

May 16, 2007

Public Works Committee
Milwaukee Common Council

Honorable Committee Members,

Objections to the current designs for a five-story parking garage on publicly owned land at Downer Avenue and Belleview Place are not limited to nearby residents worried about decreased quality of life – although those concerns are, of course, significant.

Please do not think approving this particular plan is a choice between inconveniencing dozens of homeowners vs. revitalizing a commercial strip and increasing city revenues through a land sale and increased tax base. In fact, **the current plans risks destroying the very area it claims to save, and alternatives have not yet been given time for consideration.**

Every commercial building in the two-block commercial stretch of Downer Avenue is either two or three stories. The current greenspace and majestic tree just east of the surface parking lot provide a buffer and visual corridor between the commercial and residential districts, both of which have historic statuses from either city, state, or federal governments.

This new parking garage will become the iconic centerpiece of a unique Milwaukee corridor. It will be the tallest and biggest building on the block. There is nothing like Downer Avenue anywhere else in the city, as I'm sure all of you know. A quick look at the designs for this signature structure immediately reveal that the baby is being thrown out with the bathwater. **Downer Avenue will cease to be the unique destination it has been and could continue to be, and will lose its inherent competitive advantage with other shopping districts like Bayshore.**

Yes, Downer Avenue is not now at its full potential, but the primary reasons for that are not a lack of parking or surgical facilities. Most long-time observers will tell you the driving cause of the current vacancies was the mismanagement of the previous landlord, Danny Katz. In terms of ambition for the area, the current landowner – New Land Enterprises – is an improvement, but this massive development plan needs to be modified and improved.

Yes, nearby residents and merchants think that, but so do shoppers who come from far away and visit occasionally or often. Hundreds of letters have recently come pouring in from every corner of the city, county, and beyond objecting to the current plan. Historic Preservation Commission chairman Tim Stemper said on Monday afternoon that he had never seen such a massive public response to any item.

Although his Commission voted to approve, they did so reluctantly and with the hope that a subcommittee they created will finally be involved in the design process. Stemper

publicly chastised the local alderman and the Department of City Development for not involving them in the process sooner, as is standard procedure. In other words, **the city, as of two days ago, finally has a full range of experts working on making this plan better. We should give their efforts time to mature by tabling this item until the next cycle.**

There was another revelation at Monday's meeting which should give you confidence that such a delay will not jeopardize the ultimate success of this project. New Land partner Boris Gokhman told the HPC that he cannot break ground until late July, because he doesn't want to disturb that annual Downer Days bikerace. In other words, **holding off on final approvals until June is a win-win for everybody: it gives the full machinery of city government time not just to consider – but also to influence and improve – this project, which will result in a better Downer Avenue for everyone.** Neighbors, shoppers, the city, and, of course, the developer, will benefit from such a pragmatic and thorough approach.

As currently conceived, the plan not only carries the baggage of widespread community opposition, but also the official and statutory objections of the State Historical Society. Such objections are not merely aesthetic in nature. **The historical value of Downer Avenue is a marketable commodity.** This is not an issue of preservation vs. progress.

Something can and should be built on that parcel, but it should be contextual to what already exists – so that the new and the old enhance each other and the neighborhood's profitable charm. We are not just losing history if we build this massive lotline-to-lotline parking structure in the middle of Downer Avenue – we are losing an opportunity to preserve Milwaukee's long-term economic vitality and tax base.

This committee has the important responsibility of approving all city land sales, which, as you know, are decisions which cannot be reversed. The entire neighborhood and city looks forward to your careful consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

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