

A Once in a Lifetime Opportunity

By Mayor Mary O'Connor and Andrew Kitslaar

We could not be more excited that the City of Monona recently reached an agreement to purchase the property known as San Damiano, at 4123 Monona Drive, effective June 1, 2021. This was a moment that could not be passed by.

This purchase represents an historic opportunity to preserve one of the last undeveloped pieces of land on Lake Monona as open space for this and future generations. The purchase has long been a dream of so many Monona and surrounding area residents. Monona is a city of 8,000, completely surrounded by the City of Madison. Our parks and open space are heavily used and a major reason people want to move to Monona. The use and appreciation of our open space by Monona residents has become more apparent than ever in recent months. The purchase of San Damiano is a once-in-forever opportunity to preserve and protect additional parkland and public access to Lake Monona for everyone.

Consisting of almost 10 acres of undeveloped land, much of it wooded, San Damiano features more than 1,000 feet of shoreline with stunning views. Many years ago it was the site of Native American encampments along the lakeshore including ancestors of the Ho-Chunk Nation. The house and property are part of the original farm developed by Allis-Chalmers heir, Frank Allis, in the 1880's and it was bequeathed to the priests of St. Norbert Abbey in 1929 by Josephine and Margaret Mahoney. Since then, the land has not been touched except for the addition of a small garage on one side of the property. It is a truly iconic place.

When the Norbertines announced their intention to sell San Damiano earlier this year, the City of Monona took action. The city asked for a window of time to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of raising private and public funds to purchase the property and maintain it as a public asset. After meeting with many private individuals and community organizations, the consensus was that the property should be preserved as a public asset and that there are both groups and individuals who would like to financially contribute to that effort. With a very tight window, the city needed to decide to either purchase it or have it immediately sold to a developer for a market value that exceeded our purchase price. That, in turn, would have resulted in a large condominium project at the very least. With borrowing rates at an all-time low, the Monona City Council opted to approve purchase of the property for \$8.6M and thereby control its future.

Since the agreement was announced, the city has received overwhelmingly positive reactions from the residents of Monona and beyond, the great majority of whom have said they want the property maintained as a public asset. Once the city assumes ownership, assuming continued public support for the preservation of the property as open space, a master planning process will begin. The process will be led by the city and a newly formed nonprofit, the Friends of San Damiano. It will involve the residents of Monona, as well as other potential community partners interested in investing in its future.

The investment of \$8.6M is a big lift for a city of 8,000, particularly at this time. But it's an exciting opportunity that will never come again. Between now and closing, the city and the Friends of San Damiano will be working to raise funds from a variety of sources, both public and private, to help defray the cost to the Monona taxpayer. The city has already had very positive discussions with both Dane County and the state regarding a variety of funding possibilities.

The role the Friends of San Damiano will play in the success of preserving this property will be critical. Led by former Monona Alder, Andrew Kitslaar, as president, the nonprofit will initiate a capital fundraising campaign to raise funds from private individuals and organizations, both to help with purchase of the property and for its development and operation as a financially sustainable, public space in the future. Generating significant private funds will be essential to the city's ability to develop the site for the enjoyment of all.

The city and the Friends have already received contributions from several individuals and businesses – thank you! They have also been contacted by others interested in donating. The Friends will have their website ready soon. In the meantime, those considering end of year donations, including securities, Required Minimum Distributions or via credit card, can reach out to Andrew directly at andrewkitslaar@gmail.com. Checks can be made out to Friends of San Damiano and mailed to them at P.O. Box 6647, Monona, WI 53716.

This is an extremely exciting time for the City of Monona and our community more broadly. It's important that we seize this moment and not let it pass. We hope you share our enthusiasm for protecting and preserving the San Damiano property. Once city owned, we know you'll enjoy the wonderful natural space and solitude it offers. It will be an amazing legacy to leave for future generations.