



Fair play vs. corporate welfare in Milwaukee

By Jamakaya
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Amid the fall political campaigns, a dynamic grassroots movement for justice in Milwaukee made headlines, reminding us that change does not necessarily come from politicians but from people working together in their communities.

The organization Common Ground is providing much-needed pushback to the steam-rolling effort by business leaders to get hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars to build a new arena for the Milwaukee Bucks. The BMO Harris Bradley Center is just 25 years old but is said to lack the latest technology and luxury boxes necessary to make a sufficient profit and satisfy the NBA.

Wall Street titans Marc Lasry and Wes Edens recently bought the Bucks for \$550 million. The NBA laid down an ultimatum for a new arena to be built in Milwaukee by 2017, and Lasry and Edens offered to kick in \$100 million. Former Bucks owner Herb Kohl said he'd throw in another \$100 million. It's the remaining \$200 or \$300 million that taxpayers might be asked to contribute.

In the midst of an aggressive campaign to woo support for this latest corporate welfare scheme, Common Ground made waves with its own proposal, "Fair Play: A Campaign to Foster Greatness in Public Spaces."

The basis of "Fair Play" is a devastating report about the crumbling, hazardous conditions of parks and recreation facilities in Milwaukee County and a detailed proposal for revitalizing them. That report, "Envisioning Fair Play," is available at www.fairplaywi.org. Read it and weep. It dramatizes through quantitative data and photographic evidence the disgraceful neglect of Milwaukee's public spaces.

In the report, architectural and landscaping plans show how improvements can be made at different sites, with startling cost comparisons. The new Bucks arena will have 18,000 seats at a cost of \$27,777 per seat. Comprehensive improvements at Vincent High School will cost the equivalent of just 320 Bucks seats. Lincoln Park's makeover can be done for only 221 Bucks seats.

Common Ground demands that if hundreds of millions of public dollars are spent to subsidize the privately owned Bucks, at least \$150 million must be allocated to repair Milwaukee's parks and recreation facilities. If you agree, tell your alderman or county supervisor ASAP.

It's infuriating how politicians continually privilege private interests with tax breaks and subsidies while ignoring neighborhoods and public spaces — the places where most of us actually live. When owners can slap down a half billion dollars for a team at the same time that team members are paid millions annually and game tickets are unaffordable for half the people in the city, why should the public be expected to pay up?

But what about the economic impact?!

Most studies of publicly funded sports venues — including those by the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heartland Institute — reveal exaggerated impact projections and little or no economic boosts for local economies.

But Milwaukee's image!

What kind of blinders must people be wearing to worship the image of a luxury, high-tech playpen while streets, housing, schools and parks decay around them?

I applaud Common Ground, a coalition of groups that is doing focused, effective work on public funding for rehabbing foreclosed properties and establishing the Common Ground Health Cooperative, an affordable insurance option.