

YMCA project: Real community-based planning not followed thus far

The Star Press (Dec. 01, 2020)

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I read with great interest the letters to the editor (Nov. 22) from Melinda Messineo and Andrew Dale and the Nov. 25 article entitled "YMCA publicly discusses Tuhey Park proposal," and believe this is a project of such importance to the future of our city that I feel responsible to respectfully offer the following questions, observations and recommendations.

Although I could not attend the Dec. 1 Muncie City Council Land and Traffic Committee meeting out of COVID concerns (I'm 76 years old!), I believe this is a project of such importance to the future of our city that I feel responsible to respectfully offer the following questions, observations and recommendations to be read into the public record.

Let me preface this by stating that I am fully aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly altered "best practices" when it comes to holding public meetings that address community planning and design projects. Focus groups, community-based charrettes and other citizen participatory methods that have been standard practice since the 1960's has, obviously, been greatly compromised by taking the recommended precautions from local, public health officials and the national CDC.

That being said:

1. The article states, "Based on four different studies, the YMAC Board found that a new location would be the best achieved in a downtown area. Eventually, they set their sights on Tuhey Park." What were the other three scenarios and sites that were studied? What were the criteria for selection that — I assume — Vanderwalle and Associates used in objectively evaluating

the four proposals before recommending the Tuhey Park site? Most urban planners and designers will present the assets, liabilities and potentials of the various sites so that their clients and hopefully the public can engage in meaningful dialogue and debate before a final decision is made;



2. In looking at the aerial perspective labeled as Preliminary Concept. For Discussion Only by Vanderwalle and Associates that accompanied the article, I question what the actual spatial program is for the proposed facility. As I envision the current facilities that house both the Downtown and Northwest YMCA's, I question what specific facilities have been eliminated in this proposal and how was this determined.

In the 25 years that I was involved with Ball State's Muncie Urban Design Studio (MUDS), we operated on the premise that we plan and design with the people, not for them. I believe the results from: Muncie Charrette '82 (downtown façade program and river development); Munsyana Homes Charrette (total redevelopment as Millenium Place); UEA / Lilly Foundation-funded Strategic Plan (Muncie Home Homeownership and Development Center);and, the Southside Muncie Redevelopment Charrette (Southside

Walmart and Madison Street Development) prove that this approach to major redevelopment efforts is, by far, the only way to achieve success.

My 53 years of teaching, researching and practicing community-based, urban design and planning — including in Muncie, Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and the city of St. Louis Park, Minn. — has led me to the conclusion that success is measured by what I call “buy-in by the community” where their input was instrumental in determining the optimum solution. It appears to me that the process followed by the Muncie YMCA to date has not achieved this!

Personally, I’d like to see the other three sites and proposals that Vanderwalle and Associates developed made public. Did they consider the site immediately north of the Muncie/Walnut Street Fieldhouse? This site is the same distance from the center of Downtown as the Tuhey site, has more than adequate parking and is adjacent to the latest White River Trail segment. I am not sure about ownership of the land in that I do not know if the state law granting Ball State the control of the Muncie Community School district included ownership of land. Regardless, it is publicly owned land and adds to the public-private partnership that I know Mayor Ridenour supports.

There exists a great deal of planning and design expertise available here in Muncie ... and certainly in Indiana. It has always baffled me why certain segments of our community’s leadership feel that “out-of-town” experts know what is best for Muncie. The proven compromise is to establish a team of professionals made up of local and national professionals, each of whom brings unique qualifications to the process.

Lastly, I respectfully recommend that, given the importance of this project, that all entities “step back,” take a deep breath and wait until the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted so that a credible, citizen-participatory, process can be engaged in. I believe that in the long run, this is the most responsible course of action.

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