

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Dreams of a Vibrant Downtown Madison

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Madison has a rare second chance to save downtown Madison. Now that Exact Sciences has pulled out of the Judge Doyle Square Project, it is time to get started to make the area between the Capitol Square and Lake Monona every bit as electric as State Street with a better view.

Renaissance man and veteran Architect Kenton Peters believes as I do that people have to live downtown in order to have vibrant energy there at all hours of the day. Peters would design six apartment and condo towers at the sight of the current municipal building and a parking ramp with a new hotel on the east side of them. The first floor of the towers would be reserved for commercial space so that retail shops and entertainment could flourish. The towers would be connected by 70-foot wide winter gardens with glass coverings and plenty of ventilation in the warm months so that the same temperature could be achieved all year.

The winter gardens walk-ways would be as wide as any street and would eventually connect to Martin Luther King Drive. Two levels of underground parking would cover the distance from Doty Street to Wilson Street. That would serve more than 600 vehicles of downtown residents. But perhaps the best part of the plan is to build a six acre parking ramp above John Nolen Drive with a beautiful park on top overlooking the lake. It would have pedestrian and bicycle access to the water's edge. Peters says the ramp and Park would not cost the taxpayers anything.

His proposal calls for the city to borrow the \$12.5 Million for the parking ramp. Peters and his associates would pay the debt service on the loan. The city would own the ramp and the group would pay the principal and interest on the loan by renting the parking spaces at commercial rates. That's about \$140 dollars a month. Contrast that with the Judge Doyle Square proposal to only charge the developer a paltry \$15 dollars a month for a parking space. Now here's the best part. The glorious park on top of the lake would cost 7-to-9 million dollars and be paid with impact fees charged to developers. That would be far superior to another plan the City Council is actually considering to use impact fees to build a one block park on Mifflin Street. God Lord!

The ultimate goal is to build a dynamic, residential downtown with public access to the lake. People are not going to visit or live downtown to be near an office building or stare at an above ground ramp. I drop my daughter off near her State Street apartment.

It's always buzzing with electricity because people live there or within a couple of blocks. There are no office buildings on State.

Let's realize the dreams of John Nolen himself more than a century ago or capture of the glowing vision of Kenton Peters. In his 80's now, Peters has the same twinkle in his eye he had when he wore a Badger Jersey in the Rose Bowl alongside Alan Ameche in the early 50's. Peters and Ameche were actually roommates. Perhaps that's when Peters learned to dream big. Without dreams, life can be as bland as a vacant office building at night.