

Alderman Backes Update

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Greetings once more! I apologize sincerely for the long period of time since my last update; as it does from time to time, life got insanely busy (even more so than normal for me), but I'm back and looking forward to continuing sharing my thoughts on things happening around the city.

The end of the year and the start of the new one tend to be a little slower as far as issues go with the common council. Things briefly slow down after budget time and then take a bit to pick up after the new year begins. Indeed, last night's council agenda was only six items, which is well below average.

But there are still things happening around our community and more issues coming in the near future, so let's talk!

Public art installation proposed for TriCity plaza

The TriCity plaza on the corner of 10th and Milwaukee, right in the heart of South Milwaukee's downtown, may be getting a facelift in the near future.

The city and GRAEF have had ideas for that little parcel of land going back to 2016. You may have seen a rendering passed around on social media, with a large light up "SoMKE" sign as one of the several improvements in that area.

At this point there is no actual concept design for the updates to the plaza. Because the city does not own the property, there first needed to be an official agreement to move forward with investigating such a design and determining the possibilities for the space. The council unanimously approved that initial step last night. The next step will be the actual design before the project can move forward with actual construction.

It sounds as though the site is still in quite good condition and that there won't need to necessarily be massive overhauls. This will be more in the mold of a few cosmetic upgrades, including this public art.

To me, this is another great step forward in an area that is seeing a higher concentration of really cool public art that invites people into our downtown space. You have the fantastic *Little Shop of Horrors* mural at Parkway Floral, the Bruce Lee mural at Sorce Martial Arts, the floral mural at Bucyrus Commons, the Crusher Statue, etc. Most of these things have just popped up within the last couple years. All of this adds to the vibrance of our downtown.

Economic development report provides great news

Speaking of our downtown, our outstanding economic development director Ericka Lange presented her annual report at last night's council meetings. Among the highlights:

- Last year, the first full year of operation for Bucyrus Commons, there were 35 events held at the space, both public and private
- \$215,000 was awarded in Bucyrus business grants, which resulted in more than \$600,000 worth of work and improvements in the downtown area
- The city saw 17 new business openings, 2 relocations, and 3 expansions
- 86% of small business respondents rated South Milwaukee as "good" or "very good" for conducting business, up from 73% in 2021
- Downtown storefront vacancies are the lowest they've been since I moved back to South Milwaukee in 2016

All of this serves as evidence that our city continues to make strong progress in building up the downtown area and supporting business owners!

On recording council meetings

There was a proposal to record and possibly live stream city council meetings. Currently all council meetings *are* audio recorded. At one point these audio recordings were posted on the city's website alongside meeting minutes and agendas; my hope is that will begin happening again. All recordings are currently available by request.

As far as video or livestream goes, I'm ambivalent. I have no problem being recorded personally, but I also see the perspective of those who do. I particularly took note of the city attorney's warning that livestreaming opens the council up to potential liability issues. According to City Attorney Smith, because the city does not have a designated IT person on staff that would be able to handle any issues with the livestream as they arise, an interruption to the livestream could legally force the city to stop the meeting or otherwise be at risk of violating open meetings laws.

To me, video recording does not add so much value over the existing audio that it's worth navigating those issues, especially when the city is cutting money from its operating budget in other areas.

For that, and taking into consideration other legitimate personal reasons presented by other common council members, I ended up voting no on the consideration.

However, I do think these audio recordings should be made more accessible, as they once were.

PAC20!

A tremendous thank you to those of you who came out for our 20th anniversary of SMHS Theatre cabaret in the PAC a few weeks ago. It was an incredibly special evening that showcased exactly why the South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center is such a critical part of our community.

It was a really special feeling for me to have friends from my time in high school back, plus alumni from throughout 2005-2024 and even current students all on the same stage together. We welcomed back old staff members and longtime community fixtures; it was an unforgettable evening with great performances and plenty of nostalgia.

If you haven't been doing so, please make it a point to get out and see some shows at the SMPAC. Of course, I'd love to have you at our SMHS Theatre productions (come see *Chicago* in March!) but the PAC has such a wide variety of outstanding, world-class offerings every single year. To have such a facility right here in our own backyards is truly a privilege that we should not take for granted.

Mayor Chet

As you've heard by now, Mayor Chet Grobschmidt recently passed away at the age of 104. He leaves behind a legacy of accomplishment and kindness in the city that will not be forgotten.

I only met Mayor Chet a couple times, with my most extended interaction coming at my very first Board and Commissioners Banquet the summer after I was first elected. He had some very good advice and kind words of encouragement for me that I very much appreciated.

I know how much respect and good will he built up in the city of South Milwaukee, all of it well earned. He will be missed.

If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, email Alderman Backes at tbackes@smwi.org.