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Milwaukee County: Get on board with streetcar, Couture development

By Marina Dimitrijevic

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As a lifelong Milwaukeean, I believe that what distinguishes our community is an immense sense of pride built on the nostalgia of how our city used to be. Residents put a high value on our public spaces. We love to tell a story of our first family picnic in a county park or how many times we have seen the dinosaur exhibit at the public museum. While we have a rich history, our best days aren't behind us, they await us.

As a community, we are at a critical crossroads. We can let our challenges overcome us or choose to create new opportunities and grow. It is time for our urban revival. A time to come together and make sure we are one strong city, not two.

Developing the county's underutilized, downtown transit center site is a critical step forward. The 44-story, skyscraping Couture development will add population density by housing more than 600 new downtown residents while increasing public space. This catalytic \$122 million investment provides thousands of family-supporting jobs and will take the current tax revenue created from zero to \$68 million.

The Couture developer has agreed to hire 40% of workers from within Milwaukee County and contract with Disadvantaged Business Enterprises for 25% of this development. The city of Milwaukee has committed \$400,000 as part of the proposed East Michigan tax incremental district toward much-needed workforce development. Recently, an additional \$100,000 has been promised at the county level from the developer matched at \$100,000 by the Milwaukee Area Workforce Development Board, making the total investment in preparing our workforce more than a half-million dollars. These city-county resources will connect job seekers with employers, build workers' skills and strengthen our local talent pipeline.

Construction and operation of the Milwaukee streetcar also will provide training and economic growth. It will complement our bus system by feeding into the larger system and attracting riders. This will result in an overall expansion of transit services in Milwaukee County. A 2008 report on the Portland, Ore., streetcar explains that more than \$3 billion in new development has taken place within two blocks of fixed streetcar routes.

Similar streetcar projects are moving forward in Seattle, Wash.; Tacoma, Wash., and Tucson, Ariz. Let's get in on the action. New downtown residents will spend at small businesses, which will create more local jobs that must pay family-supporting wages. Increased tourism will pay off countywide.

Take a walk with me down Milwaukee's future memory lane. After enjoying local flavors at the Milwaukee Public Market, we take a ride on the modern streetcar and head quickly to the Milwaukee Art Museum. We hop off at the lakefront and visit the museum to see the newest exhibit for free. The new sales tax our community supported has helped fund our cultural assets, so we can all access this world-renowned art without paying for admission. We walk across the bridge to rent a bike at the transportation hub housed in the Couture and ride to do some shopping at the revitalized Shops of Grand Avenue.

Our past leaders were forward-thinking visionaries who took big risks in building our emerald necklace, our county parks system and great public infrastructure such as the central branch of the library. The sure way to go nowhere is to do nothing. But I'm betting on Milwaukee. Let's take a chance together — and let's rise together.

Marina Dimitrijevic is chair of the Milwaukee County Board.

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