

Date: Monday, June 2nd, 2025

To: City of Milwaukee Common Council / Department of City Development

RE: Public Statement on the Growing MKE Plan

Dear Community Planning Commission,

My name is Dynasty Ceasar, and I am writing to offer reflections on the *Growing MKE* Plan based on my ongoing involvement in the engagement process.

I supported in organizing community meetings, reviewed public documents, and contributed independent research to help better understand the historical, economic, and policy factors informing the City's planning efforts. I have also collaborated with other engaged residents and neighborhood-based organizations working to make sense of how proposed zoning changes intersect with concerns around affordability, tax pressures, and displacement. Collaborators in this effort included Metcalfe Community Bridges, Midtown Neighborhood Alliance, and Walnut Way Conservation Corp. We also partnered with 5 Points Neighborhood Association, Milwaukee Community Land Trust, Sherman Park Neighborhood Association, and several South Side to identify concerns and develop strategies. These partnerships helped create shared understanding across neighborhoods and encouraged more coordinated dialogue around land use, housing, and zoning reform.

It's important to recognize that the adjustments made to the *Growing MKE* Plan were not developed in isolation. They were influenced by months of community engagement, critical questioning, and local knowledge. Community members identified issues with early drafts of the plan, including concerns about Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), property tax impacts, and the need for greater clarity around implementation. It was residents who requested participation from the City Assessor and called for a more nuanced approach to proposed housing tools. These contributions were not adversarial but thoughtful, strategic, and rooted in direct experience.

As part of that effort, I personally conducted several months of independent research to assess the intersection of zoning policy, affordability, and displacement in Milwaukee. This included analysis of the city's zoning history, past comprehensive plans, property tax assessment practices, housing demographic trends, and national strategies used to address exclusionary zoning and speculative development. That research helped underscore why proposed solutions—such as by-right ADUs or tax increment-based affordability strategies—require scrutiny for their potential unintended impacts.

Despite these insights, many residents were initially disregarded as lacking the expertise to inform policy. Yet it was precisely their questions and lived experience that shaped the call for a Benefits and Harms analysis. The findings and revisions that followed reflect the depth of community understanding and the urgency of grounding planning in public accountability. This

expertise, both formal and lived, should be held in the highest regard as the City considers how to move forward with land use and housing policy.

Although it appears to move toward what many neighborhoods have asked for, there is still a great need to identify ongoing strategies to support sustainable living for Milwaukee residents. This is particularly evident in revisions to ADU-related policies. While modest in scale, ADUs offer families a flexible option to support aging parents, accommodate adult children, or create income that makes staying in place more viable. When implemented with care, they can enhance neighborhood stability without eroding its character.

However, policy alone is not enough. Without targeted funding, accessible permitting processes, and capacity-building for low- and moderate-income homeowners, ADUs may remain out of reach for the very communities they are intended to benefit. Transforming policy into practice requires sustained investment and a focus on equity in implementation.

This moment also presents a broader opportunity to evaluate how development is occurring citywide. For example, recent housing efforts on Walnut Street were initially positioned as affordable to households earning under \$35,000. Yet by last year, home prices had reached over \$400,000, and that information is no longer publicly posted. This raises concerns about transparency, consistency, and whether the intended outcomes are being realized on the ground.

Displacement is already happening—not just to renters, but increasingly to middle-income homeowners facing property tax pressures. While the plan may incorporate improvements, it leaves a fundamental question unresolved: How will residents be protected from displacement? That answer must come in the form of clear, enforceable policies. Without them, tools like ADUs and increased zoning flexibility can unintentionally reproduce patterns of exclusion.

Finally, the process itself must evolve. A shared decision-making process rooted in listening to residents and partners needs to become the standard for all zoning updates and policy making decisions across all City departments. Residents must be involved from the beginning, not brought in after key decisions have been made. Milwaukee needs early conversations, community leadership at the table, and a long-term commitment to co-governance, not just outreach.

Let this be a turning point. When residents are treated as partners, not participants, our systems become more just, our institutions more accountable, and our outcomes more sustainable.

Sincerely,
Dynasty Ceasar