

## A New Presence In City's Downtown

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More feet will soon be on the streets of downtown Hartford, as a project with nine security ambassadors and six street cleaners prepares for a May start.

The new street presence will be the product of the recently formed Hartford Business Improvement District, a district of 251 properties whose owners overwhelmingly approved a referendum late last year to tax themselves and provide services like street cleaning, hospitality guides and public relations.

"You'll really have 15 uniformed people that, trained properly, will represent a pretty visible and active group of people on the street that are not there now," said M. Ronald Morneault, head of Business for Downtown Hartford, which supported the district's formation. "It's not just about visibility, but I think it's important that people who see these people realize that there are improvements being made downtown."

On Wednesday, the district's board decided to tax itself the maximum allowable under the law for the budget year beginning July 1, 2007, approving a tax rate that will generate roughly \$880,000 in a year to bring cleaner, safer streets. In December 2006, the board approved the same tax rate for the first six months of 2007.

"We're accomplishing a great deal in a very short time," said Bert Kaplowitz, the district's chair and a general manager at Northland Investment Corp., downtown's largest landlord. "That's the main reason the [district] was formed. We can move faster than a government agency."

Michael Zaleski, the district's executive director, said that his organization is now considering various proposals from vendors who want to provide the street sweepers and ambassadors. He noted that the board decided to split the majority of its funding between public safety and streetscape maintenance and improvement efforts.

Marketing will get a much smaller piece of the budget pie, Kaplowitz said.

"While we feel it's extremely important because we want to get people into the city, for the initial year of the budget, we really wanted to concentrate on safety, security and beautification," she said.

The district is not unique in Connecticut. Similar initiatives have been launched in Bridgeport, Stamford, New Britain and elsewhere.

Property owners received their first tax bill with the district assessment in January 2007. On that tax bill, the average annual payment to the district by the top five property owners was \$70,880; the average annual payment to the district by the bottom 50 property owners was \$232.

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