

Hines, Barrett back downtown Marriott

by Sean Ryan
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Rendering provided

Mayor Tom Barrett and Common Council president Willie Hines are backing the proposed \$50 million downtown Milwaukee Marriott project.

The proposed \$50 million downtown Milwaukee Marriott project has the backing of Mayor Tom Barrett and Common Council president Willie Hines even though other city-elected officials remain opposed.

The project development team, which includes the principals of Wave Development LLC, requested Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission approval to demolish buildings around the southwest corner of East Wisconsin Avenue and North Milwaukee Street. Tearing down the mid- to late-1800s buildings would clear way for the planned new 10-story Marriott hotel. If the city's Historic Preservation Commission votes against the project, the developers could appeal to the Common Council.

Hines said he supports the proposal and Barrett chief of staff Patrick Curley confirmed Barrett and his administration back the development.

"It's important to have continued growth in Milwaukee and as council president I am determined to make sure that the ball is moving forward," Hines said.

The project developers have said the project would create 500 permanent and construction jobs and generate \$2.26 million in tax base.

"I don't see any cranes downtown, and Milwaukee desperately needs stronger economic activity," said Evan Zeppos, spokesman for the project. "This is just what the doctor ordered."

But opponents of demolishing buildings, led by Ald. Bob Bauman, whose district includes the site, say old buildings play a key role in the city's economic growth. Ald. Nik Kovac said downtown areas that attract visitors — such as the 3rd Ward, Cathedral Square and Old World Third Street — all have older buildings that set the neighborhoods apart from suburban landscapes they compete against.

“Part of the recipe for success in a downtown area is, frankly, old buildings,” Kovac said.

Kovac said he does not want to chase away development, but is looking for a compromise that would preserve more of the downtown buildings.

Zeppos said the development team is open to other ideas.

The developer’s original application to the Historic Preservation Commission included a proposed design where buildings fronting Wisconsin Avenue would match the historic look of the neighboring buildings, such as the Johnson Bank building. Ald. Jim Witkowiak, chairman of the city’s Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee, said that design may be a workable compromise.

“I would have to see the final design and the proposal before I can come down on one side of it,” he said. “But I’m leaning toward supporting the demolition as long as they can re-create the front of the building.”

City historic preservation staff deemed the design inappropriate.

“We’d probably be willing to go back and look at that design if people thought that is a more appropriate route to take,” Zeppos said.

Hines said that if the new hotel design can mirror the look of the existing buildings, the project will benefit the city.

“We are talking about tax base. We are talking about jobs moving forward. We are talking about blight elimination,” he said.

Supporters and opponents at the city, however, do agree that the developers must provide a guarantee that the new hotel will be built before they can demolish any buildings.

“We want to ensure that the development moves forward so that we don’t have a hole on Wisconsin Avenue,” Curley said.

Such guarantees have been discussed by city officials in the past, but there’s still a question of whether city laws allow elected officials to demand a guarantee when permitting demolition of protected historic buildings. Bauman said one approach would be for the developers to set aside a bond or put money in escrow that the city would collect if the company demolishes a building but does not build the hotel.

The developers have committed to city officials not to tear down buildings until the project is fully approved and the company is ready to build, Zeppos said.

<http://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/print-edition/2010/11/19/hines-barrett-back-downtown-marriott.html>