

February 11, 2007

2624 E. Bellevue Pl.
Milwaukee, WI 53211

Mayor Thomas Barrett
City Council
City Hall
200 East Wells St
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Mayor Barrett and City Aldermen:

I live diagonally across the street from the city-owned parking lot and green space that has invited people into the historic Downer Avenue shopping and entertainment district for decades. In fact, I chose to make my home in Milwaukee here after choosing this incredible neighborhood sixteen years ago. I have never regretted that decision, until perhaps now, when the character of the neighborhood appears to be at risk of utter destruction, and my personal investment looks to be severely at risk. Not only do I believe the current plan is bad for residents, I also believe the plan is bad for our retailers, and I believe the plan is bad for the City as a whole.

I have every interest in the vitality and the revitalization of the Downer Avenue neighborhood. However, I am strongly opposed to the current plan and the process by which it has been created. I encourage you to reject the current plan and its current major components, all of which are severely problematic to the neighborhood: the 11-story structure, the 3-story health care/surgical center, the enclosed multi-story parking structure, and the dominant near-monopoly position of a single landlord. I also encourage you NOT to sell the city property (parking lot, green space) to New Land Enterprises, and if you do decide to sell it at least engage in a fair, competitive bidding process, leverage the existing Northeast Side Area planning process, and solicit meaningful community input.

There has been much public attention to the proposed 11-story building at Webster and Stowell. One day a condo, the next day a condo/hotel, who knows what by the time it potentially gets built. Like many others in the community, I vehemently oppose the back-door rezoning of the neighborhood that approval of this structure would result in, the loss of light for many hours of the day many days of the year, and the precedent for future uncontrolled development.

There's been virtually no input solicited on the proposed 3-story health care/surgical center, which was presented as a surprise to many of us at the late-scheduled December 18 meeting at St. Mark's Church (where by the way, it was made clear that the meeting was not about input but rather about one-way communication of the plan). The issues with the medical facility are numerous and I will only highlight them here:

- Use is inconsistent with the neighborhood – will not attract retail customers, and given the access/parking issues, may not attract patients either
- No parking in the structure (and there is parking space there that could be rehabbed)
- No drop-off/pick-up area
- Over-scaled contemporary architecture in a historic retail neighborhood

There has also been noticeably little discussion about the proposed 4-level parking structure on the southeast corner of Downer and Bellevue. It is potentially the most destructive component of the plan, and the component that you, as Mayor and Aldermen, can easily decline, as the property belongs to the City of Milwaukee. The primary argument against the building is that it fails to solve the real problem expressed by residents and merchants alike – lack of enough business activity and vacant store fronts.

- Current lot provides open, safe, convenient and accessible parking, and in fact, acts as an invitation to the retail district for pedestrians and drivers alike
- Green space provides a desirable buffer between retail and residential
- Enclosed, more expensive parking will actually serve to drive consumers/shoppers/visitors away from the neighborhood, to places where they can have easy, accessible, inexpensive, and open parking, as many Downer Avenue retailers have already expressed
- Height will make the wrong structure – a parking structure – the focal point of the neighborhood, and that focal point will be an eyesore, given the proposed design, size, materials, and appearance
- Inadequate space between the structure and the neighboring homes, who will be lucky to retain space for garbage and recycling container storage, and who will be extremely unlucky in the case of fire or other disaster, should emergency vehicles need access
- The structure, for all its disadvantages, will not add a significant number of spaces, and there is already unused and accessible parking at the Northwest corner of Downer and Park, at the other end of the block
- Traffic on Bellevue, already a nightmare, especially in the winter, can only get worse – it will be intolerable and dangerous for pedestrians
- Destruction of property value for homeowners
- Give a dominant landlord a near-monopoly position
- Violate principles of competitive bidding and proposals

Arguments that there has been substantial community feedback on the development of the Downer Avenue neighborhood are both correct and incorrect. Correct in that there have been several community meetings. Incorrect in that the plan under discussion has been a completely moving target, and getting details has been like pulling teeth. Meetings have been scheduled outside of the normal process for these kind of decisions, and at short enough notice that many people cannot even hear about them, lest actually attend. Our own alderman has expressed a complete unwillingness to listen to his constituency, while communicating complete support of his chosen developer.

At Miller Brewing Company, where I hold a position in management, we not only have a business conduct policy that assures we do nothing inappropriate, we have a policy that assures we do nothing with even the appearance of impropriety. There is enough appearance of impropriety in Alderman D'Amato's behavior that I also ask that you encourage him to abstain from commenting or voting on the matter of the Downer Avenue "development" proposal in his role as Chair of the Zoning and Development Committee.

Let us not give away an important community diamond to a single developer with clear intent to expand his dominance beyond the current level. I quote the letter he sent me late last fall:

"Dear Donna J,

You own the property located at
2624 E BELLEVIEW PL

I would like to purchase that property.

If you are interested in selling for any reason please
 Let me know. My phone number is
414-232-0011

Sincerely yours,

Ben Kral

ALSO

We have beautiful homes for rent!

We will work with you to buy property no
Money down with instant equity!"

If you'd like to see the original letter, I'd be happy to provide it.

In summary, I ask that you continue to explore reasonable ways to revitalize the Downer Avenue retail neighborhood, but not at the expense of the retailers, the residents, the historic value of the area, or integrity in business and development process.

Thanks for your attention.

Sincerely,

Donna J. Neal