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## Politics mustn't implode the project

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Guest essayist

Government cannot grow an economy; only private enterprise can do that in our market-driven system. The public sector's role is to facilitate and guide private-sector development by creating a fair, functional business environment and by removing obstacles to growth.

Gov. Eliot Spitzer's promise of \$50 million for Midtown's demolition would remove a very significant obstacle to Rochester development. The private sector had reached an impasse on this complex problem. With market rents per square foot in the low double digits, neither renovation nor demolition made financial sense. For a less significant property, the buildings might properly have been padlocked and allowed to decay until some change in circumstance presented a solution that did not require taxpayers to foot the bill. Midtown Plaza, however, is rightly "too big to fail," a property so large and so central that it holds downtown's future hostage.

I am reminded, however, of what \$50 million might otherwise buy — better early-childhood and after-school programs, new research facilities at the University of Rochester or Rochester Institute of Technology, a different redevelopment project, perhaps lower taxes. Frankly, I can't do the math. I'd not have supported state tax dollars for PAETEC Park, but some of my soccer-loving friends would disagree.

Certainly we would like a more effective community process to make these decisions. The secrecy surrounding this announcement only enforces how poorly the process works. But this is an imperfect world. The governor has made an offer that lets us think anew about downtown. Let's make the most of the opportunity.

Let's encourage Mayor Bob Duffy and Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks to think about the Midtown and Renaissance Square projects together and, including the Sibley complex, recapture the center city as the community's meeting place, turning loose the entrepreneurial zest of our many creative, committed developers. This may be the time to revisit the scope of Ren Square and allow it to move forward. The performing arts component is still seriously short of funds, a problem not likely to be solved for us by the state in the wake of the Midtown announcement.

Announced renovations at Nazareth College Arts Center and the Eastman Theatre have addressed, albeit imperfectly, the needs of some of the arts community. Perhaps it is time to explore whether renovations at another existing venue, the Auditorium Theatre, might address the gap to be filled at Ren Square.

Let's hope we don't face years of inaction as political forces in both major parties attempt to prevent the other from scoring points for "their" projects, the "Republican" Ren Square and the "Democratic" Midtown Plaza. We have a historic opportunity for the entire community to come together to write a new chapter in Rochester's history book.

There have been many successes in downtown in the past decade. Together, these two initiatives will reinforce those successes and unleash the economic potential of the center city.

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