

Alderman Backes Update

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One of the things I've always appreciated about Erik Brooks's blog, southmilwaukeeblog.com, is that it serves as a resource for a variety of community issues: updates about events, information about major projects occurring in the city, information about local politics, and a wide variety of odds and ends related to South Milwaukee.

In talking with a variety of constituents and other city officials this year, there has been a common theme: people want more information and updates coming directly from our elected officials. When Erik removed his blog after stepping down as mayor, it became clear just how much we had relied on him to kind of fill the gap in that regard.

One of the reasons I ran for alderperson two years ago was I felt like I could be an effective communicator, in addition to being able to provide good insight on the council from a different generational perspective. While I've mostly stepped back from social media of late (I no longer have a personal Facebook page, and I spend a fraction of the time on Instagram that I once did), I still feel like it's important for me to try to connect to community digitally.

In talking with Erik, he was open to the idea of me occasionally serving as a "guest columnist" of sorts on his site. My general idea is that I'll provide some updates about what happens at city council meetings, and about some of the issues we're seeing as a city, from the perspective of an active alderperson. I know many people simply do not have the time or ability to get out to meetings themselves, so this is one way (beside the minutes, which only provide the basics) to help increase awareness of what's happening at city hall.

My intent is to be as straight as possible with this information. I will happily provide my opinion on some issues, but will always be clear when doing so that it is my opinion alone. For the most part, I just want people to read about what we talked about at meetings, from the mundane and minor to the fascinating and critical.

Please feel free to email me at any time with your concerns or questions at tbackes@smwi.org. You can also follow my instagram @aldermanbackes or my Facebook, facebook.com/backesforsm.

Tuesday, December 6 Public Works & Public Property Committee Meeting

I currently serve as the chair of the Public Works and Public Property committee, which handles, as the name suggests, any issues relating to public works and public property in the city (think: trash, street department, public works projects, etc.).

We had just one item on our agenda on Tuesday: a presentation about the potential to have a new telecom install fiber internet in South Milwaukee.

The prospect is certainly exciting; fiber internet is the fastest type of internet connection available, and it's not really available in our area yet. AT&T has begun extending into this area, but it will be quite a long time before the city is connected.

The owner of LightWave Fiber Networks is interested in establishing a local office here in South Milwaukee and making our city the first he works with in the region. This is a brand new company; the owner has telecom experience elsewhere in the country. Some of the questions committee members posed were about the technology itself, while others were about his own background.

We went into closed session to discuss the matter further, with no action taken. But you can expect there to be further discussions on this issue at future meetings.

Tuesday, December 6 Common Council Meeting

There were no citizen comments at the start of the meeting, so we moved into the consent agenda. This is a portion of the meeting at which items that would require no discussion (such as mayoral appointments, approval of minutes, approval of resignations from boards, etc.) are all lumped in to be voted on together. Any alderperson can remove an item from the consent agenda for further discussion, but so far in my short time I've never seen this happen.

President of the Council: David Bartoshevich

The first section of the meeting was under the purview of the council president, Alderperson Bartoshevich. After the consent agenda passed, the council rescheduled the previously canceled Regular Meeting of the Common Council that was set for January 3rd, and also approved a motion to start the next regular meeting (December 20th) at 6 p.m. instead of 7 p.m. Basic procedural stuff with no discussion.

Human Resources Committee: Ray Navarro

Under Human Resources, there were several motions that required little in the way of discussion.

The council:

- Approved the letter of retirement submitted by a city equipment operator
- Approved the position description for the part-time Treasurer Clerk position
- Approved updated Deputy Clerk and Deputy Treasurer descriptions. In the wake of former city clerk Karen Kastenson leaving for another clerk position, there has been some shuffling of city staff to divide the role and spread out responsibilities, which necessitated updated job descriptions.

The council then suspended the rules to pass an ordinance amendment to fix and establish salaries that would be paid to the deputy treasurer and HR coordinator. Typically ordinances have to have multiple public readings, a process that can take weeks. The council can choose to suspend the rules in certain circumstances with a roll call vote to bypass that process.

Plan Commission: Brett Briesemeister

This was the meaty portion of the evening.

First, we had a presentation from J. Jeffers & Co. and Scott Crawford, Inc. with a new plan to repurpose buildings at the former Bucyrus Campus at 1100 Milwaukee Ave. Under the proposals there are 92 residential units, as well as some commercial units and other site improvements.

You may remember the proposed Scott Crawford development that ultimately did not go forward earlier this year after an extended approval process, due to the loss of some funding sources. There are some similarities between these proposals in that there are still three buildings being focused on with this project. However, there are fewer total units, a wider variety of units (anywhere from one to three bedrooms, and some townhomes) and a larger commercial component. The commercial uses would all be in the heritage building, which is the large brick building that runs parallel to 10th avenue.

The proposals have been well received at the plan commission level. There were a variety of questions put forth at the council meeting. I asked about how the developers will be working to tie in the surrounding neighborhood as had been the plan with the previous Scott Crawford proposal, and also about how solid they are on the commercial tenants the developer hinted at being interested in leasing. They are not yet allowed to say anything about specific tenants, but it sounded like there was significant legitimate interest in day-one commercial leasing from a wide variety of businesses. There would be efforts made to beautify the area a bit and make it a bit more integrated with the surrounding downtown area while still having some element of privacy and seclusion.

Alderman Briesemeister asked a good question about the affordable component of the housing. One of the most common misconceptions that has been posted about every iteration of

this project is that it's "low-income housing," a term generally used (in my view) as a pejorative to drive up resentment surrounding a project. There are some affordable rent-controlled units in this project, but as Alderperson Briesemeister was able to have clarified with his question, most of the units are at or above local market rate.

The developers attached to this project do have very strong reputations throughout the region, and the proposals they've put together are certainly impressive.

There were some concerns raised by a couple community members, specifically about whether the property would be considered attractive enough for people to want to live at (considering it is a former industrial property and still near industrial clients). Given there have been nearly two years now of study on this property and consistent interest from the developers, it would seem to me that while there is certainly a possibility there would be some tenants uninterested in the space, the developers' market research leads them to believe this would not, in fact, be a major deterrent for renters.

I'm inclined to agree; South Milwaukee, according to recent studies provided by the consultants Downtown Strategies, has a high walkability rating in its downtown area, and the increased housing density in that portion of downtown with additional commercial components coming would only enhance that walkability. Walkability is fast rising up the list of traits people look for in the communities to which they are moving, especially for renters, so it is in the city's best interest to continue increasing local walkability.

The council did not need to take any action on this proposal other than to schedule a public hearing to amend the zoning code for the property, which we did. Amendments to the zoning code to allow for residential construction would be required for the property to go forward, and any such amendment necessitates a public hearing beforehand.

Several other items on the plan commission passed without much need for discussion. A business at 1210-1216 Missouri Avenue had its conditional use permit updated to include auto sales in addition to its auto repair work. There were also some basic policies and guidelines for how Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) in the city, as well as to applications for such financing.

At the end of the meeting we went into closed session to discuss confidential matters regarding a property on Milwaukee Avenue.

Reports of the Mayor

Mayor Shelsenske provided a brief update on the Old Fashioned Christmas event, which was another big success. I was there for most of the afternoon working with my high school theatre students, and it was great to see the place consistently busy throughout the afternoon with people of all ages having a great time.

The council also approved the mayor's request to have the 125th Anniversary Committee established as a permanent committee, increasing membership to 9 and having it renamed the City Celebrations Committee. The mayor's vision for this committee is to have it in charge of special events and celebrations that might occur at Bucyrus Commons in the future, as well as 4th of July events and other festivities.

That does it for this week! I'll plan to provide regular updates about meetings in the future to help give you much more insight than you can get just from the minutes. As I mentioned earlier, please feel free to reach out to me with any questions!