

September 27, 2024

Milwaukee County Supervisors,

It has come to our attention that on September 12, each of you received an email from Scott Bush and Scott Johnson on behalf of a small advocacy group called PreserveMKE. This email contained many claims, and although you all as Milwaukee County Supervisors are already knowledgeable about the Future Museum project, we thought it would be helpful to reiterate some key points in response to their letter. Given MPM's long history in this community, there has been tremendous interest and public discourse about the Future Museum, and with that comes a certain level of misunderstanding and misinformation. I have taken excerpts from the PreserveMKE letter in italics and added clarifying information following each excerpt.

We represent a local nonprofit group, (PreserveMKE.org) working to preserve our Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) and keep its beloved exhibits, including "The Streets of Old Milwaukee," "The European Village," "The Buffalo Hunt" and "The Native Pow Wow." Our group started with about 15 concerned citizens two years ago. Today, our numbers have grown to more than 9,000!

- PreserveMKE seeks to preserve their favorite exhibits. While we appreciate their passion for the current museum—a passion we also share—our responsibility to the community is to preserve and protect the collections owned and entrusted to us by Milwaukee County. The **collections** are the cornerstone of exhibits; these are the invaluable and irreplaceable items that, when studied, give us a record of our world's natural and cultural wonders throughout time. These items are interpreted through **exhibits** to educate and spark curiosity within museum visitors. Because of the deteriorating condition of the building, the collections are at risk. In fact, collections items on exhibit and in storage have been negatively impacted and sometimes damaged due to the building's condition, including by water damage from leaks and the difficulty of regulating humidity in a building constructed without insulation and moisture barrier. It is the **collections**, not the exhibits, that we must focus on saving. The Future Museum will provide an appropriate environment for preserving these priceless collections, and many of them will be exhibited in new and creative ways to provide exciting educational opportunities for future generations.
- While we know change is difficult, and many people have a special attachment to the current exhibits, this is not the case for everyone. Through the many focus groups and surveys that have been conducted over the years, we heard repeatedly that people feel MPM's exhibits have remained stagnant for too long, impacting people's desire to visit the museum. In fact, a recent independent "Survey of Museum Goers" conducted

nationally by Wilkening Consultants showed that MPM visitors are “much more likely than average to suggest that the MPM could improve by *making exhibits more engaging or meaningful, changing exhibits more often.*”

- Several of the exhibits—built in the 1960s and 1970s—have not kept current with scientific research and lack cultural competency. Visitors expect and deserve accurate information and representation from the museum they trust. A new facility provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the community to re-envision the Museum and its exhibits while also staying true to MPM’s roots and innovative diorama exhibit style.

The public and elected officials did not receive a clear message about the fate of the MPM.

- We want to state emphatically that this is simply not true.
- Milwaukee County and Milwaukee Public Museum, Inc. have been working in close partnership since 1992 when MPM and the County agreed that the best course forward was for MPM to become a non-profit entity to operate the museum in the County-owned building while also caring for the County-owned collections. Per our Lease and Management Agreement, Museum leaders appear before the County in quarterly committee meetings to report on museum finances and operations. Museum leaders also meet with individual supervisors regularly. In addition, the County has nine appointees on the Museum board of directors, which includes Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Marcelia Nicholson. Not only are County elected officials aware of the museum’s fate, but you have been supportive partners as we collectively plan for how to ensure this cultural institution is viable for future generations, voting to provide \$45 million in bonded funding toward the Future Museum project. As part of that process, the County Board of Supervisors allowed the public to attend the meeting and share commentary.
- The Museum’s intention to relocate was first publicly reported in 2017 and has been covered extensively since. In addition to regular media coverage making the public aware of plans for a new museum, MPM leaders spent years connecting with thousands of people through presentations, focus groups, town halls and surveys. These numerous touchpoints have guided all aspects of the future museum project, including our intentional approach to redesigning exhibits for the Future Museum.

We’ve obtained copies of all the maintenance and repair reports that have been completed in the MPM. We would like to see an independent inspection of the building to assess its condition and shared with the Milwaukee County Board and its residents.

- PreserveMKE has in its possession a 17-page draft building assessment that took place over two days from 2020 that was never published. As a reminder, this building is

450,000 square feet. The draft was not comprehensive, as it did not account for numerous building systems, including the substructure and superstructure. What MPM and Milwaukee County are using as the basis for conversations about deferred maintenance and the building condition is a 718-page report from 2015, resulting from a two-month assessment of the building by the Milwaukee County Department of Administrative Services, Facilities Management Division, Facility Condition Assessment Program team and third-party consultants Thunderbird Engineering and Faith Technologies, Inc. This report, and its summary document published in 2018, detail nearly \$100 million in capital and maintenance needs. Keep in mind that \$100 million number is in 2015 dollars and is much higher in 2024 dollars.

- The building's condition continues to deteriorate and the costs to maintain it have risen dramatically over the past decade. In 2021, the American Alliance of Museum's (AAM) Accreditation Commission wrote in a letter to MPM, "the building, suffering from years of structural neglect and deferred maintenance, is utterly inadequate to meet even the most minimal standards of care for the collections." AAM tabled MPM's re-accreditation decision until we could demonstrate meaningful progress toward a new museum building. If MPM remained in its current building, it would have become the first institution of its size and prominence to lose accreditation, which would have impacted the museum's ability to host traveling exhibits and receive research grants, and most importantly, called into question the museum's ability to care for and preserve Milwaukee County's collections.

We are concerned because the building, exhibits, and collections are mostly public property. The MPM has hundreds of murals, painted by notable artists along with exhibits built by skilled artisans with the highest quality of craftsmanship. These dioramas are recognized for their historic significance by museums around the world. All of these will be tragically lost forever.

- MPM has had a history of innovation, starting with Carl Ackley who created the very first "group setting." This is now called a diorama and has also come to be called the Milwaukee Style. We continued that innovation through the years, creating immersive walk-through environments. The best way to honor those past innovators is to continue to innovate and share the next innovative iteration of exhibits.
- Museums are meant to change. In fact, MPM has created exhibits and replaced them over the years to share new stories and knowledge using the County's vast collections. MPM is currently in its third home, and with each move, the Museum has continued to change and innovate. This next move will build upon this tradition. Just as is the case with the current museum, the new museum will feature the "Milwaukee Style" of exhibits that are both immersive—with built environments that transport visitors to different times and places—and interactive, with a focus on the interpretation of

collections items. However, with the new museum comes an opportunity to design exhibits in a way that allows for the collections items on display to be regularly rotated so visitors can see more of what is in the County-owned collections. In addition, the new museum will include more fun “Easter eggs,” like the famous snake button. Through feedback, we learned that current museum visitors wished they could walk inside of the buildings in the *Streets of Old Milwaukee* exhibit, which is why its spiritual successor exhibit gallery, *Milwaukee Revealed*, will have several buildings visitors can enter. In short, visitors to the Future Museum will recognize many objects from the current museum and have a general sense of familiarity, yet they will be inspired in new ways and walk away with knowledge gained.

- In some cases, elements of current exhibits will not be carried forward at the request of individuals and their families featured in current exhibits. For example, some of the models for the figures in the *Pow Wow* exhibit have passed away, and their family members do not wish for the figure of their loved one to be on display in the new museum. We will respect their wishes. In addition, MPM’s Manager of Tribal Relations is working closely with the *Pow Wow* models and their families to determine what will happen with each figure, whether that is to be on display in another museum or cultural center or retired to a more private setting. In some exhibits, the scenes and props that hold the collection items are also beloved (e.g., a scene painted on a wall), but our focus is on creating a new environment in which to tell the stories of each collection item. If you follow the journey of MPM’s African elephant, Timba, which has been part of the collections since 1911, you’d see it has been displayed in more than one of the museum’s buildings, and the background and props used in conjunction with the displays have changed several times. We are excited to bring Timba to the Future Museum where, in its third museum home, it will once again captivate visitors, albeit with a new background and props to support a new storyline.
- The fate of the murals in the museum has yet to be determined. Each one is unique. Some span 100 feet or more; some were painted directly onto plaster. A few were previously damaged from building leaks. The museum will work directly with Milwaukee County on a plan for the murals as we get closer to vacating the current building.
- I want to underscore that while not all exhibits will transition to the new museum in their entirety, **the more than 4 million objects and specimens in the County-owned collections will be preserved** and appropriately housed in the Future Museum or offsite storage facilities.

The building was designed by renowned Milwaukee architects Eschweiler and Eschweiler, which may qualify for historic significance and designation.

- The current museum building was designed by architecture firm Eschweiler, Eschweiler and Sieloff 22 years after famed Milwaukee architect Alexander Eschweiler died. The original building design was later modified, including moving the entrance to allow for the addition of the butterfly vivarium. Another addition was added to include the planetarium and the now-vacant Discovery World Museum space. These significant changes to the original design preclude the building from being a candidate for historical significance.
- The City of Milwaukee’s [Connecting MKE Downtown Plan 2040](#) outlines a new vision for the property where the current building sits. Denoted as a “Catalytic Project,” the site is envisioned as a major redevelopment opportunity that may include mixed-income housing, neighborhood supporting commercial uses and connected streets and open access to a future redeveloped MacArthur Square. The Downtown Plan included a significant public input process and was adopted by the City of Milwaukee on July 31, 2023. [MilwaukeeDowntownPlan-ExecutiveSummary-FINAL-web.pdf](#)

MPM Inc. seeks to privately buy and own the new site of the “Wisconsin Natural Museum” with state and county grants that total more than 85 million taxpayer dollars. This is without equity or oversight by the public. That kind of public investment should come with public say and oversight.

- Facing the challenges of a failing building and the threat of losing accreditation, MPM leadership explored many ways to sustain this museum for future generations. First, we explored the costs of repairing the current building, which exceeded Milwaukee County’s financial capabilities. Next, we worked with a third-party consultant to determine if private funding could cover the costs of repairs. We learned that donors had little to no interest in contributing to a failing, government-owned building. We also learned that a public-private partnership was a real possibility. Under this partnership, Milwaukee Public Museum would continue to care for the County-owned collections, but by assuming ownership of a new building, the museum would assume responsibility for all future building maintenance, thereby reducing the County’s long-term financial responsibility. Despite the museum owning the new building, its agreement with Milwaukee County includes several measures that enable County oversight. The County will still appoint directors to the museum board. The museum will still provide regular reports to the County, and the County has oversight of decisions made regarding the collections.
- Public funding decisions about the Future Museum project were made by officials elected by the public, including the Milwaukee County Board. As noted earlier, the public had many opportunities to ask questions and provide comments through in-

person and virtual presentations, town halls, surveys and focus groups since the prospect of a new museum building was first publicized in 2017.

Since 1882, Milwaukeeans have been able to enjoy this museum in its three different locations, making lasting memories with their families and classmates. We feel the deep responsibility of building upon the museum's rich history in its fourth home. Through the Future Museum project, Milwaukee will be gaining an iconic building, inspired by Wisconsin's unique geologic history and Milwaukee's history as a gathering place, along with engaging and immersive exhibits that build upon MPM's legacy of innovation. While change is difficult for some people, especially when nostalgia is involved, public excitement for the Future Museum continues to grow as new details of the building and the exhibits emerge. We look forward to sharing the latest in project updates as construction ramps up.

If you have any questions and would like to discuss them further, please feel free to reach out to me or Aaron Hertzberg. We encourage you to reach out to us as questions arise, as we are committed to transparent and honest communication, and unfortunately there is a significant amount of misinformation being spread and alleged.

Thank you for your continued support.

Best,

Ellen Censky
President & CEO
Milwaukee Public Museum

Aaron Hertzberg
Executive Director of Administrative Services
Milwaukee County