

CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STRUCTURE

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REVIEW OF 2007 CONCEPT PLAN FOR SOUTH DOWNTOWN MILWAUKIE

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In 2007, consultants working for the Development Director prepared an initial concept plan, to stimulate discussion about the future of South Downtown Milwaukie. The concept plan presented a proposal for a triangular plaza, at Main Street and Lake Road, coupled with a transit station at that location.

Since then, the Center for Environmental Structure has been commissioned to undertake an elaboration of this South Downtown plaza concept and we are presently in the finishing stages of Phase 1 of our contract work. One of the deliverables of our Phase 1 work asks us to undertake a review of the 2007 concept plan, together with an explication of its strong points and weak points.

The plan drawing of the concept plan follows. The text following the drawing then summarizes our findings.

"Public Plaza" / "Minuteman Square"
Potential "owners Market" Location
"see Facade"
"see Facade"
"see Facade"

improved Pedestrian Connections
to Minuteman High School

Bus Stop / Drop off area

New Mixed-use Development
Freemans Public Plaza
Ground floor retail
Upper level housing and office
Lower level housing and office

Lower Level MAX Station

New Mixed-use Development
on Cash Spot Site
Lower Level Public Parking
Ground floor retail
Upper level housing and office

New Mid-level Bluff Bridge over
Falcon Creek

Pedestrian Pathway Linking Katoop Creek
with Riverfront Park (Landscape)

MINUTEMAN HIGH SCHOOL

New Mid-rise Office Building
Adjacent to MAX Station and Public
Plaza

Proposed Street Parking Main Street,
Lake Street and 21st Avenue

Restoration Over Creek

ROBERT CLEBURG PARK

Restoration Over Creek

LET ENTRANCE TO PARKING

Possible Future Development on
Existing Sewer Treatment Plant



MAJOR POINTS

1. The essential concept of a South Downtown Plaza at that location, coupled with a transit station is a strong one. It draws on the ability of the station to generate foot traffic, thus animating the plaza and creating the potential for a lively place at the southern end of Main Street.
2. The most important feature of the proposed South Downtown Plaza, is its six-block distance from the other major focus of downtown Milwaukie: the City Hall coupled with the present location of the Farmer's Market site across Main Street.
3. These two plazas and the six block stretch of Main Street which connects them, together generate the core of a new downtown as a "barbell" structure, running six blocks and connecting three linked major foci:
 - (1) The focus at City Hall, considered together with the plaza already filled with trees across the street that presently exists as a parking lot.
 - (2) The focus of a new Downtown Plaza, six blocks south, at Lake and Adams.
 - (3) The focus of the lively six blocks of Main Street that will be animated by pedestrian traffic between the plazas at its two ends.
4. The barbell structure has the potential to create a lively downtown up and down the whole of Main Street, encouraging pedestrian traffic, night life, café life, and restaurants and music, and should, with careful management, be able to animate Milwaukie as a whole.
5. Most important, this new structure has the capacity to maintain, protect, and sustain the much loved quality of Milwaukie as a traditional small town. Many people wish to maintain this quality.

LESSER POINTS

6. Preservation of the trees on present farmers market site. Objectively, we believe the site of the farmers market, with its beautiful rows of trees, is possibly the single most powerful aspect of the urban landscape in Milwaukie. We believe it would be a mistake to destroy it or place any buildings on the eastern half of this

block. Even if the farmer's market were one day to be moved, the trees by themselves, coupled with their location across from City Hall, still have inestimable value as a prominent urban park. It would take years to duplicate such a place elsewhere in the downtown, and therefore, this area should be protected. The way that Main Street works with its two main centers (see item 3), would altogether lose its force if one half of the "barbell" were disrupted.

7. The suggestion that the transit station be located further north, recently under discussion but now defunct, would in our view have been a serious error. The northern plaza opposite City Hall, is important, but is tranquil and has relatively little excitement. The southern plaza has the capacity to provide this excitement, but that plan would naturally backfire, if the pedestrian traffic from the light rail were removed to another position.

ADDITIONAL POINTS OF THE 2007 SCHEME

8. The weakest and most questionable aspect of the 2007 design lies in the triangular shape given to the plaza. This shape is inherently problematic, since the shape itself is not "positive"—in other words, it is not a shape that lends itself to human comfort and satisfaction. If the plaza were made triangular, people would be less able to feel that it belongs to them.
9. As shown in the 2007 design, the triangle is also too small, aggravating the lack of positive space. The very pinched acute-angled corners reduce the effective available space even further.
10. The triangle also leaves little opportunity for surrounding buildings to "hug" the space. If better shaped, the pedestrian plaza could be ringed or partially ringed with buildings. We consider symbiotic relationship of buildings and the space which they surround vital to successful design of a lively urban plaza; we believe it is essential that we search for configurations in which this result may be achieved.
11. We believe, in addition, that the green triangle to the west of Main/Lake (Dogwood Park), should be protected as a vital component of any beautiful plaza built in the

South Downtown location, and incorporated in that plaza. This strongly suggests closing Main Street between Adams and the railroad trestle, or at the very least, *drastically* reducing traffic on that block. It would be better if it were altogether closed, with the space now seen as the last block of Main, incorporated in the plaza itself, thus making the plaza (Triangle+Last-block-of-Main+Green triangle) a wider and more visible target for people walking south on Main. The handling of this change, if made, needs to be subtle. Preliminary inspection of the situation suggests that 21st Avenue could easily carry the traffic load, without loss of convenience. Bus circulation with the advent of light rail would also need to be carefully considered.

12. It is still too early to give a solid opinion on Adams Street, but the creation of positive space on the plaza may also suggest a further street closing of Adams. It might be valuable to discuss closing the last westward block and a half of Adams, with access for the available commercial and residential lots from the plaza itself. This is a potent possibility, but would need careful consideration with several City departments.
13. In this connection, we have a picture of land ownership in the affected four block area, and the situation seems well placed for various possible forms of public-private cooperation with plaza land, and the land around the plaza, and different necessary kinds of vehicular access to buildings and functions on and around the plaza.
14. We are in agreement about the concept of mixed-use in the three-block area next to the plaza. Retail, residential, public, and some small workshops may all be appropriate, and we shall get further information on this issue, when the pattern language and input from Milwaukie residents have been collated.
15. However, the impression given by the drawing of the three mixed use areas, as shown on the 2007 drawing, is slightly alarming. It is of course only schematic, but it suggests somewhat massive buildings, with little opportunity for individuality of different concerns and uses. We believe it is even conceivable that the development should possibly be done piecemeal, perhaps then affording more opportunity for pleasant human scale, and greater care given to the architecture and detailing of these buildings.

16. This approach would also coincide more closely with the sentiments of people who love Milwaukie, and who would undoubtedly hope for a more intimate scale in the vicinity of the new plaza, which they may, in the future, come to think of as home.
17. Of course, too, the configuration of these buildings around the plaza would be better if not so blockish, and we may therefore expect a need for very subtle handling of the individual building masses, and their architecture, to be sure that the beauty of the whole area is a primary focus.
18. The idea of placing a tower, as shown on the 2007 drawings, to mark the plaza has positive merit, but as it stands it is conceptual indeed, too conceptual. It runs the risk of being a developer gimmick, which would in the end seem obnoxious. On the other hand a high building or tower marking the point, if it were made of beautiful and solid materials, and if given a sensible function that gives it intrinsic worth, could be very beautiful. It is a high ambition. It is worth pointing out that the leaning tower of Pisa is beautiful, because it stands on a massive white marble plinth, hundreds of feet in each direction, and is itself made of that same white marble. I doubt if we can (or should) aspire to that. But it does give us something to reflect on, and to reckon with, and (perhaps) in a modest way to aim at.
19. We are skeptical about the potential of the tunnel where Kellogg Creek runs under Highway as a possible pedestrian path from Milwaukie to the Willamette. Our own attempts to visualize such a path have not yet yielded an outcome of any obvious promise, especially when coupled with the prospect of the expensive engineering and the very expensive highway bridge that might be thereby required to rebuild the area. This does not mean it is impossible. We do appreciate the desire to help people move comfortably between the South Downtown area and the riverfront park, and understand there may be an opportunity to support this movement at this location, possibly in a different fashion than an underpass.
20. In fact, access from Milwaukie to the river is a major issue, in its own right. The town and the Willamette river belong together, and are made for each other. Given the circumstance of McLoughlin as a huge barrier, it seems to us that the traffic lights which have recently been built to help people across the road are a weak solution. Ultimately, we believe this issue should be faced, so that the river is more present in the lives of Milwaukians, and dealt with in a fashion that does credit to the grandeur of the river. This would involve development of the

waterfront itself as a place of natural beauty, and also provision for more natural access between town and riverfront at more than one place along the river. How to do this adequately does not at present fall within our scope, but we recommend the City decide how best to take on this issue, at this moment in time.

21. We have considered the possibility of a large pedestrian terrace at the elevation of Main Street on its western side, somewhere between Washington and Adams. This place, possible over parking, would have a magnificent view of the sunset, a natural place to gather for a meal, and would permit the construction of a pedestrian bridge crossing McLoughlin, without the need to climb up in order to go down. It would thus provide a natural form of access to the river, at a relatively reasonable price.
21. The portrayal of Kellogg Creek, on the 2007 plan, which shows it restored from a lake to a creek and which appears to show a series of pools forming fish habitats, is very appealing. It is consistent, in principle, with the briefing Randy Schmidt received during a discussion with Chuck Willis, from the Army Corps of Engineers. However it is, any way you slice it, a very large project, requiring a considerable amount of money.
22. In addition, it is not yet easy to visualize the physical and planning process needed to repair the lake, and rebuild the original Creek in a way that helps the proposed South Downtown plaza. At present the lake is virtually inaccessible, to such an extent that one cannot even reach places from which to survey and imagine the possible improvements, and there is a kind of “can’t get there from here,” feeling about the entire problem. We wonder if it might be possible to undertake a relatively low-budget, piecemeal approach, in which the present concrete dam is first breached, to lower the water level, and then a period of observation and design is allowed to take place. In this approach, one would gradually see the situation unfold, without having to rely on an overall plan that can in principle not be competently visualized, so long as the project remains underwater. This piecemeal process, done in conjunction with engineers and ecologists, would then reveal the likely best detailed final alignment of the creek and positions of possible pools, places for paths and steps and sitting places which would connect the whole area, organically, to the new plaza. Finally, once the working ecology had proved itself, one could then make finishing touches of paths and stairs, allowing people to enjoy the area.

23. Finally, there is the issue of pedestrian safety and convenience in the area of the proposed new station. The concept plan does not really address these issues, and we have not attempted, yet, to make detailed examination of this question. In any case, it is vital that pedestrians are not put at risk from the trams themselves, nor from the occasional heavy freight trains that pass through on the railroad line.