

April 5, 2018

All Alders
City Of Madison

Re: Establishing Policy Guidelines for Alterations of Capitol Square Area Planting Beds
Legistar 50596

Dear Alders,

At your Tuesday April 10 Common Council meeting the agenda will include a proposal to establish guidelines for removal of portions of the Capitol Square area planters. (Item 64) The proposal will allow these public spaces to be converted to private use as sidewalk cafes. I do not believe that this new policy is in the public interest and I urge you not to support this legislation for reasons I will detail.

Urban areas are enhanced when there is ample greenspace to ameliorate the visual and physical effects of the overwhelming amount of hardscape that comes with an urban environment. Streets, sidewalks, paved over terraces and the buildings themselves already dominate the area around the Square. The sidewalk planters with their landscaping and trees are what create a more pleasant ambiance and make the Madison's downtown a beautiful place to be. In fact, without the planters and trees the areas would likely be deemed much less desirable for sidewalk cafes.

Planter areas, trees and other greenspace are easily lost and very difficult to regain. The competition for the use of downtown right of way is intense. In addition to sidewalk cafes other uses like public seating areas, B-Cycle, media distribution, vending, bus stops and fire department access limit areas available for green space. Additional pressure comes from efforts to maintain traffic flow or add bike lanes. All too often trees and greenspace are not given priority when these decisions are made. Redevelopment of properties has also had an impact on downtown greenspace. The recent experience with 25 W. Main St. (the corner of W. Main and S. Carroll) has shown that even when removal of trees and planters is not part of the approved plans, there can be impacts that result in less planter area and fewer trees.

The Staff report identifies 12 planter locations at the diagonal intersections around the Square. Four of these planter areas have already been paved over or partially lost. The proposed policy would allow 50% of the remaining planter areas to be paved over. The total loss could be 2/3 of the planter areas at these three intersections. The top of State Street is not included in the Staff report. It has some trees but no planters currently.

The motivating force behind this initiative is private businesses which want to use the public right of way for sidewalk cafes. While the outdoor café spaces can be wonderful, under this policy they will come with a tradeoff that decreases the ambiance of the public common for the benefit of a single private business. There is no imperative for a municipality to provide public space for private gain.

The resolution suggests that the use of planters will be limited to the diagonal intersections. However, if this proposal were to proceed what would be the case to say no at the blocks directly around the Square or just off the Square on East and West Washington? Businesses in these locations could clearly ask for 'fairness' and 'a level playing field'.

Each request taken only on its own may seem to have limited impact but each is a cut into the gracious ambiance we have tried to create and maintain in our downtown. Each new request for use of a planter will be another cut, and added to the many other ways greenspace is lost, will be a death by a thousand cuts.

Outdoor cafes and activity spaces are an attribute that add to the vibrancy and ambiance just as do planters and trees. To create an enjoyable urban space we should be adding more of both, not pitting them against each other in a zero sum game.

I would suggest a better option would be to convert parking spaces either temporarily or permanently to new plaza space which can increase both greenspace and the space available for outdoor cafes. Two parking stalls can easily provide an equivalent amount of café space to that shown in the staff report example. Yes, there are tradeoffs with this idea as well but the result is an addition to the ambiance of the downtown, not a subtraction.

Again I urge you to reject the resolution that is being proposed.

Thank you for your consideration,

Peter Ostlind
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