

October 29, 2014

Members of the City Council of Des Moines

Dear Members:

Few cities ever have the chance that post-flood Des Moines had to “re-invent” itself starting in the 1990s and continuing into today. Community leaders came together with a vision to create a downtown that was not only attractive to business, but also attractive to professionals and others interested in city living. The result was a variety of new housing options—from loft apartments to brownstone-style townhomes—as well as a flourishing independent restaurant and entertainment scene.

For more than 20 years, civic, business and community leaders have held the course—creating a true personality for Des Moines. From the Western Gateway to East Village to Court Avenue—we have seen a literal rebirth of the downtown and the solidification of districts—each helping create a unique “vibe” for our city. This steadfast commitment to making downtown Des Moines a place people want to live, work and play is the envy of other Midwest cities aspiring to reinvent themselves. We have all taken the calls, consulted with their leaders and offered advice to other communities trying to replicate our success.

That is why the decision to place a retail grocery store—even one as fantastic as Hy-Vee—in the middle of a thriving downtown entertainment district boggles the mind. As a community, we have taken so few missteps on this road to rejuvenation, it is hard to believe that this is where we will fall off the rails.

As business owners and leaders are we opposed to a downtown grocery store? Absolutely not. Are we opposed to Hy-Vee? Again, absolutely not. But we are opposed to placing a giant retail store—any giant retail store—dead center in the middle of our entertainment district. We are opposed to making parking even more of a challenge. And most importantly, we are opposed to giving over the trendy, youthful and “center of the city” vibe of our entertainment district to any mega retail establishment.

With the influx housing, everyone understands that proximity to a quality supermarket is important. Downtown has cried out for it. But why next to cultural attractions like the Science Center? Who wants a mammoth chain food store be the first thing those coming to the Des Moines Farmer’s Market encounter? Why must it loom over and dominate a street once defined by one-of-a-kind independent restaurants and bars? The moment we relinquish the look and feel of our downtown to a retail giant best known for its giant brightly-lit parking lots and 24 hour oversized red signs across suburban housing areas is the moment we’ve given up that which we strived for in the first place.

Further exacerbating the affront to the independent businesses in the entertainment district is the fact that the city has concurrently eliminated the requirement that the Knapp project include a 250 stall public parking garage—one of the few initial pieces of the plan that could have encouraged rather than deterred those heading downtown.

The city has instead recommended that the parking garage located between Court Avenue and Walnut be taken down—but there is no immediate plan to rebuild the garage. The redevelopment could be years away. No plans have been drawn. No bids for the redevelopment have been taken.

As our elected representatives and advocates, the council can no longer stand by and look at these two items separately. This planned demolition and the HyVee development are not across town from each other. Their impact must be looked at together.

These two parking-related changes in tandem with the introduction of a big box grocery retailer into what is currently one of the city's trendiest districts will be Court Avenue's dismantling. We recommend the city put the brakes on the Knapp/HyVee project and refocus its efforts on the development of a parking garage. Once the garage is near completion it can restart the development of the South 4<sup>th</sup> Street block on Court Avenue.

Again, we are not opposed to Hy-Vee, many of us live downtown and are thrilled to have access to such a store. But why not rethink this and look closer at locations on MLK Parkway where there are vast spaces waiting for rebirths of their own? It is no less convenient, but significantly more attune with the vision and direction we have ALL worked so hard to make a reality in the Court Avenue District and beyond.

Please reconsider this plan. As dramatic as it might sound, the decimation of our parking structure combined with the addition of a giant retail store is a stab wound in the heart of one of the most critical parts of what we've all worked so hard to create in the heart of downtown Des Moines.

Thank you for your thoughtful review of this plan. Scott Carlson with Court Avenue Restaurant & Brewing Company is available to answer any questions ([scarlson@courtavebrew.com](mailto:scarlson@courtavebrew.com) or 515-282-2739)

Respectfully,

Jimmy Owens

Secretary

Court District Association