

Remarks Before the EDC
Fred Mohs – 10/20/2010

The October 6, 2010 final report from the Economic Development Committee worries about 55% of Madison's total area being exempt from property taxes. Obviously, we could change that proportion greatly by getting rid of the Arboretum, Picnic Point, or even the whole University. Obviously, this is not the way to go.

Our state and university institutions bring a great deal to our community, as do our hospitals. We do have areas of under-utilized real estate. Some of it represents older, outmoded industrial sites, or others such as the University Research Park, were planned to be very low-density. The under-utilized industrial sites are easy, but what about changing the design of the Research Park? Can this be accomplished without going back on agreements made with the Research Park itself or surrounding neighborhoods?

As a result of the Edgewater issue, historic districts that make up only a tiny portion of Madison real estate have come under attack. After 35 years of success, contributing structures, which are universally a part of all historic districts, are having their legitimacy challenged. Madison can have plenty of new development and achieve far greater density without ever touching a contributing property in a historic district.

In terms of making recommendations regarding the review of Madison real estate development projects, the Mayor called for a process that is "efficient, predictable, and uniform and maintains existing high standards." I agree with those goals.

Slide 9, on page 5, points out that "metropolitan areas with stringent development regulations generate less employment growth than expected given their industrial bases." This is not the whole story. What are these communities like given less focus on planning and regulation? Do we like Houston better than Madison?

Madison has been a planned community from the start. We have accommodated growth quite well and at the same time, have

produced a beautiful, livable city. We can plan carefully and still have an economically successful city.

Predictability is important. In real estate development, risk, has a cost. Predictability, is valued. Developers who must worry about what will be built next door ascribe a cost to a risky environment that translates into requiring a higher return. If you want cheap and cheesy development, all you need to do is add risk.

Page 7, slide 13 states, "Efficient = Streamline = Simplified." That is just fine.

Page 12, slide 24, has to do with transferring the landmark functions to Urban Design and making Urban Design advisory to Plan Commission. This weakens both commissions and does not make maximum use of their expertise. It is additionally an unwelcomed burden on the Plan Commission.

Page 13, slides 25 and 26 – I agree with both options.

Primarily, as a part of the Edgewater dialog, the term "getting to yes" came into vogue. The best interpretation of that phrase would be for the Plan Department and the city officials to be helpful and timely while processing applications. The worst interpretation would be for those same officials to feel threatened or at risk by fairly and uniformly applying the standards that have been duly passed on by the Plan Commission and the City Council. Some projects are not worth approving. If we don't believe that, we are Houston.