From: Maria Valenti
To: MayorQ; Bough, Andrea; Melissa Patterson Hazley; Robinson, Melissa; Vasquez, Mario; Platt, Brian; Decker, Forest; Public Testimony; Justis, Amy; Berry, Rita; Rea, Crispin
Subject: Columbus Park Rejects Ordinance # 240046
Date: Monday, January 22, 2024 9:15:45 AM

To: Mayor Quentin Lucas; City Manager Brian Platt; Councilwomen Robinson, Patterson Hazley, French, and Bough; Councilmen Rea, Curls, and Rogers; Director of Housing Blaine Proctor; Assistant City Manager Mario Vasquez; Neighborhood Services Director Forest Decker.

At a public meeting at the Northeast Kansas City Chamber, on Wednesday, January 17th, the words “fragile” and “vulnerable” came up many times, for both neighborhoods and individuals. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss HOME ARP funds for a single, citywide, non-congregate homeless shelter. Nearly 200 people (we ran out of Zoom capacity) from eight neighborhoods spoke about the fragility of their communities: chronic disinvestment; lack of public engagement and partnership; the consolidation of services; outdated infrastructure; crime; vacant buildings; and blight and garbage. We need resources to “fill up the well.” Instead, being of service leads to more services.

We are trapped in a pattern that has endured over 100 years.

In spite of assurances, there was no public engagement before the City awarded funds to Hope Faith via the introduction of Ordinance 240046. All communication was initiated by Councilwomen Robinson and Patterson Hazley. They hosted meetings in partnership with a coalition of Northeast leaders. No major HUD grant should be awarded without engagement, which must happen first, not after, decisions are made. Over $7 million is a significant amount to one provider. There is no plan for sustainable funding.

Details of this shelter have been sparse and constantly changing, including the number of rooms and bathrooms, and deadlines for operation. We were told it would be a large non-congregate shelter, only to learn the City asked for a waiver for private bathrooms for each room—which means this shelter is a congregate one. The grant includes expansion and fundraising. These future plans have not been disclosed, and we are surprised that federal taxpayer dollars can benefit the fundraising of a private, and apparently favored, non-profit organization.

As citizens, we do not know how to repair our neighborhoods, or work on common problems, when we are constantly misled.

This area hosts City Union Mission, ReStart, Bee Hive, ShelterKC, Hope Faith, Nourish KC, Morning Glory Ministries, Salvation Army, Cherith Brook, and more. We have the majority of public housing and refugee resettlement. There are clinics, sobriety programs, and sex trafficking outreach. Every year, buses and vans drop off men with backpacks in our neighborhoods. We routinely meet people from other states who come to Kansas City looking for help. This generosity, while laudable, is not equitable. It is not a shared commitment citywide. Spread out the funding throughout the city, rather than putting it all in one place.

Being of service has not led to prosperity or, in many cases, basic

functioning. Properties are boarded up or have burned down. Four neighborhoods in the Historic Northeast accounted for 17% of the arson cases from 2020-22. Violence is on the rise while police are stretched thin. We struggle to keep parks safe and clean, and sidewalks repaired. These are simple things, but our neighborhoods don't have them.

Neighborhoods struggle with the unintended consequences of good intentions. Service providers help people who are desperate as well those who are dangerous. Everyone deserves food, clothing, and health care. While this approach is humane, it has a serious downside. Criminal groups are sustained and emboldened. They prey upon vulnerable houseless individuals and upon neighborhoods. We do not have good tools to fight back.

Police cannot remove squatters without owner permission. Slumlords and speculators don't care, and that's if you can find them, since many live out of state or the country. Encampments regroup as soon as they are disbanded. When neighborhoods complain, we are blamed. We have all been given common sense advice that does not work; informed we are not competent (vacant buildings are our problem); gaslit (we are exaggerating); and accused of being intolerant or racist (even though the most violent group is, and always has been, white men).

The trickle-down economics of downtown investment have not reached our neighborhoods. We are dismayed by claims that major expenditures, such as a downtown baseball stadium, will somehow protect current affordable and public housing. Such promises are only that—promises—and we have been hearing them for decades. We need direct plans and action, with robust investment, and not assertions of future benefits that never arrive.

Grants for homelessness provide siloed solutions. They can have a transformative impact for individuals; the stories are compelling. What these efforts fail to acknowledge is their damage to neighborhoods. Charities promise that circumstances will improve for us all if they receive more money, more space, and more control. Unfortunately, our experience shows this assertion is not true. They often do not take responsibility outside their property line.

Homelessness is everywhere. Services should be everywhere.

We endorse dispersed non-congregate shelters with special support for women, families, LGBTQ+, and single Black men, who are disproportionately impacted by homelessness, underemployment, and lack of support.

Each community needs a way to assist people turned away from shelters—or who are too afraid to use them in the first place—because those people come to us. We lack the resources, knowledge, or staff to help. We have begged for outreach teams for years because we do not wish to call the police, and do not need to, most of the time. When we encounter an individual in mental health or addiction crisis, injured, ill, etc., we need experts to come here.

Please work with multiple providers to give them capacity to respond to complex RFPs, gain community trust, and deliver quality services at the right scale. A shelter that works for single men may not be a safe environment for women with children or youth aging out of foster care.

Paseo Gateway must be given the opportunity to succeed; we cannot attract

new business or housing investment if Paseo West is expected to bear the brunt of Kansas City's social problems. It is not acceptable for outsiders to drop off supplies at encampments, or on the streets, leaving garbage by the metric ton along every neighborhood bordering Independence Avenue. It is not fair for wealthy communities to write checks to our local charities, yet refuse to share their neighborhoods. They can build affordable housing and welcome service providers. Open a shelter. We already have—for the last century.

Urban renewal efforts are slow at best. That inattention not only costs Kansas City more residents and a more robust tax base, it destroys momentum and could make revitalization impossible. In the case of Columbus Park, urban renewal was stalled by unfortunate decisions by the City, LCRA, and Housing Authority. These decisions enabled speculation instead of development. Our contracts were signed around the same time as Beacon Hill, by some of the same parties. What's the difference? We did not get the same investment, incentives, or priority.

Now, it could be too late. It's a post-Covid world.

We had an ideal opportunity to build the housing Columbus Park has been asking for since the mid 1950s and, once again, with renewed efforts in the late 1990s. Today, we must contend with inflation, high lending costs, high labor costs, more expensive energy codes, and requirements from the Fire Department that make urban infill challenging, expensive, and unattractive to even the most stalwart infill developer. We lack an economic engine to boost the community. The public housing needs maintenance and improved management. Our history is crumbling as some of our multi-family buildings, held hostage by "investors," fall apart. Some of our residents are at risk of being displaced due to skyrocketing property taxes; speculators, meanwhile, pay a pittance. We need a long-term strategic plan that we have, so far, failed to figure out how to pay for.

This entrenched pattern is the reason you witness so much anger and frustration at public meetings. This latest episode is not new. It is yet another blow after too many. We don't expect you to know these facts. We ask you to provide real public engagement, and investment, in order to stop this cycle once and for all.

Columbus Park thanks Councilwomen Robinson and Patterson Hazley, and their aides, for their hard work and dedication. We appreciate Councilman Rea and Councilwoman French for attending our meeting and remaining informed.

Sincerely,

Maria Valenti