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Theodore C. Widder III: New south branch library will be in the right spot

Theodore C. Widder III
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As president of the Madison Public Library Board and vice president of the Madison Public Library Foundation, the nonprofit foundation that supports library activities, I wanted to try to assuage some concerns about the proposed location of the new South Madison Branch Library.

At a recent public forum that dealt with the Villager Mall redevelopment, the wisdom of siting the branch in a new building on the corner of Park and Buick streets was questioned. The concerns expressed related in part to safety and asked, in essence, why the library board had not considered keeping the new branch in the so-called "atrium space," which will be the renovated portion of the mall and is the current location of the South Madison Branch.

First, just a comment about the library board's recognition of the need for new and expanded library space in south Madison. The current branch is approximately 3,500 square feet in size and shares space in the Villager Shopping Center, which is well off Park Street. We have long recognized the need, given the very high usage of that branch, for expanded and improved space.

The initial plan for the new branch was for a 10,000-square-foot facility. Based on an analysis by library staff, we were advised that there was a need for an additional 2,000 square feet, making a total of 12,000 square feet -- more than three times the existing space. Since the cost of this additional space would have to be met by private fundraising efforts, we on the board and the foundation felt that because the need was there, we would be able to go to the community and raise the additional funds.

In short, we were very committed to having the best possible new branch library for south Madison.

Now to the site question. Based on longstanding board policy, we always try to locate our branch libraries so as to maximize visibility. Indeed, part of our siting criteria is that branch libraries be on major arterials so that they are highly visible and are convenient to the largest number of users.

By locating the branch on South Park Street, we felt that this met our existing policy and had the added benefit of making a significant statement about the city's commitment to the south Madison community. That is, motorists who use the South Park Street corridor would see very tangible and visible evidence of the city's commitment to this community.

We believed that by locating the new facility on Park Street, it would not diminish in any way access for people in the neighborhood. The entrance to the library will not face South Park Street, but will be accessed from the interior of the redevelopment and will most likely be oriented toward the prominent atrium entrance. In our view, this will provide convenient and safe back-and-forth access for people using both the atrium and the new library.

Concerns were also expressed about traffic noise. We think this is something that can be handled by architects. The new Sequoya Branch under construction is located at the intersection of Midvale and Tokay boulevards, both busy streets, and we believe the design has dealt with the road noise issue. We think the same can be accomplished for the South Madison Branch.

In sum, we think the chosen site is where the new, enlarged and improved South Madison Branch Library should be located. We are excited about placing this very important community and neighborhood resource in as visible and yet user-friendly and safe a location as possible. We think we have done that.

Finally, as the project proceeds, we will be seeking regular input from the neighborhood to help us make this the best possible branch it can be.

Theodore C. Widder III, a Madison attorney, is president of the Madison Public Library Board and vice president of the Madison Public Library Foundation.

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