

Historic Milwaukee, Inc.'s Response to "The Real Losers if a Project Fails" by Patrick McIlheran, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, published 11-21-10:

Mr. McIlheran writes that the foreign investors funding Wave Development's proposed \$50 million Marriott hotel "don't have to live here. To them, we're just another place." Ironically, he then goes on to advocate for the demolition of five 19th century buildings that our elected representatives thought were unique enough to the history and heritage of this City to unanimously pass a resolution protecting them (on November 17, 1987; File No. 870085) to make way for a hotel that, as currently designed, could be located in any city in the United States.

As Mr. McIlheran surely agrees, the law applies equally to all of us. The law in the City of Milwaukee currently provides that to demolish the five subject buildings, the developer has to demonstrate that it meets the guidelines for demolition adopted by the Common Council. As currently submitted to the City's Historic Preservation Commission, the developer's application to demolish the five 19th century buildings fails to address a single one of those guidelines.

The developer's application also fails to conform with the policies and standards of the Downtown Area Comprehensive Plan Update, a plan designed to maximize tax base and job creation that the City spent 18 months on and over 2,500 people participated in developing, that provides "locally designated contributing historic buildings should be retained and redeveloped in accordance with local preservation requirements" (p. 65) – because it makes good economic sense, and that was unanimously approved by the Common Council and signed by the Mayor *just over a month ago* (October 21, 2010; File # 100235).

Mr. McIlheran attempts to frame the issue as Preservation vs. Development, writing "preservationists say they're not anti-development, but they plainly see it as optional and history as non-negotiable." This is inaccurate for at least two reasons:

First, a mechanism for demolishing buildings in the district is written into both the historic preservation ordinance and the preservation guidelines for the district adopted by the Common Council. The developer's current proposal fails to comply with any of those guidelines – in fact, nowhere in their application to HPC do they even reference the guidelines for demolition. Mr. McIlheran either (1) knows this and chooses to ignore it (determining the law somehow does not apply to Wave Development), or (2) failed to even review the developer's application and the relevant law before writing his column (in which case he is woefully uninformed and lacks credibility on this issue).

Second, it is widely understood that preservation is a development tool. Our historic built environment is an important part of ensuring the East Side Commercial Historic District, Downtown, and the Third Ward are thriving economically. Imagine the Third Ward had the 19th century buildings been razed. What does Mr. McIlheran think those buildings looked like before they were adaptively re-used? Adapting historic buildings to the needs of today provides a one-of-a-kind experience that no other city can provide. Want to improve the economy, want to let the market decide? Then use these buildings, because the market is telling us talented professionals are choosing to live and spend their money in cities that do not have a throw-away attitude about their historic built environment, that have a sense of local community, and are able to combine sustainable development with abundant, authentic, and ambitious new architecture.

Historic Milwaukee, Inc. applauds Wave Development's desire to invest in the City. However, as currently submitted, its proposal does not conform to City code, seeks to create new wealth while destroying existing wealth, and asks the City to trade something that we as a community have determined makes us unique for something that increases our anonymity. As a result, HMI cannot support the developer's current proposal.

Anna-Marie Opgenorth
Executive Director, Historic Milwaukee, Inc.
828 N. Broadway, Suite 110, Milwaukee, WI 53202
414-277-7795