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March 24, 2010

To: Syracuse Common Councilors

Dear Councilor,

I think it would be a shame if the Syracuse Developmental Center were developed according to the article in today's paper. Rather than SCSD leasing it from a private owner for 15 years, City should buy the property and lease it to SCSD as needed. This gives City control over the long-term redevelopment of such a large and prime piece of city land. I also question the propriety of SCSD leasing schools from private owners. And I would be wary of the 200 employee call center plan. It is not guaranteed, nor does it have to be situated at SDC. It is just an enticement to help win popular support (like Pyramid Co. promoting Destiny to obtain another 30yr tax break, then creating only a simple mall addition).

Without the big school lease, the prospective private sale of the property will probably not go through, and City will likely be able to buy the property at or near the ridiculously low last sale price of \$2.2M—minus back taxes. City should have bought this state owned property originally (or had the state gift it to us).

The far more important point I want to make is that the city would benefit far more if the property were developed into an upscale (at least for Syracuse) residential area with some retail mixed in.

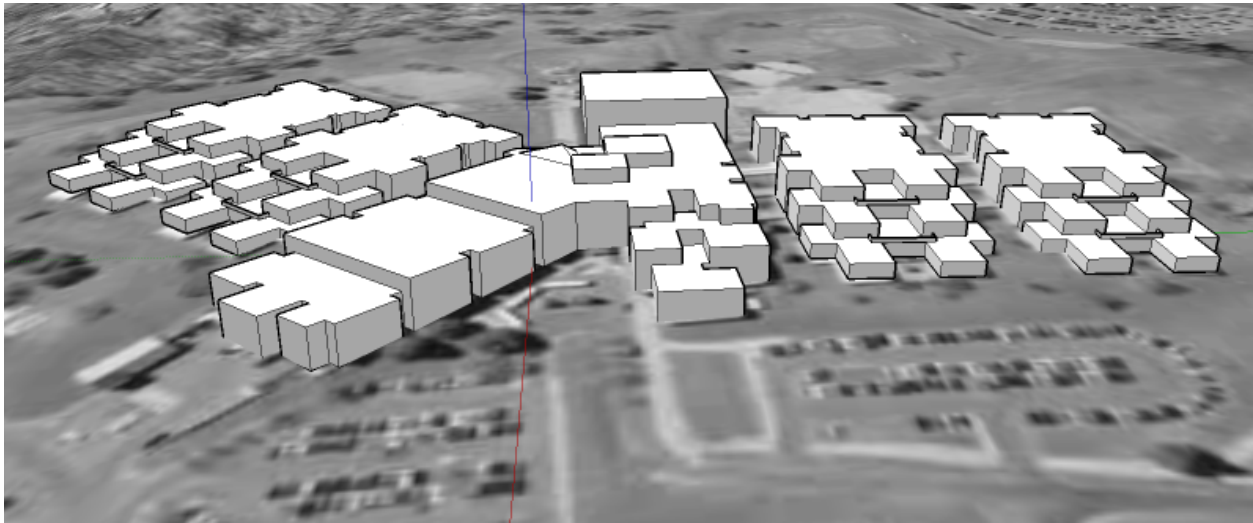
It is an incredibly rare opportunity to have such a large contiguous area of truly prime in-city land to redevelop. It's nearly 50 acres, on one of Syracuse's major hills, with extensive vistas; the zoo is an attractive neighbor; there is a great park beyond, and even a golf course; and it's slightly less than a mile to downtown—15 minute walk. Syracuse needs another upscale neighborhood to help attract more professionals, and even retirees, to live here. This property is a huge opportunity to create that feature.

I had already sketched out some design ideas 2 years ago. Following is a quick sketch of a vision for upscale development at SDC.

Sincerely,

Carlo Moneti
<http://arsteca.net>
<http://syracusebroadband.org>

Sketch Plan for Syracuse Developmental Center Redevelopment



I suggest to create a mixed use upscale residential/commercial area, prominent enough to jumpstart other upscale development in the area. The property has excellent characteristics. It is nearly 50 acres on one of Syracuse's major hills, with extensive vistas; the zoo is an attractive neighbor; there is a great park beyond, and even a golf course; and it's slightly less than a mile to downtown—15 minute walk. Syracuse needs another upscale neighborhood to help attract more professionals, and even retirees, to live here. This property is a huge opportunity to create that feature.

Central to the plan is to restructure most of the buildings into relatively upscale (for Syracuse) condos and apartments. The existing structure is built in the shape of 6 fingers (as viewed from above) with a narrow connection between them. These connections could be demolished in order to create navigable residential streets (semi private drives). The buildings would then have one or two stories added to them in order to break away from the institutional look and create modern townhouses with garage on the ground floor.



(Ad-hoc image for visualization purpose)

Because the buildings cascade down the hill in step fashion, each townhouse can have a large terrace with panoramic views of the city. This would apply to the two outside "fingers" on either side of the current structure. The result is a green in-town neighborhood, with a large green space/park up the hill where children can play.

The central and taller two fingers could become commercial space and include: cafe/restaurant; clothing, jewelry, wine, grocery, and other shops; a commercial health club and associated spa services (hair salon, dry cleaning, massage, pro shop, physical therapy) could make good use of the existing swimming pool and exercise facilities located in the back part of this section.



(Ad-hoc image for visualization purpose)

I would also suggest turning the property's entrance road into a regular city street by reconnecting it to the original east and south entrances (Wilbur Rd and Grand Ave.). I do not recommend creating an enclave. I predict it would be economically (and socially) less successful.

There are many more options and details I could mention. There would also remain a tremendous amount of land that could be developed as demand warrants. But this is just a brief sketch.

We cannot transform Syracuse into an economically and culturally vibrant city (i.e. a city in which people want to live) unless we consider all decisions with imagination and vision for the future. City government must take the lead in urban planning if Syracuse is to thrive. I hope this is enough to give city leaders food for thought before rushing into any decision.

I would be glad to collaborate with any public or private entity entrusted to develop this property in a way that makes most sense for the city's long-term future.