

Zoning Committee
Milwaukee Common Council
November 18, 2025

Good morning. I am Dennis McBride, mayor of the City of Wauwatosa. Although I'm not a City of Milwaukee resident, I have a keen interest in what happens in Milwaukee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Many times over many years, including in remarks to the State Legislature, I have publicly stated that Wauwatosa cannot thrive or survive without a strong Milwaukee. For that reason, I strongly advocated for a local sales tax for Milwaukee and Milwaukee County and I continue to advocate, wherever I can, for the best interests of Wisconsin's most important city.

In addition to being a mayor, I wear other hats. One is the cap of a proud alumnus of UW-Milwaukee, my alma mater and the alma mater of five of my six siblings. In scores of ways, UWM is essential to the success of Milwaukee and our region.

I am also a member of the board of directors of the Wisconsin Center District, which of course occupies an important part of the west side of the Milwaukee River and which owns and operates the UWM Panther Arena and the Miller High Life Theatre, which are the subjects of today's hearing.

The City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission has unanimously recommended to you that the UWM Panther Arena and Miller High Life Theatre be designated as historic landmarks, and thus protected from demolition or from exterior modifications without the commission's approval. Before I became mayor of Wauwatosa, I served for 10 years on our city's Historic Preservation Commission, and I have written and lectured extensively on a variety of historic topics. It should go without saying that the UWM Panther Arena and Miller High Life Theatre are worthy of historic landmark status and protection.

First, let me focus on the Miller High Life Theatre, which old-timers like me know better as the Milwaukee Auditorium. As stated in the Historic Preservation Commission's report, the Auditorium was the first building planned in the newly-conceived Civic Center. After a competition that drew proposals from architects across the country, the winning proposal was by the renowned Milwaukee firm of Ferry & Clas, and designed in the Neoclassical Beaux Arts style for which the firm is best remembered. The Auditorium became the prototype for such buildings across the country. From the beginning, it has been the site of important historical events, most notably the speech delivered by former President Theodore Roosevelt just a half-hour after he was shot in front of the Gilpatrick Hotel. It is an irreplaceable part of our architectural and civic history.

Now, let me turn my attention to the Arena. When it opened in 1950, it was the first of many significant civic improvements which the newly-formed Greater Milwaukee Committee proposed following World War II. As a student of urban planning, I have always considered the Arena to be one of the most distinctive – and, frankly, glamorous –

buildings in a city that allowed so-called "urban renewal" to destroy so much of our distinctive architectural heritage. With its striking clamshell roof clad in copper, built in the International Style, it is a building in which any city would take considerable pride.

But the building has significance for other reasons. Generations of Milwaukeeans like me have enjoyed events in the Arena, including numerous games of the Milwaukee Bucks, Milwaukee Does, Milwaukee Hawks, Milwaukee Wave, Milwaukee Admirals, Marquette University, UWM, and even the Chicago Blackhawks. Significant political rallies and concerts have occurred there, and for many local colleges and universities, especially UWM, it has been the site of numerous graduation ceremonies. *Presley Wonder*
Robert Indiana floor @ Harvard

Please allow me a few personal notes. My mother and father, who were both newspaper reporters, met in the *Milwaukee Journal* newsroom across from the Arena. As a boy, I often visited them at work and always admired the beautiful buildings across what was then 4th Street. They raised me to understand the importance of civic buildings. In 1951, my father covered the first Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame dinner and ceremony at the Arena for *The Journal*. Twenty years later, my twin brother, who was then a Milwaukee Bucks ballboy and later became the Bucks' equipment manager, was on the team bench when the Bucks won their first National Basketball Association championship. The Bucks' new home is the Fiserv Forum, but for my money the Arena is still the best place in Milwaukee to watch a basketball or hockey game.

As noted in the Historic Preservation Commission's report, both the Auditorium and the Arena are significant buildings designed by two of Milwaukee's greatest architectural firms. Buildings of such grandeur are more than just buildings; they are part of a city's soul and an expression of municipal pride. If we were to lose these buildings, we would lose an important – and irreplaceable – part of Milwaukee's architectural fabric.

Finally, let me address the economic cost of losing these cherished buildings. UWM has made a significant investment in the Arena, not only to promote its basketball team, but also to make a statement about its ever-increasing contribution to the intellectual and economic life of southeastern Wisconsin. It would be an immeasurable setback for the university if its men's basketball team, the primary contributor to its athletic program, lost such a significant site for its home games. But it would also be a blow if Milwaukee's public university was deprived of a site for its graduation ceremonies. Having a downtown presence is important for a university with a top-rated research program; it helps to recruit not just athletes, but also scholars from around the world.

The president of the Milwaukee Admirals has told me that if the Arena were demolished, the Admirals would be sold and moved out of Milwaukee. This is not an idle threat; like UWM, the Admirals cannot afford to play in the Fiserv Forum, nor would there be enough available dates for those two teams after the Bucks and Marquette get their first choices.

For all these reasons, and many more stated in the Historic Preservation Commission's report, I strongly urge your committee and the full Common Council to confer historic landmark status on both the Auditorium and the Arena. Thank you for your consideration.