

September 24, 2017

AN OPEN LETTER

**TO: Elected Officials
Neighborhood Association Presidents and Members
Concerned Citizens of Kansas City, Kansas**

FR: Chester C. Owens, Jr.

RE: Northeast Kansas City, Kansas Master Plan

The process of implementing the Northeast Master Plan has begun. The comments in the attached document represent my distinct views that outlines some background and history of the Northeast area, which I believe is essential in knowing prior to implementation of such project.

For questions or comments, I can be reached via email as referenced below:

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“NO CHAIN IS STRONGER THAN ITS WEAKEST LINK”

Kansas City, Kansas will NEVER be the city it has the potential to be as long as what is known as the Northeast Area continues to be neglected and treated so unfairly by governmental entities that are supposed to treat all of its citizens equitably.

I have had the opportunity and privilege to work and participate in most areas of Kansas City, Kansas over the past fifty years, as a successful business owner AND as a dedicated and committed City Councilman, when the form of government changed in 1983.

The proposed Master Plan provides an opportunity for us to dismantle existing biases, stereotypes, and neglect, but we must FIRST understand what the REAL problems are. We who LIVE in the Northeast area have, over the past twenty-five years, witnessed up close and personal, what appears to be deliberate neglect, resulting in the rapid decline, of my community, which I do not hesitate to define as the “*exploited area.*”

Over the past forty years, we are aware of the millions of dollars poured into this area with no change. Rarely have the people who LIVE in and who LOVE this area been considered or even invited to become involved in the decision-making processes that affects us directly, but we are the ones who UNDERSTAND the area. Additionally, we are aware of the grant dollars that have been received and allocated for various initiatives and projects in our community; however, once again, no consideration or invitation has been extended for us to be hired to work on such projects. The agencies or government who receives the grants never really attempt to get to know the residents or anything, for that matter, regarding the culture of the people who reside here. It is as if we are irrelevant and invisible, and the programs over the years have been a colossal failure. There is a saying that if one does the same thing over and over, expecting to

obtain different results, the actions are to be considered insanity. What has occurred over the many years has been nothing short of insane.

We have also witnessed over the years the various studies by “*consultants*” or “*experts*” who earn thousands of dollars, but nothing really changes – besides the consultants becoming wealthier, and their reports gather dust on the shelves of City Hall or in an agency office, as the consultants and “experts” together, share in the bounty. This practice only fuels our frustration and raises our awareness of the inappropriateness of these actions. When you have been beaten down as much as we have, it is easy to lose hope, and when hope is lost, death is imminent and hopelessness always looms close by as a result of the inequities in our community. Fortunately, however, many residents of these areas are people who CHOOSE to live here and are tenacious in refusing to allow hopelessness to become the order of the day. So, please don’t be fooled by WHO you think we are. Many residents in this area have participated in studies and completed surveys, but NOTHING ever occurs in the aftermath. We who work **hard** in our neighborhood groups are often asked by non-participants, “But, what are you able to accomplish?” I do not believe City Government really understands or appreciates just what the neighborhood groups do in all areas of our city, nor does City Government understand the substantiality of our existence. This alone is a tragedy. For the record, let it be known that going forward, we are bound and determined to make sure that this plan is done right – decently and in order, and we will not be disregarded or invisible in the process. We will.....I will NOT go away. I will personally hold accountable those who deem themselves in charge. You can take that to the bank!

Much of what needs to be done initially to make a viable community and improve the quality of life in this area does not require a large infusion of dollars, nor do we need to rush to complete the plan. The process must begin with honest, meaningful discourse and inclusion. It

took a long time for us to get where we are, and we need to make sure that EVERYONE understands how we got here.

It has been proven over and over again that throwing money at a problem does not solve it. Stereotyping and advice from our “chosen leaders” who do not live in the Northeast Area, nor have any desire to, are two of the major factors that have contributed to the decline. There must be authentic two-way dialogue between the residents of the area and people of good will, to really begin the process. REAL listening must occur; and big egos must be “checked at the door.” There must be an admission of past inequities that must be acknowledged prior to moving forward. It may be a difficult journey, but one that is imperative to embark on.

The residents in this area struggle to have the same quality of life residents in other areas of the city have, and this should not have to be – the problems are overwhelming, but overall, we are not underlying cause of such problems.

In my neighborhood some years ago, we began a process of citing what some of the obstacles were that we faced while trying to achieve a good quality of life, and it is imperative that the term “good quality of life” is properly defined. We clearly documented several items and instances where neglect, hypocrisy, and just plain ‘ole meanness or abject evil occurred, causing major inequities and handicaps for us. At some point during this Master Plan process, we will share these specifics with the consultants, other neighborhood groups, and elected officials, that hopefully, will assist them in making the Master Plan work for all in the way that it should.

The Northeast Area, at one time, was thriving successfully, and was as viable as any other area of the city, albeit rigid segregation and the pangs and degradation of the heinous

crimes of Jim Crow. There was a strong business community, and any type of top-quality service was available. The schools were of the highest quality, second to none. The question should be asked, however, “What happened so we will not make the same mistakes again?” causing such a flourishing community to no longer exist.

I am often asked, and it is often stated, “Why are there so many vacant lots and deteriorated houses in the area? Why is there so much poverty in the area? Why is there so much crime in the area? Why is there such a sense of hopelessness in the area?” Until these questions are fully addressed and discussed with a dialogue, NOT a monologue, the problems will not be solved. Once the problem is accurately diagnosed, the solutions will readily come. I understand this is a long process, and that is why I stated there should be no rush to complete the process. However, if this is NOT done, the area will continue to decline and the problems will continue to be “*WORKED ON*,” but not solved, and it will, undoubtedly, affect other areas of the city. To build a few new homes or new apartment buildings and to add a few retail shops here and there, will not be a long-term solution. The quality of life issue must FIRST be addressed, and I am certain OUR definition of a “good quality of life,” is no less than yours.

The comments I make here today are shared by many. I continue to travel in many areas of the city and remain informed on issues by attending and participating in discussions that affect the city and the county. I continue to work with and engage young people and LISTEN, REALLY listen to their concerns....something that many agencies do not do – that is to listen authentically, without holding on to the notion that the “young people do not carry valid opinions.” I have so many of them tell me, “I can’t wait until I get grown and move OUT of Wyandotte County.” Folks, we must reverse that thought. Why do YOU think they feel this

way? The vast majority of people will never tell city officials or even the “chosen leaders” what they REALLY think for fear of intimidation and retaliation, and believe me, it DOES occur.

I would like to make it very clear that my comments are not politically motivated; they are not threatening nor are they race-based. Hopefully, as we move along, we will see things only as what is RIGHT, and what is WRONG....

Additionally, I do not want to make it sound as if some of the residents of the Northeast Area have not participated in the decline, because we have, and I hope as we go along, all of the issues will surface in a “raw” way and will be discussed openly and honestly.

I plan to be an active participant in this process, and I pledge that I am only one person, but this process will not be “*business-as-usual*.” The stakes are too high and too many human lives hang in the balance – and that includes our future generations to come. It is virtually criminal what is happening to many of our senior citizens – many who have paid their taxes – just like you; raised their children – just like you – did the right thing, and now, in the twilight of our lives, we face insult, neglect, intimidation, rejection, degradation, etc., from many people who have benefitted from our labor and sacrifice.

I have at least two studies that were conducted on the Northeast Area that was merely a waste of time and money that provided us with false hope, but probably fattened the pockets of the consultants and other unknown entities. I ask you to search your consciousness and your hearts regarding whether or not YOU are in that number – directly or indirectly.

The Northeast Master Plan will require long range vision and thinking outside of the box – by first admitting that “there IS a box. We can be and MUST be original and authentic in our thinking and in our action. We must be visionaries endowed with integrity and honest

wherewithal to affect much needed change for the betterment of ALL – not just a select few.

Helen Keller said it best: “The only thing worse than being blind is to have sight, but no vision.

We must not just do what is popular – we must do what is RIGHT.

Finally, I am looking forward to this journey that hopefully, will not only lead to real, positive change, but can be a model for other cities in the country. Let’s not just “talk the talk....let’s WALK the talk....” The time is NOW. Without fear or intimidation, I am honestly committed.....are you?

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