
County Grounds Coalition



What is the County Grounds Coalition?

We are a coalition of grassroots environmental and citizens' groups who came together to protect the County Grounds' natural areas.

We do not oppose all development, but we do oppose this plan. We urge our local governments to work with its citizens as a steward for these areas, preserving them in a natural state for future generations.

What's wrong with the Life Sciences District (LSD) plan?

It was created without public input and makes recommendations that conflict with the City's Comprehensive Plan and Housing Plan. Instead of providing a guide for balanced development, it promotes a developer-driven vision of a new metropolitan center with urban densities. Is that what we really want?

It proposes turning control of the sale of public lands over to a not-for-profit entity that would oversee development, and management of the plan's Environmental District to yet another not-for-profit board. This lays the groundwork for removing the public from having any meaningful say on the future of public lands and public funds, just as they have been excluded from the creation of this draft plan.

There is no question that environmental areas would be severely harmed by the construction of any road through the open spaces of the northeast quadrant (north of Watertown Plank Road and east of Highway 41/45). The only reason to build a road extending 92nd Street to the Village is to provide access to future developments. Claims that the additional road is necessary to relieve congestion on Watertown Plank are unfounded and would bring more traffic into the Village at a location that will endanger pedestrians and impede walkability.

The City should start over with a new planning process that begins with public input and is informed by the Environmental Report submitted to the Milwaukee County Board, which states that the LSD plan is "inconsistent with the environmental standards it promotes."

Why is the City proposal a step back for Wauwatosa?

This plan will continue the erosion of natural habitats that has occurred every time the public has made concessions to allow for new uses of the County Grounds. The emphasis is on development, with some green spaces, rather than maintaining the current ecosystem. Even if Sanctuary Woods is not developed, the addition of several thousand apartments will alter the current balance, replacing an area of wildlife and nature with people, traffic, buildings, driveways and parking lots. The saddest part is that there is no need for the development, since Innovation Park is still barely used, the Research Park is at least half empty, and the market for

new apartments in the Milwaukee metro area has been saturated to the point that new projects are being downsized or cancelled.

Is this the best way to fund City services?

No. While new developments can increase the tax base to help pay for City services—and we understand the constraints imposed by the state's levy limit—they also place increased demands on the City for services and infrastructure, including new storm and sanitary sewers, water lines, roads, sidewalks,

streetlights, and ongoing maintenance. If the City decides to use Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) to pay for these improvements, the City would have to wait up to 27 years for the taxes from this development to go into the general fund and help pay for these services. Do we know if these projects will retain their full market value for even 20 years? The LSD plan's big winners are the developers who will see their returns much sooner.

Overdevelopment can actually shrink the City's tax base by devaluing the community's property as a whole (the city's total property valuation). And if, as is likely, the 6,500 new apartments fail to attract enough tenants to pay for themselves, the landlords will lower the rent to fill the vacancies. So, besides lowering the rest of the community's property values, the apartment buildings' own property values will shrink to match the lower rents.

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Who's going to be left holding the bag if those LSD apartments remain mostly empty, or even half-empty?

The taxpayers will. If the project fails to retain the value projected and does not generate sufficient taxes, Wauwatosa will be responsible for any shortfalls. That means all of us will be “left holding the bag” to pay for the increased fire, police, sewage, water and other services and utilities the new structures will demand. Even worse, there might be pressure for tax dollars to raze and clear the property for a new round of development. That's why it is so important to have a good understanding of the potential impacts if development moves forward BEFORE approving a document that will be used to set those plans in motion.

Can the City and its developer partners be trusted to preserve whatever natural areas remain once the Life Science District is fully developed?

Sadly, no. They never have before, and there's no reason to believe they can be trusted now. Past proposals have always included the promise of no more development. Yet here we are. In 2010, the community reluctantly accepted a proposal for the UWM-Innovation Park after being assured multiple times on the record that this would be a unique proposal that would incorporate sustainable development with a business accelerator that would generate new businesses and jobs. When they were negotiating for public approval and public funds, they promised to preserve historic buildings, support habitat creation, and abide by limitations on development. Within months, developers worked with the City to remove restrictions, and increase TIF financing and developer subsidies.

County Supervisor Luigi Schmitt says the new LSD proposal would take “only 11-15 acres” of the remaining 60 acres—that's 17-25%!—but will protect the rest. Keep in mind that we are now down to the “remaining 60 acres” after starting with more than 1,000 acres. All of this has happened with elected officials starting with a proposal from developers and telling the public that they needed to compromise. It's time to ask the question, “Who do they work for?”

Will the LSD plan protect the County Grounds' natural areas?

Again, no. While the plan's supporters say it's the best way to protect green space, the plan itself says very little about protecting green space and nothing about protecting natural habitats. It talks about the importance

of green space, but the verbiage is misleading. For example, the main section devoted to environmental areas talks about the creation of an Environmental District. But this proposed district would include areas that were zoned for Special Purpose Conservancy years ago.

The implementation section would create an unelected not-for-profit group that would “manage” the district and is empowered to charge impact fees and use financial resources to build additional amenities like. This will actually increase the options for usage allowed under current zoning and will do nothing to protect habitat areas. Sanctuary Woods is not identified in the plan, and the closest area to it on the map shows a minimal amount of open space situated along the so-called Scenic Parkway that would provide access for the adjacent four- to five-story buildings. And four to five stories is the minimum—they might wind up even taller.

The implementation section makes no mention of all the habitat areas, protected and endangered species, or efforts to recognize and limit development impacts. The plan treats green space as an amenity to be enjoyed by the residents of the apartment buildings next to it (page 91). The plan also ignores previous plans and Council resolutions that protect those areas in an effort to claim that the LSD plan would accomplish something that's already been done, while ignoring the existing restrictions on development.

The new LSD plan betrays all of the commitments made by the City in the past to preserve the County Grounds' remaining natural areas in return for allowing the developments that are there now.

Why have a plan? Why not leave the area as is?

Greed. The City administration and its consultants (GRAEF) continue to ignore the Northeast Quadrant Plan that was developed in partnership with Milwaukee County and adopted in 2004. This plan promoted a vision of sustainable development with restraints intended to promote the preservation of historic buildings and natural areas. This plan was incorporated into the City's Comprehensive Plan and the approvals for the creation of the UWM-Innovation Park. Among other things, it promoted expansion of habitat

simply by promoting the planting of native plants rather than turf. Within months of pushing the public to compromise and agree to support Innovation Park and provide TIF support, the UWM-Real Estate Foundation was already working with the City to remove constraints.

The new LSD plan betrays all of the commitments made by the City in the past to preserve the County Grounds' remaining natural areas in return for allowing the developments that are there now. The citizens of Wauwatosa need to hold their elected representatives accountable to those commitments.

We need to start over.

To find out more, call or text (414) 467-8757, visit our website, countygroundscalition.org, and like us on Facebook.