

The Works

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The \$75,000 Parking Spot

A TIF-sponsored plan to solve the parking shortage near Devon and Western has an architect mad enough to run against 50th Ward alderman Berny Stone.

By Ben Joravsky

The opening bell of the 50th Ward alderman's race has sounded, and so far the campaign's main issue is a parking garage at Rockwell and Devon. To Greg Brewer, who's attempting the Herculean task of unseating long-time incumbent Berny Stone in next February's election, the garage represents just about everything wrong with local government. In his view it's a waste of money that's been given the green light only because city leaders can't admit when they're wrong.

"We should just junk it right now and save ourselves the \$4.5 million it's going to cost," he says.

Brewer says his outrage over the project is what has inspired him to run for office for the first time. "I think it shows the ward needs better planning," he says.

And what does Stone say? "He's a schmuck," says Stone. "I love running against schmucks."

Yes, the race is on.

Brewer, an architect with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, says

he had one of those *aha* moments that could occur to anyone who takes the time to study one of hundreds of deals that are routinely approved every year. The parking garage is the product of the Devon-Western tax increment financing district, which, like all other TIFs, siphons property taxes away from schools and parks in order to subsidize development that, in theory anyway, will eventually generate even more tax revenue. In the case of the commercial stretch of Devon just west of Western, the biggest need is parking, says Stone, who along with city planning officials controls how the millions in the Devon-Western TIF fund will get spent. "It's especially bad on weekend nights, when traffic's almost at a standstill," he says. "People are begging for parking. They've been telling me this for years."

Stone found that no developers were willing to put up the money just to build a parking garage—the profit margin's not high enough. So in place of the city's crumbling,

trash-filled parking lot on the northeast corner of Devon and Rockwell, he decided to promote a TIF-supported retail/condo project sandwiched around for-profit parking, alleviating the parking shortage and creating development with one stroke.

Thus was born the as-yet-unnamed complex, a six-story structure with retail on the first floor, 30 condos on the fifth and sixth floors, and parking on floors two, three, and four. Under a deal approved by the Community Development Council, which oversees TIF projects, the developer, Mohammed Siddiqui, is putting up about \$12 million; in return the city's offering him \$4.5 million in various subsidies—\$3.6 million in TIF funds, plus purchase of the current parking lot, valued at \$915,000, for \$2. Once the contractual details of the deal are negotiated between the developer and the city's planning department, the proposal awaits City Council approval, typically a formality



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But Brewer thinks these numbers are off base, the result of demarcating spots where they won't fit in reality. He figures that the completed garage will only add a net gain of 60 spaces, at a cost to the city of \$75,000 each.

when an alderman supports a plan. "This is a great idea," says Stone. "It's a pity it wasn't done years ago."

Brewer thinks the deal is a travesty. The development will dwarf the two-story buildings around it, stretching from lot line to lot line with a portion hanging over the sidewalk on Rockwell. What's more he says, it doesn't add enough parking to justify its \$4.5 million subsidy. According to the building plans, the development will create a total of 215 spaces, 37 of which will be reserved for the new condos and stores. In that case 178 will be left for the general public, a net gain of 124 spaces over the 54 in the current parking lot.

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mates that 19 spaces will have to be eliminated from a portion of the fourth floor that is only about five feet tall. "How are you realistically going to get people in and out?" he says. "You'd have to be walking hunched over." Brewer calculates that another 45 spaces will have to be shaved off to give cars room to get in and out, allow for pedestrian exits, and correct other problems with the design. "It's going to be a very tight fit," he says. He figures that the completed garage will only add a net gain of 60 spaces, at a cost to the city of \$75,000 each. "For that we will spend \$4.5 million?" he says. "If your goal is to add parking you should add parking. But 60 spaces for all that money? I don't think it's worth it."

Brewer, who lives close to the proposed development, is doing everything he can to stop it. He's

started a Web site, Citizens for Responsible Development (crd50.org), he's speaking to local groups, and of course he's running for office on this one-issue platform. "This isn't in the best interest of the ward," he says. "We have to fight it."

Stone says he's not concerned about Brewer's opposition. He argues that the garage will be a relief no matter how many parking spaces are added. As for the condo project, he predicts it will help spark a development boom.

"It will be like the 43rd or 42nd Ward—you'll see," says Stone. "It will be a new Devon—it ain't gonna be the same. You'll have four-story buildings with condos. You'll have all the upscale stuff. Like it or not, change is coming, and you can't run away from change."

Early and Often

It was her obsession with Ace, the boyishly cute *American Idol* contestant, that led Lia Berezka to Dialidol.com, an Internet site designed last year

by an Ohio computer whiz who's a fan of the show.

She'd been posting about her love for Ace in an online journal, and "someone wrote me back that, according to Dialidol.com, Ace wasn't doing very well," says Lia, an 18-year-old senior at Von Steuben High School. "I said, 'What's that?' and I checked it out."

Turns out that Dialidol.com allows people to repeatedly vote for contestants through their computers—and offers a consistently accurate estimate of who's up and who's down, making its predictions by counting the number of busy signals its computers encounter when they call in their votes. By around Tuesday night at midnight Dialidol predicts who's been voted off. Who's actually been cut isn't officially announced until the end of Wednesday night's show.

"Before I knew about Dialidol, I'd be dialing up Ace's number on my phone," Lia says. "I'd call four, sometimes five times just to get in one vote. With Dialidol you go over your DSL and basically tell your computer who you want to vote for. If it gets a busy signal, it automatically dials again until it gets through. Then

it keeps dialing. I voted 300 times for Ace, and I never even picked up my phone."

On Wednesday, April 5, Lia shocked her friends by accurately predicting that Mandisa would be voted off that night. "It was like I was this crazy psychic who had these visions or something. My friend Grace said, 'You're really weird and geeky.' She has this friend Colby, and he was like, 'I think it's really cool you can do that.'" Grace told him, 'I think you have a crush on Lia, 'cause you're a geek, and she's just as geeky as you are.'"

On Wednesday, April 19, Lia shed a few tears as the show announced what she already knew—Ace was a goner. In the aftermath I tried to console her by telling her she'd learned a lesson about politics: any election that can be manipulated will be, so if you want to win you'd better exploit every advantage.

"There is something creepy about this," she agreed. "Not everyone knows about Dialidol, not everyone has the technology to use it. They say America's voting, but it's not a fair vote. I guess it's a good thing that none of this really matters." ■

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