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November 29, 2018

Linda Elmer

Historic Preservation Commission

City of Milwaukee

Dear Linda,

I was told that you were the person to whom to address this letter of dissent for the Washington Park Historic Designation Application, file number 181146. Thank you for your time and please pass this letter on to members of the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission in advance of Monday's commission meeting.

Just three weeks ago, we at the Urban Ecology Center learned that an application had been filed with the City Historic Preservation Commission to designate the whole of Washington Park as an historic district. We learned of this when State Representative Evan Goyke reached out to us inquiring about a potential letter of support for the application assuming that we, as a significant stakeholder in Washington Park, were aware of its submission. The fact that we were not was a surprise to us both. I immediately reached out to Guy Smith, Director of Milwaukee County Parks. He, too, was unaware of this application. It seemed especially peculiar to not include the landowner in such an application. Director Smith did in time receive in certified mail the application, which he subsequently forwarded to us at the Urban Ecology Center.

The application was submitted by Michael Carriere. We first became aware of Mr. Carriere a couple of months ago when he wrote an article for Urban Milwaukee that is highly critical of Urban Ecology Center's plans to build a beautiful new center in Washington Park, together with a new parking lot and access road, repair of pedestrian bridges, and restoration of native habitat. We immediately reached out to Mr. Carriere and our lead Land Steward met with him and explained what we sought to do and achieve in Washington Park. We thought we had addressed his concerns. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Carriere came to a well-attended public meeting at our Washington Park center sponsored by Milwaukee County Supervisor Marcelia Nicholson. The focus of the meeting was the Restoration Plan Urban Ecology Center has been negotiating with Milwaukee County Parks for the last few years. Mr. Carriere got to see and hear firsthand overwhelming support for the Restoration Plan and the entire project from neighbors, Park visitors, local politicians, and representatives of Milwaukee County. Mr. Carriere asked no questions and expressed no concerns at the public meeting. It was a few weeks later that we first heard about the petition he filed with this Commission. The previous article, timing and quiet method of submittal makes it appear as if Mr. Carriere is perhaps using this process to try to derail our project. This is concerning to us.

The public meeting held by Supervisor Nicholson was the culmination of two years of planning work which included numerous public input sessions to determine a plan of action to improve both the building that we currently lease alongside the Washington Park Lagoon as well as the nearby crumbling infrastructure (paths, walkways, parking lot and bridges). Our plans also include adding native plant diversity to specific areas of Washington Park, all with community member input and volunteer services. This planting work is done with approval from the Milwaukee County Parks professional Landscape Architect who was part of the master planning process for Washington Park in 2001. At each of these meetings, people were highly encouraged

to share their views and perspectives. They did and we listened. The building design that we have, designed by the lead architect of the 2001 plan for Washington Park, is the outcome of this extensive work. All through this process we have received nothing but overwhelming support from the community. We were in fact invited into Washington Park by this very community that we serve, and most who are now employed at the Washington Park Urban Ecology Center hail from the community. We have now been in Washington Park for over 10 years. Never once, during all of this time, was this historic designation brought up. While all this planning work was going on, we were also negotiating key legal documents, including a long-term lease for the property the new building will be located on, with Milwaukee County. These negotiations have been going on for two years. In the last several months, our plans have been scrutinized at public hearings before the Milwaukee County Parks Committee and the Milwaukee County Finance Committee. In July, the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, after extensive discussion, preliminarily approved our proposed project for Washington Park. Never once, during all this public scrutiny, was this historic designation brought up.

I share all of this as context for our surprise as well as our confusion. While our project has been vetted through numerous community engagement sessions, with authentic input from hundreds of neighbors and community members, this application that is in front of you has had none of this. In fact, it appears to be intentionally secretive based on the fact that the key stakeholders in the Park were not even informed of it being crafted. Why?

We have intentions of investing upwards of \$12 million in Washington Park as part of this project, bringing tens of thousands of visitors that prior to our existence would never even set foot in the Park, yet it appears that a small group of people, some whom I call friends, are attempting to put up, perhaps unintentionally, what might be a prohibitory road block to our work and maybe even our very presence in the Park.

Am I overstating the case? I honestly don't know, and that is where the problem lies. We have not had the time to understand exactly what the ramifications of historic designation mean for the Park, our building and our work, yet today you all will make a decision that might stop our efforts. There are so many questions. As a practical matter, what can we do or not do to the current Boathouse – a building described in the present application as a non-contributing building – if the Park is designated as historic? Will the current design of the proposed new building, something we have been working on diligently for two years, need to be completely redone? Who will pay for this? Who makes this decision? And what do they base it on? Will the building need to emulate a building from the period that this application states as the time of historic importance between 1891 and 1900? If this is the case, do we also need to demolish the historic icon of the Blatz Temple of Music, the current Harley Band Shell, as well? It was built in 1938.

Do we support the work of the famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted? Of course we do! Our current work in the Park and our proposed restoration of native habitat in the Park have been mischaracterized as ignoring his work when in fact I can make a legitimate argument that our organization has exposed more people, young and old, to his genius than any other organization in the city. Our naturalization of the Park is, in fact, inspired by his work. His dedication to the variety of experience, the diversity of plants and the views in a park are exactly what we aspire to accomplish. We need this natural diversity to offer the vibrant outdoor laboratory that our program requires. Will this good work we are doing need to stop? and if so, why? We are the one group in the park that has the capacity to bring in large investments that the park desperately needs. Investment, mind you, that can include additional methods and practices that can enhance the public's education and experience with Frederick Law Olmsted's genius if we were to work together on this. Warren Manning, Olmsted's protege, who truly did the planting plans for the park was a strong advocate for native plantings. We can pretty much assure you that neither he, nor Frederick Law Olmsted, created a park that was largely monoculture Kentucky blue grass as it is today, yet this is what seems to be desired by the application, all adding to our confusion.

Something that seems to be overlooked in all the discussion about "Olmsted's vision" is his commitment to education. He was a social reformer who believed a true democracy could prosper only on the foundation of formal education, including outdoor education. That commitment aligns perfectly with our commitment to provide environmental education to thousands of school children in the Washington Park community. The primary purpose of our Restoration Plan is to expand our "outdoor classroom" for the school children who come to UEC,

for some of them, for their only experiences with environmental education. And, with our new and larger building, we will be able to increase the number of public schools we serve from 14 to 33. All of these schools will be within a 2-mile radius of our new building, in some of Milwaukee's most underserved neighborhoods. That means that each year we will take thousands of students out into Washington Park to study trees, flowers, butterflies, dragonflies, birds, frogs, the water cycle, nutrient cycling, etc. We need additional areas of restored native habitat so we can provide this hands-on education. We want to do this restoration in areas near the new building so that our school kids can easily walk there, especially the youngest students with the smallest legs. We are very concerned about the impact of the application now before you on our educational programs.

Our work connects urban people to nature and each other. That is our mission. I believe Frederick Law Olmsted, were he alive, would support this mission. The tens of thousands of visitors to our center and the Park increases community pride and the tremendous positive activity reduces crime. The Urban Ecology Center Model is now attracting people from all over the world to Washington Park. It would be a shame if this designation, unintentionally perhaps, forced us to move to a different park.

Our intent is to preserve and enhance the integrity of the Park with our work. We have already gone through great strides to make this happen. We have an open, transparent, community-driven process in everything we do. Instead of this historic designation, why not have all those who support this work join our advisory team for our work? We have made this invitation and we welcome this. We would love to celebrate Frederick law Olmsted in our building; why not have this team join us in this effort?

Our fear is that if this designation passes, every single time we remove grass to plant a native plant with volunteers (and we plant thousands of plants each year), we will need to come to this Commission to obtain your approval. While we respect your role and your purpose, is this what you seek?

We do not wish to be seen as a group that is against an historic designation, especially related to a man whom we admire and emulate, but the context and the timing and the secrecy of this application, together with all of the unknown consequences that the designation will or might have on our project, forces us to ask the commission to decline the request.

We think there is a better way to achieve the goals that this designation wishes to achieve. Applying the "Frederick Law Olmsted lens" over the park is important and a good idea. We welcome doing more with this. As stated, we have invited and will continue to invite those who are most knowledgeable and concerned about this onto our advisory committees for the work that we do. However, if the "Frederick Law Olmsted lens" is the only lens applied to the park (which is our primary concern here with this official designation), and if the Urban Ecology Center's mission of connecting people in cities to nature within Washington Park becomes substantially onerous because of it, this may push the existence of the Urban Ecology Center out of Washington Park. It is not clear if this is the intent of the applicant and supporters of this designation, but we know it is not the desire of the community at large.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Leinbach". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

Ken Leinbach