



**West Bank Business Association**

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Mayor Jacob Frey,  
350 South 5th Street, Room 331  
Minneapolis, MN 55415

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Mayor Frey,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with members of the business community.

Eight years ago, when I began my role, I set out with businesses and residents to shift the way processes historically worked on the West Bank. We wanted our neighborhood to be one that was more *proactive* and less *reactive*. We wanted to work alongside the city to shape and guide the changes happening in our neighborhood, instead of existing in reactive conflict.

For years our residents, businesses, and their staff dutifully served on boards, committees, and commissions. People with limited time and resources graciously gifted their time to have a voice in the democratic process and serve their city.

From the Business Association's perspective, we have a healthy relationship with the city of Minneapolis. We serve as an administrator for many city grant programs and work together productively on local projects, from lane changes to public art.

When a new development was announced for Lot A without input from the community in which it would be placed, it came as a surprise to many in the business community that have been so actively involved in the neighborhood and with the city.

Since the public announcement about this development, I have been working alongside our neighbors and businesses to respond to a crisis. 200+ businesses and their staff, many of which already operate with razor-thin margins in an increasingly demanding economy, have been told that the neighborhood's single largest public parking resource will be severed. They have been also told, repeatedly, they have no say in how a city-owned lot will be utilized.

This is problematic.

**Our city government is a democratic institution.**

A democratic, community-led process is not one that unilaterally decides something and drives that decision top-down. Elected officials are in office to *work alongside* the community, and the city is not following its own process for redevelopment.

Council Member Warsame has cited a campaign pledge to build a mall as the basis of support. But an election promise does not replace engagement with the community most impacted by this proposal. Many from the West Bank / Cedar-Riverside community (those that live, work, and operate businesses in this neighborhood) are being ignored or told they have no say in this. Members of our business community are telling me that they have been told directly by CM Warsame that there is no use expressing any opinions, and that it's a "done deal." How does this nurture honest engagement?

### **There has been a lack of transparency**

Why was there no local community process prior to the announcement, even and especially with those most critically affected by this effort?

Why was there no effort to engage the community beforehand, through existing organizations funded by the city, like Cedar-Riverside NRP, the West Bank Business Association, and others who exist to serve as a resource expressly for these situations? This lack of outreach, coupled with the insistence that there is nothing stakeholders can do, exacerbate the feeling of mistrust.

At our meeting you said that sometimes an idea has to be put forward, so people have something to respond to. We are responding, but the businesses feel they are not being heard.

Our community has repeatedly asked for the feasibility studies, parking studies, and research that went into this decision. I have not received this information from the city. Not only is that in violation of the Government Data Practices Act, it continues the breach of trust currently being experienced by the community. This letter marks our fourth written request for documentation and studies in the past six weeks, in addition to several in-person requests. It perpetuates the problematic perception that this is a top-down process.

We were told that it is not traditional to include seats in the RFP process for local stakeholders, and that it is an internally staffed committee and review process. We believe allowing local stakeholders involved in this process will add on-the-ground insight and an element of transparency and balance of power in a process that so far, has been lacking in both.

### **Parking is still a critical resource for the West Bank.**

Yes, we have two light rail stations.

Yes, we have bus transit.

Yes, we are feverishly working to build up traffic from these resources to these businesses so they can be less reliant on cars.

But we're not there yet.

West Bank businesses, including cultural assets like the Cedar Cultural Center and Mixed Blood Theatre, have customer bases that absolutely rely on parking. During events like shows, weddings, and concerts, and even just on regular evenings, the minimal parking resources in the neighborhood fill up.

The city stated in past conversations that there are 2,300 parking spots in a half-mile radius. We push back on this figure as wildly unrealistic, as this half-mile radius does not take into consideration barriers like a river, several freeways, and a deeply cut Washington Avenue trench - all of which isolate our neighborhood from resources like these.

Midtown Global Market has been referenced as a possible model for this project. That development has been successful, in large part, because of the hard work the Neighborhood Development Center does to program, staff, and support it. The Midtown Global Market is also *surrounded* by parking, which fills up regularly during events.

We back the city on its broader goal to reduce vehicular traffic throughout Minneapolis, and to promote more sustainable forms of transportation. But unless the city wants to critically wound the small businesses and cultural assets that it professes to support, we need to know that the city genuinely supports and has plans to help existing businesses.

Promoting mass transit, biking, and pedestrian friendly options takes time. Prudence requires that the need for parking is diminished before parking resources are depleted, lest we risk losing more cultural resources and cornerstone businesses - the gentrification the city says it wants to avoid.

### **Our approach to avoiding displacement and gentrification**

With all of this, it may surprise you to hear that parking is not the top priority for businesses in the neighborhood. Annual surveys and outreach to the businesses on the West Bank show that the top priority is *retention*.

As we watch neighboring districts shift dramatically away from locally-owned storefronts, our businesses are taking note. They do not want to be met with the same fate, and we have been working with them to prevent displacement.

There is a legitimate fear among the businesses that these types of investments will trigger, not prevent, gentrification. To avoid gentrification, which the city says is an aim, we need to recognize the root causes of displacement. We recognize that depleting critical resources such as access and parking are triggers for displacement. Access to the businesses for loading vehicles and parking are pieces of this puzzle, but not the only ones.

Our work is focused on providing investments that also keep people in place and mitigate the effects of displacement. District marketing, technical assistance, creative place-keeping, individual business support, and capacity building. In the past five years, we have had an excellent retention rate among our businesses in the neighborhood. In the face of any development, we encourage the city to dedicate additional resources to priorities like these to help offset and mitigate displacement, as well as to devote funds to construction mitigation.

As a value, the business association works to make sure our members, particularly members of color, are engaged and represented is a core part of our strategy - from the beginning. "Nothing for us without us."

Please, pause this process. People support what they help create.

Please work to rebuild trust in the neighborhood before moving ahead with the proposal. A good way to begin is to commit the resources needed to ensure businesses aren't displaced along the way, and to engage the community in authentic, honest conversations.

The business association's requests are:

- To pause this process so that authentic, community-led engagement can be conducted on the purposes and final uses of this neighborhood resource,
- To share the reports, studies, and research that went into this proposal,
- To commit sufficient resources towards anti-displacement efforts both during and after construction so that **not a single business is unwillingly displaced as a result of this effort,**
- And to give local stakeholders, not exclusively city staff, a seat at the table in the RFP-decision-making process.

Our neighborhood has already been marginalized repeatedly. Please give time for local community input on this lot, which is the single last biggest developable parcel in an under-resourced, under-served area.

A more robust and transparent community engagement process can only help build strength in whatever does wind up moving forward in this space.

Thank you for your continued communication, and I look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JS', is centered on a light gray background.

Jamie Schumacher  
*Executive Director*