

547 Basswood Ave.
Verona, WI 53593
March 13, 2008

Bruce Sylvester
Director Of Planning & Development

Dear Mr. Sylvester:

I am writing for a number of reasons. First of all, I was at the Community Forum on Retail Development, and would like to thank the Plan Commission for holding the forum in the first place, and for taking such care to ensure that all in attendance were able to express their opinions freely. I felt that the meeting was well-organized and well-run; I appreciated the background, explanations and clarifications at the beginning (and whenever they were needed); and I also appreciated very much the chance to express my opinions through the survey and the voting process.

Second, I'd like to applaud you for all the hard work and thought you've put into the process thus far, and for the careful, reasoned decisions you've made. While I've admittedly given it only the level of attention of the average citizen who cares about the future of her community (i.e., reads the paper and considers the issues, and attends the occasional meeting), I personally feel that you've chosen the best of the three development options in T. Wall's proposal, based on its overall appearance, its mixed-use composition and its greater accessibility to pedestrians and bicyclists and, by its location, to seniors in the community. (I have no doubt that we probably have you to thank for much of that; and also that other factors were probably significant in your choice as well, but those were the features that stood out to me.)

I do appreciate the need for more retail in Verona (especially non-fast-food restaurants!) but hope that, aside from the T. Wall development, it can, for the appreciable future, remain *small* retail. It seems to me that this reflects the wishes of a majority of Verona residents. Also, I liked the frequently-stated argument for going slowly. There's nothing more bleak in a community landscape than a cluster of empty buildings -- at times perhaps because that community has been overly optimistic in its retail projections.

And while, prior to the meeting, I'd have said that I preferred to see development (and redevelopment) concentrated along the Main Street and Verona Road corridors, I was persuaded by those who spoke at the meeting that there are ample reasons to scatter it around, placing more of it in and around Vincenzo Plaza, for example; and also, reasons for not overburdening West Verona Avenue with undue traffic in light of all the schools and day care centers in that area. Perhaps the key issue is one of balance; I'd still like to see a discernible downtown in Verona. It's one of the reasons that Monroe & New Glarus -- and now, Verona -- have so much more of a community 'feel' than, say, Fitchburg. And I hope we *never* end up with anything along the edge of Verona that begins to resemble the ghastly Menards-Circuit City-Batteries Plus-Taco Bell strip of stores that lines Commerce Drive in West Madison!

(And in passing, let me say that I'd love for someone to encourage the owners of the Hubbard Street Diner in Middleton and the Market Street Diner in Sun Prairie as well as several Madison area restaurants, including Bluephies and Monty's Blue Plate Diner, to consider Verona as a locale for their next venture! But I'm digressing.)

The **main** reason I wanted to write was to express my concern about the recent survey commissioned by AIG Properties and conducted by the St. Norbert's College Survey Center. I was one of those called for the survey, so I had the opportunity to see how the survey was conducted, which led to my concerns about several features of the survey.

At the outset of the survey, the caller identified herself as being from the St. Norbert's College Survey Staff and told me, "You are being called to participate in our Verona Commercial Development Survey regarding new commercial development interests in your area." While the description AIG chose for the survey was not untrue *per se*, it seemed misleading, implying that this was a general survey of a variety of development options in the Verona Area, rather than a survey undertaken to assess residents' feelings about one specific development option only. (The fact that the description of the survey confused and misled people seems supported by the fact that so many people at the meeting Monday night asked if you or the Council had sponsored the survey.) Only upon asking directly who'd commissioned the survey was I told that it was AIG Properties.

Far more concerning was the fact that some of the questions were written in a decidedly slanted fashion, to elicit the answers AIG wanted the survey to produce. Specifically, after a question about my age ("Are you over 18?" "Considerably!"), whether I lived in the City or the Town of Verona, and how far I generally traveled each week to do my shopping, I was asked, in this exact phrasing:

"Overall, would you prefer to have a community shopping center nearby County PB & M if it reduced your weekly shopping travel time?"

To me, this is a very poorly-worded question, and one intended to elicit a 'yes' response from a majority of those surveyed. It's certainly a very innocuous-sounding question, and I suspect that anyone not paying very close attention might simply hear, or think to himself, "Would I prefer to have a 'community shopping center' nearby 'if it reduced my weekly shopping travel time?'" – and of course the answer would be yes.)

If, on the other hand, the question had been phrased, "Overall, would you prefer to have a development nearby County PB & M if it drove long-time Verona merchants out of business?" most people would probably say no!

As most people are well aware, how a question is phrased materially influences the answers people give to it. (Even the term 'community shopping center' yields more positive responses from most people than the term 'development,' a fact that has not escaped the AIG staff.)

If what AIG *really* wanted to know was, 'Do you want to see a new development with additional retail options for your shopping at the corner of PB and M.' why not ask THAT question? The cynical reply might be, because they're afraid of getting too many 'no' responses to that question, and they'd like to be able to go to the Plan Commission and be able to say (for example) that, '89% of the Verona residents we surveyed said that, yes, they want to see a development at the corner of PB and M.'

If indeed that's the case, that's important information for you to have. ***But it's not information you can know from the responses to the question asked in this survey as the question was phrased.*** And I seriously wonder, when AIG reports the survey results to you, ***if they will be providing you with a list of survey questions, verbatim,*** or simply a 'summary' of some sort. And I wonder, too, if any of you found *yourselves* on the list of randomly-chosen respondents called for this survey.

There was one odd question about whether I felt that retail shops 'would provide a good shield for industrial development in the area.' (I don't recall the precise phrasing.) I felt a bit puzzled, and a bit as though words were being put in my mouth. Once again, it felt like a question to which the only likely answer was, 'well, yes, I suppose so.' I asked the surveyor if perhaps *industrial* development could provide a good shield for *retail* development, then admitted that I was just being a smart aleck, but that really, the question was making the prior assumption for respondents that industrial development was problematic and that we needed shielding from it, and I don't know that that had been established.

Finally, the surveyor asked me, if there *were* retail development in that area, what kind 'would add the most value.' I asked if I might hear a list of possible options and tell her which I felt would be of most value, but her computer would not permit that; I had to say yes or no (or no opinion) to each option before going to the next (and for each yes, to propose specific retailers I'd like to see go there). The list, of course, included department store, home improvement, discount, electronics, bookstore, pharmacy, grocery, restaurant, and perhaps others.

Once again, I found myself frustrated with the process, knowing that it's been proven, time and again, in well-conducted research, that even the order in which options are presented affects the likelihood that people say yes or no to a given option. If a developer wishes to place certain retailers in his development (perhaps because they represent his best options, perhaps because he is already negotiating with them), he can place those retailers in more positive positions than others in the survey and thereby gain somewhat more positive ratings for them.

St. Norbert's College has always seemed to me to be a solid outfit and I must confess, I'd simply assumed that when someone commissioned them to do a survey, that their staff (who presumably have some training and experience in test construction, statistics and the like) played at least some role in writing the survey questions. At some point in the survey, however, after an especially biased question was asked, I asked the person conducting the survey who had written the questions. She went to ask her supervisor, returned, and said that AIG had simply provided a list of questions to the St. Norbert's College Survey Center staff, whose role, then, was apparently simply to place the phone calls, tabulate the results and, at the risk of sounding sarcastic, lend their respected name to the survey.

I realize I've gone on and on about this, but I was quite disillusioned by the whole process, to say the least. Once again, I think most everyone in this day and age is aware that statistical findings can be gathered and presented to 'prove' anything we want them to, but there exists an entire rather sophisticated field of test methodology, and had AIG genuinely wanted to accurately determine how a random sample of Verona residents felt about their potential development, it would have been possible to design a fair survey – something far more like the one we filled out at Monday night's meeting -- to get at those answers.

Instead, I feel, they chose to cloak their actual motives in the guise of a more general survey 'regarding new commercial development interests in your area,' to hire the staff from a college whose name is well regarded in Wisconsin to conduct the survey, to provide a list of biased questions aimed at eliciting the answers they wanted to hear and finally – call me cynical, but I'd guess -- to present to the Plan Commission a summary of results that does not include the actual phrasing of the questions answered by respondents (and hence will not be terribly meaningful to you).

Small and unimportant though it may seem, if this survey is at all representative of AIG's level of integrity, and of their level of regard for the rights and wishes of Verona citizens, I would be extremely reluctant to place in their hands anything so important to the future of Verona as an entire development.

Thank you so much for hearing me out, particularly when I realize that brevity is not my strong suit! And once again, thank you for serving on the the Plan Commission. Hard though your job is, it's surely one of the most important there is to the future of our community, not only in the near future, but for generations to come.

Respectfully yours,

Denise Beckfield

Denise Beckfield

Thanks for listening to my diatribe!
Having worked ~~peripherally~~ peripherally in the area of
test construction for a time - & expecting
honesty & good faith from people, this
particular issue really got under my skin.
(Plus, the broader issue of the future of
developments in Verona is so important -
& there are so many tough decisions
to be made, it's hard not to get caught
up in them, & want to express an opinion
about them!)

I really do appreciate all the work
the Plan Commission (& you, as Director)
are doing - it's very ~~difficult~~ ^{complex} & I suspect, often
thankless work. And I appreciate the dedication
involved, & the willingness of the Commission to
hold forums & listen to our opinions with such open minds,