support this process. If there are any questions in response to this report, or if there are ways I can be of further support as this work unfolds, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kerr Mesner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first and last names being more prominent.

Kerr Mesner, Ph.D.
Principal Consultant
Heart Story Consulting, LLC





Appendix:

Summary of Key Themes From 2017 Strategic Planning Process

Our **MISSION** is to continually enhance the environment of Elmira's Downtown District through innovative programs, promotions and partnerships that foster a sense of community while strengthening the economic vitality of our business partners.

With a clear **VISION** of furthering those partnerships in an architecturally diverse Downtown District to create a vibrant, dynamic and welcoming place to live, learn, work, shop and play.

SWOT Analysis Summary:

- Strengths: events, small but effective staff, the landscape and possibilities of the area, business and family relationships/support
- Weaknesses: lack of familiarity with EDD, nighttime safety, staff/funding limitations, the need to connect more effectively with a wider diversity of stakeholders.
- Opportunities: publicity/marketing, social media, community engagement in changing the narrative, collaboration, community support and partnerships, quality of life, benchmarking best practices, arts, history, landscape.
- Threats: safety/perception of safety, crime/drugs, lack of local newspaper support.

Top Three Objectives:

1. #1 Marketing, Public Relations, Publicity and Outreach

- a. Discuss, evaluate and adjust committees to accommodate the work of defining, developing, creating and deploying a comprehensive marketing plan for EDD.
- b. Identify /leverage resident leaders in all parts of the Elmira area.
- c. Increase inclusivity for events (more resident to come to events in their community), encourage more diversity.

2. #2 Events

- a. Discuss, evaluate and prioritize all EDD events (against success criteria) to determine status for 2018 (continue, enhance or stop current program, add new programs). Submit proposal to the BOD for review and approval.
- b. Have a jazz event like the Southern Tier Jazz Fest (fund raiser versus free, brand it so that people will come)
- c. Evaluate events against success criteria (keep vision and mission in mind) - is it engaging, vibrant, welcoming? In addition, we should give people what they want/are used to and then expose them to something new.

3. #3 Partnerships and Collaborations

- a. Identify, define, and evaluate current/potential partnerships to enhance collaboration to further EDD's Vision and Mission.
- b. Develop template for evaluating current and potential partnerships.