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Alderman urges caution as Milwaukee County considers the sale and disposition of county facilities

Statement from Alderman Robert J. Bauman February 13, 2013

The Milwaukee County Board and County Executive deserve credit for undertaking a review of the extensive inventory of county facilities. It is true that consolidation and possible elimination of surplus facilities can save tax dollars. However, I urge the county board to proceed with caution and take a more holistic view of this issue, because their decisions can have unintended consequences for the neighborhoods where these facilities are located.

A case in point is the so-called “City Campus” at N. 27th & W. Wells Streets, which is located in my aldermanic district and two blocks from my home.

A county supervisor recently commented that the county should never have purchased this former hospital. That is probably true, but it did purchase the property and it currently houses several county departments that were moved from the former Courthouse Annex that was demolished several years ago.

The employees on the premises and the mere presence of this county facility are major assets to the neighborhood. The workers’ patronage of local businesses and their coming and going from the building provide “eyes on the street” that benefit public safety. The county provides general maintenance for the facility and grounds which comprise several acres. All of this activity takes place in an urban corridor—N. 27th St. from W. Highland Blvd. to W. St. Paul Ave.—that has suffered from 40 years of disinvestment and blight. The residential neighborhoods surrounding this corridor are relatively stable and contain some outstanding housing stock. These neighborhoods have experienced various levels of revitalization over the last 15 years, but the 27th Street commercial corridor remains very problematic. In this context the presence of the county’s City Campus is a real asset and anchor.

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If the county were to vacate this facility and offer the property for sale it would be creating a huge void because the private market is not in a position to absorb this facility for market driven commercial or residential development. As a result, the residents of the near west side would be saddled with a very large, empty, building complex: no more customers for local businesses, no more “eyes on the street,” no more maintenance of the facilities and grounds. In other words: more blight measured in acres.

There has been talk that the city (Department of City Development) would acquire this facility. That may be a good idea if the city has a very specific plan for redevelopment and reuse and the developers and financing are ready to go. Otherwise, the city would end up with a white elephant that would remain a large vacant building complex or become a large vacant lot (if the city decides to spend several million dollars to demolish this building complex on speculation). Either way, the end result would be more blight in the short run.

Perhaps the county could see the City Campus as an asset where additional administrative offices could be located, thereby freeing up space at the Courthouse for additional court and judicial activities such as Children’s Court. Increased activity at City Campus, which is only two miles due west of the Courthouse, could actually be a win-win for the county, the city, and neighborhood residents and businesses.