

MILWAUKEE'S POWER SHORTAGE

BRIDGES FALL DOWN, SUMMERFEST'S IN TROUBLE, WHO'S IN CHARGE?

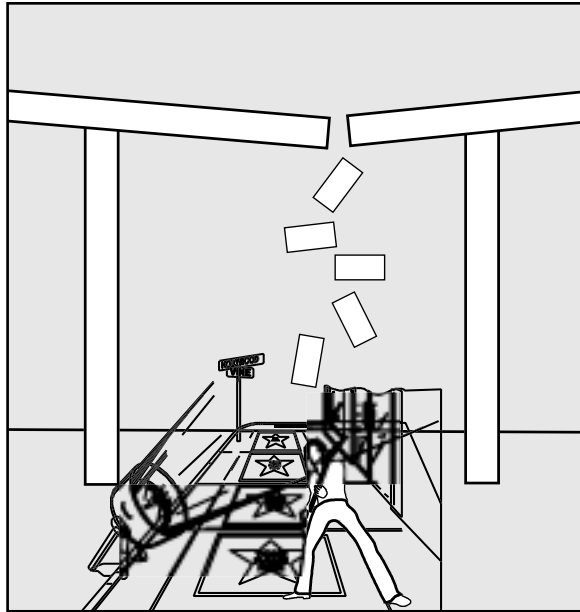
CHARLES J. SYKES

The first year of the century was not a good one for Milwaukee's fragile civic ego.

Perhaps the year's most arresting and memorable image was the collapse of the Hoan Bridge, a segment of which was brought down by dynamite to prevent an even more spectacular catastrophe for one of the city's most visible landmarks.

The falling bridge came only 17 months after the crane disaster at Miller Park and only weeks after a jury handed out the largest damage award in the state's history for the accident at the ballpark, which is one of the city's other most visible landmarks.

Shutting down the Hoan Bridge had dire implications for the city's transportation system. But the fall of the Hoan may also have been symbolic of larger problems in Milwaukee: A city once known for its stolid competence and work ethic has seen an awful lot of stuff that doesn't work. Some of the costliest projects turned out to have been poorly planned and designed, often too small to achieve the purpose for which they were intended. But the problem seems to run deeper. At the end of 2000, Milwaukee not only had



to cope with the collapse of one of its major bridges, it also confronted a mayor embroiled in a messy sex scandal, a police department in disarray, clouds over its premiere festival, and a long string of major projects and/or institutions that appeared increasingly dysfunctional.

This is not the way Milwaukee thinks of itself. Traditionally,

Milwaukee has been a city that did not necessarily move quickly or with much flash, but it was safe, clean, and capable. Our scandals were rare, minor, and usually dull. A few years ago, the misuse of state phones to make long distance calls was a front-page story here. Our bureaucrats were costly, but generally efficient. Although the city was known as conservative and slow to change, its tradition of careful (seemingly endless) deliberations also meant that it was not prone to make mistakes. Whenever Milwaukeeans felt enthusiasm for a new fad coming along, it usually appointed a study commission until the feeling had passed.

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There were blunders and missteps along the way — the vacant corridor where the Park West Freeway was supposed to go, the infamous Hole in the Ground in downtown Milwaukee, and MECCA — but usually when we finally got around to doing something, our major projects generally worked.

That no longer seems to be the case. The breakdowns and squabbles raise obvious questions about the city's physical infrastructure; but also suggests larger questions about the city's decision-making infrastructure. Why are so many projects not working? Why are so many institutions in trouble? Is there a pattern here? If so, who's responsible? And who's in charge?

A list of the city's major projects reads increasingly like a casualty report:

Bridges And Roads

Once known as the Bridge to Nowhere, the Hoan Bridge's failure was apparently the result of faulty welding done back in the 1970s. Until it buckled, the Hoan Bridge was the only major thoroughfare into Downtown Milwaukee that wasn't scheduled for demolition or reconstruction over the next few years. The price tag for those projects — including the reconstruction of the increasingly decrepit Marquette Interchange and the freeway system — could come to \$5 billion. Because they are all coming at once, the projects could leave downtown Milwaukee as an economic island, cut off from easy access from the rest of the area.

Miller Park

Building a new ballpark for the Milwaukee Brewers was not only the messiest political controversy in memory, but also a project whose human and financial costs exceeded any expectations. The crane collapse in July 1999 not only took three lives, but also delayed the opening of the new ballpark by a full year, and resulted in the largest jury award in the state's history. Unfortunately, despite that effort, Major League Baseball's continuing irrationality in handing out massive contracts

makes it unlikely that the new stadium will be able to either keep the Brewers competitive or insure their continued viability.

Sewers

Despite spending a staggering \$1 billion to build a Deep Tunnel that was supposed to prevent massive overflows, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) has been dumping billions of gallons of raw or partially treated sewage into Lake Michigan and the area's waterways after heavy rains. Although MMSD downplays the cause and effect link between their discharges and the pollution levels in Lake Michigan, bacteria in the water forced the closing of South Shore Beach for nearly half the swimming season in 1999. At one point, readings of fecal coliform bacteria at the beach reached 65 times the level considered dangerous. While the official line of the MMSD is that the tunnel is indeed functioning exactly as designed, the frequent dumps make it clear that the Deep Tunnel was, in fact, a *Kind* of Deep Tunnel, built too small to avoid polluting the city's lakes and streams.

Summerfest

One of the city's outstanding success stories, Summerfest is unable to move ahead on plans to update and upgrade its grounds because it has been unable to secure a new lease from the city. Near the end of 2000, talks between the festival and the city's Harbor Commission broke down completely and personal animosities, and jealousies, seem to play as much a role in the cloud over the festival as City Hall's desire to drastically increase its take from the festival.

Convention Center

No sooner had the city's new \$175 million Midwest Express Center opened its doors than experts began pointing out that the new convention center would have much less space than most of its competitors. Even with the completion of a new addition, the convention center has only 189,000 square feet of prime exhibit space, even though comparable cities boast facilities with at least 300,000 square feet.

"There's no question 300,000 square feet is sort of the state-of-the-art level centers are shooting for," said one expert on the tourism industry.

Despite the new investment, the city's entry into big time conventions has been decidedly mixed. The International Association of Chiefs of Police reneged on its plans to hold its annual convention here this year, saying it needed more space, and GenCon, which had been meeting here since 1985, has said it has simply outgrown Milwaukee's infrastructure. After the Veterans of Foreign Wars held its convention here last year, some of the attendees gave the city decidedly negative reviews for the quality of local hotels and service.

In late 2000, plans for a 300-room, \$42 million Embassy Suites Hotel across from the Midwest Express Center were put on hold after the developers failed to secure financing for the project, which is considered a key element in avoiding the center becoming a costly new white elephant.

County Jail

Designed to cut overcrowding, the County Jail was itself overcrowded from the day it opened, despite a price tag of more than \$200 million.

All of these problems are compounded by turmoil at the top.

Mayor John Norquist

The mayor has gone from being a rising New Democratic star to fighting off a sexual harassment suit from a former aide. Norquist has confessed to having a consensual sexual affair with the aide, but the complaint against him details a five-year long sexual liaison. Not content with accusing the mayor of sexual misconduct, the former aide is also alleging a pattern of racial discrimination and favoritism.

Beyond the snickering over the mayor's sexual proclivities, the suit may serve to worsen racial and ethnic divisions in the city.

Police Department

Milwaukee's reputation as a relatively safe city has taken a battering over the last decade, but the city ended 2000 with a Police Department under siege and in apparent disarray. The number of arrests is down more than a third in just two years, even though the violent crime rate went up in 1999. At a time when cocaine deaths are on the rise in the city, the number of adult drug arrests dropped by more than a fifth in a single year; and despite the city's "quality of life" police initiatives, the number of tickets issued has also plummeted. In 1999, the number of illegal guns taken off the streets fell to a five-year-low. As recently as 1996, police confiscated 4,530 guns; that was down to 2,822 in 1999. Despite declines in murder rates in comparable cities, the number of murders actually rose in 1999. Meanwhile, the vast majority of police officers say they have no confidence in Chief Art Jones,

and there were media reports that his chief political backer, Mayor John Norquist, wanted him out.

At year's end, Jones seemed adamant that he intends to stay despite his political isolation. More ominously, the chief has grown increasingly willing to play the race card in shoring up his support, a potentially explosive political ploy.

There are signs of deeper problems as well.

Business And Jobs

Milwaukee lost a major corporate headquarters last year when Firststar bought U.S.

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Bancorp for about \$21 billion — and announced that the new mega-bank would be moving its office to the Twin Cities.

Milwaukee remains the economic engine of the area, but despite the economic growth of the 1990s, Milwaukee added only 4,000 new jobs — a dramatically lower rate than either Green Bay or Madison, both of which added more than 30,000 jobs each. As one study noted: “One does not have to be an academic in order to realize that when a city like Green Bay, one sixth the size of Milwaukee, creates over seven times as many jobs as Milwaukee, something is seriously wrong with economic development in the central city.”

The case of Midwest Express airlines illustrates how Wisconsin continues to discourage growing businesses from expanding their operations here. Despite bipartisan support, Midwest Express has been unable to get legislative approval for tax breaks that would bring Wisconsin into line with comparable states. The failure may jeopardize as much as \$1 billion in expected expansion by the airline over the next five years. In September 2000, the airline announced plans to add Kansas City to its existing hubs in Milwaukee and Omaha. “I’m troubled,” said State Representative Jeff Stone, “because it shows me that Midwest Express will continue to grow and this is a direct blow to Milwaukee. It’s an opportunity lost for Milwaukee.”

There have been more than a few of those.

This is not to suggest that there are not notable successes. But the pattern again, often seems to be two steps forward, one step back. Miller Park is scheduled to open next spring, but the Green Bay Packers no longer play in Milwaukee. Downtown has seen a modest boom in new housing, but the area still lacks even a single movie theater. Harley-Davidson has announced plans for a major museum in the city; but the city’s premier music festival’s future is increasingly clouded; the Grand Avenue Mall continues to decline, having failed to draw a replacement for Marshall Fields, and Northridge is virtually dead. The city managed to cut its property tax rate for

more than a decade, but was forced to impose double-digit increases in 2000, suggesting that the era of tax cuts may have come to an end.

Even the brightest successes seem to have been infected somehow. The stunningly beautiful new addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum avoided political complications by raising all of the \$75 million price tag privately. And as Santiago Calatrava’s North American debut, it should attract national and international attention.

But despite all of those positive atmospherics, Milwaukee officials apparently blew the opening date — failing to complete the project in time for a major Georgia O’Keefe exhibition scheduled for May. Perhaps dazzled by Calatrava’s flamboyant style or in awe of his celebrity, the museum’s management and donors seem unable to maintain control of the project — the cost ballooned far beyond original estimates and the completion dates were continually moved back.

Instead of simply delaying the opening of the \$75 million project, officials have decided to open it anyway — unfinished. In a mastery of understatement, Alexander Tzonis, an architectural historian who has written extensively on Calatrava, calls partial openings “terribly rare.” Other critics compare the “phased” to displaying a painting or a sculpture that was still a work in progress. While Milwaukeeans tried to put the best possible face on their failure to get the elaborate project done on time, none of the half-dozen architectural critics contacted by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* could recall any museum opening in the fashion chosen by Milwaukee. One New York architectural critic dismissed the spin as “silly.”

Trouble In River City

As disparate as the problems may seem, taken together they seem to suggest a breakdown in the city’s decision-making infrastructure. Initiatives go unfinished, projects don’t work as advertised, disputes are unresolved, the private and public sectors squabble. And no one steps forward either to take responsibility or to offer leadership.

Even so, at year's end there was only scattered recognition that Milwaukee had reached a turning point. No politician has lost his or her job over any of these miscues — nor is any likely to do so.

In part, that reflects the roots of Milwaukee's power shortage. Unlike other major cities, Milwaukee seldom has competitive local elections. There has not been a close mayoral election since 1988, or a race for county executive that has been competitive since 1992. It is also worth noting that many of the troubled projects are overseen by non-elected boards or commissions: the Wisconsin Center Board (the Convention Center); The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (the Deep Tunnel); the Stadium Board (Miller Park); and the Harbor Commission (the Summerfest lease). Because members of these boards are not directly accountable to the voters and are often virtually anonymous, the public has a hard time figuring out whom to blame when things go wrong.

Compounding the lack of accountability is Milwaukee's longstanding civic complacency and reluctance to criticize civic leaders. This smugness — the conviction that whatever may be the troubles elsewhere, Milwaukee is doing just fine — has persisted despite the success that other cities have had in revitalizing their Downtown areas and drastically cutting the rates of violent crime. Perhaps a legacy of the city's inferiority complex, many Milwaukeeans seem to regard criticism of civic institutions as an attack on the city itself. All of this means decision-makers are often not subject to the kind of searching scrutiny to which their counterparts in other cities have grown accustomed.

Although sweeping conclusions are always fraught with risk, it is increasingly

clear that Milwaukee is no longer as distinctive as it would like to imagine it is, nor as immune to the problems of other cities.

This might not matter so much except for other changes in the leadership infrastructure. In recent years, the city has seen the passing of a generation of major leaders, men (yes, they were generally all male) who were accustomed to getting things done, building consensus, marshalling political and financial resources to move projects ahead — knocking heads if need be. Even though the city has a savvy and activist Chamber of Commerce, it has not been able to fully compensate for the loss of major corporate headquarters and the clout of their locally based executives.

While presumably little could have been done to dissuade Firststar from moving its headquarters out of town, for example, the breakdown of talks over Summerfest is precisely the sort of dispute that an effective civic leadership could have avoided.

The city's leadership deficit comes at a particularly ticklish time in the city's history. Milwaukee faces critical decisions

about the future of Summerfest; reconstructing the city's transportation system may carry a price tag of as much as \$5 billion; Downtown development continues to lag; race relations are strained; job creation is anemic at best; efforts continue to reform MPS; and the city faces major challenges to keep up with a rapidly changing world economy.

Of course, cities do often get second, and even third chances. But the rules are changing rapidly, and Milwaukee urgently needs to change its image from a place where things fall down and break, to a city that gets things right once again.

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