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Viewpoint: More at stake than money in South Shore relocation

Linda Wolfson South Bend Tribune

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Where should the South Shore Train station be relocated? After the discussion at Monday's South Bend Common Council meeting, it is clear that the mayor is intrigued by the downtown possibility, but wants to explore the feasibility of a \$100 million price tag; the railroad and the South Bend International Airport still haven't given up the idea of a west-side airport location; and there needs to be further opportunities for the public and the council to have input and influence this important decision.

Two other things ought to be clear. First, building a west-side location that disrupts the Ardmore neighborhood should remain permanently off the table. Second, as council member Regina Williams-Preston, D-2nd, pointed out, the Honeywell location should receive further serious consideration because of the important issue of equity.

Earlier this year, the city of South Bend commissioned a study to compare the advantages and disadvantages of five possible sites for the new station. The study compared a number of criteria, including cost (for construction and for operations and maintenance) and the estimated economic impact of the investment for each alternative. Construction costs varied widely. Building a station downtown has an estimated cost of \$102.3 million. The lowest estimated cost, \$23.9 million, was for the Honeywell site.

When the projected economic impact was analyzed, it was estimated that 77 percent of the capital costs of constructing the station at Honeywell would be recovered by

new property taxes paid over a 10-year period, assuming a mixed-use development plan. For downtown, only 42 percent of the capital costs would be recovered in 10 years.

Cost and economic outcomes are important criteria for city officials who make economic development decisions. However, an additional consideration was emphasized in the Prosperity NOW report, commissioned by the city in 2017. This report, “The Racial Wealth Divide,” compares the economic status of South Bend residents according to race. South Bend is 54 percent white, 27 percent African American, 13 percent Hispanic and 1.4 percent Asian American.

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A comparison of economic status finds that black households in South Bend have half the income of white households, have twice the unemployment rate and are two times more likely to have no liquid assets to be used in case of emergencies.

These financial inequities result from institutional racism that is embedded in our historical, political, cultural, social and economic systems and institutions. But the situation is not static. It responds to ongoing practices and policies that could increase or lessen the inequities that currently exist. As expressed in the Prosperity Now report, “it is important that racial economic equity is a frame used in all facets of its [South Bend’s] future economic planning to ensure the racial divide of the past is not continued into the future.”

Economic justice demands not only inclusion but equity, defined as just and fair inclusion. The need for racial economic equity should drive all policy decisions, including decisions about how the city invests its resources. Matt Zone, president of the National League of Cities, has written that “Cities need to be intentional about targeting their economic development programs, funding and policies at the specific populations and neighborhoods that are increasingly distant from the growth sectors of their regional and city economies.”

The west side of South Bend is an area of the city that has not experienced significant economic investment. It is also an area with a high concentration of black and brown residents. The Honeywell site is located just south of LaSalle Square, a formerly vibrant commercial strip destroyed by disinvestment and neglect. A major project like the South Shore station could spur the development of affordable housing construction and retail development in the area near LaSalle Square.

The Honeywell location also provides access to businesses on Lincoln Way West (via Bendix Drive) and on Western Avenue (via Olive Street), the main corridors joining the west side and downtown. Choice of the Honeywell site provides development potential not only for an area long in need of revitalization, but for a significant portion of our city. It is the best choice not only because it is the least expensive but because it addresses the urgent need for economic equity and the closing of South Bend's racial wealth divide.