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Seeing beyond the streetcar: Just one part of strategy to create opportunities

Statement of Alderman Ashanti Hamilton January 23, 2015

With all of the somewhat extreme and dramatic claims being made in the streetcar debate, it is time to remind everyone about the already approved and ongoing efforts in Milwaukee that are not being mentioned by either side, but that go hand in hand with the streetcar project.

For example, it was last summer that the Common Council approved (15-0) the report “Growing Prosperity — An Action Agenda for Economic Development.” The plan, which includes a streetcar, has several key recommendations, including new transit options to better connect inner city residents with job opportunities, and using inner city vacant properties to foster business startups.

Growing Prosperity is all about better use of human capital, infrastructure, land and transit options to maximize Milwaukee’s economic engine so that it can benefit downtown AND the entire city.

Then there’s also the 2010 Milwaukee Downtown Plan (which also includes the streetcar), a multifaceted plan (drafted following an intensive planning process) that looks at maximizing downtown assets to further create economic development opportunities and jobs for residents.

And my references to city efforts to stimulate jobs cannot leave out the MORE ordinance (Milwaukee’s Opportunity for Restoring Employment), which made an effort to allow women and minority-owned businesses to have a hand in helping build larger developments and scale city infrastructure projects, and wherein city residents would be working 40% of the hours on those projects. The TIF to fund the streetcar even sets aside resources to ensure that there is maximum participation from city residents and small businesses. The community outreach and planning process set in place by the Northwestern Mutual Life downtown headquarters project set a precedent that members of the Council are demanding the streetcar project follow.

I would bet that several of my colleagues who have been outspoken in their opposition to the streetcar of late actually voted FOR many of the examples and efforts I’ve just outlined.

-More-

Now, I do not believe the streetcar project is a panacea for all of Milwaukee's employment issues and other serious matters (especially public safety), but it is clear that it is definitely part of our overall economic development plan!

Further, I am very concerned about how some of my colleagues are bringing public safety and protective services into the streetcar equation (saying, "We should send the streetcar money over to the police department and the fire department for more officers and firefighters").

Using the money for anything other than the streetcar is not allowed, and Milwaukee is already spending a staggering amount each year on police and fire services (59 cents out of every dollar in the city's operating budget goes to fund police and fire costs!). To me it seems there are many on the Council who seem to be unaware of just how much the city is already spending on public safety (or who are conveniently ignoring that part of the equation!). The truth is that if this project is rejected, not a dime more will be made available for police...and if approved, not even a nickel will be diverted from our public safety efforts.

Because NONE of the streetcar money can be siphoned off to pay for more cops or firefighters, I suggest some of my colleagues support making more city funding available for existing programs that will improve public safety while also improving job prospects for city residents. They can start with making sure our existing Promise Zones and transitional job programs such as Compete Milwaukee receive a constant and appropriate level of funding.

While we debate every inch of the streetcar project, let's not forget about the plans and programs already in place that will be enhanced by the streetcar. I challenge every person who felt the need to get involved in this debate to make the commitment to do their part to make the racial and economic disparities that have dominated the conversation disappear.