

An open letter: Support the Dover Street Teachtown plan

By Jay Bullock

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A new plan would turn Dover Street School from an empty, outdated hull into apartments and support for young teachers.

Dear Ald. Jim Bohl, et al.:

I've been following the story of the proposed Teachtown redevelopment of the vacant Dover Street School for some time now, as a [journalist](#), a Milwaukee Public Schools teacher and a homeowner in the 14th aldermanic district. I am writing to offer my strong support for the proposal, which would pour \$18 million of investment into the neighborhood, add significantly to the tax base and provide a space for young teachers new to the city to find their roots and develop a love of this city that I, too, have adopted as my home.

When rumors of a plan to turn the old Dover school into teacher housing first bubbled up, I was skeptical, to say the least. I've followed what happened there since MPS first proposed merging Dover – a good school but whose enrollment was falling – with a nearby school in 2007.

I watched as a charter school that wanted the space sputtered out and as a group tried but failed to get the capital together to make the building a community arts space. I have been in there, and I get why the dozens of other groups that expressed an interest in the property before Teachtown all bailed: It is old, asbestos-filled, short on bathrooms and lacking in any amenity you can name, from an elevator to modern wiring.

Indeed, I tried selfishly to score the space for me and my students at Bay View High School for an extension of our new creativity and innovation program. But I was told flatly that no, there is

no chance that MPS will make the necessary investment to bring the building up to code so it could legally open its doors again.

For a long time since then, I assumed I would stare at the vacant hulk of building forever from the windows of the high school, since no one who could afford to fix it wanted it, and no one who wanted it could afford to fix it.

Until Teachtown.

Here, for the first time, is a proposal that has both teeth and legs. Teeth, because it is a smart, well researched plan modeled on successful developments in Baltimore and Philadelphia that provide apartments and support for young teachers who would otherwise have trouble finding a place to live in a new, expensive city. Teachtown Milwaukee helped find housing for 109 such teachers in 2013, so I believe they could easily fill 90 units on the Dover site with teachers.

And it has legs in that there is financial and influential muscle behind the project – MPS, the Greater Milwaukee Committee and a respected local developer.

If I were Melissa Goins, the developer, I would have walked away months ago, despite the plan's teeth and legs. This is because the rampant NIMBY-ism and the literally parochial concerns of a nearby voucher school have made this whole process a frustrating mess.

Showing that they are better people than I, though, Goins and Ellen Higgins (of CommonBond properties, a property management group with more than 40 years of experience maintaining properties like what Teachtown would be) bent over backwards to accommodate the complaints of neighbors and concerns of St. Lucas Lutheran School.

They changed the plan from three additional buildings on the site to just one building that will be shorter in height than the current Dover building and turned perpendicular to the street to minimize the effect on neighbors' lines of sight. They cut the number of planned apartment units by almost 20 percent. They are adding more than one parking space per apartment unit. And they are willing to turn over a massive chunk of the property, nearly a third of it, to St. Lucas as a playground that could continue to serve the neighborhood the way the current playground space does.

A lot of opposition to the plan comes from people projecting onto it rather than thinking about what the life of a real young teacher is like. At a community meeting on March 24, the single biggest complaint was parking and increased traffic in the neighborhood.

"How many of you," one neighbor asked the 300-person audience, "have more than one car for your household?" And, sure, a lot of hands went up. But the people moving into Teachtown aren't going to be families with lots of cars, but rather single 23- and 24-year-olds on a budget lucky to own one car and unlikely to throw lots of raving parties (seriously, that came up more than once at the meeting).

They'll also be less than a block from public transportation on Kinnickinnic Avenue. Young people moving to Milwaukee are more likely than older residents to live a car-free lifestyle, according to [a recent story](#) in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

That proximity to KK is important to note, too. Many neighbors are concerned that this development would change the flavor of the neighborhood, which is full of single-family houses. But the Dover property is located right near KK, separated only by a non-single-family building – St. Lucas Church. It's across the street from a very large non-single-family building (the St. Lucas School) and near other multi-unit apartment properties in the neighborhood, not to mention many commercial spaces on KK.

As a resident of Ald. Tony Zielinski's district, I am disappointed that he has chosen to [oppose the plan](#). Zielinski told the Daily Reporter [earlier this month](#) that he would support a plan that just redevelops the Dover building into housing. But that is a pipe dream. Both Goins and another developer quoted in that story say there is no way to make such a project financially feasible.

Instead, what is likely to happen to the space if you shoot down the Teachtown plan at your April 21 meeting, is nothing. My fears about staring at that empty shell of a building every day forever will be realized after all.

So please move this project forward, and please honor the work that Goins and her team have done to make this project fit the demands of the residents. MPS, the tax base and the future residents of this fine neighborhood will thank you.