

Remarks to the Committee on Parks and Culture

Janice Wilberg, Ph.D., Chair, Milwaukee County Commission on Aging

June 10, 2025

Good morning and thank you, Chair Wasserman and committee members, for the opportunity to speak this morning. I'm Jan Wilberg. I've served on the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging since 2020 and am serving my third year as Chair. I am here to convey the Commission's strong support for the new McGovern Senior Center as a mixed use senior center/senior housing development in McGovern Park.

Please know that this project, indeed the entire effort to reimagine senior centers, originated at the Commission on Aging. In 2020, Chair Richmond IZard created a Select Committee on Senior Centers chaired by Commissioner Gloria Pitchford-Nicholas. The committee was comprised of representatives of the five senior centers, Advisory Council members, individuals with development and program expertise, and senior advocates. During the pandemic, the Select Committee met every two weeks, reviewed detailed information on each County-owned senior center's physical condition, gathered national best practices, studied models of successful aging, and created a list of key attributes to be considered in future planning.

After the Select Committee's final report, the Commission on Aging amended its bylaws to establish a Standing Committee on Senior Centers. That committee, currently chaired by Commissioner Gene Guskowski further refined the Select Committee's work into the MKE Hubs Report which was shared with and warmly received by the County Board in 2023. The 2025-2027 Area Aging Plan recently approved by the County Board references the MKE Hubs recommendations and includes a specific goal to establish a mixed use senior center/senior housing development. I recount this history to make one thing very clear. The push for a new McGovern comes directly from the Commission on Aging. Now we are at the point where County Executive Crowley and DHHS Director LaGrant have made this a priority and we are so grateful for their commitment, expertise, and partnership.

Why the focus on senior centers? Because senior centers have enormous potential for reducing the crushing health and mental health impacts of social isolation and loneliness. Because senior centers can make access to critically needed services 100 times easier, reduce malnutrition and nutritional risk, and offer opportunities for civic and volunteer engagement. Because senior centers can welcome older adults with disabilities and offer respite and support to caregivers. Senior centers can be places of knowledge, connection, health, and joy. The Commission understands this because we are seniors. That's why we've worked so hard on this challenge.

So that brings us to today. This is a watershed moment for the 190,000 older adults in Milwaukee County. And the moment is in your hands.

Do we throw up our hands and say we're powerless to build a new McGovern Senior Center, that older adults will just have to keep making do with the cramped, non-functional, falling apart senior center they have right now? Or do we embrace this unique opportunity to create a state of the art senior center, one that is beautiful, functional, and welcoming to every older adult who seeks companionship, exercise, learning, and recreation?

The first choice is easier. I know this because that's the choice the County has been making up until this year. Letting the McGovern Senior Center and Kelly, on the southside, just sit there as repurposed, jerry-rigged, ancient and decrepit buildings is the result of everyone – administration and County Board – throwing up their hands.

Meanwhile, you have Milwaukee County residents – like me – going to senior centers that scream – *Hey! We're glad you paid taxes all these years and showed up to vote in every election and helped your community whenever you could, but really this beat-up place, this patched together senior center, this is the best we can do for you.*

Is McGovern a great gathering place? Yes! I often talk about my short-lived line dancing career at McGovern. The room was always packed, the music loud, the dancing amazing (except for mine), and people could not have been warmer or more welcoming to me. I know why folks love McGovern. It's worthy of their love. But the people who use McGovern are also worthy of love – your love, their community's love. I don't mean to be a bleeding heart but ultimately, when you get right down to it, what we invest in older adults is a reflection of our collective regard for them.

I am 77 years old and so I have been around a long time. I love Milwaukee County's parks and often marvel at how they continue to be beautiful and well-maintained despite funding reductions. So my hat's off to the Parks as well as to the volunteers who are the parks' lifeblood. But while I love the parks, I'm not an ideologue.

I believe there are times when the greater good demands compromise. There are times when wisdom and generosity, vision and compassion, principle and pragmatism lead us to new ways of thinking. What has always been doesn't always have to be. There can be a beautiful park and an amazing new senior center with senior housing. Those things are not mutually exclusive unless we resist compromise and refuse to meet the moment.

When I was just starting out at the Social Development Commission fifty years ago, I was baffled by the oft-used phrase "Nothing changes if nothing changes." Of course, I thought, that's self-evident. It took years for me to really absorb the truth in that statement and to understand its simple power. Nothing changes if nothing changes. Never was this truer than in this case.

I am asking you – as an old woman, as an advocate for older adults, as Chair of the Commission on Aging – please seize this moment. Create a new way of thinking about parks and older adults and what defines the public good. Embrace change on behalf of all of us. Thank you.

June 9, 2025

To: MILWAUKEE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS PARKS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

**MILWAUKEE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS HEALTH EQUITY, HUMAN NEEDS &
STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE**

MILWAUKEE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS FINANCE COMMITTEE

From: MILWAUKEE COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING SENIOR CENTER COMMITTEE

**RESPONSES TO CONCERNS RAISED ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF CONSTRUCTING A
MIXED-USE BUILDING CONTAINING A NEW MCGOVERN SENIOR CENTER AND
AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR SENIORS IN MCGOVERN PARK**

"ELEMENTS THAT ARE INCOMPATIBLE WITH PUBLIC PARKLAND"

Concerns about additional parking and activity are understandable and legitimate. However, it has been well documented by studies for decades that additional "eyes on the street" have led to safer urban environments. **Adding an additional 30 – 50 "sets of eyes" with the addition of an affordable housing component to a new McGovern Park Senior Center 24/7/365 would provide a level of security that would be unprecedented in MKE County Park History.** Certainly, this is an innovative public safety concept worthy of further exploration.

"DHHS HAS BEEN PLANNING THIS PROJECT SINCE 2017"

MKE County Facilities Department began an assessment of all the 5 existing senior centers in 2017 that encompassed both the infrastructure and the programming interests of those County residents using them. Hundreds of users took part in numerous listening sessions. The MKE HUBS Report (the ultimate response to those listening sessions) was accepted by the Commission on Aging in spring 2023. **The actual planning effort to re-imagine the future of the McGovern Senior Center began less than a year ago in 2024.**

"TALKING WITH PEOPLE THERE YOU WON'T FIND MUCH SUPPORT FOR THIS PROPOSAL"

On the morning of April 9, 2025, more than 80 active users of the McGovern Senior Center gathered for a listening session to discuss the future of the senior center itself and to get their feedback on the possibility of a new senior center sharing a structure with an affordable housing component for seniors. **Those present OVERWHELMINGLY endorsed the concept.** The main reason was that McGovern Senior Center is their home. It has served the neighboring area for generations and **they adamantly DO NOT want to be relocated to some other off-site location.**

"THE SENIOR CENTER WILL BE REPLACED WITH A 4 STORY APARTMENT BUILDING"

The new building **WILL NOT exceed 3 stories in height.**

“IF DONE OUTSIDE A PARK SETTING IT COULD ENHANCE THE ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD IN WHICH THE HOUSING PROJECT IS LOCATED”

Thinking more holistically about this opportunity, we feel strongly that **a thoughtfully designed, strategically located new structure could enhance both the neighborhood AND McGovern Park simultaneously**. In addition to the new structure itself, **the site of the current building could be re-configured to re-engage the adjacent community** by creating better access to the pond and developing a functional memorial to the history of the park and its long history serving that area. If one were to think of this entire southeast sector of the park as a whole, rather than just an individual structure, you could envision a potent and meaningful redevelopment of a part of McGovern Park that at the present time only serves the senior centers limited hours, is generally underdeveloped, neglected and because of the lack of security is subject to bad behaviors.

“THE SENIOR LIVING BUILDING IS IN CONFLICT WITH THE FABRIC OF THE NEARBY COMMUNITY”

The building itself will be setback and buffered to reduce its visual impact on the adjacent single-family neighborhood. Regarding the community fabric, research shows that the strongest neighborhoods are typically those that support diversity, especially in terms of demographic diversity. Many of the potential seniors who might reside there might have grown up in this neighborhood, raised families and enjoyed the amenities of the park for their entire lives. **A new structure carefully located at the edge of the park could be an incredible bridge between the park, the neighborhood and the entire history of the area.**

“WHY USE PARKLAND WHEN VACANT PARCELS ARE AVAILABLE ACROSS THE CITY”

As stated earlier, those dedicated **existing senior center users have made it abundantly clear that they DO NOT want to be located somewhere other than their current location**. Members of both the Senior Center Committee and the development team have looked long and hard to find a nearby site with no success. **The effort to assemble a parcel of land would add significant cost and time to this endeavor and endanger the access to the available federal funding**. Adding years to this process will further burden those older adults who rightfully seek both a modern senior center and affordable housing.

“THE JFS HOUSING DEVELOPMENT JEOPARDIZES A THRIVING, ACTIVE SENIOR CENTER COMMUNITY”

On the contrary, **creating a 24/7 zone of older adult activity can only enhance the vitality of a newly re-envisioned McGovern Senior Center**. First, there is a commitment to keep the existing building in full operation during the construction process. Second, the only real “thriving activity” currently takes place during the existing building’s limited operational hours. Most late afternoons, evenings and weekends the building sits empty and subject to vandalism. **Adding an older adult oriented affordable housing component will create a true hub of activity that would energize the site 365 days per year**. In addition, a thoughtfully articulated reuse of the existing building site will become a community resource that could benefit ALL generations in the surrounding neighborhood.

“WHY IS JFS BEING GIVEN A FAST TRACK, SOLE ACCESS OPPORTUNITY TO LEASE PARKLAND WITHOUT A PUBLICLY NOTICED COMPETITIVE BIDDING PROCESS”

An appropriately public noticed Request for Qualifications was issued by MKE County earlier this year for a Feasibility Study to Replace the Existing McGovern Senior Center. **11 development groups submitted responses.** A team of economic specialists within MKE County government vetted the responses, conducted interviews and ultimately selected the JFS Team to conduct the feasibility study.

“THE PROPOSAL’S FEDERAL FUNDING OF \$2MILLION IS INSIGNIFICANT AGAINST THE TOTAL PROJECT COSTS”

The cold reality of financing affordable housing projects is that it is an incredibly difficult and fragile challenge. If it were easy we would not have an affordable housing crisis either locally or nationally. A typical financing package includes a “stack” of smaller financial capital packages that will ultimately create the funding needed to proceed with the project. Missing pieces in these stacks are often referred to as “gaps in the financing”. **The \$2 million Federal Funding for this project is a CRITICAL COMPONENT AND NOT AT ALL INSIGNIFICANT.** The only other source for this money would literally be the MKE County public coffers. In terms of GOOD GOVERNANCE, it would be an “unwise decision” for the County to turn its back on this source of funding that would directly benefit older adults in MKE County who are in desperate need of this sort of support.

A CALL TO ACTION

Milwaukee County means many things to us all and we care deeply about them. We want to protect our parks, keep our rivers clean, keep long-standing institutions like the domes, the museums and the senior centers healthy and thriving. In doing so we choose our “lane” to focus on our interests and often put on “blindness” ignoring the interests and challenges the other “lanes” are facing.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that Milwaukee County is really the 952,000 people who have made this their home. In this case especially, let’s also not lose sight of the fact that 185,000 of them are older adults. In the coming years this number will continue to grow, and their specific needs CAN NOT be ignored. Many of them, especially our minority communities, face ongoing struggles with loneliness, isolation and finding affordable housing. The opportunity to create a mixed-use senior center / affordable housing for seniors’ development on the edge of McGovern Park could be a game-changing, forward-looking solution to these critical issues.

We implore all concerned MKE County residents to take off their respective blinders. To find a way to collaborate with each other. To find ways to work together to advance all our specific concerns in a fashion that will benefit the greater good!

We CAN do this if we are willing to RESPECT EACH OTHER AND WORK TOGETHER!

