

Tuhey Park would harm community

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“Why do they make it so hard to want to live here?” asked my friend, visiting my shop during a lull in Black Friday traffic.

Hearing such from this friend surprised me. She’s a Muncie native who left town for a while and decided in recent years to move back, just like me. In other words, we are most definitely people who want to live in Muncie, a fact we’ve expressed by investing in our hometown, building our businesses and our lives here. Two bigger Muncie boosters would be difficult to find. Yet, despite displaying uncharacteristic pessimism for our city, I knew exactly what she was getting at.

During our three years back, we’d already both fought against damaging proposals like the county’s obsession with building a new jail (it passed) and the city’s dangerous flirtation with bringing heavy polluters to our community (it failed). Here we were with yet another fight on our hands, because the local YMCA and mayor’s office had jointly announced a scheme to construct a new centralized Y facility using a significant portion of Tuhey Park’s greenspace.

Forget for a moment the motivations behind YMCA’s proposal and the mayor’s support of it. Forget the inexcusable number of community “leaders” — whether elected officials or the self-appointed patricians of “Next Muncie” — who did not immediately stomp the brakes upon seeing this proposal. Forget the First Amendment liability such a transfer of public capital to a religious organization could create. Forget that converting a treasured city park into pavement for 300 cars suggests lyrics of a certain Joni Mitchell song. And forget, if you can, that absolutely no one asked people living closest to the park or relevant neighborhood associations what their vision for Tuhey might have been.

Those factors are ultimately irrelevant to my main point: YMCA's plan for Tuhey is an exceptionally bad idea.

The Tuhey proposal works counter to both prevailing wisdom in planning and what the community has said it wants. As workplaces become increasingly spatially divorced from residence, we should be making decisions to improve quality of life and quality of place. With our rock-bottom cost of living, we should be working to make our community attractive to telecommuters, emphasizing and improving our public assets. Young educated workers starting careers value arts, culture and infrastructure, especially parks. The most recent five-year Parks and Recreation Master Plan reports that Muncie has a significantly lower park acreage than is recommended per capita. Developed with feedback from citizens, the plan envisions increasing parkland to benefit quality of life and place — a sound economic development strategy for attracting workers in tomorrow's economy. The Y's argument that a new facility will convince such people to choose Muncie is specious at best.

Losing public parkland is also costly to our community. Lower-income individuals would effectively lose Tuhey for recreation and outdoor activity, as YMCA's private membership-driven model is inherently exclusionary. Because public parks are generally permanent community commitments, no person living or owning property nearby could have anticipated Tuhey's pending destruction. Living until recently in Muncie's hottest up-and-coming historic neighborhood, these residents face the fallout from this betrayal of public trust. Rising property values and high quality of life enjoyed by them are both put at risk by this plan.

Make no mistake, I have absolutely no opinion about the YMCA building a facility. I am not a member, so their choices aren't my business. However, when those plans threaten much-needed public parkland in our city, it becomes all of our business. All that said, a plan utilizing a park for such purposes could have merit if downtown was so densely used or expensive that no feasible sites existed.

But they do.

At the request of Friends of Tuhey — a group galvanizing public opposition to this plan — I found seven alternative sites. The first was retrofitting and expanding existing facilities, constructing an attached parking garage. Other feasible sites include:

- Land and existing lots adjacent the Fieldhouse, developing a public-private partnership with Muncie Community Schools to create a community health and fitness campus.
- Land and disused parking lots adjacent to the Innovation Connector at Jackson and White River Blvd.
- Unused but levee-protected land northeast of Elm and Columbus, a new anchor for the McKinley Neighborhood which, according to Next Muncie, is already set to become a “live-learn neighborhood”
- Muncie Sanitary District land northeast of Jackson and Jefferson downtown, partnering with First Merchants to develop first floor retail along Main with a shared parking facility.
- Vacant lots between Elm and Madison south of Charles downtown, joining forces with Open Door and YWCA to create a community care campus.
- Occupied lots just south of the tracks, west of Madison and north of the MHA’s Millennium Homes, providing YMCA an opportunity to truly dedicate itself to people in need.

Each site offers wider community benefit than the Tuhey proposal, and does so without devastating loss of public amenities. Each site would be significantly more beneficial to all stakeholders while not betraying public trust by privatizing a park,

This was all on my mind when my friend asked why our civic leaders make it “so hard to want to live here.” I answered with encouragement — we must

keep fighting because it's our city, a great community with many wonderful people striving for good. But her next question left me in silence.

“What happens when people always fighting bad decisions exhaust themselves and give up?”

I hope I never have an answer. I hope the county's Comprehensive Planning Process in 2021 involves extensive resident input, and reflects the will of its citizenry better than the collection of misfit plans thrust upon us by elected officials and the “leadership” of Next Muncie. I hope the resulting plan focuses on quality of life and place, providing a template to avoid such ill-advised proposals. And I hope the city leaders actually follow this template, because it would free people who love Muncie from fighting against bad ideas to instead fight for good ones.

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