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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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## **Statement of Alderman Jim Bohl: The Suburban Doesn't Work in the Urban: A New Model for the Grand Avenue Mall**

The recent announcement by Bon-Ton Stores Inc. that the future of Boston Store at The Shops of Grand Avenue may be short lived should serve as a wake up call to city officials about the failed experiment of trying to force feed, with taxpayer subsidies, the dying concept of maintaining a suburban style, cookie-cutter retail environment in a downtown urban setting.

Opened to much fanfare in 1982, the Grand Avenue Mall saw limited early success morph into a menagerie of stores that have closed and been recycled, only to close again. Look at the recent history of the Borders bookstore, Old Navy, and Linens and Things to name a few examples. This, not to mention the loss of the mall's other anchor department store tenant, Marshall Fields, in 1997.

While not disparaging the recently announced additions of an American Family Insurance office and Fresh Healthy Eatery & Juice Bar to fill two empty spaces, one doesn't have to look far and wide to find a mall with a vacancy rate rising upwards toward the stratosphere. Even to the biggest advocates of an urban shopping destination along Wisconsin Avenue, any attempt at continuing the facade of replicating a suburban-style shopping experience here should be severely questioned. To put it more bluntly: I'm convinced that a traditional shopping mall concept simply will not work at this location and any talk of additional taxpayer subsidies, be it of city or state origin, to try to retain a Boston Store for the short-term or temporarily prop up a rehashed concept at the mall, should be out of the question. Instead of the city and state incentivizing Boston Store to stay, let's create a unique and thriving mall development that inspires them to want to stay.

Rather than trying to piece together the last vestiges of a dying urban mall concept, the Bon-Ton announcement could serve as a wake up call that a new, innovative approach may be the only answer out of this conundrum. The Shops of Grand Avenue owner, Bank of America, under the new mall management firm of Jones Lang LaSalle, might consider looking far south to the Sunshine State for an example of creating such a unique destination.

In the throes of Fort Lauderdale Florida is an indoor, quarter mile long, 500-shop destination that describes itself as an emporium market place and boasts that its "customers come from around the world." See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aEW9gSc3d4> for a video that provides a flavor of The Market.

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## **Bohl Statement/ADD ONE**

Could such a concept work in downtown Milwaukee? Rather than view this as simply the recreation of Seven Mile Fair north, see this as an amalgamate of the Wisconsin State Fair's Expo Pavilion and Starving Artist Show with a mix of gift and specialty boutiques, restaurants, discount shops, confectionaries, and a plethora of small merchant vendors selling homegrown and homemade specialty items. Like the Florida example, Jones Lang LaSalle would be well served to try a concept that offers more "the feel the energy and excitement of an open-air, old-world market indoors" and less the same old cookie cutter approach that's been tried over and over. With the growth of a Buy Local movement and the boom in small business ventures, I believe there is both a sufficient market and a sufficient number of vendors that exist to make an emporium concept shopping destination work downtown.

If it is to succeed, the shopping environment on downtown Wisconsin Avenue will need to rely on more than just downtown residents and weekday workers. It also needs to attract shoppers from the suburbs. To do so, it must offer something unique that one cannot find at a traditional mall. Would a downtown Milwaukee Emporium attract customers from around the world? Perhaps not, but customers from Wauwatosa, Brookfield, Brown Deer and Oak Creek might not be a bad start.

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