



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Chris Abele

MILWAUKEE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

DATE: March 23, 2016

TO: The Honorable Milwaukee Board of Supervisors

FROM: Chris Abele, Milwaukee County Executive

RE: County Board File No. 16-200

---

I am leaving County Board File No. 16-200 unsigned. I'd like to thank the Board for approving my plan for getting the Domes back open to the public as soon as possible. I also ask for the Board's support of the taskforce that we've assembled so we can move forward together as one unified County.

The Mitchell Park Conservatory Domes are part of the cultural identity of Milwaukee County. This icon holds fond memories not just for residents of Milwaukee County, but for visitors from all over the state and country.

Though the overall structure of the Domes remains secure, the materials and technology used during construction are now outdated, and we've observed concrete debris falling in recent years. Despite proactive steps to address this condition in 2013 and 2014, this problem continues to occur. These conditions led to the decision to temporarily close the Domes until we can be certain that they are safe for the public to enjoy.

News of the Domes' short-term closure has rightly prompted much public discussion and concern about their future. The county is working as quickly as possible to get them reopened in a way that is safe to the public. However, this short-term fix will only last a few years. I have proposed that we use these few years to — as a community — create a long term vision for what's next. The Domes are actually the second conservatory to be housed at Mitchell Park. Before the Domes, there was a Victorian-style conservatory that, after about 50 years, wasn't safe anymore and was replaced by the Domes.

Now, about 50 years into the life of the Domes, we're facing similar issues. It is time for us as a community and county to have a conversation about the best way to invest in the next phase of the park. Because of the cultural significance of the Domes and the extensive, and likely expensive, investment that will be required, the community has a vital stake in this process. I am committed to an open, transparent and community-driven process as we move forward. Make no mistake, I don't see this as a challenge but rather an incredible opportunity. Let's give ourselves a chance to make the most of it.

I am proposing that the open and transparent process takes place with a community steering group that includes neighborhood organizations such as Journey House and Clarke Square Neighborhood Initiative, greater-Milwaukee groups such as Visit Milwaukee and NEWaukee, conservatory expertise from the Friends of the Domes, and other key regional stakeholders. This group will help with an extensive community engagement process that will create a vision for a facility that serves the needs of a broad spectrum of county residents and organizations, as well as create recommendations on how to proceed.

Some have tried to limit the discussion of "what's possible" to binary options — fix the current domes or tear them down — without a robust community discussion. Nothing can be further from the truth. While the county does have financial constraints and many competing priorities, this should only inform our imaginations, not limit them. As John Gurda said in his February column in the Journal Sentinel, "We could repair the complex, rebuild it or replace it with something as novel for its time as the Domes were for theirs."

The Mitchell Park Conservatory Domes have been an important and living part of Milwaukee's history for more than 50 years. Let's make sure the next generation has a conservatory that gains national recognition commensurate with the reputation of Milwaukee's park system and befits the legacy and history of the Domes and surrounding Mitchell Park.