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Mayor gives impromptu city tour

Lukes headed to Chicago for national conference on urban design

By Shaun Sutner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
ssutner@telegram.com

WORCESTER— The mayor hopped on a mini-bus and gave a visitor an impromptu guided tour of the city from an urban design vantage point.

Next stop: Chicago.

Yesterday afternoon's excursion was a prelude to Mayor Konstantina B. Lukes' trip to the Windy City next week to participate in the annual National Session of The Mayors' Institute on City Design.

Mrs. Lukes is one of six mayors and eight design professionals from across the country who will take part in the intimate, three-day symposium hosted by Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and intended to give urban leaders ideas on how to improve the way the cities look and work.

The trip is being paid for by the institute, which has hosted 750 mayors since the group's inception in 1986, according to Mary Racicot, an aide to Mrs. Lukes.

The mayor will present a short overview of Worcester with a focus on a pressing urban design issue, in this case turning Washington Square, long a desolate urban speedway perched on the edge of Union Station, into a viable neighborhood that fits in with the rest of the city around it.

To prepare for the session, Mrs. Lukes, with the city's economic development director, Timothy J. McGourthy, in tow, showed Jess Wendover, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Mayor's Institute, around the square and a few other neighborhoods that city officials see as interlinked with its redevelopment.

"Because it is one of the city's most important portals, I'd like to see some significant architecture or public art here," Mrs. Lukes told Ms. Wendover as the bus navigated the newly paved square, which has been converted recently from a forbidding mega-sized rotary into a smaller, more manageable roundabout.

Hefty dirt piles indicated the handful of development parcels that have been spun off by the \$7.8 million re-design of the square.

Planners envision the four smallish, 1- to 2-acre properties as home to well-designed multi-purpose buildings that might include apartments or offices upstairs and retail shops or restaurants at ground-level, giving the area a vitality that has been lacking.



Mayor Konstantina B. Lukes describes development plans around Union Station to Jess Wendover, director of The Mayors' Institute on City Design, as Timothy J. McGourthy, Worcester director of economic development, looks at plans during a tour of the city yesterday. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

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Mrs. Lukes and Mr. McGourthy talked for a while about the challenge of compelling developers to come up with attractive, cutting-edge architecture in a city that does not possess a formal design approval process like many larger cities.

"Design review? What design review?" Mrs. Lukes said, somewhat sarcastically, when Ms. Wendover asked if the city had such authority.

The city officials noted, however, that in the rebuilding of Washington Square, the city will enjoy some leverage because the Worcester Redevelopment Authority, which will seek to sell the parcels to private developers, can write design standards into the deeds.

And the mayor, who far from a starry-eyed cheerleader for the city and who has been publicly skeptical over the years about the \$565 million CitySquare project planned for the empty urban outlet mall between Washington Square and City Hall, also expressed some uncharacteristic optimism about CitySquare.

As the bus drove by the mall's sprawling, clumsily designed parking garage — most of which is slated to be torn down — she declared: "That mall will not be here a year from now."

"It appears to be in the works," Mrs. Lukes said of the long-delayed CitySquare undertaking.

Mrs. Lukes appeared considerably less positive about another municipal sore spot, little-used Worcester Regional Airport, which was visible on a distant green ridge through the bus windows from atop Belmont Hill.

"It's the only airport where the planes have to go up to land," Mrs. Lukes said.

Contact Shaun Sutner by e-mail at ssutner@telegram.com.



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