

Common Council Caucus Presentation - Utica Master Plan 01/05/11 6:00 PM
by Frank Montecalvo

Thank you Mrs. Arcuri for inviting me to make a presentation to the Common Council on the Utica Master Plan. I felt honored when the Mayor appointed me to serve on the UMP Steering Committee, as well as when my colleagues tapped me to lead the Infrastructure and Water Front Development Subcommittee and, temporarily, the Business and Technology Subcommittee. Tonight, however, I am speaking as a member of the public who has thoroughly reviewed the document, rather than as a subcommittee chair.

The Mayor took a hands-off approach and trusted the Steering Committee to construct a neighborhood-based comprehensive plan that would provide a new vision of the future for Utica. We have not lived up to that trust. I am not here to discuss the specific recommendations of my subcommittee because you have scheduled a separate session for that purpose. My concerns are broader, and I wanted to bring them to your attention as soon as possible before you proceed further with **a fundamentally flawed document -- a document that, unless corrected, will continue the decline of both Utica and the Region.** The flaws can be grouped into four themes.

I. The “Living Document” Problem.

Utica at its peak was the product of generations of private efforts and risk-taking. Utica’s past master plans could be picked up and understood by anyone, including the city officials who implemented the plans, and the risk-takers and entrepreneurs who made the city grow. Existing and proposed scenarios could be compared. Private risk-taking and investment were encouraged because the older plans guided human activities, reduced conflicts, made the future predictable and expedited official decision making. This Master Plan fails those functions.

Although the Plan is supposed to be “Neighborhood-Based,” you cannot go through it and tell exactly what changes are proposed for each city neighborhood. You cannot go into the plan and understand, for example, what is planned for the neighborhoods around the Bosert site or the former Washington Courts site. If you had a proposal for these places, you could not tell if neighboring changes would reinforce your proposal or undermine it. Thus, the Plan will fail to inspire the private sector to take a risk on investing in those locations. The Plan is a list of goals and intentions, but how many would place a bet on a goal or intention? Why should the Plan require you to hold two months of meetings to be understood? The Plan needs to speak for itself and be made definite.

The plan tries to make up for its abstractness with process. This is where the “living document” idea comes in. Essentially, the Plan will constantly be a work-in-progress with constantly changing meanings. I counted at least 17 different citizens groups or committees written in as requirements to interpret and implement the Plan’s jargon. No master plan worth having should rely on committees to be carried out. City Hall has professional staff. The plan creates an entire new level of bureaucracy for people to deal with, one that is not accountable to the voters

nor to an elected administration through an employer-employee relationship. The committees would ultimately feed into the “UMP Partnership Advisory Board Executive Committee.” The Plan strategically sandwiches the unelected, unaccountable Executive Committee between the elected Executive Branch (Mayor) and Common Council, becoming a filter for all proposals that would come before either. The committee structure will become a shadow government serving private interests. It will create more hoops for the private sector to jump through, introduce more uncertainty, and introduce unaccountability. Investors will simply go to the suburbs, where they will have more control. The committee structure must go.

II. “Intrusive Government Control.”

Proper government regulation can eliminate conflicts, thereby leveraging private efforts to more productive results. But as architect Mies Van der Rohe once said, “Less is More.” The Utica Master Plan needs to focus on ensuring that essential municipal services are delivered in a cost-efficient manner. It should not try to guess or substitute its opinion for the marketplace, because that places taxpayer dollars at risk. It should not take on the responsibilities of private businesses or individuals because that makes the government a *competitor* of those *not* taking from the government. This will discourage private investment, violate Article VIII of the State Constitution, and foster dependency on the taxpayers. It should not try to remake society, because that infringes on freedom. The Master Plan fails on all these counts.

While educating first time home buyers, instructing people in the “slow food movement,” training people to serve in the tourism industry, and developing a “restaurant row” may be nice things, they are appropriately *matters of personal or business responsibility and not the responsibility of the taxpayers* of Utica. People should not have to be given grants to bring their properties into compliance with codes.

The Affordable Housing proposals are particularly objectionable. The need is questionable because every national ranking of Utica gives Utica high marks for the affordability of its housing. (If Utica needs housing, it’s Upscale housing that will bring in tax revenue, while minimizing demand for services.) Requiring developers to set aside 20% of their units for Affordable Housing imposes a burden on developers. If the market is there, it *will* be done. If it is not there, it *should not* be done.

Using Affordable Housing to achieve a “Mixed Income Model” in every neighborhood is, bluntly, Social Engineering. Utica should have learned from its last social engineering experiment, forced busing, that it does not work. The benefits from forced busing are hard to see, but the harm it caused is obvious. Utica lost its greatest advantage over its suburban competitors, specifically, its neighborhood school system. Parental involvement and student behavior suffered, time was wasted on buses, and the buses clogged traffic. It drove people to pull up stakes and move to New Hartford. How did that help Utica? Fewer people in Utica meant higher school *and city* taxes for those who stayed behind. UMP’s requiring all neighborhoods to meet a “mixed income model” will produce the same result. People will go elsewhere to avoid social engineering.

III. Failure to Recognize Sprawl and Its Causes as a Major Economic Development Problem

While sprawl is usually regarded as an environmental issue, it is a major economic development problem because it contributes to the high levels of taxes and fees that drive businesses away. Rolf Pendall in his 2002 paper "Sprawl Without Growth" documented a 47% increase in urbanized acreage in Central NY between 1982 and 1997, while populations declined. You know from your own observations that Utica's emptying of people, businesses, and economic activity into its suburbs has continued since. You do not need a degree in Urban Planning to figure out that a population that spreads itself over double the area must pay more to supply itself with municipal services. Fewer people left behind in Utica must be taxed more to maintain services. Adding activities to New Hartford adds a demand for services and more taxation there. Sprawl is a lose-lose proposition for most people -- although suburban developers and civil servants might benefit. Pendall attributed sprawl to state and *local* policies and called it unsustainable. Our local sprawl has helped to make Oneida County the 19th highest taxed county in the nation, when property taxes are computed as a percent of property value (Tax Foundation).

The Utica Master Plan totally ignores sprawl and the local and regional decisions that contributed to it, dooming the region to repeat the same mistakes. Forced busing was one mistake. Utica Schools joining BOCES and putting Utica students on buses for vocational training in New Hartford was another.

Regionalization of both water and sewer systems were others. Population density and distribution are key in determining the affordability of municipal services. As the regional population center, services can be efficiently delivered to Utica residents. Serving suburban customers with water and sewer, however, is more costly because they are at greater distances and are spaced further apart. Regionalization of these systems coupled with the imposition of *uniform* rate structures mean that Utica residents are subsidizing their suburban competitors. That encourages sprawl.

When the arterial system was installed hundreds of tax paying properties were taken in Utica, countless others were starved of traffic with pattern changes, and neighborhoods lost a "critical mass" of activities to sustain themselves. Because Utica was at full build-out, most of these people relocated to the suburbs. That caused sprawl.

Oneida County's PILOTS, tax-breaks, and taxpayer-financed infrastructure improvements for suburban green-field developments; and allowing new developments to illegally hook up sewer lines to a combined sewer overflow in Yorkville; have all caused sprawl. Perhaps it is significant that some of the same consultants now dealing with these issues for the County are also involved with drafting the UMP. Is that why sprawl gets ignored?

The Utica Master Plan's suggestion to regionalize more services, its failure to address the impacts of more property takings for the Arterial, and its failure to discuss harmful Oneida County policies make clear that the problem of sprawl has yet to be grasped by the powers-that-be. Not addressing sprawl also suggests that the environmental review of the Master Plan has been inadequate.

IV. Failure to recognize that Utica's population base carries the region

The suburbs could not have grown to their current size without the Utica population base making their water and sewer services affordable. Although New Hartford has overtaken Utica as the regional retail hub, this would not have been possible without the population base in Utica to supply shoppers and employees. Although the suburbs do not depend on Utica city government, they DO depend on the population base that lives here. That Utica population base can no longer afford to be put upon to serve "regional" needs.

Why are you hearing about this from someone who lives in the suburbs? Because I understand that if Utica declines, the entire Greater Utica area goes down with it -- because the rest of the region depends upon the population base located at the urban core. **I cannot hope to convince my suburban colleagues of this reality, until Utica leaders get it first.**

The Master Plan should be the resource that people turn to to be educated in this regard, but the draft is totally oblivious to this dependency. This deprives Utica leaders and representatives on various local and regional boards of the knowledge they will need to properly advocate for the well being of residents and businesses located within the City of Utica. Their inability to do so places both Utica and the entire region at risk.

In conclusion, I note that the consultants gave the various subcommittees no opportunity to discuss each other's work and the overall impact of this very complex document. Thus, the Steering Committee has not addressed the issues I raise tonight. Please send the draft Master Plan back to the Steering Committee and request that the flaws I have identified be corrected.

Thank you for your attention.