

DOWNTOWN MILWAUKEE: “OLD WORLD CHARM, NEW WORLD CLASS”

A Plan to Revitalize and Grow Milwaukee's Downtown: Minus the Downtown Streetcar

by Ald. Robert G. Donovan

I. Background: The Need for a Plan

Downtown Milwaukee has a collection of assets that would be the envy of almost any city – outstanding architecture, including a wealth of historic buildings; clean and safe streets; an attractive river-and-lakefront setting; a large and growing housing stock – the list goes on and on. Yet, in Milwaukee, the sum seems to be less than the whole of the parts. The city has never been able to fully capitalize on these assets to create a thriving, cohesive and world-class downtown. Too many areas in the central business district are unkempt, underutilized or unattractive. There are too many “dead zones” utterly lacking an active street life. For these reasons, I am proposing the following plan to revitalize Milwaukee's Downtown.

II. Develop Plan to Replace the Bradley Center, Create a Sports and Entertainment District

Any plan for reinvigorating Downtown Milwaukee must address the issue of what to do with the BMO Harris Bradley Center and nearby sports, convention and entertainment facilities. The facility that replaces the Bradley Center needs to be truly state-of-the-art – the best of its kind in the nation, and one that will last far longer than 20 years. Also, as recently reported by *The Business Journal*, Milwaukee has a smaller convention center than any of its peer cities, including Cincinnati, Indianapolis and St. Louis. As a result, Milwaukee cannot even compete with third-tier cities to attract conventions to what could be America's most beautiful downtown. Therefore, we need a comprehensive facility plan -- a vision for the entire Westown sports, convention and entertainment district – that Milwaukee residents and business leaders will wrap their arms around.

Issues to consider include:

a. Emulate Other Cities

Downtown Milwaukee should seek to emulate the strategies and experiences of the most successful large U.S. cities with respect to sports and entertainment districts. What types of facilities do these cities offer, how were they financed, who developed them? Can Milwaukee combine its existing and future downtown sports and entertainment facilities to create a world-class entertainment district like *L.A. Live* in Los Angeles? Could such a district be funded through a “seat tax” on those who attend games, performances and events at the district's facilities?

b. Revisit Proposal for a Special Tax

It's critical to the success of Downtown to ensure that, if a replacement for the Bradley Center is built, the populace of Milwaukee as a whole supports it. Simply adding another sports or entertainment tax like the one used to finance Miller Park just won't fly with Milwaukeeans. Perhaps Milwaukee should revisit former Governor Doyle's proposal to establish a 0.5% Premier Resort Area Tax applicable to the sale of goods

and services by Downtown businesses. This tax could produce annual revenues of \$1 to \$3 million, which, under state law, could be used to fund infrastructure expenses within the district, including expenses relating to the construction of a new Bradley Center.

Another possibility, currently being discussed by MMAC and other area leaders, is to create a special sales tax to fund not only a new basketball arena, but Milwaukee County cultural attractions as well (e.g., the Milwaukee Art Museum and Milwaukee Public Museum). In my opinion – and the opinion of others I have spoken to – such a tax, if implemented, needs to be as broad-based and flexible as possible, so that all taxpayers and residents of the region benefit from it. It needs to be collected beyond the borders of the City of Milwaukee, perhaps encompassing the entire seven-county “M7” area. And the revenue it generates needs to be made available for a wide range of initiatives and purposes, extending far beyond sports and cultural venues. As I envision it, proceeds from a 1.0% sales tax could be allocated as follows: 25% toward construction of a replacement for the BMO Harris Bradley Center, 25% for local road projects and 50% to be used in whatever way each municipality in which the revenues are collected sees fit (e.g., for property tax relief, infrastructure projects, public safety or parks).

c. Consider Selling Parking Structures to Generate Funds

Perhaps the City of Milwaukee can revisit the idea of selling some of its downtown parking structures as a means of generating funds to redevelop the Bradley Center area. Past impediments to selling the structures – including loss of state shared revenue and the large amount of outstanding debt on the facilities – have lessened or disappeared entirely in recent years.

d. Coordinate Facility Management

Milwaukee needs to rethink the way it manages sports and entertainment facilities in the Westtown area. The Wisconsin Center District and the Bradley Center Sports and Entertainment Corporation need to merge as soon as possible so that existing and future facilities can be managed more efficiently and effectively.

e. Rethink Need for Existing Facilities

The outdated and underutilized U.S. Cellular Arena should probably be torn down. Similarly, the Milwaukee Theater, which competes with a number of other Downtown entertainment venues, should be sold or repurposed.

f. Complete the Delta Center

As noted earlier, because of its undersized convention facilities, Milwaukee is falling further and further behind its peers cities in the highly competitive convention business. The final phase of the convention center should be constructed as soon possible to increase Milwaukee’s ability to attract larger conventions and events than can be currently hosted. Additional convention business would provide a shot in the arm to existing and potential Downtown hotels, restaurants and retail stores.

g. Increase State Presence in Downtown Milwaukee

Finally, redevelopment of the Westtown sports and entertainment district would be the perfect opportunity to increase the State of Wisconsin’s presence in Downtown

Milwaukee. Perhaps a new State office building could be built on a vacant or underutilized site in Westtown, similar to the development now occurring at 27th Street and Wisconsin Avenue. What more appropriate location for State offices than in the most populous part of Wisconsin – the region that generates the most tax revenues and is also the major delivery point for many State services, such as those of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. City of Milwaukee officials need to make it a priority to work with Governor Walker in relocating heavily Milwaukee-directed State services and offices to Downtown Milwaukee. The thousands of State employees who work in these offices could provide a major economic shot-in-the-arm to the local economy.

III. Redevelop MacArthur Square for Active Use

Immediately to the west of Milwaukee's sports and convention facilities lies MacArthur Square, an underutilized, unattractive and somewhat inaccessible public space that has languished for decades and is truly an embarrassment to Milwaukee. This area needs to be put to a more active use – one that makes MacArthur Square an actual destination for Milwaukee residents and visitors, not just a hang-out for vagrants. Each day, literally thousands of workers, students and visitors come to facilities within a block or two of the Square – MATC, the County Court House, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee Public Library and the Police Department and Municipal Court Safety Building, just to name a few. But few of these individuals would ever think of spending time at MacArthur Square. Making the Square more accessible to pedestrians is critical to this effort. But repurposing the facility is also essential. One possibility is to use this space for "hall of heroes," with displays honoring both local veterans and local fire and police heroes. What better location to honor our veterans than a facility named after General Douglas MacArthur, a famous, well-decorated veteran with Milwaukee ties. Other possibilities for MacArthur Square include using it as a new location for the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame (currently located along the east wall of the Arena), creating a venue for free lunchtime concerts and opening it up to food vendors – all of which could make the Square a more lively and attractive component of Downtown Milwaukee.

IV. Address Lack of Retail Activity at Grand Avenue and West of the River

Perhaps even more embarrassing for Downtown Milwaukee than MacArthur Square – by virtue of its sheer prominence and visibility to Milwaukee visitors – is the Grand Avenue mall, which recently sunk to a new low when it was sold at a sheriff's sale for less than half its assessed value. Despite repeated efforts to reinvent itself, the mall is plagued by high turnover, high vacancy and a poor public image. This large, underutilized retail center has a blighting effect on the entire Westtown area. Downtown Milwaukee west of the Milwaukee River desperately needs decent, attractive retail options, particularly shops and establishments where conventioners and others visiting Downtown's sports and entertainment facilities can spend time and dollars. One possibility is a recent proposal by Mandel Group chief operating officer Robert Monnat to transform the Grand Avenue mall into an urban sports retail outlet center. Such a development could make Downtown Milwaukee a shopping and travel destination for athletes and sports fans from across the nation.

To the greatest extent possible, Milwaukee must strive to replicate the vision and success of the Historic Third Ward in this part of Downtown. This means creating more housing and modern offices on the upper floors of buildings and making the area more physically attractive. As a nod to the city's Old World roots, more fountains, possibly sponsored or

“adopted” by the city’s many ethnic organizations, could grace Downtown’s public spaces. Perhaps the central business district could even be reinvigorated by running shuttle buses to the Naval Station Great Lakes in northern Illinois, which trains approximately 40,000 U.S. Navy recruits each year – thereby creating scenes reminiscent of the not-so-distant past, when sailors were frequently sighted on the streets of Downtown. At a minimum, the Greater Milwaukee Committee’s long-dormant Grand Avenue task force should be reconstituted and reconvened to perform an in-depth exploration of options for reinvigorating the struggling mall and west-of-the-river retail in general.

V. Continue to Grow the Downtown Housing Stock

As suggested previously, another key element of the revival and growth of Downtown Milwaukee is the creation of more housing in this area. This includes both new construction and retrofitting of former commercial buildings for residential use. It is essential that the Downtown housing stock grows not only in size, but also in diversity of housing unit type (with more middle-income and family housing) and, most importantly, diversity of location, with more units being developed in Westtown and other areas that have been largely missed by the housing boom. More Downtown residents mean a more active Downtown street life and translate into more business at Downtown retail establishments, restaurants and sports and entertainment venues, thereby aiding the success of the other components of this Downtown revitalization plan.

VI. Take Advantage of Development Opportunities near Lakefront

Finally, a successful plan for Milwaukee’s Downtown must capitalize on the city’s greatest natural asset – Lake Michigan. Milwaukee needs to study and emulate the best examples of Great Lakes cities making the most of their lakefront locations. This includes maximizing public access to the lakefront while simultaneously encouraging high-quality, high-value development on nearby privately-owned land. Developments that build upon Milwaukee’s lakefront amenities, like the proposed Northwestern Mutual office tower and the high-rise *Couture* apartment/hotel complex proposed for the Downtown Transit Center site, can bring much-needed vitality and tax base to Downtown Milwaukee without harming the beauty or accessibility of the lakefront.

VII. Conclusion: Milwaukee Can Be Best of Old and New Worlds

In my opinion, Downtown Milwaukee has not even begun to reach its full potential. This city has great natural and man-made amenities. But many challenges remain unaddressed – the need to replace the Bradley Center, the abundance of underutilized sports and entertainment venues, a barren MacArthur Square, the floundering Shops of Grand Avenue and Downtown retail scene, an underdeveloped housing market and failure to capitalize on the lakefront’s potential for attracting nearby development. I believe the proposals set forth above represent a solid starting point for addressing these challenges head-on. Milwaukee needs to take bold actions to solidify its status as the proud Great Lakes city with old world charm and new world class.

What I have put forth here are simply ideas. Without enthusiastic, competent and effective leadership to bring them to fruition, these ideas, and the many other excellent ideas that have been suggested for improving our city, will remain just that – ideas. This type of leadership has been sorely lacking in Milwaukee. **In a nutshell, we need to shake things up and get Milwaukee moving forward again.**