

From: Gail Fitch

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To: mayor@milwaukee.gov

Cc: mdamat@milwaukee.gov; planadmin; rjbauma@milwaukee.gov; ahamil@milwaukee.gov; wwade@milwaukee.gov; mmurph@milwaukee.gov; RACMInfo; HistoricPreservation; Ischil@mkedcd.org

Subject: Downer Ave - Forget the Wool Sweater

Dear City Fathers / Mothers:

Re: Downer Ave.

A landlord intending to repair his buildings is laudable, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Downer Ave. already has charming street scaping.

I do not like to see the city railroaded by having to "agree" to a whole package with a developer. There doesn't have to be a whole package. It's like the developer is saying, "I'll do these nice things if you let me do these terrible things to your city." ("Let me watch your sheep, and I'll give you a nice wool sweater.") Since when do the developers dictate the terms?

Ten to twenty years ago, Downer Ave. was a popular street for socializing due to The Coffee Trader, other coffee shops and restaurants, the movie theatre, etc. Then, a new landlord charging high rents drove some tenants out, and vacant storefronts, plus high rents themselves, did not attract other businesses. Other streets, instead of Downer Ave., became popular for the age 20s-30s-40s coffee shop crowd. Now, the 20s folks who congregate on Brady St., North Ave, or Water Street / downtown probably never went to Downer Ave. It was before their time. The younger 1980s-1990s Downer Ave. patrons have now largely gotten married and moved to the suburbs.

Once a street loses its momentum, it can be hard to get it back. It has nothing or very little to do with parking. Downer Ave. thrived with the parking it had, the same parking it has now.

Downer Ave. has an ambience, and is a Historic District. Romantic settings attract diners, book buyers, and coffee shop socializers. Spoiling this street by plunking a monster parking structure on it could do more harm than you think.

Nobody likes parking garages.

UWM recently built a second parking garage, north of Hartland Ave., and it is so underused that it's revenue is only 1/3rd of what was projected. It still has to be paid for, and so now the student/staff bus pass has gone up in price to compensate.

The proposed parking structure for Downer Ave. would:

1. Clash with the appearance of other buildings, and spoil the ambience. Yes, aesthetics matter.
2. Block the view of the church as you approach from the south, as many people do by car, bus, or on foot. The open area that the surface parking lot represents, sets off the church nicely. The lot is also an open area that people can see past to the lovely neighborhood -- homes and trees -- immediately east of Downer Ave.
3. Be a brutal insult to the Kovac's house. If you had owned a house in a gracious neighborhood for 35 years, how would you feel if someone proposed building a 48-foot-high wall within about three feet of your house? What does it say about a municipality that would even consider doing that? Will the Kovacs be compensated by the city, such as by being exempt from property tax for the NEXT 35 years?

Who wants a parking structure that would do this to the Kovac's house and the appearance of the street in general? What does that say about them? This proposal treats the neighborhood like it's a cardboard backdrop, and not a real place where there are actual buildings, people, and sight lines -- and consequences to all three -- that extend past the developer's lot line.

Ends do not justify means. It is highly doubtful whether a parking structure would help business on Downer Ave. Instead, charging reasonable rents would be more likely to have a positive impact, and that would not wreck the ambience that is an asset to business -- and life -- on and around Downer Ave. It is an absolute certainty that replacing the surface lot with a parking structure would harm the quality of life for the Kovacs in their house next to it. It would be a betrayal.

Weigh the definite harm against the very iffy benefit, plus the "leave well enough alone" factor. Why would the city want to shoot itself in the foot?

A better place for a parking structure would be the NW corner of Park and Downer. It is a larger lot that could provide more spaces and STILL have a larger buffer zone around it. A buffer zone is essential. That corner has only been an open space for 15-20 years, and is more tucked out of sight.

In contrast, the lot at Belleview & Downer, SE corner, next to the Kovac's house and kitty-corner from the church, is much smaller, has been an open space "FOREVER" and is highly visible and integral to the layout of the area by leaving open sight lines between the shops and the beautiful church and residential neighborhood to the east. It's a really inappropriate place for a parking structure.

Thanks for listening,
Gail Fitch
almost lifelong East Sider
(414) 278-5848