

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: City Should Think Big, Not Protect Its Turf.

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So, what do city leaders want to do after spending \$250,000 on a consultant to improve the John Nolen Drive corridor and the “hairball” intersection at John Nolen Drive and Blair Street in Downtown Madison?

Rejecting a \$3.7 million plan by city engineers and the consultant, the City Council prefers a short-term fix of painting the pavement and sidewalk green for bicyclists and walkers, and putting some signs up at North Shore and John Nolen. They would create two new left-turn lanes just by painting the pavement.

That is some expensive paint!

This is the latest attempt at revitalizing the Downtown after the city approved a \$5 million study in 2014 to better “celebrate the lake.” While the study gathers dust on government office shelves, our leaders do nothing to celebrate the beauty of Lake Monona.

The council and mayor now are considering a plan to construct an 18-foot-wide walkway from the foot of King Street to the lake with a spiral ramp by the shore. The city paid \$125,000 for an easement for the “walking bridge” even though it was a fire lane and could not be commercially developed.

For some maddening reason, city leaders are not interested in a much better idea by East Wilson Street resident and architect Kenton Peters. He says the city could buy the site now being developed for another apartment building to make room for a 100-foot-wide gateway to a six-acre park overlooking the lake. It would sit above a 500-stall parking ramp over John Nolen Drive.

The gateway and park could be landscaped and paved for walkers and bicyclists with access to the water’s edge. Perhaps the best part is the park and parking ramp would not cost taxpayers any money. That’s right. The \$9 million for the park could be paid for with impact fees charged to developers, according to Peters’ plan. The city would borrow \$12.5 million for the ramp. But the debt service, principal and interest on the loan could be paid back in full by a developer by charging commercial rates for the parking stalls.

Instead, the city wants to pay \$52,000 a stall for 560 underground parking spots as part of the new Judge Doyle Square project. The city parking stalls would cost \$27,000 more than the stalls in the ramp proposed by Peters. Even though the city would own the ramp in either case, the parking stalls in the ramp proposed by Peters would be rented by the developer. Money collected would pay back the city for financing the ramp's construction.

But wait a minute, that makes too much sense. The city doesn't want to give up ownership of the parking business. They have to pay their parking staff after all. And it's pretty hard to electrify the Downtown when the city wants to spend \$30 million to rebuild the Municipal Building.

In fact, 15 of the 23 office buildings south of the Capital Square are tax-exempt government buildings. Most of the city's overpriced parking stalls would be used by government workers. Most of those workers drive home to the suburbs or the edges of town after work. That means they might vitalize the Downtown at lunch.

Thinking big, Peters would like to see many of the government buildings moved to the corridor between Williamson Street and East Washington Avenue in a new "Government Center." That would make room for residential towers connected by glass-enclosed walkways with commercial space on the first floor of the towers. The streets north and south from Doty to Wilson and east and west from Pinckney to Martin Luther King could be underground as we glorify a foot-friendly Downtown.

The only way to truly revitalize the Downtown is to get more people to live there instead of just visiting during the day or for an occasional Farmers' Market or once-a-year events such as the Taste of Madison. But can we at least build a free six-acre park overlooking the lake and a free parking ramp below it?

The biggest reason why not is because of turf. In my view, the whole concept is dead on arrival because the city doesn't want to lose that much control of the parking revenue. As for the grander Downtown vision by the architect Peters, city employees are loathe to relocate to make room for new Downtown residents who could actually make the city come alive by staying Downtown after 5 at night.

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