

July 6, 2020

Dear Room Tax Commission

I am writing to encourage you to approve an equitable allocation of room tax monies to Monona Terrace, assuring that our community and convention center can weather these turbulent times. This is a very personal message and recollection.

In 1987 Mayor Paul Soglin and the Madison Common Council appointed the citizen-led Monona Terrace Commission to determine 1). whether Frank Lloyd Wright's final design for a spectacular public building could be adapted to meet the requirements of a contemporary convention center and, if so, 2). how to pay for it. After two years of study and deliberations, their conclusion was, go for it! I was on the mayor's staff at that time and over the next eight years witnessed the planning, the design, the controversy, the financing, the fund raising, the referendum, more controversy, the construction and, finally, the Grand Opening.

Monona Terrace was a huge investment on the part of our community, the result of a collaborations and commitments on the part of local and state governments, the private sector and individual citizens. It was an exciting, stressful, nail biting, enlightening time. And it was a risk. There were plenty of naysayers who believed city resources should be directed elsewhere or that the city should not be in the convention center business. From the beginning it was understood that Monona Terrace needed to be a successful cutting-edge business operation and economic driver, as well as a community space embraced by all parts of the Madison community.

Now, 23 years later, I'm privileged to serve on the Monona Terrace board and there is no doubt that Monona Terrace is an unqualified success. I will not reiterate the compelling data and information you have already received regarding the economic impact of Monona Terrace and the current fiscal and programmatic challenges of this time. Rather, I want to take a moment to consider a fundamental reason why Monona Terrace has succeeded.

Monona Terrace is a success because it has an outstanding product for sale. Our customers, via surveys of meeting planners and event attendees, consistently give Monona Terrace scores of 90 – 99% in all measures of performance and satisfaction. Ninety-nine percent of our customers say they would be pleased to return. From providing the latest in audio visual services and tech support, to top notch catering, to keeping abreast of the latest industry innovations, to creative and energetic sales and marketing strategies, to wildly popular rooftop celebrations such as Dane Dances, to attractive, super clean restrooms (no minor thing!), Monona Terrace staff and our community partners are at the top of their game. The staff retention rate, always an indicator of business stability, is unusually high.

But sustained business success can be a fragile thing, as we know too well these days. Monona Terrace has already made drastic cuts in personnel, operational and capital expenses in response to lost business and anticipated room tax reductions. Much is at risk and to carve too deeply into Monona Terrace operations would be to threaten the continued viability of this investment gem. Your support of our staff during the shutdown will allow Monona Terrace to prepare for 2021 and beyond and to respond immediately when our first customers - mostly smaller, mostly local - return. In the meantime, staff have found ways to continue to serve the community. For example, the popular Wednesday noontime meditation class has attracted so many virtual participants that is likely to continue in this fashion. When we reopen Monona Terrace needs to be able to provide the same level of outstanding service that our customers have come to praise and expect.

Monona Terrace was the dream of visionaries who, in the 1930's, were inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's initial design for a public place overlooking Lake Monona, and of Madisonians who championed the cause in the 1990's. That dream has been realized and continues.

Thank you for your consideration of the needs and challenges faced by Monona Terrace as well as those of our partners who share the room tax. I encourage you to continue to fund Monona Terrace and our other partners at current levels, adjusted for the room tax shortfall.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jane Richardson
Monona Terrace Board Member