



Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

January 25, 2016

The Honorable Patricia Najera
City Plan Commission Chairwoman
809 N. Broadway, 1st Floor
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Honorable Members
City Plan Commission
809 N. Broadway, 1st Floor
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Chairwoman Najera and Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of File 151194, which relates to a change in zoning from Downtown-Civic Activity to Parks for the Milwaukee County Historical Society. I appear today on behalf of the residents the 10th Supervisory District, but also to relay to you the actions taken by the full County Board of Supervisors related to this topic.

Milwaukee County has placed a high value on providing the public with access to world-class cultural institutions. However, cuts to state aid, declining property values, and an aging infrastructure have resulted in a \$250 million maintenance and capital improvement backlog at our parks and cultural amenities.

This maintenance backlog threatens to undermine public access to these institutions at the same time young professionals are seeking “quality of life” amenities. Also, critical to establishing a high quality of life is ensuring that these cultural amenities remain open and accessible to the public.

The only way to guarantee public access to our cultural assets is to ensure the amenities remain publicly owned entities. Doing so is becoming increasingly difficult since the Legislature’s adoption of Act 55, which essentially consolidated the ability to sell county-owned land without establishing a public process or a requirement for public oversight. However, county-owned land zoned as parkland remains subject to County Board and public oversight. Retaining such oversight is the best way to ensure that our public assets remain public.

As you know, each budget cycle, County Supervisors must make difficult choices and prioritize funding for some programs over others, especially as levy limits continue to constrain the county’s ability to fund all of the programs of importance to our residents. The county can ill-afford to invest in programs or institutions that can be easily privatized or sold. Privatizing assets could not only lead to a lack of public access, but investing millions of dollars in assets that could be sold is also not a prudent financial investment.

In order to continue the process of reinvesting in county cultural assets, the County’s Finance, Personnel and Audit Committee voted to authorize a \$2 million dollar investment for Phase 1 of the restoration of the exterior cornice of the Milwaukee County Historical Society building.

This budget amendment was proposed by Supervisor Patricia Jursik, and was not originally included in the County Executive's Capital Budget. It was the Committee's intent, and my hope, that this initial investment will eventually lead to the full rehabilitation of this historic landmark.

The County Historical Society benefited from the Committee's reluctance to invest \$3.61 million in upgrades to the Marcus Center. The Committee's reluctance to do so stems from a provision included in 2015 Act 60, the arena financing bill, which requires Milwaukee County to transfer title to the Marcus Center unencumbered to the Wisconsin Center District upon receiving a request from the District Board.

Despite being required to release its ownership rights to the Marcus Center, the Act holds the County liable for all outstanding debt associated with the Marcus Center by requiring the deed to be transferred unencumbered. It is my understanding that transfer of the Marcus Center to the District will occur prior to all of the debt already incurred by the County being retired.

Although there are no current plans to do so, the Committee - and the Board - was equally concerned that this property could be transferred unencumbered in a manner similar to that which is expected to occur with the Marcus Center. If that were to occur, the County would be left with millions of dollars in debt service payments for a building in which it has no ownership interest. As you can see, this would create an untenable financial position for the County. As a result, the Committee made the appropriation related to the cornice repair contingent on the County Historical Society being rezoned as park land.

I know each of you shares my appreciation for all of Milwaukee County's cultural institutions, including the County Historical Society. In order to ensure that the Historical Society remains a landmark open to the public, I respectfully request that you support File 151194, which authorizes a change zoning from Downtown - Civic Activity to Parks for the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Supreme Moore Omokunde
10th Supervisory District