



RUSSELL W. STAMPER, II
ALDERMAN, 15TH DISTRICT

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Our voices will NOT be silenced this time: Lessons from MKE's "GROWTH" of the past

Statement from Alderman Russell W. Stamper, II July 29, 2024

In 1966, the City of Milwaukee was faced with a dilemma; a dilemma that at the time seemed of the utmost importance. That dilemma was founded in the belief that the city could not grow and maximize its future growth unless the population of the suburbs could be connected to the downtown area. The plan to answer this dilemma was the creation and enhancement of the freeway system that ran through Milwaukee. The State of Wisconsin and the powerful stakeholders of Milwaukee, led by many that did not represent the community, decided that 17,300 homes and 1,000 thousand businesses was justifiable collateral damage to achieve connection and growth. Those 17,300 homes and 1,000 businesses though were mostly in the African-American community; a community that did not have a say in this plan of connection. It was a community told that all this was for the betterment of the city and state as a whole and that the plan was the best course of action. Sixty-eight years later, with hindsight, we see now that this plan was a catastrophic failure that destroyed the African-American community as it was at that time. It did great harm to an African-American community that to this day is still reeling from the destruction of its infrastructure and cohesion that once its strong suit

Today, in 2024, we are faced with a similar situation energized by a similar dilemma. The City of Milwaukee and the powerful stakeholders that pull the levers of the city see population growth as the overwhelming problem of our time. They see increasing the population as a necessity for the survival of the City of Milwaukee. These powerful stakeholders, led by the Community Development Alliance (CDA), have proposed drastic zoning changes that, despite all representations to the contrary, will primarily effect the African-American community. The CDA states that these changes in zoning are needed to save the City of Milwaukee and increase the population, all while increasing racial equity. We ask, with due respect, who are they to determine the fates of the African-American community? Who are they to determine once again that the Black community must be sacrificed for the betterment of the whole?

With those questions and many more in mind, several of my constituents and anchor organizations have lodged complaints about the Growing MKE Plan. My own district, the 15th, is the heart of Milwaukee's African-American Community. It is 77% African-American, with several areas having 40-80% of its residents experiencing poverty, and 20% to 40% percent being homeowners.

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These proposed zoning updates championed by the CDA and Department of City Development do not represent the 15th District's lived experiences. We do commend the CDA and DCD for removing the eight-plex concept on residential blocks - but that's not far enough. We don't want them on the corners either. We don't want anything that can alter or change our community, especially absent the input of our community, to be given the green light.

Our community has spoken loudly but remains unheard. The less than lackluster numbers touted by the CDA and DCD for community outreach are laughable. The documented outreach results for the Growing MKE Plan of 1,700+ residents being tapped for input out of a city of over 500,000 are ridiculously low. By contrast, one of the pillars of the 15th District, the Metcalfe Park Association (operated by those in and of the community), matched those same numbers **in less than two weeks of work**. This is not a NIMBY issue. To say that is false and an insult. This is an "I have a voice and I want it to be heard to determine the fate of my own community" issue.

This is an "I don't want to be told by someone not of my community what's best for my community" issue.

I, along with my neighbors, find it revoltingly insulting that the CDA would have the audacity to tout racial equity as a reasoning for this dreadfully derelict plan when the community they are saying they are seeking this equity for does not support it. That is not equity. That dismisses the views of those who have lived in the affected communities for decades. It dismisses those of us who have raised families in the community. It dismisses those who have fought tooth and nail for the betterment of the community. It dismisses an entire community that refuses to allow outside ventriloquists to steal our voices and pretend that we have spoken.

Our community sees every day the blighted homes, the vacant lots, the deteriorating streets. The lack of attention shown our neighborhoods as opposed to the more affluent and downtown areas is evident and we fight every day to turn the tide. However, those pressing issues don't stop us from also seeing what's going on with this Growing MKE PLAN. We see a repeat of history. We see African-American voices being silenced and told that someone else knows what's best for them and the city in which they live, work and play. We see developers trying to strip the power from the people and getting a blank check to reconfigure our neighborhoods as they see fit. We see a City that thinks population growth will save it. We see another dilemma the City of Milwaukee is laying at the feet of the African-American Community, making us bear the consequences of a plan that is not ours to bear. It is a plan spurred on by a problem caused by an insatiable appetite for growth that we will not allow to be rectified at the expense of the African-American community as it was in 1966.