**More on the XL Center**

**By State Senator Joe Markley**

In a recent New London Day op-ed, sports columnist Mike DiMauro voiced scornful dismay at my opposition to another quarter-billion dollar (or more) public expenditure on the failed Hartford civic center. It might alarm Mike, but I assert my right to question any state spending that reaches nine figures.

If someone can make a go of the facility, they have my best wishes, but I’d put no more taxpayer money into the effort. Painful as it might be to recognize that the investment was unwise, it would be worse to throw good money after bad, as government so often does, from force of habit and lack of public outrage.

Is it seriously suggested that another facelift would make the place work? Only so many events need such a space; those which do will use it as-is, if the price is right. As it stands now, the state is the most reliable renter, using the XL Center as an off-campus site for UConn sports.

That connection makes this white elephant a sacred cow. I know how disinclined politicians are to question anything involving our Huskies, but I honestly don’t see the danger in having the teams play all their home games at home. They have a nicer arena right on campus, with easy access and plenty of parking, not twenty-five miles down the highway.

But neither the practicalities of stadium finance nor the needs of college athletics are what divide me fundamentally from Mike DiMauro. We have a different sense of what makes a city work. In asking, ‘Do you go to downtown Hartford to see a game or concert at the XL Center or the breathtaking whimsy of Pratt Street?” Mike views the city as a tourist, not as a resident.

A suburbanite might drive downtown for a game, a concert, a favorite restaurant, or for work, or an afternoon of shopping, an evening bar-hopping—but a resident chooses the city for it all together, the thousands of doors you never enter as much as the hundreds you do. What you remember of a city where you’ve lived is the feel of the streets, activity and variety enjoyed on foot, people around you at all hours engaged in their lives, a sight so fascinating you can sit on the sidewalk with a drink and watch them go by, in any civilized place.

That essential urban quality was largely destroyed in many American cities by misguided efforts at renewal in the 1960s and 70s. Growing up in Southington, I saw the damage done right next door: Meriden, half-leveled for a hopeless downtown mall and dire public housing; New Britain, sliced to pieces by highways through its heart; and Hartford, assaulted by enormous projects which replaced mixed-use neighborhoods with desolate concrete plazas and huge single-use facilities.

Almost every day during the day, the XL Center is a dead zone, four city blocks of concrete bunker, the better part of a mile of sidewalk smack in the heart of the grid where nothing happens. What activity it generates is almost entirely nocturnal, vehicular, and confined to two spurts: a flow of traffic in, another out two hours later.

Great damage at enormous expense was inflicted on our cities by experts so sure they were right that they simply dismissed their critics, as Mike does. Their error was elegantly skewered back in 1961 by Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, though the point still hasn’t sunk in.

“Although it is hard to believe,” Jacobs wrote, “while looking at dull gray areas, housing projects or civic centers, the fact is that big cities are natural generators of diversity, and prolific incubators of new enterprises and ideas of all kinds. The diversity rests on the fact that in cities so many people are so close together, and among them contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets.”

It is essential to Connecticut that our cities come back; to that end we should recognize that monolithic projects like the Hartford civic center have done more harm than good. Rather than a charade of refinance, reorganization, and new construction, consuming hundreds of millions at the least in fruitless expense, we ought to face facts.