

Big office building could come to Milwaukee's near west side as group buys up properties

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A block bordered by W. Wisconsin Ave., W. Michigan St., N. 27th St. and N. 28th St. is being targeted as a major development site by Near West Side Partners Inc. (Photo: Department of City Development)

A major office building and other new developments might be coming to a key site on Milwaukee's near west side — providing a big boost for that neighborhood.

Those projects are being spurred by [Near West Side Partners Inc.](#), a nonprofit group supported by Marquette University and other players, which is buying several properties on two blocks of W. Wisconsin Ave.

The group's leaders aren't saying much about their plans.

They are targeting at least two high-profile prospects: a \$65 million, 163,400-square-foot state office building, and a Medical College of Wisconsin office building with up to 150,000 square feet and an undisclosed cost.

Either project could anchor a series of new developments south of W. Wisconsin Ave. and west of N. 27th St., said Ald. Robert Bauman, whose district includes the near west side.

"Certainly, 27th and Wisconsin is as good a site as any," Bauman said.

That location is coming to light because of a new Common Council resolution, sponsored by Bauman, to sell two city-owned properties, at 2719 W. Wisconsin Ave. and 625 N. 27th St., to a Near West Side Partners affiliate.

Those two properties, with lots totaling just under 22,000 square feet, would be sold for \$1, according to a Department of City Development report. The city acquired the properties through property tax foreclosures.

The land would be combined with other parcels owned by Near West Side Partners on the block bordered by W. Wisconsin Ave., W. Michigan St., N. 27th St. and N. 28th St.

Along with another parcel that Near West Side Partners has under contract, the sale of the city-owned lots would put the entire block under the organization's ownership.

The group plans to market the site for development once it controls the entire block, the city report said.

That proposed sale is to be reviewed by the Common Council's Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee at its Tuesday meeting. The sale needs council approval.

Even with strong institutions and employers, such as Marquette and Harley-Davidson Inc., the near west side could use some help. The household median income in the area centered on N. 27th St., between W. Highland Blvd. and W. St. Paul Ave., was just \$18,352 in 2015, according to U.S. Census data.

Buy and hold strategy

The block's properties, including those owned by the city, are either vacant or underused, said Keith Stanley, Near West Side Partners executive director.

The group, which is supported by Marquette, Aurora Health Care Inc., Harley-Davidson Inc., MillerCoors LLC and Potawatomi Business Development Corp., has the patience to buy and hold the site for future development, Stanley said.

The group wants a project that would help transform the near west side, he said.

"It really opens the door for possibilities at that site," Stanley said.

A vision for that block includes office, retail and other commercial services, preferably as part of a mixed-use development that features apartments, according to the city's [new development strategy](#) for the N. 27th St. business corridor.

Any future office building would likely be at the corner of W. Wisconsin Ave. and N. 27th St.

That's a key intersection.

The site is across N. 27th St. from a two-story, 60,000-square-foot [office building built in 2013](#) by developer Joe Klein and leased to the state Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare.

Also, it's across W. Wisconsin Ave. from the former Wisconsin Avenue School, which developer Rick Wiegand plans to convert into [Ambassador Suites](#), a 23-suite extended-stay hotel.

Wiegand, who bought the property from the city last year, plans to begin renovations by the end of 2018. Even if the Near West Side Partners block isn't redeveloped by the time the hotel opens, Wiegand hopes to see the block's buildings demolished.

"My guests at Ambassador Suites aren't going to be comfortable looking at the blight across the street," Wiegand said.

Other nearby pending projects include plans by Food and Beverage Wisconsin, an industry networking group, to create [a center of excellence](#) with offices, a shared lab and even a rooftop farm at Wiegand's three-building complex south of W. Wells St. between N. 27th and N. 28th streets.

Stanley declined to talk about specific potential developments on the organization's site at W. Wisconsin Ave. and N. 27th St. The group's affiliates began buying parcels on the block in March.

Bauman said Near West Side Partners is focusing on landing two projects:

The Wisconsin Department of Administration plans to seek proposals this spring to replace the nine-story state office building in downtown Milwaukee, at 819 N. 6th St.

That building, constructed in 1963, is outdated and inefficient, according to Gov. Scott Walker's [2017-'19 state budget](#). It would be replaced by a 163,400-square-foot building, with a project cost estimate of \$65 million.

The new building's agencies could include the Departments of Administration, Health Services, Revenue, Workforce Development and Public Instruction.

It also could house the governor's Milwaukee office, the Public Defender's office and the Board on Aging & Long Term Care.

Construction is to start in April 2019, with the building completed by August 2021.

The other prospect is Medical College of Wisconsin's plan to develop a community center with 100,000 to 150,000 square feet in Milwaukee's central city within the next 18 to 20 months.

That facility would house the new Center for Flourishing Lives, according to the college.

The office building wouldn't include clinical programs. Instead, it would house programs to address "social determinants of health through civic engagement, education, research and policy change over the next decade," a project summary said.

The center would house the college's Office of Senior Associate Dean for Community Engagement, the Center for AIDS Intervention Research, the Center for Patient Care and Outcomes Research, the Institute for Health and Equity, and family medicine programs.

The Wauwatosa-based college hasn't disclosed a cost estimate for that project.

Portfolio grows

Meanwhile, Near West Side Partners is expanding its real estate holdings.

The group recently agreed to buy a property just west of its block, at 2801 W. Wisconsin Ave. That site features a vacant, dilapidated three-story office building on a 50,600-square-foot parcel, according to city assessment records.

Oconomowoc Residential Programs Inc. had planned to convert the building into a 50-bed [residential care center for troubled youth](#).

But that plan was delayed by the building's pending city demolition order, which the care center operator was seeking to overturn through a lawsuit filed in Milwaukee County Circuit Court.

Near West Side Partners doesn't yet have specific plans for the property.

But it could provide more options tied to development on the block just to the east — perhaps for a parking structure tied to a major office building.

"By controlling the future of this key, strategic parcel, we will be able to create new opportunities for the adjacent block, attract an even larger new development, or provide a complementary use in close proximity," Stanley said in a statement.

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