

August 31, 2020

“Not Welcomed: The Art of Displacement”

Dear Community,

As generationally home-grown natives to this great city of Milwaukee, we humble, locally and loyally-invested, resilient residents and business owners of the 5 Points Neighborhood, take our community and civic responsibility quite seriously. As evidenced throughout history, and even to this day, smaller societies, like our family and small business oriented neighborhood, are consistently subjected to pillaging, bullying, and surprise attacks by larger acquisitive, self-serving factions, motivated not by cultural preservation and harmonious integration for an improved quality of life, but by individualized wealth-accumulation through imperialistic domination. The result, the subjugation of a population and erasure of peace-of-mind and existence for that small, historic, self-sustaining community.

Given the absence of precursory communication or community engagement, when we unexpectedly received a simultaneous welcome letter, listing amounts to be tacked onto our already high taxes, and city-sponsored public hearing notice about the expansion of Milwaukee's and Wisconsin's and, unexplainably, one of the nation's largest business improvement districts, the Historic Martin Luther King Jr. Bid #8 (“MLK BID”), into our area, we were more than caught off guard and taken aback. The dearth of communication and inclusion from those who would be the most affected by this expansion is indicative of the city governance we have been receiving in this area for some time now. A lack of proper representation for and input from our residents and business owners has led to a level of frustration akin to warding off bullies. This bullying was extended into the City Planning Commission hearing held on August 17, 2020.

If one would review the publicly recorded transcript of this hearing (http://milwaukee.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=2406), one would observe the grave disparity in manner and weight that the 5 Points community members and other areas wrapped into the proposed territory expansion were given in testifying compared to incumbent MLK BID constituents, who were, in most cases, active board members of the bid. Of the six property owners from the proposed expanded BID territory who testified, five were vehemently in opposition to the expansion with one poignantly asking, why the MLK BID would even think to expand during the pandemic, forcibly adding on an additional financial burden to the small neighborhood businesses already struggling to stay afloat. Instead of responding to this question or any other counterarguments concerning gentrification, and hushing the input from residents as invalid, the hearing was flooded with a barrage of pro-expansion endorsements by present and past MLK BID board members and entities within the existing bid boundaries. The hearing was the grossest display of conflict of interest and corruption and analogous to staging a rubber-stamped “democratic” vote in which the imperialistic Commissioners allow its colonizers' votes for invasion to outweigh the votes of the indigenous people of said invaded land. We the indigenous black residents and businesses of the 5 Points community had our

voices drowned out by the self-serving external factions who stood to gain the most from this expansion.

In far too many occasions in the wake of the MLK BID #8, the adjacent property owners have been subjected to severely rising taxes that have threatened to and have physically displaced the long-standing indigenous black home and business owners of the area. One has only to point to the Brewers Hill and Halyard Park neighborhoods to see clearly what lies ahead for our affordable 5 Points neighborhood as the BID expands.

On a personal note, as a financially-vulnerable black artist, I utilized the city's Art and Resource Community Hub ("ARCH") artist housing program in conjunction with my own life savings to become an embedded mainstay in my childhood neighborhood through the development of 5 Points Art Gallery & Studios. This black woman-owned artist safe-space, created for increased representation and collection of artwork produced by artists of color, as well as for visual, culinary, and performative art business development, has become a notable community staple. It has come to my attention that my earnest neighborhood reinvestment project has been wantonly and exploitatively used against me and my neighbors in the most classic cases of gentrification. In secluded real estate development meetings held by the MLK BID, Bader Philanthropies, Alderwoman Milele Coggs and more, my community reinvestment project has been promoted to lure external investors, threatening to displace not only my cherished neighbors, but me as well, from an area that we call home. I haven't even owned 5 Points Art Gallery & Studios for two years and have had calls to sell and am now being subjected to the MLK BID's expansion. I see the trajectory of the corridor and the surrounding area as one that is quickly eliminating the power and the traces of those indigenous to the area.

During the public hearing, the MLK BID and bid expansion supporters inadvertently revealed their promised plans of bringing American Family Insurance to the neighborhood. I would hope that American Family's CEO, Jack Salzwedel, a self-proclaimed Black Lives Matter advocate and ally and corporate steward of healthy community reinvestment, not be in alliance and support of the systemically racist tactics of redlining and displacement of black and brown communities being enacted through the MLK BID's expansion. Society's current equilibrium is tilted heavily towards a decimation of black lives and it's not only as a result of police brutality. Displacement and the decimation of families and neighborhood-based businesses via gentrification is equally brutal and inhumane. We all have bellowed the slogan "Black Lives Matter"; but to continue to aid in the pushing of our community down the slippery slope of gentrification shows as much disregard for black lives as those with a badge have unfortunately shown.

5 Points does not welcome the Historic MLK Bid #8's expansion.

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5 Points Art Gallery & Studios
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