

TO: Members of the Milwaukee Common Council

FROM: IFF

**Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce
Milwaukee Charter School Advocates
School Choice Wisconsin
Schools That Can Milwaukee**

**RE: File #120658; relating to use classifications and building design standards
in the industrial-mixed zoning district**

DATE: 15 October 2012

The coalition of organizations listed above respectfully asks that the Council withhold action on File #120658, relating to use classifications and design standards in industrial-mixed zoning districts. While we share Alderman Perez's concern that part of creating a quality school means ensuring a quality physical environment, we urge the Council to withhold action until a more comprehensive facility policy is in place for high quality schools that seek to locate or expand in the City of Milwaukee.

We believe consideration of this ordinance is problematic at this time for two reasons:

1. **The Council has not yet implemented 2011 Wisconsin Act 17 which would allow for the purchase of surplus Milwaukee Public School facilities by other education operators.** This has unnecessarily constrained the options available to schools like St. Marcus Lutheran School, Rocketship Education and others. Although Act 17 clearly gives the Council the authority to dispose of these buildings, the Department of City Development and Mayor Barrett's office have indicated that full implementation is unlikely in the short term.

Because MPS refuses to relinquish control of its vacant and underutilized facilities, other education operators are forced to select buildings from the limited supply of commercial properties available. These properties typically require significant investment in order to make the building suitable for school use. This circumstance is not ideal for the school nor the surrounding neighborhood, but without access to surplus facilities, schools have little choice in the matter.

Also, because of this portfolio of unused buildings, MPS is saddled with more than double the national average of appropriate square footage per student at the middle and high school levels. This has led to a skyrocketing budget deficit for

maintenance and repairs. As a result, more money is funneled out of classrooms that serve children and into empty ones that do not.

The Common Council has the ability to better align a valuable resource with needs of the community by acting on the authority granted to it by the State Legislature in 2011. In doing so, it would mitigate a substantial financial strain on the Milwaukee Public Schools. It would also ease the demand for less traditional facility options that may not be the most appropriate for school use.

2. **Milwaukee clearly has a community-wide objective to increase the capacity of high performing schools.** In order to achieve this objective for all students in all neighborhoods in the City, there must be some flexibility for schools that require specific facility types to accommodate specialized programs or serve a specific student population. While we understand the special use designation will still permit schools to use the buildings in very narrow circumstances, the special use process requirements may unnecessarily inhibit schools from locating in some neighborhoods or serving certain populations. This could be especially true for high school programs hoping to serve students on the south side. While we agree with Alderman Perez that school programs in these facilities must be safe and appropriate, the existing permit process is adequate to address these issues.

We appreciate the conversation we have had with Alderman Perez and other members of the council about this proposed zoning change in addition to the larger issues we raise in this letter. We hope that this issue and issues like it can be discussed in the broader context of a facility policy that improves the education landscape for all Milwaukee students.

