

To the Milwaukee County Board:

We are very disappointed, even angry, at the Economic and Community Affairs Committee's failure to take any meaningful action this week on the Board's referral of the Irgens development agreement back to Committee.

Despite the Board's admonition that environmental protections be added in writing, the developer agreement the Committee is sending back to you for your approval is exactly the same as the document you asked it to change. Instead of making the written changes you asked for, the Committee chose instead to accept the developer's vague verbal "assurances." Nowhere in the "latest update" do the words "conservation easement" or "deed restrictions" appear. But since deed restrictions can apparently be wiped out with any new development agreement, a conservation easement for the Habitat Protection Area (HPA) should be a written requirement.

As we've written to you before, our concerns are not limited to the HPA, but cover the urgent need for environment-friendly building design and construction as well—specifically regarding Dark Skies protocols, stormwater management, landscaping, and public-access trails—all of which were in the UWM developer agreement, which the Irgens proposal replaces. Nor does it cap total square footage for the buildings—even though Irgens has itself proposed such a cap—not to mention mandating bird-friendly windows or any limitations on building heights, density or setbacks.

Our Coalition also asked for a voice in the stakeholders' Association to make sure the actions of the Association's commercial stakeholders are consistent with environmental concerns. And the Association needs our voice. We bring the knowledge, experience and resources that the commercial stakeholders sorely lack—a lack they've demonstrated time and again, as they've mowed down natural habitats and destroyed dozens of trees, all in violation of the current UWM developer agreement.

Irgens' argument that they can't include an environmental stakeholder in its Association because we might not be around in a few years fails to pass the laugh test. We've been fighting to Save the County Grounds for decades, and we'll continue to do so long after Irgens has leased or sold this proposed development's building spaces and gone on to other projects.

It's more than interesting that adding an environmental voice to the Association is the one issue that would cause Irgens to “walk away” from the project.

Unfortunately, it fits a pattern: avoiding accountability at all costs, whether to the public or to written commitments. Like any developer intent on converting public resources into private assets, they’d prefer to make their decisions behind closed doors to serve their private, not the public’s, interests.

The Committee also dismissed the idea of turning over management of the Habitat Protection Area to the Friends of the Monarch Trail, even though its representative at that meeting, Jim Price, informed them that the group does, in fact, qualify for such a role, not only on the basis of expertise and experience, but under its 501(c)(3) status as part of the Park People, as well.

This project has been sold to the County and City of Wauwatosa as a job-creator that will increase the County and City’s tax base. While Irgens may operate on spec, that’s no reason local governments and the people they represent should do so.

Just look at all the “Innovation” Park/Campus office space that has stubbornly remained empty for years, since long before the pandemic began. Add to that the 106,800 square feet of leasable office space in Research Park owned by Irgens (see attached), much of it vacant for years. Irgens even used those vacancies two years ago to try to shrink the tax base when it petitioned the City of Wauwatosa to reduce its property tax assessment.

The pandemic itself might change the traditional workplace permanently too, transforming traditional office work into remote work. So why build for a future that might not exist? Even if Irgens does fill its proposed buildings, there’s no reason to believe they will expand the County’s tax base if all they do is attract businesses from one part of the County to another.

This shell game will not produce any new jobs either, other than temporary jobs in construction.

We urge the County Board to refer the developer agreement back to Committee again, with more specific amendment instructions, or reject it altogether.

Sincerely yours,
COUNTY GROUNDS COALITION

Peter Abbott, chair
Dain Maddox, vice chair

LuAnne Washburn, secretary
Dianne Dagelen (member, Sierra Club), treasurer
Barb Agnew (Friends of the Monarch Trail)
Cheryl Nenn (Milwaukee Riverkeeper)
Danielle Pahlisch (Friends of County Grounds Park)
Jonathan Piel (local historian; Friends of County Grounds Park)
Jim Price (Friends of the Monarch Trail)
Barb Schoenherr (Friends of County Grounds Park)
Nancy Welch (Wauwatosa alder)

[Organizations listed for identification only.]