

Proposed Condominium on Webster and Stowell

We represent a group of neighborhood residents who are opposing a proposal to construct an 11-story condominium on the northeast corner of Webster and Stowell avenues. We oppose the project, and are circulating a petition against it, for several reasons. We do not believe that Downer Avenue's problems are a function of inadequate parking or population density; we think, rather, that they stem from high rents, poor management strategies and practices, and the development, since 1990, of attractive shopping/restaurant hubs downtown, in the 3rd Ward, on Brady St., and at 5 Corners. We also believe that the proposed building's size (120ft. by 180 ft. by 130 ft.) is out of sync with its commercial and residential contexts, that its shadowing effects on adjacent and nearby properties would be significant; and that the 200 cars that would be parked in the building, plus those of visitors, would place substantial additional pressure on adjacent (30 ft.) streets. Finally, we think that Downer Avenue needs more creative business planning and management practices, not a building that adds unneeded density and intrudes massively on the residential neighborhood; the corner of Stowell and Webster needs a smaller condominium compatible with the neighborhood visually and spacially.

There are residents of the neighborhood who are opposed to virtually all construction projects to revitalize Downer Avenue. They were highly visible last year in response to proposals that the city to sell one of its Downer Avenue parking lots to Ogden Realty for a boutique hotel, or to New Land for a parking structure above grade-level retail stores. There are also neighbors who support the building of an eleven-story apartment and parking complex, believing that it will revitalize and sustain the Avenue's economy, and relieve both current and future street congestion.

We represent a middle-of-the-road, and we believe majority, opinion among area residents. We appreciate both the commercial and residential character of the Downer Avenue

area, and believe that the residential and commercial communities must accommodate and help to sustain one another. We **do not** oppose either “development” in general, or parking structures or condominium projects in particular. We would like to see creative new structures on the city parking lots on Downer (e.g., parking structures above retail stores and/or professional offices), and additional commercial and professional space developed on the second and third floors on both sides of the Avenue. But we **do think** that the building being proposed for Webster and Stowell encroaches massively on the surrounding residential community, and we urge a separation of the Webster-Stowell and Downer Avenue projects, with the first of these reconfigured on a more modest scale.

The New Land proposal currently calls for an eleven-story building with entry level reception and activity areas, a mix of subterranean and above-ground parking, and 73 one- and two-bedroom apartment units above them, and 11 penthouse apartments on the top two floors that will be terraced to reduce “shadowing” somewhat. The building will have roughly 200 parking slots, for use by residents of the building and occupants of the second and third floors above Schwartz Books and Starbuck’s, some 26,000 square feet in all, that will be developed as commercial or professional office space.

The new owner of the property on the northeast corner of Webster and Stowell is New Land Enterprises, owned by Boris Gokhman and his partner Walter Shukh. They recently acquired this and other properties on Downer Avenue (including the building in which Starbuck’s and Schwartz’s Bookshop are located) from Katz Properties (see writer Tom Daykin’s June 20, 2006 article in the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#)). New Land Enterprises plans to refurbish these properties, and to develop the second and third floors above Schwartz’s. The fact that the new owners are willing to invest money in the area, and that the project would bring roughly 150 new residents and businesspeople, i.e., potential consumers, to the neighborhood, may account for the support that the project currently enjoys from area merchants. As suggested above, however, we do not believe that inadequate parking or population density are what is ailing Downer Avenue, or that initiatives in either of these directions address its real problems.

If the developers are to go ahead with their plans, they must obtain variances from the existing city codes and regulations that govern new buildings, specifically those that limit

buildings to a height of 60 feet (4-5 stories) and require compatibility with their surrounding contexts. The Department of City Development and the Common Council's Subcommittee on Zoning and Neighborhood Development, chaired by the area alderman, Michael D'Amato, must both approve any variance.

Mr. D'Amato supports the New Land proposal, as do some people in the Department of City Development, apparently. They and others in city government appear happy to be dealing with an investor other than Mr. Katz, and who is willing to invest money and help to expand their revenue base. Some allow that the problems of the Avenue (business closures) are not simply or principally a function of parking facilities (they concede that high rents, the types of business, and the way in which they have been run have been contributing factors). But the Webster-Stowell project and the money behind it are birds in the hand that city officials are hard pressed to turn down given the neighborhood opposition to previous proposals, and the absence of alternative projects and funding sources.

The regulations and restrictions that govern new construction were revised in October 2002, to achieve a balance between preserving neighborhood character and meeting contemporary development needs. The City of Milwaukee's Department of City Development web page includes in its statement of governing principles that:

“New buildings should be designed in ways that retain the traditional qualities of Milwaukee's architecture. This does not mean that new buildings should nostalgically imitate historical styles. In fact, to do so would be contrary to the creative design traditions that produced Milwaukee's rich architectural legacy. Timeless design principles should be followed that produce architecture *that fits with its context and is human scale*. New buildings should be designed *to be compatible with neighboring structures, spaces, and activities*. Combining good design with the city's rich architectural heritage will maintain its unique, attractive, “people-friendly” environment and further enhance Milwaukee's residents' quality of life” (my emphasis).

It later identifies 4 specific principles: 1) neighborhood compatibility; 2) pedestrian friendly design; 3) land use diversity; and 4) transportation diversity. It is our view that

proposed project violates the first three of these. With regard to neighborhood compatibility, the DCD writes:

“a cohesive neighborhood environment depends on buildings that compliment one another. The size, shape and location of buildings as well as the uses contained within them, create “patterns” that define neighborhood character. New development should be compatible with the patterns of its surrounding context” (my emphasis).

We believe that a building as tall (120 ft.) and massive (160 ft. by 130 ft.) as the one being proposed is grossly incompatible with: a) the remaining buildings on Webster and Stowell, on which there are both single-family and two-family residences, and apartment buildings of no more than four stories, each of which is set back from between 4 and 10 feet from the sidewalk; and b) those of the wider 16-square block neighborhood in which there are only **two** buildings more than four stories (the 6-story building on Stowell and Belleview and a 9-story building on Prospect and Bradford - which was built at least thirty years ago and itself clearly violates several of the above principles). We further believe that such a building, which will take fully one-half of the block of Stowell between Webster and Belleview, would have an enormously detrimental **“shadowing effect”** on the other buildings immediately north, and both east and west, of the property site.

The DCD’s second principle, which deals with pedestrian friendly design reads: “Cities are for people, and an environment designed to accommodate the pedestrian heightens human experience and sense of place. New development should be designed to create attractive, comfortable and safe walking environments.” We submit that structures without ground-floor retail stores to distract from above-ground parking levels are inconsistent with this principle.

And, finally, the department’s third principle addresses land use diversity: “Milwaukee neighborhoods are comprised of a rich mix of land uses. Such diversity uses land efficiently, provides for neighborhood convenience, and contributes to unique urban experiences.” We submit: a) that there is no evidence that the residential and parking components of the proposed structure are going to revitalize Downer Avenue’s retail businesses (whose problems are not entirely or perhaps even largely a function of the parking shortfall), and b) that it would be better

to develop additional parking facilities (with distractive store fronts) on the wider (50 ft.) Downer Avenue than on either the 30 ft. Stowell or the 31 ft. Webster.

Someone I know who is a Planner in the DCD and a former neighborhood resident thinks that the most viable objection to the project will be the “shadowing” issue, i.e., the blockage of direct sunlight that will come with a such a large (in breadth and depth) and tall building so close to surrounding properties (it would be especially bad for residents of the four-story apartment buildings immediately north of the site). He doesn’t think that the city is currently open to selling either of the two Downer Avenue parking lots to private developers, or that we can take the issue of potential congestion on streets as narrow as those adjoining the site, as, in his view, the impact of the additional cars will only be felt for a half-hour to an hour in the morning, and briefly in the afternoon or early evening.

We think that the shadowing effect are very serious, that a parking facility for 200 cars will create an enormous burden on a street as narrow and short (between Downer and Stowell) as E. Webster during the morning rush hour, and that the cars of those coming to visit condominium residents will add to the area’s already substantial parking crisis during evening hours and on weekends. We urge the city to work creatively with us (residents), the Downer merchants, and both New Land and other potential developers to resolve economic and other issues affecting the area through design concepts and projects that use the Avenue itself more effectively, and avoid encroaching so massively on the adjacent residential area.

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