

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE  
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

**DATE:** November 14, 2025

**TO:** Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Celia Benton, Director of Economic Development, Department of Administrative Services

**SUBJECT:** An informational report on Due Diligence Findings for 800 W. Wells street and Next Steps Towards Divestment

**REQUEST**

This report is for informational purposes only.

**POLICY**

Wis. Stat. §§ 59.17(2)(b)3

**RELATED FILES**

25-238: An informational report on due diligence underway at 800 W. Wells Street, current location of the Milwaukee Public Museum

25-586: From the Economic Development Director, Department of Administrative Services, providing an informational report on the preservation of the Milwaukee County Collection and the disposition process for surplus property during the Milwaukee Public Museum transition

22-454: Authorization to negotiate and enter into agreements and submit future resolutions for the issuance of not-to-exceed amount of Forty-Five Million Dollars in general obligation bonds or notes for the relocation of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

**BACKGROUND**

The Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) expects to finalize their move from 800 W. Wells Street in late 2027 or early 2028. Milwaukee County owns the land and buildings and will be fully responsible for them once MPM moves. Milwaukee County Economic Development is proactively conducting due diligence and envisioning for this site prepare for divestment of this once-in-a-generation opportunity in Downtown Milwaukee.

After issuing a Request for Proposals in 2024, Economic Development hired a consultant team of Graef, Bear Real Estate Group and CG Schmidt (consultant team) to help us understand future site opportunities within the framework of existing conditions, market capacity, the City of Milwaukee's Downtown Plan and Milwaukee County's strategic plan. Milwaukee County

Economic Development's goals for the process of determining a future for this site are to be proactive, transparent and visionary.

The scope of work of the consultant team included two major components: 1) Review of the site conditions and 2) Analyze future site scenarios based on the framework noted in the paragraph above.

### **Site Conditions**

The site is on the northwest corner of W. Wells Street and N. 7<sup>th</sup>/James Lovell Street. It publicly faces south along W. Wells Street. It is about 3.7 acres in area and has a challenging elevation slope. The site is zoned C9D9(A) which is intended to be a "civic activity district designed and intended to serve as a regional center for office, government, educational, cultural and recreational activities." There are four buildings on the site:

- The original museum building built in 1962-1962, comprising 417,449 square feet
- The MacArthur Square/Wizard Wing addition from 1965 (City-owned)
- The Discovery World Building built in 1994, comprising 44,440 square feet, and
- The Daniel M. Soref Theater (Dome Theater) and Atrium constructed in 1996, comprising 18,080 square feet

The original museum building is a concrete structure designed for public use. The MacArthur Square/Wizard Wing structure is connected to the northside of the museum building and is partially supported by the museum's pile caps and structure steel angles attached to museum wall support cast-in-place concrete slab edges at multiple levels. In addition to the buildings, the site includes a surface parking lot, a parking, loading and maintenance drive and landscaping.

The southern ramp to I-43 travels below the museum building and Wizard Wing structure. The ramp tunnels and buildings are structurally connected.

The consultant team-commissioned 2025 structural analysis reports that the main building is showing signs of deterioration consistent with water infiltration in various locations, primarily

at the roofs and basement. In addition, the report comments that extensive rehabilitation would be required to address non-structural deficiencies essential for occupancy change.

The 2025 structural analysis also notes the Wizard Wing shows signs of movement with cracking evident in non-structural finishes. It notes that the Discovery World and Dome Theater are in apparent good condition.

The consultant team also reviewed historical property activity to determine property boundaries and identify easements and other restrictions on the parcel. This is a foundational aspect of real estate due diligence and necessary to obtain comprehensive title insurance. The team also created an ALTA survey and reviewed two supplemental surveys. As a result of this research, fifty-three historical records were found, and the Chain of Title listings includes

- Lien (1)
- Deeds (14)
- Warranty Deeds (18)
- Quit Claim Deeds (4)
- Affidavits (2)
- Common Council Orders (1)
- Certified Resolutions (1)
- Declaration of Restrictions (1)
- Agreements (2)
- Ground lease, as amended and restructure (5)
- Easement (4)

Based on the summary of findings, Milwaukee County Economic Development does not anticipate any encumbrances would impact future options and is closely partnering with the City of Milwaukee's Department of City Development on any City-related agreements.

## **Cost Estimates**

The consultant team provided estimates related to future use options and noted the following:

- Mixed-use adaptive reuse is estimated to cost \$209 million
- Full redevelopment cost estimates range from \$216 to \$229 million
- Direct museum reuse costs are estimated at \$350 million
- Demolition of the site is estimated at \$12.5 to \$13.5 million

- Value of the land if it were vacant is estimated at \$7.4 to \$9 million
- The costs for the County to carry the building after the museum moves is estimated at \$1.9 million a year

The consultant team recommends the full demolition and redevelopment option because it would deliver higher density at a lower cost per unit versus adaptive reuse and allows for a greater tax base for the County.

### **Envisioning the Future: Site Use Development Recommendations from the Consultant Team**

The consultant team conducted a two-level screening process to consider future options for the site. In the first level, they performed a high-level screening of five option types, with only the option of full building removal and redevelopment surviving. After the high-level screening, adaptive reuse, museum reuse and partial adaptive reuse were removed three reasons. 1) the lack of a future market for a state use or purpose, 2) insurmountable issues with the existing site buildings, and 3) misalignment with County and City goals. As noted in the section above, the full redevelopment option also offers greater density at a lower cost and greater benefit to the County.

In the second level screening, the consultant team performed a land-use-based evaluation with criteria that included:

- 1) Market potential
- 2) Qualified Census Tract/Affordable Housing Score
- 3) Future Economic Value
- 4) Financing Considerations
- 5) Catalytic Potential
- 6) Alignment with the City of Milwaukee Downtown Plan\*

\*“Connect+ing MKE: Downtown Plan 2040” was approved by the Milwaukee Common Council on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023 to set a vision for the future of Downtown Milwaukee’s land use, urban design, and catalytic project recommendations. The “MacArthur Square & Library District” (including 800 W. Wells Street) was noted in the plan as a catalytic project, recommending that the museum site be redeveloped with high-density mixed-use development that includes affordable housing and neighborhood supporting commercial uses on the ground floor. The

Plan also notes to extend the street grid north of Wells Street to connect to MacArthur Square and support infill development of the surface parking lots.

Per their evaluation criteria, the site in its highest and best use has the potential to accommodate a mix of uses, including:

- Residential multi-family: Market rate (including senior housing)
- Residential multi-family: Affordable (including senior housing)
- Residential multi-family: Workforce (including senior housing)
- Student housing

The consultant team estimates that the market could bear up to 555 housing units at the site. Supplementary uses, including hospitality, medical, civic, retail, green space and commercial were noted for their potential to be integrated into a residential project. Costs from their scenarios range from \$216 to \$229 million and the scenarios assume phased development.

The three redevelopment examples provided by the consultant team (attached) aim to accommodate:

- A primary residential use, including market rate, affordable, workforce and student housing
- Provides activation opportunities along the street edge
- Connects visually and physically to MacArthur Square
- Does not prevent MacArthur Square redevelopment as envisioned by the City of Milwaukee Downtown Plan

All examples organize the site into two independent parcels integrated through a common infrastructure of public access.

### **Milwaukee County Economic Development Next Steps**

In the months ahead, Milwaukee County Economic Development will focus on sharing the information found in this report with stakeholders around the community, including nearby institutions, local developers, neighborhood associations and more.

In mid-2026, Milwaukee County Economic Development intends issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) for acquisition of the site. The RFP will include research from the consultant team to

support developer due diligence. The RFP will also include the future use examples from the consultant team as supplemental information but not a proposal requirement for submission. The RFP Submissions will be reviewed every three months until a project is chosen for an option agreement.

In the interim, Milwaukee County Economic Development will continue to support MPM's moving efforts and will seek to mitigate the risks associated with County ownership until a new owner is confirmed.

As we advance toward releasing an RFP in mid-2026 and ultimately identifying a qualified development partner, Milwaukee County Economic Development's priority is to safeguard the asset, support MPM's relocation, and position the site for a productive new chapter of community value.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

This report is for informational purposes.

### **ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN**

2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered

3B: Enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability

### **FISCAL EFFECT**

N/A

### **VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES**

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### **PREPARED BY:**

*Celia Benton*

Celia Benton, Director of Economic Development, Department of Administrative Services

**ATTACHMENTS:**

800 West Wells Street Site Analysis Report

Exhibit A-1: Project Site Location

Exhibit A-2: Land Use and Ownership

Exhibit A-3: Zoning

Exhibit A-4: Site Characteristics

Exhibit B-1: ALTA Survey Map

Exhibit C-1: Summary of Title Search Report

Exhibit D-1: Structural Overview and Condition Assessment

Exhibit D-2: Structural Overview Exhibit

Exhibit E-1: Site Costs and Constructability Considerations

Exhibit F-1: Evaluation Matrix

[MilwaukeeDowntownPlan-FINAL-web.pdf](#)

cc:

David Crowley, County Executive

MaryJo Meyers, Chief of Staff, Office of the County Executive

Aaron Hertzberg, Executive Director of the Department of Administrative Services

Liz Sumner, Comptroller

Members of the Committee on Community, Environment and Economic Development

Members of the Committee on Parks and Culture

Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board of Supervisors

Allyson Smith, Committee Coordinator

Clarence Kinnard, Committee Coordinator

Steve Cady, Director of Research and Policy