

The State

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Arts center offers more benefits

There's been a lot of criticism about the idea of the Columbia City Council letting a local artist use now-empty space in the old Tapp's building rent-free for an arts center with studios, theater space, a gallery, classroom, wood shop and coffee shop and framing and print services.

To understand why this deal makes sense, you need to understand how the city entered into a 10-year lease of the first two floors of the Tapp's building to start with. The city's aim was to stimulate economic development and

encourage housing downtown rather than have an empty 88,000-square-foot building. As a result, the city gained 42 apartments occupying 66,000 square feet that had been competing with other empty space downtown. Those units were built where infrastructure already existed, avoiding the costs of sprawl - which studies put at around \$125,000 per unit. That's a saving to the citizens of South Carolina of \$5.25 million in sprawl infrastructure costs, and \$500,000 every year in operating costs to support the sprawl.

The environmental impact of using an existing building rather than constructing a new one is significant as well, but even more significant is that 55 to 60 more people living in the city don't drive 20 minutes twice every day, polluting our air.

But the bottom two floors of the building sat empty for most of the lease. Now, city officials are trying to find a way to put them to good use - although this won't be done

for free. Instead, they would let Brenda Schwarz Miller use the space for free for the remaining year and four months of the lease, and give her a \$200,000 loan to get her arts center up and running.

It's important to note that Ms. Schwarz Miller originally went to the Community Development Office and was redirected to City Council. Her request has been modified several times at the city's initiation. What she wanted was a normal economic-development loan for a very well-thought-out arts center project.

Critics fail to consider that her proposal is for a full arts center, with a community outreach component to identify talented young artists who otherwise would never get a chance with scholarships and mentoring. It gives talented college students commercial exposure. It supports the efforts of studio artists everywhere to promote themselves with on-site individual marketing and promotional services. It will be an engine for arts activity and a communitywide resource providing a gathering place for artists and those who enjoy the arts. It will provide gallery shows and art-related entertainment venues to stimulate interest in the arts.

In a recent column ("The artful city," March 18), Warren Bolton suggested that the city undercut Ms. Schwarz Miller's plans by taking a month to accept bids from anybody who has an idea about the space and pick the best idea. The impracticality of that is ludicrous and naive. Who could use

the space with no capital improvements? Who would put in so much effort without knowing if they would be able to lease the property after the city's lease expired? What building owner would allow any business to continue in the space without some assurance it could be successful? Not me. Our meetings with Ms. Schwarz Miller for more than a year convinced us she had a viable plan that will succeed when she gets funding.

To truly understand this plan, you need to understand the concept of a destination location. Destination locations draw people who otherwise would not come downtown; they are invaluable for the city's economic vitality. They produce sales taxes, hospitality taxes, business license fees, parking revenues, increased water and sewer revenues, increased franchise taxes from utility companies and ultimately higher real estate taxes. In short, they are the economic engines of the community. We all thrive off of them.

The Columbia Museum of Art, Mast General Store and Nickelodeon are destination locations. The Tapp's Art Center will be a destination location, with numerous aspiring artists, their families and those who love the arts visiting regularly.

Mr. Pioreschi is an owner and managing member of Mainstream V Lofts, which owns the Tapp's building. He also is the founder of Capitol Places and has more than 35 years experience in real estate development, the past 13 years in Columbia. Mr. Pioreschi is also COO of US Development in Columbia.



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