

Plans, Priorities and Pitfalls

Written by Kathleen McCarthy
Monday, 24 July 2000 18:00

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There is no question that there exists much discontent in the air relative to Davenport's new city council. And confidence in city government appears to be at an all time low. But how can this be after electing seven new aldermen, practically the entire council, who appeared committed to bringing a new way of doing business to Davenport? What happened to this inspired bunch who promised to carry the people's baton? The first six months of any new job has a learning curve to be absorbed, no matter how experienced the applicant(s). All kinds of nuances are encountered, protocol is introduced, operations are gleaned, bugs worked out, alliances established, and agendas are slowly revealed. That is usually when things get interesting because such things as 'agendas' either produce consensus or conflict, especially where a group effort is involved. It is no different at City Hall. But problems have arisen because this new Council's 'agendas' were supposed to reflect the wishes of the people who elected this new team, as opposed to representing the will of developers as the previous council was so prone to do. Yet here we are again, after having resoundingly expressed our collective wishes on the City's proposed 53rd Street Mixed-Use Development via last November's election, we are back in the same frustrated position we fought so hard to get out from under.

I use the term "we" loosely. In fact, it was through the organized efforts of CURV that saved our collective behinds from a world of financial hurt if the bonds had been issued to pursue the Mixed-Use project. The monumental salvation that was CURV's sole victory cannot be measured. And I will continue to drill this point home until our community fully grasps what that citizen's group accomplished. If that bond sale for \$25.5 million had occurred last August 1999, it would have gobbled up 54% of our entire capital improvement budget for a golf course with high rent housing and commercial development in the north east end of town. 54%! Hello! As a city, we already have a tremendous challenge facing us to finance the projects that have been identified as "critical" to the well being of Davenport. Most notably is the huge capital improvement expenditure for a fully implemented storm water management system by the year 2007—a federal mandate by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that is looming for Davenport and every other city with a population of 60,000 or more. Couple that with the deplorable condition of the storm sewers and mains throughout the older sections of Davenport and this city is looking at a serious financial burden that can no longer be put off. Beyond that

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are the parking ramps and the relocation of the museum to downtown—two projects that will make the difference between life and death for our downtown—not to mention bringing us up to speed with the rest of the Quad Cities' downtown revitalization efforts. Other projects include the Centennial Bridge egress, John O'Donnell renovation, and many other less costly but equally important street and bridge repairs that are vying for attention.

All these projects can move forward because CURV stopped the Mixed-Use project from coming to fruition. Their efforts stopped the bonds being issued because they challenged the City in court. If the court case had not existed at the time, the previous council could not have been stopped from letting those bonds and we would be at unprecedented financial risk, a position unacceptable to most municipalities. The 53rd Street Mixed-Use project would have put Davenport at the limit of its bonding capacity. If an emergency came up, we would have had no resources available to deal with it. The previous council wasn't informing the public of these facts. And this fiscal dilemma only describes the first year. Nor do the above costs reflect the interest the City would pay to service the bond debt.

The real rub is that no one is more aware or has a better understanding of the potential disaster that CURV averted than this present city council. They inherited the budget and its explosive constraints. They have first hand knowledge of the financial mayhem that would have ensued if those bonds had been issued. They understand all too well the debt of gratitude Davenport owes to CURV. So why haven't they expressed such sentiments by at least negotiating with CURV for a settlement? Not only are they burying their heads in the sand with regard to the settlement agreement between CURV and the City currently on the table, but several are resurrecting the golf course for consideration at the project site as a viable development alternative. Go figure.

According to one QC Interfaith representative, she was courted by Aldermen McGivern and Moritz ((who, incidentally, is a CURV Plaintiff) to support McGivern's revised golf course proposal. At least McGivern is consistent in his position. He came into office favoring a golf course as part of the original Mixed-Use project and he is consistent in continuing to serve those interests that favor it.

In a recent Ad Hoc Committee on 53rd Street, one citizen requested a legal opinion as to whether or not there is a conflict of interest in McGivern's sitting on the Ad Hoc Committee due to his professional connection as an appraiser to the real estate community, especially the developers. While this concern about McGivern being unduly influenced by developers is completely legitimate, it should not be construed that the potential conflict is a deliberate one. He should not be penalized because the nature of his business as an appraiser is directly impacted by the real estate community. It should, however cause Alderman McGivern to be acutely aware of public perception and how his advancing the reconsideration of the golf course proposal, albeit without the use of TIF, but with the use of city owned land, creates trepidation.

My gripe is that the current golf course proposal is based on the same financial data that supported the original one as part of the Mixed-Use project. **READ THE STUDY!** Even the consultants agree that the supply and demand is marginal in terms of actual need. If this is the

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case, then what are we thinking? Once again, the only winners in this scenario are the developers.

It is financially irresponsible to make the argument that by building a golf course, this will encourage high rent residential and commercial development, which will in turn increase the tax base. A 1998 Iowa State study of nine Iowa communities demonstrated that residential development does not create a net increase to the tax base, but in fact costs cities to provide services to it. It is commercial development that actually increases the tax base, but the actual commercial development that occurs because of the existence of a golf course is negligible. If you want to make that argument, then build a golf course in the inner city or near the city's more dilapidated areas to spur redevelopment. Oh, that's right. It is too cost prohibitive when compared to building on wide-open farmland. Here's an idea—what about using TIF to help those areas develop that would not otherwise do so? But I digress.

Then there is the argument that the Mixed-Use plan was in keeping with the City's overall 1975-76 Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP)—a plan whose last population projection update was in 1980. The population of Davenport in 1975-76 was 99,000 with a projected increase in population to 129,000 by 2000, but revised to 120,900 in 1980. Unfortunately, the current population in 2000 is actually less—96,000—so it follows that maybe the CLUP is not reflecting the best land use for the present demographics and its associated needs. In recognizing this, the City has set out to revamp the CLUP and bring it in line with current and revised population trends. In doing so, it is prudent to rethink what the City should be encouraging to develop, especially when the CLUP being consulted is based on growth of an additional 20,000 people in Davenport that did not occur. If population growth is stagnant, then perhaps it makes sense to invest in maintenance and repairs of current infrastructure as we consider planning and ordinances that would control, yet enhance future development.

Finally, with CURV still in litigation with the City relative to the land the City owns in the project area, how feasible is it that any plan proposed be implemented? Can the City move forward on selling any of this land, or take any action whatsoever? And heaven help the City if CURV wins their appeal because that will open the door to another trial that could have been avoided. Way to go councilmen.