



Bucks should take a lesson from Titledown

By Pat Small
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The Milwaukee Bucks' new arena deal includes big extras: a needless new parking garage and a publicly subsidized entertainment mall.

Coincidentally, the Bucks aren't the only Wisconsin sports team with ambitions. Bill Glauber's Sept. 6 Journal Sentinel feature detailed how the Green Bay Packers designed Titledown District, an unsubsidized mixed-use development on 34 acres the team purchased near Lambeau Field. The Packers smartly used a feasibility study and community engagement while planning their project. Local government leaders and the Packers committed to some guiding principles:

- Build a vibrant neighborhood with desirable amenities and local businesses — not just bars and another "boring" mall, in the words of a St. Norbert College business professor.
- Respect existing businesses and don't replicate them.
- Create development that "gives back to the community" — after learning what people actually want and need.
- Include a large public space — 10 acres — designed for everyone's enjoyment, not just paying customers.

In contrast, the state arena bill has mandated that "public plazas" within and near the proposed Bucks mall can be used only by the Bucks for commerce. It'll be a cash-coral sports bar — not a public space.

In April, the Bucks presented glitzy sketches of their entertainment complex, based on the heavily subsidized Kansas City Live! The Bucks have yet to release details in writing, at least for public review. It's now past time for them to present fleshed-out business plans as other developers do. Just what do they intend for our downtown? We all need to know before contracts are signed.

Important downtown decisions must not continue being made piecemeal and in secret. Willy-nilly decisions preclude big-picture planning.

The Wisconsin Center District, which operates three convention-related properties and funds Visit Milwaukee, is being required to pay \$213 million (with interest) for arena construction in this deal. That albatross will hamstring convention-center expansion and prospects for decades.

Unlike Green Bay's inclusive process, the City of Milwaukee allowed public comment just once — after this ugly-duckling of a deal was already hatched and called a swan. Robust community involvement was eschewed in Milwaukee's process.

Perfunctory presentations by city officials have been for show-and-tell — not to elicit citizen input about how to craft and fund a successful public-private project. Instead, taxpayers will be used like an ATM. It simply has not mattered to city officials and Bucks owners what Milwaukeeans may want downtown.

No credible data supports claims that a mammoth bar complex will "grow the pie" for the 70 hospitality businesses within a half-mile of the arena. Blithely saying demand will increase is irresponsible wishful thinking. City subsidies for a mall that merely hopes for new residents and hotel guests ignores the actual market.

When planning Titledown, the Packers wisely chose to create "something that was new, different and complementary." What the Bucks propose, and city officials endorse, in no way resembles this conscientious goal. The Packers' plan arose organically from the ground up — not as a top-down demand, from visiting billionaires.

Milwaukee's public officials must not abdicate their civic duty regarding the redevelopment of 30 acres of public land being given to the Bucks. City officials and the Bucks have a moral obligation to ensure that this prime land is used for the greater good, not just the Bucks owners' private gain.

In exchange for public largess, Bucks owners must guarantee real community givebacks — as savvy team owners do in other cities. Such commitments cannot be left to their whims. Promises of trickle-down prosperity will not suffice in our cash-strapped city.

Green Bay and the Packers have the public's interests in mind. Milwaukee and the Bucks will also benefit, even at this late date, from a participatory process for arena-district development rather than a "Bucks-Know-Best" approach.

Why rush to approve the Bucks' sketchy plans? To protect taxpayers, city officials should negotiate further before acquiescing to Bucks' and NBA demands. Don't jeopardize local hospitality businesses — and don't needlessly pay \$35 million for a new garage. Those savings could be applied to dramatically reducing staggering arena-construction debt imposed by the state Legislature upon the Wisconsin Center District.

The Bucks might handily get Common Council approval for these follies. Consequently, a thriving hospitality market will be recklessly flooded. A big-box bar mart won't improve downtown's economy. It could even become the white elephant in the room after the Bucks' "enhanced revenue stream" runs dry. That is what happened in Minneapolis; Memphis; Glendale, Ariz., and elsewhere.

The ball is now in the Common Council's court. It should look north to Lambeau Field for inspiration on how to win one for the people.

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