



UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS

Mayor Michael Dylan Brennan
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September 23, 2024

VIA EMAIL

Heights Libraries Board of Directors
Lee Road Library
2345 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118

RE: Coventry PEACE Campus Building

Dear Members of the Heights Libraries Board of Directors:

On August 16, 2024, I spoke with Heights Libraries Director Nancy Levin by phone (she was kind enough to reach out), and she asked (and I am paraphrasing, this is merely the gist) whether as mayor I had any ideas or thoughts about what the cities of University Heights and Cleveland Heights could do to help resolve the Coventry PEACE situation. And while I shared my support for Coventry PEACE, its tenants, and its mission, I did not then have any ideas ready to share as to what if anything our cities could do to help. After all, and as I did point out then, when it comes to facilities issues, University Heights has been focused on replacing its own facilities. As we also discussed, Cleveland Heights has facilities issues to address as well. I expressed the importance of the Libraries finding a way to fulfill the commitment it undertook when it acquired the Coventry PEACE property in 2018 and said that if I had any other ideas to assist in that regard, I would share them.

Accordingly, I am writing this letter.

Since that call, I have taken occasion to consider the situation. It has been years since I was on the board of FutureHeights, one of the core tenants. Simultaneously, I was freshly off the board and newly the mayor when Heights Libraries acquired and took on the former Coventry Elementary School. I did not expect Heights Libraries to intervene, but I welcomed it. It felt like a *deus ex machina*. Heights Libraries was freshly off the successful reopening of the University Heights branch. The ribbon cutting was my first event as mayor-elect. Both I and the community loved what the Libraries accomplished there. And I thought that Heights Libraries would have the Midas Touch to turn this Coventry PEACE situation into gold.

Six years later, the situation is not golden. The situation is unresolved.

This situation affects all of us in the Heights. While Coventry PEACE may not lie within the municipal boundaries of University Heights, University Heights residents funded in part the construction of Coventry Elementary School, University Heights residents work at organizations

that are housed in the former school building, and University Heights residents participate in many of the programs and activities that these organizations offer.

Over the years, I have generally (if distantly) been aware of the situation between Heights Libraries and the Coventry PEACE tenants. As a supporter of arts and culture, I have been hopeful of an outcome that ensures stability and security for long-term planning and programming for the organizations. I believed that Heights Libraries was in the best position to work with the tenants towards that outcome.

This situation caught my closer attention when I learned in May 2024 of the non-renewal of the tenants' leases. I then participated in a community survey on the future of the building, and attended a library board meeting on August 5 at which Coventry PEACE Campus gave a presentation to the board. The reported accounts of the information presented at the board meeting didn't square with what I had observed, and my concern grew.

It is my understanding that when Heights Libraries purchased the property (including the parking lot, playground/park, and building) from the CH-UH City School district, it had the intention of temporarily taking on stewardship of the building in order to allow time for the nonprofit organizations to set up and operate independently. Much has happened, including a global pandemic that caused unprecedented upheaval in our lifetimes. I understand if it is now the case that the library sees that it has "done its time" and is now seeking to be relieved of the burden of the building and associated issues. Nevertheless, I have long held that the Heights Libraries took this on and at minimum has a responsibility to leave it better than it found it. Displacement or eviction of the tenants and demolition of the building is not better; it is far worse. As an elected official serving the public, serving our shared constituencies, I cannot stand by and watch this happen.

If the above statement seems incomplete or unfair to any stakeholder, please set that aside now. I do not intend to recite a complete statement of facts or determine here the truth of any facts which may be in dispute. Regardless of how we all got here, it is in the community's interest to find a solution that enables the building's nonprofit arts and culture organizations to not only survive but thrive. Coventry PEACE is a shared community asset. I credit Heights Libraries for recognizing that in 2018 when it intervened in the situation.

As a city that recently created a limited purpose Community Improvement Corporation to solve a specific issue on private property to facilitate its redevelopment (The University Heights Parking Garage Community Improvement Corporation which will serve to help facilitate the redevelopment of University Square and towards that end, hold title to a parking garage), I know that government entities can take the lead to create public-private partnerships to foster economic development. The Coventry PEACE situation is not the same, but it is also not altogether different. The building needs investment, but it is structurally sound. Several

governmental and philanthropic programs exist that could bring the necessary funds for improvements. We need to bring the subject matter experts together to create a legal and governing structure that can best facilitate that process, rather than either (a) forcing nonprofit entities to do so on their own, or (b) requiring Heights Libraries alone to find the solution.

As a community that values arts and culture and is proud that we are home to many artists and nonprofit organizations, we need an arts center, such as the one at Coventry PEACE. At a minimum, we—the cities, the library, and the organizations—should **work together to explore a new structure** that will create a path for independent operation of the building so that it can continue to be a treasured community asset for a long time to come.

I propose that Heights Libraries, Cleveland Heights, and University Heights work together to find a way forward for Coventry PEACE. On the onset I am prepared to devote city staff time and guidance towards this work.

I often say that as a mayor I don't get to pick and choose our problems or crises. Yet somehow as elected officials we have chosen thus far mostly to stay out of this situation. Until now. I thank the members of Cleveland Heights City Council and Mayor Kahlil Seren for their leadership in recently initiating the beginning of a public discussion of this issue at their last council meeting. I thank Council President Tony Cuda, Vice Mayor Michele Weiss, and Director Nancy Levin for meeting to discuss the situation at a time when I had COVID and could not engage in that discussion. And I thank Heights Libraries, its director and board, for recognizing early on the importance of Coventry PEACE, and for being willing to take it on and bring it along thus far when the cities weren't ready or willing to do more.

We truly are all in this together. We should work together to leave no one behind. If there is a solution to be found to ensure the long-term viability of Coventry PEACE, and I am confident there is one, let us find it together.

Sincerely yours,



Michael Dylan Brennan, Mayor

CC: Nancy Levin, Director, CH-UH Public Library
Kahlil Seren, Mayor, Cleveland Heights
Tony Cuda, President, Cleveland Heights City Council
Michele Weiss, Vice Mayor, University Heights City Council
Krista Hawthorne, President, Coventry PEACE
Cleveland Heights and University Heights City Councils