

November 17, 2017

Response to comments made at the C.H.-U.H. School Board meeting on November 6, 2017.

From the start of the movement to establish the Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Campus, the community organizations that call Coventry home have tried to be honest, positive and productive in our dealings with the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District, the City of Cleveland Heights and residents. We set out with the hope that together we would demonstrate a successful public-private partnership working for the greater good. We have tried to understand everyone's concerns, to present options that benefit the entire community and to live up to the name P.E.A.C.E., People Enhancing a Community's Environment.

Upon watching the video of the November 6 CH-UH Board of Education meeting, our hopes wavered. Our hearts sank with each inaccurate statement and careless insult. The same evening that we met with city leaders and the Heights Library board in the hopes of working out a solution agreeable to all stakeholders, our school district leaders were discussing whether the current tenants of Coventry should be called "squatters," musing about boarding up the building and even joking about tearing it down. This all played out in front of a mural that read "Developing a Stronger Community Through Unity."

The school district still owns the property, but BOE members have shown little interest in the P.E.A.C.E. Campus vision. Only one member showed up when we presented the plan at a Cleveland Heights City Council meeting on September 11, and invitations to join us for the community meeting we hosted on September 27 were declined. We offered to present to the board in October, but the response indicated that they didn't see the point, given their tentative agreement to turn the property over to the city.

Regarding the misleading discussion at the November 6 meeting:

It's true that most of the current tenants have not signed the month-to-month leases we received in the summer. Those leases were supposed to be accompanied by a memorandum of understanding from the city, confirming what we were told in July about staying in the building through June 2018. We still have not received that memorandum. But all tenants associated with the P.E.A.C.E. Campus proposal have continued to pay rent. So no, we are not "squatters," and we deeply resent the use of that word in a public forum. We have always acted in good faith with the school district, even after suddenly learning in May that our leases were void and we could be forced to vacate with just 30 days' notice. We have worked hard to serve our constituencies and to make the Coventry building an asset to the entire community. When elected officials carelessly toss out terms that imply wrongdoing, it is not only hurtful, but damaging. Our reputations are our most valuable assets.

It's true that the rents are "below market rate." The rates were set by the school district, and no current tenant was ever asked to pay more. Several organizations are key partners with the school district and provide services at no charge. More important, however, it's a false equivalency. The school district does not (and should not) provide the same level of service that a commercial landlord would. To be very clear, we are not complaining — we all knew the deal when we moved in. The Coventry building is a special case. The tenants were recruited by the school district, with help from the city, in accordance with the findings of the 2008 Coventry Study Committee, which evaluated reuse options and noted that housing arts and community-service nonprofits was popular with residents.

But the most alarming comments came at the end of the discussion when a board member indicated that emptying and boarding up the Coventry building is a real possibility, and a school district official suggested tearing it down. This elicited laughter.

Not once in the 13-minute discussion did anyone even acknowledge the detailed proposal put forth months ago by the tenants and their partners, a proposal that takes into account the priorities of all stakeholders — school district, city, library, tenants and their clients, and residents.

We truly understand the board's frustration, but in turn they must try to imagine ours. We're told by the city that it can't act on our proposal because of "an understanding" — there is no formal agreement — with the school board to issue an RFQ (request for qualifications) to private developers. We're told by the school board that it can't even listen to our proposal because of its understanding with the city.

Now it's mid-November and we're just a few weeks away from the tenants, who are trying to plan for 2018, needing to decide whether they can continue to wait, or must begin finding new homes. There is no guarantee that any of these groups — which employ 200 people, most of them Heights residents, and serve thousands more — will resettle in Cleveland Heights.

We understand that there are many details to address regarding the Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Campus proposal. But the choice before our elected and appointed officials is pretty straightforward: Do we try to preserve and build on something that's already working and enjoys broad community support, or do we let it fall apart in hopes that someone comes forward with a better, as-yet-unspecified plan?

Our vision allows for the transfer of ownership more quickly than if an RFQ process moves forward, and has received strong community support. But unless the school board and city both agree to forego the RFQ process, or at the very least agree to extend our occupancy through June 2019 so that we can submit our plan to the RFQ, then they will run the clock out on our organizations. We will have no choice but to leave, and the hope of Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Campus will be extinguished.

But we remain hopeful and determined to move forward in a spirit of partnership, progress and respect.

You can watch video of the November 6 meeting here. (<http://www.chuh.org/2017MeetingVideos.aspx>) Discussion of Coventry begins at about 1:13:00, and runs about 13 minutes. We encourage you to watch it.

To learn more about the Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Campus proposal, please visit: <http://coventrypeacecampus.org/about/our-proposal/>.

Signed,

The organizations of Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Campus

Ensemble Theatre	FutureHeights	Coventry P.E.A.C.E. Park
Lake Erie Ink	Reaching Heights	
Family Connections	ARTFUL	