

PLAIN TALK BY DAVE ZWEIFEL

Opinion | Let's get Lakefront Porch project over the finish line

By Dave Zweifel
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The Lakefront Porch is set to begin construction in 2023. Ken Saiki

Susan Schmitz, the local dynamo who for years pumped life into Downtown Madison Inc. before retiring in 2017, dropped an email last week to promote a project she's been helping bring to fruition on East Wilson Street.

The project is what's known as Lakefront Porch, the unique urban park that will soon sit atop the Madison Water Utility's downtown well, across the street from the Essen House and down East Wilson where Rubin's Furniture used to be.

Schmitz's email reminded everyone that construction on the small park, envisioned as mostly a place to congregate and enjoy a stunning view of Lake Monona, will begin in a matter of weeks but still could use about \$60,000 to reach its \$525,000 goal. If all goes well Lakefront Porch could be completed by the fall.

As Cap Times reporter Nick Garton wrote last year, the park was designed by architect Ken Saiki to include a raised wooden platform with shade structures, tables and chairs, community garden space, bike racks, ramps for accessibility and lights directed downward to reduce light pollution. All of it will sit atop the bland concrete slab that has been there since the '60s.

Madison's premier philanthropists Pleasant Rowland and Jerry Frautschi each contributed \$100,000 to help make it a reality.

In her email, Schmitz recalls when she was at DMI and she and her co-worker, Sarah Reiter, used to walk by the slab, glance at the lake in the background and say, "This should be a park."

"At that time, this area of downtown was not very active," she added. "Since then there has been an amazing amount of healthy growth, so it is time to make our dream a reality."

The downtown's First Settlement neighborhood has been looking at the site through the years, and with help from the water utility installed some tables and chairs on part of the slab and added some flower beds. When COVID hit, many neighborhood residents embraced the idea of making the site a place to gather.

Now Lakefront Porch will become a bona fide destination for the neighborhood, which has added apartments and condos in recent years.

Schmitz said the Lakefront Porch project has partnered with the Madison Parks Foundation, which is holding the funds, and there's an agreement to transfer the property from the water utility to the city Parks Department once it's completed.

And, obviously, she hopes that folks will step up to raise that final \$60,000. So do I. You can learn more at lakefrontporch.org where there's also a link to contribute.

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Correction: At the time of publication, the Lakefront Porch project had raised \$390,000, and \$60,000 was needed to reach the project's updated goal of \$450,000.