

November 2nd, 2022
St. Paul City Council Public Hearing

Matthew and Jamie Wright
1155 Seminary Ave., St. Paul, MN 55104

Council President Brendmoen, Council Members, good afternoon.

I'm Matthew Wright, my wife Jamie and I own this home where we live with our two young sons.

We were visited by code enforcement officer Daniel Hesse from the Department of Safety and Inspections on October 4th, and were told that an anonymous complaint had been received about our little free library, which had been installed in the boulevard in front of our home. He was apologetic and befuddled by the complaint, but stated that he was bound to respond to it. He said he would see what he could do, but if we received a letter from the city, we would be obliged to comply. The letter arrived the next day, ordering us to remove it.

The little free library, which is in constant use by our neighbors and has led to many conversations, connections, and good will, was given to us and installed at no cost by Hawona Sullivan Janzen and her team on August 2nd, 2021 as part of her "Love Letters to the Midway" public art project, which used little free libraries to distribute small free pieces of local art to our neighborhood in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and after the death of George Floyd, which affected the Midway more than any other part of our city. We decided on the placement of the little free library with the goal of ease of access, facing the sidewalk spur that crossed the boulevard to the street. We also have an approximately 5 inch-high planter box on the boulevard as well, which was installed by a previous owner, leading us to believe that this was an acceptable location. We were completely unaware that the placement of either of these was a potential violation of the city code.

The letter we received from the city stated in a footnote that "most correction notices derive from Chapter 34" of the city code. That chapter does not mention anything like little free libraries or boulevard regulations. It was clearly a form letter, and made no reference to the part of the code that we may have violated by placing the little free library where we did.

We were confused by this, and decided to appeal. During the appeal hearing on October 18th with Marcia Moermond, Legislative Hearing Officer, and Lisa Martin in Code Enforcement, our low planter box on the boulevard was brought up by Ms. Martin, and we were informed that this, too, is a violation. We bought this, our first home, in the Summer of 2021, and the planter box was already in place. We have been using it to grow vegetables. We see these boxes on the boulevard often in our neighborhood, and had no idea that it could be a violation. Upon further investigation, I have noticed that the city is encouraging rain gardens to be planted in the boulevards in front of homes, and these gardens can be used to grow vegetables.

In the letter we received after the appeal hearing, on October 20th, section 106.01 on obstructions on public land was cited, but this section is very general and makes no specific reference to boulevards in front of homes. I then searched the city code myself, and discovered section 105.01 on obstructions on boulevards, which it does seem we are technically in violation of, but this was not cited as the basis for our violation in any letter received from the city, leading to further confusion.

In the letter we were also informed that some of the weeds in our boulevard were too long, which were not in the garden, and I corrected that immediately by cutting them. We take full responsibility for that and were happy to comply.

While we recognize now that it is possible that we are in unintentional violation of section 105.01 in these two instances: the little free library and low planter box in the boulevard, we feel that the procedure followed in the anonymous complaint process, the confusing letters from the city, the common presence of both little free libraries and planter boxes in the boulevards in front of homes, the allowing of boulevard rain gardens, and the many positive benefits to the neighborhood, are all mitigating factors in our case.

Little free libraries and low planter boxes on the boulevard in front of homes are common and benefit our neighborhood. They lead to connections among community members, and pose no obstruction to city maintenance operations or driver sightlines. The maintenance of boulevards in front of homes is substantially the responsibility of homeowners, even though these are public property. We believe we are being good stewards of the public property in front of our home, and are using the boulevard in a way that benefits our community. We respectfully request that these are allowed to remain where they are, and additionally, the careful consideration of a modification to the city code to allow little free libraries and low planter boxes on the boulevards in front of homes, in keeping with the boulevard rain garden initiative as well as current common practice.

Sincerely,

Matthew and Jamie Wright