



Donn Esmonde

COMMENTARY

Sabres need to rethink the ramp factor

Sometimes you have to exaggerate to make a point, so forgive me this excess: HarborCenter is a parking ramp disguised as a project.

Yes, the focus for the square block at First Niagara Center's front door is a regional hockey center and hotel. But the design – rubber-stamped Tuesday by the Common Council – is dominated by a five-story parking ramp of questionable need, atop which the good stuff will be plopped.

The \$20 million-plus, 845-space parking ramp turns a reasonably scaled project into a bizarre-looking monolith that dwarfs its surroundings and discourages the walkability that the downtown waterfront needs.

"This will be one of these things where, when the building goes up, people will say, 'How did we let this happen?'" said Tim Tielman, a preservationist and urban designer.

The sad thing is, it doesn't have to be this way.

Taking the time to get it right beats rushing into a regret.

The Sabres-backed project has gone from award to approval in less than six months, a relative blink. It could have used the closer public look – and guiding hand – that shaped the nearby "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" waterfront. Someone would have stated the obvious: There already is a 1,100-space parking ramp next to the arena that is all but empty except for Sabres games and concerts. And there is a Metro Rail stop a mere slap shot away. More parking? It's like shipping ice to Antarctica.

"They have a chance to do something cool," said Tielman, "instead of putting two windowless boxes on top of a parking ramp."

Tielman is no casual critic. He designed the much-praised Larkintown public space for Howard Zensky. He is largely responsible for preserving the 19th century artifacts and design at the Erie Canal Harbor historical site.

Buildings that Tielman helped save have paved the way for our downtown revival. Tielman also has an alternative, parking-lighter plan for the Sabres project. It humanizes the project scale, uses the existing ramp, adds another rink and more retail and keeps the waterfront connection (greaterbuffalo.blogs.com).

I am all for private investment and a regional hockey center that will attract visitors and outside dollars. I applaud Sabres owner Terry Pegula for picking up most of the \$172 million bill. But what gets built here will have a more lasting impact on the community than any coaching change. I know that the project just got rubber-stamped. But there still is a chance to do it better. Taking the time to get it right beats rushing into a regret.

I don't blame the Sabres. Indeed, team officials said the project needs only 400 parking spaces. Their HarborCenter plan merely followed the city's project suggestions, written by strategic planning chief Brendan Mehaffy, to include parking for nearby Canalside uses. To my mind, it is another case of the city's anti-urban overdependence on on-site parking for access. It's a good way to ruin a neighborhood.

I know there are plans for bars, shops and a marketplace at the nearby Aud site. But that plan includes (yet more) parking.

Beyond that, there already is enough access – between Metro Rail and existing parking – for 18,000 people on hockey and concert nights. I don't foresee that sort of a crowd at Canalside on any given day.

The Sabres just switched coaches. That isn't the only change they should be making.

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Buffalo News

2.24.13