

Wood River Potentially Pursuing Illinois Main Street Membership

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter
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WOOD RIVER - Wood River City Council members are proceeding with caution to potentially pursue membership in the Illinois Main Street organization. After lots of questioning and discussion at Monday's meeting, city officials' hesitancy seemingly centers around an obligation to provide financial support to the organization for at least three years if they were to join.

The agenda item in question concerns “a Letter of Intent with Wood River Business Alliance to pursue Main Street Affiliation and provide partnership and financial support for a minimum of three years.” The city’s financial obligation to the organization upon officially joining would amount to \$25,000 per year for three years.

The Wood River Business Alliance, formerly known as Wood River Economic Development, is an organization promoting new and existing small businesses in Wood River. Illinois Main Street is part of a larger national organization, Main Street America. According to their [website](#), “Illinois Main Street supports a network of communities across the state that are working to bring prosperity to their older and historic downtowns and commercial districts.”

Wood River would become the second city in the Riverbend region to join Illinois Main Street, following Alton, if their Letter of Intent is met with approval and the council later votes to officially join the organization and provide financial support. The next-nearest Main Street cities are Carbondale and Jacksonville.

Wood River Marketing Director Kristen Burns spoke on behalf of the Business Alliance at the City Council meeting on Monday, sharing more details about the successful events they’ve held and their top priorities for the city’s development. She and Sarah McGibany, the Executive Director of Alton Main Street, spoke in favor of Wood River joining Illinois Main Street.

McGibany said Alton has been a Main Street community since 1995, and she’s been the director since 2006. She credited the city’s involvement in the organization with producing several “success stories,” adding that since the pandemic, about 20 businesses have opened in downtown Alton.

She also said Illinois Main Street prioritizes the preservation of historic buildings in downtowns across the country, and that the suburban “exodus” that left many downtowns largely vacant is starting to reverse as more people live, work, and shop in their cities’ downtowns. She sees Wood River’s potential partnership with Main Street as a way for the city to capitalize on that trend, but noted that to join the program, they would need to designate an area with specific boundaries based on architecture - ideally, an area with a high density of historic buildings, such as downtown Alton.

Councilman Bill Dettmers moved to table the item until the council’s next meeting, which would be held next year in 2024, to allow the Wood River Business Alliance more time to work on relationships with local business owners. However, the deadline for the Letter of Intent is fast approaching at the end of December, so council members

voted to move forward with the Letter of Intent without binding the city to any financial obligation until they vote separately on whether or not to officially join Illinois Main Street.

The Wood River City Council will likely discuss the item further and take a final vote at their next meeting, which will be held on Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2024, due to the New Year's Day holiday.

A full recording of the Dec. 18, 2023, Wood River City Council meeting is available at the top of this story, on the [Riverbender.com Facebook page](#), or on [Riverbender.com/video](#).