

## When historic preservation becomes hysterical

Posted on November 22, 2010 1:30 PM



By Roger Stafford

***Roger Stafford is associate publisher of Key Milwaukee and KeyMilwaukee.com.***

Milwaukee has a well-deserved reputation for preserving historic buildings, but the urge to preserve is beginning to stand in the way of much-needed downtown revitalization.

A proposed 200-room Marriott Hotel, entirely privately financed (\$50 million) at Wisconsin Avenue and Milwaukee Street, would wrap around the historic building at the southwest corner of that intersection. Historic and modern architecture would coexist and downtown Milwaukee's major thoroughfare would get a much-needed shot in the arm. One could reasonably expect new businesses to spring up along East Wisconsin Avenue and in the empty buildings adjacent to the Marriott's main entrance on Milwaukee Street.

Standing in the way of this home-grown project are three buildings – one on Wisconsin and two on Milwaukee. If age is the only requirement for a historical building, they are historical. They do not, however, have any historical significance and they have been empty or underused for many years. In fact, they stand in morning shadow of the very modern 411 building, which replaced the truly historic retail headquarters of T.A. Chapman.

Here's the situation as we see it:

- The "old" buildings, that will not be missed after the hotel is completed, contribute \$100,000 to the city's tax base. They also add significantly to the decaying appearance of what was once one of America's premier downtowns. They are and have been for some time less than 50 percent occupied (the only two current tenants are a used book store on Wisconsin Avenue and a bar on Milwaukee Street).
- The new Marriott, which could break ground early next year, would pay an estimated \$2.26 million in taxes, would require 350-450 construction workers and would result in 175-200 full-time jobs when completed. While 200 rooms would not bring downtown Milwaukee to the level where it could support a major convention or trade show, it would be a start. It would complement the nearby Pfister Hotel and Hotel Metro, support existing restaurants and retailers and spur new ventures to open in historic and less than historic buildings on the east side of downtown Milwaukee.

- Key Milwaukee is the only monthly visitor guide in the metropolitan area, with two websites and social media programs dedicated to serving the needs of leisure and business travelers. Those travelers need more lodging opportunities downtown. We agree with leaders of the Wisconsin Center District and Visit Milwaukee, who have long argued for additional hotel rooms to support a growing tourism industry and attract major conventions and trade shows.

Unfortunately, many developers in recent years have proposed facilities that required public support at a time when municipal funds are strained. The new Marriott is a rare exception. Jackson Street Management LLC is a local developer, asks no public funds and even plans to use Milwaukee's Kahler Slater Architects.

It should be a no brainer for Milwaukee's leaders. If the city's Historic Preservation Commission rejects the hotel proposal, Mayor Tom Barrett, Common Council President Willie Hines and Alderman Robert Bauman need to bring an to end the hysteria over three "old" and little-used buildings and push this project through the Common Council. It could mark the start of a rebirth of activity in downtown Milwaukee.

<http://www.biztimes.com/blogs/milwaukee-biz-blog/2010/11/22/when-historic-preservation-becomes-hysterical>

## COMMENTS

### **Sam Denny writes:**

Roger is correct. Too many people get hysterical when it comes to old buildings that simply cannot be used any longer. History has shown this over and over again.

Posted on: November 22, 2010 12:09 PM

### **J Martin writes:**

You bring up a great point on property neglect. The adjacent Johnson Bank building is a case-in-point of how a willing property owner can improve a property so that it doesn't remain underutilized or decrepit. Not to mention how the entire Third Ward was revamped from its derelict state in the 70s and 80s. Nothing has ever stopped the property owners at the proposed hotel's location from fixing up their properties in the past. In fact, I am surprised that DNS doesn't enforce building codes on downtown buildings as it does on properties elsewhere around the city. Would you be happy if your neighbors let their lawns go to seed and their houses fall apart for the last fifty years? The only way to keep the property tax base high is to force owners keep their buildings usable and presentable.

Posted on: November 22, 2010 1:53 PM

### **Jeffrey Jordan writes:**

Here's the problem, rewarding property owners for allowing their buildings to fall into neglect is not very good public policy. Then screaming that the only way to solve the problem is to tear the buildings down is, in the words of this writer, hysterical.

If we need a hotel in the downtown district, then build it on one of the many pieces of vacant land available. Here's the dirty secret. We will have a Marriott, built to meet some price point in the market, until the depreciation schedule runs dry and then it will be flipped to a lower class hotel and then again until somebody decides to tear it down and build a....but we repeat ourselves.

Cheap buildings with quasi-nice facades are easy to build and tear down. Wonderful old buildings are irreplaceable

Posted on: November 23, 2010 7:50 AM