

The Whole Chessboard

Good chess players know that the best moves aren't necessarily the first or most obvious moves.

In the case of the Muncie YMCA's prospective consolidation and relocation to Tuhey Park, I share the same concerns that many have expressed in response to Mayor Dan Ridenour's strong advocacy for the project. The only opinion that I can add is that it's critical that we start to plan our future in a far more strategic way. We must rely less on expedient fixes—which typically compromise desired outcomes—and more on lasting solutions which are durable and that meet community favor.

Before I attempt to explain my assertion and offer some words about the YMCA's desire to find a new location for its consolidated operations, I want to say that I love our community as I know many do. I was born and educated here and I invest a significant amount of my time and energy to make Muncie a community of contentment and perpetual promise. Many dedicate themselves to these ends, including our mayor. This writing seeks to reconcile the kind of community planning it takes to achieve better outcomes through the example of the YMCA question.

The awkwardly-conveyed idea of our Mayor to relocate YMCA operations to Tuhey Park is an example of getting the cart before the horse. Simply put, the action curtails planning in community and unnecessarily pits people against ideas and neighborhoods against establishments. Good ideas fail because great care is not taken to invite conversation and to listen and discern together. Mayor Ridenour consistently presents ideas to small groups of people and then assumes that he's informed the public. I watched the Muncie Parks Board meeting and it was disconcerting to watch the park board, who are fully vested to inquire, discern and act on our behalf, learn about the project and readily approve the concept of the YMCA building atop a city park at the same meeting; a discussion confined to less than thirty minutes.

So what's the right course of action? I believe that we need to be looking at the entire chess board. My hunch is that there are a few better locations to be considered that exist in our central city and to the immediate East and South of our downtown and which would spur additional investment beyond solely a YMCA structure.

It's not just the geography of the chessboard that we need to be observing but the opportunity for moves to be made in partnership.

Here's an example of an idea that could come out of a shared dialogue:

We've made and continue to make investments in our community schools. Why not run the operations of the YMCA out of a building addition constructed on the North side of the Muncie Fieldhouse? Needed and necessary improvements to the Fieldhouse along with an addition onto the North side of the fieldhouse provides the YMCA access to a gym and rooms sufficient for core and ancillary uses, an adjacent sports stadium and athletic fields, and a swimming pool located within Central High School are within a two-minute walk. Equally important, the Fieldhouse is located on a primary MITS route. And, there's plentiful parking around and to the North of the Fieldhouse.

I realize there would be much to sort out from the scheduling of facility uses to prospective leases and clear justification for such a collaboration and communications and even exit strategies but it can

be achieved. Harder things have been accomplished. And, there is precedent for this model—between YMCA and community school corporations—in other parts of the United States.

This is just one example of an idea that could have come up in a community discussion.

This writing is not a criticism of the YMCA. The YMCA has been working on the planning of a consolidated and newly located YMCA for some time. But when the leader of our city so strongly advocates for an idea without seeking and identifying and acting through frameworks—that both support and expand existing missions and resources—then the options on the chessboard become limited.

We need to look at the entire chessboard and we need to do it not by haphazardly bandying about ideas. We must increase our willingness to seek, identify and act on frameworks that both supports and expands existing missions and resources. To do less is to leave too much on the table.

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