

Project Better Together: Iowa City area groups quickly unite to help businesses survive

Back in March, when the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world upside down, four economic development organizations in Johnson County pulled together with one goal — to help local businesses survive. They pivoted from supporting businesses in a booming economy to figuring out how to help a community facing drastic and sudden changes with no end in sight.

Women lead three of the four organizations. Nancy Bird is executive director of the Iowa City Downtown District, Kim Casco is president and CEO of Iowa City Area Business Partnership (previously the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce) and Kate Moreland is president and CEO of the Iowa City Area Development Group (ICAD). Josh Schamberger rounds out the quartet as president of Think Iowa City.

Their organizations had been meeting monthly for 10 years to share information and discuss economic and community development. But as local businesses began to shut down mid-March, they realized they needed to do more as a group.

A COMMON GOAL

They dropped everything else they were working on and focused on pandemic recovery.



“It’s all about our community — that’s the end goal for all of our organizations,” Casco said. “We share that

common goal. We didn't need to create one for this; we already had that. That allowed us to move fast."

They recognized an immediate need to get communications in line, so they weren't sending out conflicting information to their different members or investors, Bird said.

Communications and marketing staff from the four organizations pulled together. Within weeks, that team began sending out a joint newsletter. They developed a website as a repository for all the resources that were quickly coming in from local, state and federal sources.

"We just prioritized," Casco said. "All of our orgs realized that navigating the pandemic and getting our business community real-time information, that became the No. 1 priority."

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By mid-May, they had formed Project Better Together, a coalition of Johnson County leaders from city and county government, area hospitals, schools, non-profits and social

services. Mark Nolte, who had previously served as president and CEO of ICAD, was appointed as the project's director.

In their roles, they can't provide the business community with funds or employees to keep their businesses operating.

"But we can help them by making sure they have the greatest information, that they've got best practices, that they know who to go to to get that support," Casco said.

SHOP LOCAL INITIATIVES

To drive local spending and support small businesses, they launched the Holding Our Own Shop Local program on June 22 to drive \$1 million in sales to help small businesses stay alive during the pandemic. Within the first five weeks, shoppers submitted receipts totaling \$104,000 in exchange for \$12,520 in gift cards.

By late August, Holding Our Own had provided \$51,950 in grants to 33 Johnson County businesses that identified as being owned by Blacks, Indigenous and People of Color or Immigrants. Financial institutions and other area partners contributed to the grant fund to support businesses that either didn't qualify for state or federal aid or had been denied.

"I think launching Holding Our Own was a huge risk and one we're really proud of," Casco said. "Kudos to our (communications) team for figuring out the logistics and pulling that off."

FEMALE LEADERS

Over 20 years in his current role, Schamberger has never seen the four organizations work so closely together.

"All three of these women inspire me and our community to be better, to dream bigger and work harder," Schamberger said. "We have worked closely together for years, but these last five months or so have been special."

The women were equally complimentary of Schamberger and Nolte, praising both as community leaders and connectors.

“Women tend to be known for having a collaborative outlook,” Bird said. “We’re very fortunate to work with other men who share that value.”

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PURCHASE



Mutual trust and respect allowed group members to avoid wasting time by jockeying for position, Casco said. That's due in part to talking openly about the overlap in the work they do and trying to avoid duplicating and competing, she added.

Being curious is helping them in a time of unprecedented uncertainty when they don't always have the answers, Moreland said. They can keep an eye on the collective needs of the community, then leverage relationships to fill the gaps.

"From the standpoint of being a woman leader right now, I think this time in our history requires conscious leadership, which really means putting people first," Moreland said.

Their relationships have become closer as they learn to leverage their individual and complementary strengths. They now meet two or three times a week. They've learned to rely on each other in other ways as they work extra hours to support their families and the community through the pandemic.

"It's non-stop," Casco said. "I think we're trying to navigate it. I talk with my peers about how to maintain our own balance and mental health. We talk about it as a team all the time.

"A lot of it comes from knowing that there are just things you need to stop doing that aren't of value or aren't relevant to be able to make room for those things that are more important."



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