

Ready, fire ... aim? Project like YMCA/Tuhey proposal requires preparation, focus

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The current controversy about the location of a new consolidated YMCA in our community prompts a review in light of a few more panoramic considerations. Understanding that there is always pressure, political and otherwise, to produce tangible results as quickly as possible, this should not preclude consideration of longer-term consequences and related developments that stand to be affected. Expedience, particularly when permanent developments are being considered, should never trump careful planning, widespread engagement and sensitivity to those folks most directly impacted. Put another way, we should not be pursuing action without being fully prepared and properly focused. There are at least four facets to this situation that deserve more careful attention.

First, our community has no focused master plan for development of its geography and unique physical assets. At minimum, these assets include the White River and, for purposes here, local parks. There has been no formal planning process for this beyond mention in the community's Comprehensive Plan, nor has there been a clear vision and accompanying plan document that sets in place timetables, cost estimates and impact assessments for all related major developments that the community can review and discuss. In absence of such, any idea makes perfect sense to some and not to others.

Contrast this with the approach that Ball State University has deployed. The institution's physical campus, as it exists today, has its roots in a campus plan that began decades ago and has been updated regularly since. The plan engaged both folks on campus and external planning professionals who brought perspective and experience to this. And few would argue that the campus has not evolved rather magnificently. The key to this, of course, was specific, deliberate, disciplined and longer-term planning.

Second, a community like ours requires a vibrant downtown district as its primary indicator of success. We have demonstrated down through the years that we cannot build a successful city around a mall (the Muncie Mall) or a museum (the Minnestrista center). We will learn again, all too soon, that we cannot do so around a justice center either. We need to think about optimizing an asset that stands to affect the entirety of our community and serves as our community's heart, that reinforces downtown as a major economic driver and contributes mightily to the image and character of the city. One way to achieve that is to consider every single development for its location in or directly adjacent to downtown and, no less important, for its potential to highlight and reinforce the primacy of the district. If, in fact, a mall, a museum and a justice center were all located in or near the geometric center of the community, they would accentuate the centrality of the downtown in the hearts and minds of the entire community.

Third, we need to understand that wheresoever we elect to site a new building — in this case a two-story, 64,000 square foot building and associated parking — the location is permanent and precluded from other types of development and use for several generations. While some would say that nothing is permanent, a building of this size—nearly exactly the same size as the existing downtown YMCA and, for comparative purposes, about 15% larger than the White House — is as close to irreversible as can be. And with the case at hand, this would essentially displace a popular community park that is used by people from all sectors of our community. This fact alone suggests disciplined planning.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the matter of citizen participation. Our community has invested considerably in this during the past decade. We have facilitated the development of neighborhood associations, provided training for their leaders, encouraged them to be active and affirmative in developing their neighborhoods and trusted them to serve as noteworthy partners in our community's development. All of this was predicated on the notion that widespread active engagement of neighbors is highly desirable and has significant potential for constructive impact.

No less significant, all of this came with an implicit pledge that these folks would be heard on matters of consequence. And lest anyone think that this is small inconsequential stuff, consider this: if there are, say, 35 functioning neighborhood associations, each with an active corpus of

20 people, each of which has ongoing communications with 20 neighbors, that's 14,000 people, or about 20% of the city's population. If nothing else, the constellation of neighborhood associations in our community could properly serve as a plenary for reviewing all issues of importance, weighing-in with street-level perspectives, supporting solid ideas and offering critical perspectives on others. To ignore the wealth of citizen engagement we've been able to engage over the past 10 years is to do nothing less than to welch on our pledge.

Paying heed to these considerations — deliberate, long-term master planning, the primacy of downtown as the community's aspirational signature asset, the permanence of our decision and the engagement of the larger community — can keep us from being seduced by expedience, narrow thinking and decision-making that does not respect the will of the people and conform to well-considered criteria. At very minimum, it would restrain us from firing long before we are fully and properly prepared and aimed.

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