



July 31, 2013

Plan Commission
Madison, WI

Dear Members of the Madison Plan Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts: I apologize for being unable to attend your Aug. 5 meeting in person. By way of introduction, I serve as President of SVCA. At the city level I've served on the Parks Commission. At the state level I serve on Wisconsin's Invasive Species Council.

I wholeheartedly support the Hoyt Joint Neighborhoods Plan. I think it provides a strong and effective vision for our future. I'm pleased that most city staff reports have endorsed it so strongly. There are two elements that are particularly worth highlighting.

First, this was a fully open and democratic process. Everyone who wanted to participate had an opportunity to speak. The co-chairs, city representatives, and consultant coordinated numerous surveys and open votes. I don't think any one person got everything they wanted, but we all respected the will of the majority. That's why every one of the member neighborhoods voted to approve the March 13 draft. In the case of Sunset Village, our approval was over 94%.

The second element is that we took a comprehensive, integrated approach to the entire planning area. We tried to construct an overall sense of balance for every issue we tackled, and looked at the entire planning area as a whole. I think these are two compelling reasons to send the neighbors' vision to Common Council.

I'm concerned that two of the city staff reports, and some outside interests, have deviated from that integrated view, and instead zero in narrowly on one or two focus areas. When you do that, you lose balance. For example, the Economic Development staff approved those areas that we identified for densification, but then also recommended all of the remaining areas, one by one, for more densification. That sacrifices the forest for the trees. The worst case is their alternate vision for eastern Mineral Point Road. This urban boulevard provides a seamless connection to our sister neighborhood Westmorland, access to major bike and pedestrian trails, and a local non-commuter gateway to our namesake, Hoyt Park. These features would be completely transformed by the traffic and density resulting from proposals by an absentee landlord, Mt. Olive, and these few city staff. When three years of volunteerism and voting are simply replaced with an alternate vision, you lose buy-in. Not only in the Hoyt Park joint neighborhoods area, but also throughout our city, we're seeing neighborhood after neighborhood withdraw from what began as a balanced comprehensive approach, but has transformed into a one-size-fits-all orthodoxy. That cannot be good for Madison. In the case of the Economic Development report, the underlying assumptions are so ingrained that they are not even accompanied with any data supporting a benefit from their proposed override of neighborhood wishes. We hope you will take the lead in re-establishing a more comprehensive, integrated, and balanced approach.

Madison has worked hard to develop its process for neighborhood planning. So what you decide will determine the future playbook that people follow. We want citizens to be involved. But if their ideas are largely nullified even before they get to Common Council, will neighbors commit to such hard work and energy? When entities sit out the democratic process and then afterwards lobby hard and coordinate write-ins from outside the neighborhood, such as Mt. Olive has, is that the process you want to encourage? Can we really expect neighbors to endorse a plan that still bears their name, but does not reflect their views? Madison can do better than that. But we need your help.

Madison's strength has always arisen from the diversity of its neighborhoods. But only a balanced approach to development can redirect us from a course in which every neighborhood is becoming like every other neighborhood, and Madison will soon become merely 'Anywhere-USA'. Rejecting balanced approaches such as that espoused in our neighborhood plan ignores broader-scale perspective, such as the point at which people decide they must leave in order to enjoy the community values they originally chose. That promotes suburban sprawl, and cannot be good for Madison's economy.

I encourage you to send the neighbors' vision to Common Council. I fully recognize that Common Council has the authority to approve, reject, or modify it. But at least they'll be deliberating on a vision that was openly debated, democratically approved, and followed a process that Madison wants to see emulated in future neighborhood plans.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kenneth Raffa
President, Sunset Village Neighborhood Association