

South Shore Chamber of Commerce
July 13, 2016

Introduction/South Shore

- Good afternoon.
- Thanks, Brian, for asking me to speak today. It's truly an honor to be in front of this group. South Milwaukee has a great story to tell, and we need to do a better job telling it.
- That starts with me, and it starts with events like this.
- Of course, a lot of our story is still being written. More on that in a few minutes.
- But I want to start with a recognition that this story is about much more than South Milwaukee. This success story is really one about the entire South Shore.
- There are so many good things happening across this region, and we need to celebrate them ... because we all benefit from economic growth in the South Shore.
- I look at St. Francis and its lakefront redevelopment, including its new FBI building, and cool small businesses like the St. Francis Brewery.
- I look at Cudahy and its upgrades downtown, including its terrific new streetscaping which we'll be taking lessons from, and its growing list of growing businesses, from the Angelic Bakehouse to Patrick Cudahy.
- And I look at Oak Creek, one of the fastest growing cities in the state. From Drexel Town to its burgeoning business parks to its lakefront redevelopment to the new IKEA on the way, our neighbors to the south are leading the way in economic development in the South Shore, and everyone in this room is better for it.
- Of course, I'm here to talk more about South Milwaukee, and I will, but I'll never lose sight of the fact that we are only as strong as our entire region.
- None of us can do this alone. Economic development is a team sport.

- Sure, we have our own initiatives we're working on, and we have our differences, but there is so much that unites us as the South Shore, and we can't lose sight of the fact.
- In that way, the South Milwaukee selling story is really the South Shore's selling story.
- Affordable housing. Clean, safe streets. Strong neighborhoods. Great schools. An unmatched emerald necklace of parks. A burgeoning downtown opportunity.
- That is South Milwaukee's story ... but, to varying degrees, it is also the story of St. Francis, Cudahy and Oak Creek. Let's tell it. Let's celebrate it. And let's continue to write new chapters in that story every day.

South Milwaukee's Story

- So, on to South Milwaukee. For us, the headline when it comes to economic development is simple: "We're just getting started."
- But we've started ... and that's the exciting part.
- Cities need to deliver their services and deliver them well. And we do in South Milwaukee. But that's just the starting point, the entry fee.
- We need to do more, especially when it comes to economic development, and when it comes to our downtowns.
- We must be proactive. We must lead from the front when it comes to attracting and retaining sustainable businesses to our cities. We must make economic development a core part of our mission as a city each and every day.
- And I'm proud to say we're doing that in South Milwaukee.
- It starts with a plan, and a commitment to bringing it to life. That's the story I'm telling today: "Have a plan, work the plan."
- This plan can't sit on a shelf and collect dust.
- So, we sought out to create a plan that we could truly own and activate ... one that put downtown redevelopment front and center.
- We need to focus downtown because that's where our greatest opportunity lies. Our commercial districts on the north and south

sides of South Milwaukee are generally healthy and, while we can't turn our back on them, we need to get our city center right.

- Downtowns define communities. It should be a point of pride for current residents ... and be an attraction for visitors.
- Think about it – when you have visitors from out of town over, where do you want to take them, what do you want to show off first? Your downtown.
- And when you're in a new city, where do you go first, and what is the lasting image you take away from your visit? Often, it's the city center.
- I want us to be famous for our downtown in South Milwaukee.
- That said, we'll never have what we had in the 1950s and 60s. But what we can do – and what I spend countless hours driving towards – is deliver the same energy and vitality downtown that we had in decades past.
- The community is behind us.
- Until recently, everyone wanted a revitalized downtown, but there was no consensus around what that was, nor how to get there. I am happy to say that we have that consensus now ... and it took our planning efforts to get us there.

Working the Plan

- The city council passed our 2035 comprehensive plan update and downtown plan in May, and it did so with this mandate: We must work the plan.
- And we are. We're bringing it to life with a number of actions, big and small, all with a goal of attracting and retaining more sustainable small businesses.
- A few examples ... before the plan even passed, the council already had earmarked \$250,000 toward Milwaukee Avenue streetscaping improvements, a first phase for what will likely be a long-term makeover for our main street. Concepts are coming back this month, with work to begin in 2017, as we put our money where our mouth is when it comes to breathing new life into our historic downtown.

- Then, on the night we passed the plan, the council also passed two additional initiatives ... a new downtown revitalization grant program, and funding for a deeper study into the potential formation of a business improvement district or similar organization, and the joining of the state's Main Street program.
- First, the grant program. The council voted to fund a new program where the city will contribute up to \$30,000 in matching grant funds for improvements both inside and outside of our downtown buildings. It's truly a downtown-only program ... and priority is given to property and business owners in the 900 and 1000 blocks of Milwaukee.
- The support for interior projects is also unique ... and it's reflection that many of our downtown storefronts need much more work than facades to become viable again.
- We're just starting to promote this opportunity. My goal: We'll run out of money in the first year, and be looking for a second and third round of funding.
- There is more information at your table. Take a look, and bring us a plan!
- Also on the night we passed the plan, we also approved additional funding to work with Graef on defining downtown "ownership" for South Milwaukee.
- What this means is we will be spending the next six months studying the state's Main Street program and its potential for South Milwaukee, as well as potential organizational structures for downtown management. Maybe this leads to the creation of a BID, or some other organization that will own the future of our city center.
- BIDs and organizations like them have worked so well in so many other places ... enabling so many positive changes in the areas in which they're focused. What model works for us? Well, we'll know more by the end of the year.
- We'll visit several communities in the area to meet with leaders there and see what worked ... and, just as importantly, what didn't, and why.

- That is how we'll get to a solution for South Milwaukee, and look to act on any recommendation coming out of this deep dive study.

Right People at the Table

- The “who” is really important here. We are undertaking this work with more than just the support of downtown business owners – they are at the table.
- Our downtown ownership workgroup that we just formed includes four key downtown business owners, and they'll be the ones making the recommendations coming out of these efforts. They will own the recommendations because they made them.
- The South Milwaukee Community & Business Association is also a partner in this downtown work. Their president – who happens to own the local downtown flower shop, Parkway Floral – is on this work group.
- Our local chamber is newly energized and eagerly wants to be part of the solution when it comes to our city center ... and we're giving them that voice.
- Indeed, governments can only do so much to drive change when it comes to redevelopment. We can lead, and we are, but ultimately our role is merely to facilitate a brighter future ... and then get out of the way.
- That starts with being business friendly, streamlining our processes that that help made redevelopment a reality.
- With that in mind, we also made a significant change in our economic development committee structure earlier this year. It's a bit of inside baseball, but it's critical.
- We used to have a Community Development Authority to oversee our TIF districts, and then our Plan Commission would have its kick at the can when it came to redevelopment in those districts. Both advised the council, which made the final decisions.
- We thought, “Why do we need both of these bodies?” Having both slowed down the approval process, and at times they had different visions for our city's redevelopment future. It made redevelopment that much tougher.

- So we changed that. We merged the two groups. We now have a Plan Commission with expanded powers – one that is solely tasked with bringing our plan to life.
- Already, we're seeing benefits from this move. We're more nimble as a city, and that will only pay off as we continue to attract new businesses and development.

Events

- I want to close with a few points on an underrated aspect of economic development: events. Yes, events need to be part of this story.
- They build community, and they build business. And I'm proud to say we have developed the best local events calendar among communities our size in the area, if not the state. And many of these are focused downtown.
- There are literally dozens of special events happening in our city center this year.
- For example, the South Milwaukee Downtown Market.
- The name and location of our successful farmers' market are no accident. We purposely sought to create this event in our city center, getting residents and visitors excited about coming downtown again – while putting on display the downtown opportunity for current and prospective businesses.
- It's worked. Our market is now the largest between Milwaukee and Kenosha, and we regularly attract more than 1,000 people downtown on a Thursday night to shop, grab dinner, enjoy some live music, and meet family and friends.
- We've extended that thinking to other downtown events in the last couple years. Our food truck festivals have attracted thousands of people, to go along with downtown outdoor movies, our Evening on the Avenue downtown street festival, a downtown business trick-or-treating event, and our enhanced downtown Christmas celebration.

Closing

- So that's our story. At least some of it. I can talk for hours about where we've been, we're at today, and where we're headed.
- As I said "we're just getting started."
- I can point to a number of early success stories – where we've been able to attract sustainable small businesses and help our existing ones grow.
- MKE City Sippers, Revolution Hair Studio, Board Game Barrister, DB Tax & Financial Services, Jen's Sweet Treats, Moran's Soccer Pub, Sorce Martial Arts, Styled Aesthetic, JB's T-Shirt Shop, Tony G's Grant Park Garage, Azteca Mexican Restaurant, Ace Hardware ... these are just a few of the small businesses that have either opened or expanded in downtown alone our fair city in the past couple of years. And there are more to come.
- In South Milwaukee, we do indeed have a promising future. This is more than just a slogan on a sign: Our best days are still ahead of us.
- And that's my message for the South Shore. We are just getting started. Our future is bright, and our best days are yet to come. Our potential as a region is still unmet, and that's why it's so exciting to be the mayor at this time and place.
- All of the South Shore communities have great stories to share ... and are in the process of writing new chapters as I speak.
- My ask: Get behind what's going on here. Get involved. And tell your friends, family, colleagues and business associates just what is happening here.
- Help write that story.