

As an Alder, you have the chance to support the prosperity of specific companies (certain developers, land holders, area builders). The only disadvantages are higher tax costs to deliver urban services, lower property values for existing real estate, a more difficult housing market for sellers, and greater risk from fire and medical emergencies. Would you make that trade-off? This is the choice that you have this month, as you deliberate the Mayor's proposal to green-light development in the "Northeast Neighborhood" (NEN).

Background

The NEN is generally bounded by U.S. Highway 14 on the west, the Lewis Nine Springs E-Way on the north, the Town of Dunn on the east, and Swan Creek on the south. It's bisected by County Trunk Highway MM and served by Fitchburg's new interchange on east Lacy Road. It consists of rolling farmland in field crops and vegetables, forests, streams and wetlands, and a clean fill site, and occupied by a number of rural homes.

The neighborhood was designated as a future urban development area under Fitchburg's FUDA planning process in 2004, and the Northeast Neighborhood Plan (hereinafter, the "Plan") was developed through a long and contentious process beginning in 2005 and ending with Common Council adoption in 2010. Should the any of the area be developed, the next steps would be approvals for urban (water and sewer) services, land division, rezoning, and building permits. The mayor is proposing the beginning of the first step: a Common Council resolution directing staff to prepare the City's application to the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission for an urban service area (USA) amendment. If the USA amendment is granted, the City can permit development with municipal water and sewer services. Here I argue that **to proceed with a USA amendment at this time could lead to dramatic, negative changes to the City**, and that successful development of the area at this time requires significant study, changes to the City's capital improvement program (CIP), and limits to development elsewhere in the City. These will take some time.

As specified in the FUDA process, the City hired a consultant, Ruekert/Mielke, to collect public input and scientific data about the area and its context and devise a development plan. The presentation of the first draft of that plan, in September 2007, was soon followed by three other competing plans: a development plan by a major land-owner, the City's own park and open space plan, and a plan by a local non-profit for off-the-grid ecotourism and organic agriculture. The Plan Commission charged an *ad hoc* committee, the Northeast Neighborhood Land Use Committee, to reconcile eight conflicting aspects of the four plans and present a unified plan to the Plan Commission and Common Council for approval. I was appointed Chair of the committee, which met approximately every two weeks beginning in March, 2008. The resulting, unified plan was adopted by the Common Council in April, 2010.

The [Plan](#) may be found on the City's Web site. Historical material related to the development of the plan may be found via the [Past Materials/References](#) link on that page.

The Plan is a good one from the standpoint of water, environmental protection, municipal systems, and staging. It is consistent with the regional design specified in the Comprehensive Plan, that we develop new urban areas within a mile of our rail line, except in sensitive environmental corridors. However, as chair of the NEN Land Use Committee, I am very aware that the Plan is interdependent on a larger context. Considering that context, we are **not** ready to proceed with the implementation step of amending the Dane County central USA to include it. **When the conditions assumed in the NEN Plan are met, I will support the orderly development of the area.**

Fire protection and emergency medical services

The Plan clearly assumed that a new fire station will be built to serve the area in 2015, as specified in the capital improvement program (CIP) before 2012. For example, on page 2-10, the Plan says:

"The Planning area is currently beyond the four minute fire department drive time. A fire station siting study recently completed by the Fire Department calls for the relocation of each of the existing fire stations. One of the relocated stations, when operational, will better service this neighborhood.

"Opportunities and issues relative to the Urban Service Area (USA): Until such time as the USA is expanded to include the Northeast Neighborhood, or portions thereof, the development potential of the neighborhood is limited. At the point in time that the City amends the USA to include land in the Northeast Neighborhood, it can reasonably be expected that development may occur in those areas with access to public utilities. Water system and fire service challenges exist in providing appropriate service to the neighborhood, and may affect the development timing of the area. ..."

The CIP was modified in 2012 to move the construction of new stations to 2017 and 2019, with the eastern station, which would serve the NEN, planned for the later date. We tend to think of this issue in terms of fire stations, but emergency medical services (EMS) are stretched even thinner. Currently, most EMS comes from fire station no. 2, northwest of Verona Road. No citizen who has looked at the location of fire station no. 2 on a map of Fitchburg and considered EMS thinks this is a good idea. When new fire stations are built, each will have a staffed front-line ambulance, bringing EMS response time to less than five minutes for all of urban Fitchburg. According to a [fire station location study](#) by Short Elliott Hendrickson Inc. in 2009, the NEN is now eight to ten minutes away from a fire engine and twelve to fourteen from an ambulance (study figure 1).

The Mayor has proposed that the City of Madison provide fire protection to northeast Fitchburg under an automatic aid agreement until our fire stations are relocated, and has proposed to build the new, eastern fire station first, in 2017. However, no agreement is in place. In the interim, Common Council has agreed to spend capital funds to keep our aging, poorly located current stations functional.

Because the fire station relocation was scheduled for 2015 at the time the Plan was adopted, and because fire service is a clear prerequisite for development of the NEN in the Plan, we should not authorize work on a USA amendment for the NEN until firm fire and EMS service plans are in place. Rather, **city staff should instead be directed to finalize those emergency service plans.**

Extending infrastructure over vacant land

By [policy](#) in the [Comprehensive Plan](#) (p. 2-27), the City should not extend urban services over vacant land to serve development that's not contiguous with the existing urban service area. However the NEN is surrounded by undeveloped land. The City's new Uptown neighborhood is in the USA, but only one parcel, on Syene Road at East Cheryl Parkway, is under construction. No other work is yet underway west of U.S. Highway 14. Likewise, there has been no development interest in the NEN between U.S. Highway 14 and County Highway MM. It is only west of Highway MM, at the easternmost edge of the city, where development is proposed. To develop this area, new water main must be extended one half mile, from U.S. Highway 14 to County Highway MM, over agricultural land. Until the area between Highways 14 and MM are developed, the city as a whole will shoulder the construction, maintenance, and holding costs of the connecting infrastructure.

When Uptown is substantially built out and urban services are needed in the NEN west of Highway MM, adjacent to Uptown, the City should consider extending urban services into the NEN.

Drinking water demand

The City's water utility has a goal to deliver water at the tap within three days of pumping it from the well. Fresh well water is more attractive to water users and is less likely to contain impurities, such as iron and lead, leached from the distribution system. When water service is extended to the NEN, assimilation of development land should be relatively rapid, so that there are sufficient water users to keep water delivery times short. This, in turn, requires that there be sufficient market demand for the new development planned for the NEN to generate the water consumption necessary to meet water age goals.

As of June, 2012, the City had an approximately 15-year supply of development land in Uptown, the North McGaw Neighborhood, the Arrowhead area, east of north Fish Hatchery Road, and in other areas around the urban service area. Development around the city must be carefully staged to insure rapid land assimilation each new neighborhood, in the context of the overall market for development land in Fitchburg and the region. The City has not developed a city-wide neighborhood staging plan, and does not track homes built on speculation and owned by builders or existing homes for sale by occupants, so it is difficult to see how the market will react to new land available in the NEN.

To reduce the chance that the City will build and maintain infrastructure before it is needed, to increase the likelihood that the City will meet its goals for intensity of development and tax base per acre, and to insure sufficient water demand to meet water quality goals, **the City should develop a city-wide, market-sensitive staging plan for development of various types before extending urban services to the NEN.**

Market effects on taxpayers, home owners, and other development in Fitchburg

New land for development dramatically changes the market conditions for alternatives, including spec homes, owner-occupied homes for sale, unplatted land, and alternative types of development. Record low vacancy rates for rental housing in various configurations, foreclosure rates, depressed prices for existing homes, and shifting generational preferences for urban living and public transit suggest that multi-family housing to rent or own in Uptown will be much more attractive to the market than single-family residential units in the NEN, but this should be confirmed or refuted by a market study.

The depressing effect of new lots and homes on the values and tax assessments of existing homes and condominium units, both occupant- and builder-owned, suggests the City should proceed with caution in extending urban services. **If the NEN is to have urban services in the near term, aggressive and effective steps should be taken by the City to discourage development in the McGaw and North Stoner Prairie Neighborhoods until Uptown and the NEN are substantially built out.** Like the concern for drinking water demand, this suggests the need for an enforceable, city-wide staging plan for development in new, urban neighborhoods. When such a plan is in place, urban services can be extended to the NEN when the market conditions in the staging plan are met.

Groundwater management

High standards are set in the Plan for managing storm water run-off, but the Plan itself calls for more data and better models of groundwater hydrology (pp. 6-3 and 6-4). Groundwater recharge is critical in the NEN, because too much recharge can lead to flooding of homes down gradient, and too little will damage rare and sensitive ecosystems to the east. Good input data and faithful models are needed because storm water

management plans are evaluated not by field measurements, but by modeling proposed systems. If the models insufficiently mimic the real system or are based on unrepresentative data, evaluations based on model output can be useless. There are two important ways modeling can be improved: better models and better climate data input.

During the development of the Plan, the critical role of groundwater modeling was recognized, and the best available model was used. However, an improved model was under development by the Wisconsin Geological Survey, so the Plan urges that development plans be evaluated with newer models as they become available. We understand from Ken Bradbury that the updated groundwater model for Dane County will become available from the Wisconsin Geological Survey in April, 2013.

Wisconsin's climate is changing (<http://www.wicci.wisc.edu/climate-change.php>). Climatic models for large areas have been enhanced (down-scaled) to better predict how Wisconsin's climate will change in the coming decades. The short answer is that it will be warmer, wetter, and both precipitation events and droughts will become more extreme. This affects the value of storm water and groundwater modeling, which is typically based on a fixed, historical precipitation regime. If we build storm water treatment, conveyance, and storage systems based on the results of models using data from cooler, dryer, and less severe climates than we expect to have in the future, we could be in for expensive surprises. The uncertainty about future climates suggest we build facilities with greater safety margins, or at least evaluate them using more recent climate data than is traditional engineering practice.

Before proceeding with a USA amendment application, City staff and its consultants should evaluate groundwater hydrology using the new regional model under a climate regime that's more likely to be observed in future decades.

Conclusion

In urban planning, citizens hate sprawl, but they hate density even more. In a similar way, developers and other businesses love certainty, but they love flexibility even more. I believe we should strive for more density and certainty. We should finalize our plans for emergency services and for staging green field development, and reevaluate hydrology. This may take a few months, but it will benefit taxpayers and municipal service consumers and the future residents. We can then proceed with expanding the urban service area in safety and with confidence.

I respectfully request that you not recommend approval of R-03-13 at this time. Instead, let's direct City staff to complete plans for emergency services in the City, and to review the NEN Plan in the context of the new, regional groundwater hydrology model when it becomes available this spring. A relatively short (two to six month) delay in beginning work on an urban service area amendment can reap large rewards in confidence that we are doing the right thing. A solid plan for emergency services will be an advantage in the marketing of both Uptown and the Northeast Neighborhood, while the current lack of a plan is a handicap.

Ald. Steve Arnold, District 4, Seat 7
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