

Envisioning the Future of Milwaukee County Senior Centers

CONTEXT

The **Select Committee on Senior Centers** has been charged to explore the future of the 5 MKE County Senior Centers and to imagine what a 21st Century version of a “senior center” might be. Initially the focus was on the brick-and-mortar aspects of potential new models such as building typology, size and location. In doing so members of the Select Committee have toured the existing 5 buildings, have inventoried their usage patterns and have become familiar with how they work together as a network serving very diverse populations.

However, due to a unique convergence of factors currently taking place, the Select Committee has intentionally widened its focus to consider a variety of intangibles that will surely shape the outcome of this effort.

The Select Committee is conscious of the fact that **we are in a distinctly different social construct** then we were during the period when the current Seniors Centers were conceived and developed. Newer generations of users, the Boomer Generation in particular, are actively participating in the use of these buildings. In 2025 the first wave of Gen-Xers will turn 60. Together these groups will comprise a diverse collection of mature Milwaukee County residents who will have the power to change the way that aging takes place. Together they can embrace the opportunity to reshape their lives, connect with and help one another and change the world for the better – all while learning, growing and having fun! It is doubtful that the five current Senior Centers will be able to meet the high expectations of these new users.

In addition, the Select Committee is keenly aware of the fact that **the pandemic has permanently changed the way that we will interact with each other in both large- and small-scale social and service settings**. As a society we have quickly become familiar and, to a surprising degree, comfortable with events that are either partially or fully “virtual”. What remains unanswered is what the consequences of this trend will have for older adults, especially those who are not yet comfortable, nor have easy access to the technology needed to access these virtual environments. For them to combat loneliness and isolation, gathering in congregate settings is vital to their wellbeing. Yet at the same time the aging process leaves them highly vulnerable to infectious diseases in group settings. Finding the correct balance here will be a critical consideration for the future of Senior Centers in Milwaukee County.

An enlightened vision for the future of senior centers in Milwaukee County will need to be responsive to current usage patterns, the expectations of future generations and the lessons learned during an unprecedented national pandemic. It must also be responsive to the local Aging Network Goals.

AGING NETWORK GOALS 2022-2024

In twenty years, the composition of the Milwaukee County population will be enriched by a greater number of older adults across a wide range of generations, perspectives and experience. These older adults will enjoy broad knowledge of services, supports and opportunities that easily connect them with their peers, are easy to access and are coordinated among many different provider groups.

In order to facilitate these Aging Network Goals, a re-imagined presence needs to be explored and envisioned. This “presence” can potentially take on several different forms both physical and virtual.

However, before discussions begin about specific solutions it's necessary to first **imagine a series of experiences** which either individually, or taken as a whole, will enrich the quality of life and participation for all those who come to enjoy them. Think of these statements as a **list of attributes**. These attributes, in turn, can be used to evaluate how well the existing Senior Centers align when considering renovation strategies. They can also be used as the basis for the design and programming of any new Senior Center environments that may evolve from this envisioning process.

21st CENTURY ATTRIBUTES

YOU HAVE ARRIVED

Imagine a **covered canopy** to provide protection from the elements for auto or bus drop-offs and pickups for individuals or group events. Imagine an exciting and energizing **Welcome Center** that clearly indicates the full range of services, programs and activities contained within. Whether you're a regular or a first-time user you will experience **a feeling of welcome, glad you can be here, please join us!**

A SENSE OF PLACE

Imagine an easily navigable **Main Street** that provides clear and convenient access to the wide variety of opportunities that will be available. It might also provide **cozy little nooks** to just sit and watch the world go by.

EASY SOCIALIZATION

Imagine inviting **gathering areas at various scales** located both indoors and outdoors that are designed to allow conversation and camaraderie. Some might be the scale of a residential living room and others might be much larger and available to rent for a banquet. All will be fully accessible with **convenient access to refreshments** to keep you hydrated and keep the conversation flowing. And of course, there will be adequate restrooms within easy reach for all.

LET'S EAT

Imagine **attractive dining venues** that are the antithesis of current cafeteria-like settings. Some might be designed to create a **coffee shop atmosphere** while others might be more like a **café** or a **grab-and-go** and developed in partnership with local ethnic food providers. Or perhaps there will be an intentional outdoor space to allow regular visits by **local food trucks**. There might even be a **drive-up window** to accommodate those looking for a quick convenience. How about a **demonstration cooking kitchen** to foster the importance of good nutrition and long-term health?

KEEP FIT

Imagine a **Fitness Center** modeled after popular health clubs. Imagine spaces designed for state-of-the-art exercise equipment along with studio areas for aerobics, tai chi, yoga, dance and other activities. Perhaps partnering with local fitness providers will allow space for massage and other soothing therapies along with rooms for fitness counseling. And of course, refreshments will be readily accessible.

STAY WELL

Imagine a **Wellness Clinic** created in partnership with a health care provider that will have spaces for simple exams, screening events, vaccinations and counseling for routine health concerns. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments where programs that promote awareness of one's body and an understanding of the relationship between sound nutrition and good health can be presented.

EASY ACCESS TO THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Imagine a **Senior Services Support Center** designed specifically to help users and visitors navigate the complex web of senior oriented services available to MKE County residents. Imagine a series of casual gathering areas and counseling offices designed to assist seniors as they transition to the need for more assistance and for **care giver support groups** who now require more complex support systems for their frailer loved ones. Imagine **activities that can both feed your soul and provide spiritual support** when needed. Imagine the opportunity to create base locations for various **Senior Advocacy Groups** to meet, organize and strategize as they seek ways to support and advocate for best outcomes for all concerned.

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW

Imagine **Lifelong Learning Settings** created in partnership with local higher learning institutions. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments as well as spaces for larger lectures that could become a home for regular classes during the day and early evening as well. This component would also serve as a launch point for a wide variety of tours to events, nature walks and other cultural activities.

EMBRACE HYBRID GATHERING STRATEGIES

Imagine **Hybrid Solutions** that allow the flexibility to do things together in the same space AND/OR to participate virtually. Imagine environments that enable older adults and people of all ages to come together and **find ways to learn, work, create and by harnessing all the technological tools** available in today's digital age.

LET'S MAKE SOMETHING

Imagine a well-planned **Creativity Center** with ample studio spaces and storage areas to support a full range of creative activities. Imagine spaces properly designed to facilitate word-working, weaving, lapidary projects, art, stained glass, sculpture, sewing, photography, video production, creative writing and other endeavors. Imagine **Gift Shops** and **Galleries** where these creations can be proudly displayed and marketed.

GET TECH SAVVY

Imagine a **Tech Center** with up-to-date devices in a learning environment that will allow you to stay ahead of rapid technology change. Imagine managing the social media messaging that will become a vital component of what will make each location great.

KICK BACK AND HAVE SOME FUN

Imagine taking part in thoughtfully programmed **Recreational Activities** with friends both old and new. Imagine inviting spaces to play cards or board games, shoot pool, play shuffleboard, watch sports games

on TV, participate in a variety of performances, enjoy some movies, dance and sing or just relive great moments from back in the day. Imagine a space to sponsor a cultural event or host a banquet. Imagine a place where you don't have to be serious and productive all the time.

CREATE A 7AM TO 10PM CULTURE

Imagine **well-coordinated programming and partnerships** created to maximize use through the day and evening to ensure the facility is cost-effective and used to capacity. Imagine increasing the visibility of senior programming, creating opportunities for intergenerational programming and building larger community support.

THINK BIG AND THINK SMALL SIMULTANEOUSLY

Imagine renovations to the larger existing locations to keep them in alignment with the desired Attributes **AND AT THE SAME TIME** Imagine smaller centers strategically located and scaled to align with the unique cultural nuances of Milwaukee County's diverse population.

CREATE AN APPROPRIATE BRAND NAME

If the goal is to create a place where Mature Milwaukeeans (note the lack of the use of words like senior or elderly in the future) can gather to live fully engaged lives, then advocate for the development of a series of **MKE HUBS**. A hub, per the Oxford Dictionary, is "the effective center of an activity, region or network". Imagine a place where the **full network of regional Senior Services** is readily accessible.

VISION STATEMENT

Imagine innovative and vibrant environments programmed and designed to encourage a holistic approach to an engaged life.

Imagine spaces, activities and experiences created to support the vital and active lifestyles of new and existing generations of mature Milwaukee County residents.

IMAGINE THE MKE HUBS!

MOVING FORWARD

Across Milwaukee County and the nation, we are experiencing unprecedented growth in the percentage of our older population. At the same time, we have created an age-segregated society where older and younger people rarely socialize, collaborate or create together.

To bridge this gap, we need to update and modernize our public policies, social practices and time-honored programs for this rapidly increasing older population so that all will benefit from a re-envisioned notion of community-based support and enrichment.

A conscious strategy to implement the development of the MKE HUBS will be an intentional step in that direction.