



Luther
Memorial
Church

August 2, 2011

Dear Common Council Members:

As you know, you have on your agenda this evening three items of critical importance to Luther Memorial Church—the landmarking of Luther Memorial; the rezoning of the St. Francis parcel; and a demolition permit involving the 1964 structure on the St. Francis site. We hope that you follow the Landmarks Commission's recommendation and vote to landmark Luther Memorial this evening. We understand that the other two items will likely be referred.

Meanwhile, as you continue to discuss the future of Luther Memorial Church and the historic block on which it sits, we encourage you to visit our beautiful Cathedral and its surroundings. The Church is truly one of our city's cultural and architectural gems. It's such a gift to our city that we think it almost speaks for itself in this debate. The Madison Isthmus Vocal Ensemble, a local choral group that has annually performed at Luther Memorial for years, will again sing in our nave this Friday, August 5, beginning at 7:30 PM. We would be happy to give any alder a tour.

Meanwhile, we feel compelled to reaffirm our core beliefs about this project, especially in light of the pointed (and mildly accusatory) "position paper" you recently received from our neighbor's lawyer.

We strongly believe that the block on which Luther Memorial sits is a place of peaceful reflection – a small, but important part of what makes Madison a special place in which to live, study, and work. It seems fairly obvious that the proposed massive housing project would destroy one special place of reflection (St. Francis House and Chapel) – and truly threaten another (Luther Memorial Church).

Luther Memorial was built by Claude and Starck to last a millennium. But like all great architectural works, its walls are only as strong as the human will and resources necessary to maintain them.

As such we're grateful for the overwhelming support we've received from you in the process to declare Luther Memorial a landmark. Throughout the process, our committee volunteers and elected alders have, quite appropriately, considered Luther Memorial a special part of our city's architectural culture and history. That's hardly cynical. In fact, it seems rather genuine.

This isn't just about our church –and it isn't just our issue. Luther Memorial and its beautiful arches and stained glass windows are part of the whole city. Places like Luther Memorial unite a city across generations. The same is true of the green space next door and the historic St. Francis House. As a congregation, we share a special bond with our Episcopalian neighbors, and a mutual civic responsibility to preserve and enhance this place. We join with everyone who values Madison and the university community, in preserving this oasis reflection and spiritual pursuit.

We find it mildly humorous that our neighbor would actually accuse us of “coveting” their property. In fact, we are willing to do whatever we can to help our neighbors continue their student ministry on that site, including making a formal offer to purchase the land at a price that would enable them to do so. We have practically begged them to talk with us about this. But we have heard nothing. We doubt that most Episcopalians in the Diocese of Milwaukee have any idea of the St. Francis proposal.

As such, we’re a little reserved about talking about “compromise” on a plan no one has had a full opportunity chance to review, especially after the current plan was unchanged for many months and, then decisively rejected by the Plan Commission. We’re always happy to talk, of course. But it seems a little late in the process to introduce a massive “compromise” that appears to be the same overall mass and (as the attorney of the developers stated in today’s paper) contains the same number of beds as the already rejected proposal.

Is that really how this process is supposed to work?

Finally, we willingly acknowledge our neighbors’ property rights. But part of the point of having neighbors and living in a community is learning to exercise our rights in appropriate fashion. We simply think that, in the exercise of their property rights, the St. Francis Board and the Diocese of Milwaukee needs to conform to the various civil and procedural standards established by the City of Madison for the benefit of the common good. We think that we need to exercise our personal property rights in a manner appropriate to local scale and human need—not merely for housing only, but also for visual, aesthetic, and spiritual value. As such, the St. Francis proposal is not merely a Luther Memorial issue, but a city-wide concern, and that whatever develops on this (or any) city block exemplify the best process and the best result possible for Madison.

We urge you to support the Plan Commission and the process in which your fellow alders and committee volunteers have already spent hundreds of hours studying and evaluating before rejecting the project. Thank you so much for seeing Luther Memorial Church as the landmark it truly is.

Please do visit this sacred space. People of all faiths and traditions have been moved by Luther Memorial’s tranquil beauty and openness to the whole human community within the University’s lively neighborhood. We will be glad to welcome you.

Sincerely,

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