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Sent: Saturday, May 18, 2024 10:51 PM
To: #CI-StPaul_Ward7 <Ward7@ci.stpaul.mn.us>
Subject: Open Letter to the City Council on the UST arena

Think Before You Click: This email originated **outside** our organization.

Dear Councilperson Johnson,

Please read the attached letter. It relates to a matter that will soon be before you.

Thank you,
Steve Sikora

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Open Letter to the St Paul City Council on the UST Arena

St Paul City Council
310-A City Hall
15 Kellogg Blvd. W.
Saint Paul, MN 55102

Ward 1, Anika Bowie, ward1@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 2, Rebecca Noecker, ward2@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 3, Saura Jost, ward3@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 4, Mitra Jalali, ward4@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 5, Hwajeong Kim, ward5@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 6, Nelsie Yang, ward6@ci.stpaul.mn.us
Ward 7, Cheniqua Johnson, ward7@ci.stpaul.mn.us

Dear Councilperson,

I have little faith you will read to the end of this letter, but some of your constituents will. Hopefully they'll reflect upon it when they next cast their ballots.

To this self-proclaimed "historic" City Council the impact of the University of St Thomas arena on surrounding neighborhoods may seem insignificant in the greater scheme of world events. This situation is incomparable to genocide in the Middle East for example. But it is every bit a holy war. Righteous battles rage right here in St Paul where your constituents reside—in the very wards you are elected to represent. Council members are supposed to be advocates for their ward constituents. These UST/community struggles should have drawn your attention and your advocacy long before now. To date they have not.

At the core of the conflict is an unholy alliance between two earthbound saints; St Thomas and St Paul. I don't pretend to understand it. But these entities have historically allied to fulfill every wish the elite, private, religious institution wants granted, with the vengeance of a crusade. Any citizen who dares stand in their raging path must be converted or vanquished. I have met former community activists who carry their bitterness years later. Skirmishes over UST expansions have flared for decades and they are now erupting again.

In 1990 a Conditional Use Permit or CUP was created by a resolution of the Planning Commission. Its purpose was to reign in UST from absorbing city blocks of nearby properties in order to expand their campus. The CUP defined campus boundaries, setbacks and height limits of future buildings as well as parking accommodations based on the number of students and faculty commuting to campus. It was an agreement created to prevent a ravenous institution from seeping into the peaceful, adjacent residential areas and degrading them. It has been partly successful.

In 1995 and again in 2004 the CUP was revised to allow expanded campus boundaries. Boundaries were only held in check through intense community resistance. In those years, the school grew from the manageable St Thomas College to the ambitious University of St Thomas. Since then the school's aspirations have only continued to spiral heavenward. In its latest stage of development, driven by its own design, UST has advanced from a Division 3 sports school to Division 1. The circumstance, we are told, will require expanded sports facilities—*starting* with a 5,500-seat arena. I emphasize *starting* because this arena is not the end of UST's sports expansion. However, as aspirations billow, the cramped dimensions of the campus will remain exactly the same as when the school was a college of a mere 2500 students.

UST has been on an aggressive building track for decades. And with each new structure the student body of commuters has grown. UST's website claims 9,000 full and part-time students and over 1,000 faculty and staff, 2/3rds of which commute to campus on a daily basis. I want to emphasize that fraction. 2/3rds of the student body, as well as all faculty COMMUTE! They do not arrive on foot, by train, bus or bicycles. They drive cars. This fact creates a parking situation unlike anything occurring at other local colleges that share the same neighborhoods; Macalester College, Concordia University or St Catherine University. None of them are commuter schools. UST is a COMMUTER COLLEGE, and it has nowhere near enough available campus parking today. Those other schools are not in conflict with their neighbors as St Thomas is constantly.

Parking at UST is a shell game. Talk to any student about the lottery to get a parking pass and then the likelihood of actually finding an open space, even with that coveted pass. Yet despite the dire parking situation that exists today UST eliminated almost 400 parking spaces to build the recent Schoenecker Center and planned Anderson Arenas. The campus is about as cramped as it can get right now and not one new parking space is to be added.

Thanks to UST's legions of commuters, and to its parking policies, nearly half of all "permit only" parking zones in the City of St Paul are designated streets around the school. Think of it, half a city's worth of parking problems can be easily traced to UST, with a worsening situation to come. Savvy students know that permit parking is only loosely enforced. Some have even made the calculation that it is cheaper to pay the occasional tickets than it is to buy a parking pass at all.

The straw that finally broke the camel's back for the mostly tolerant neighbors is the proposed *multi-purpose* arena, intended to be shoehorned into UST's south campus. In case you have not visited, the south campus is surrounded on three sides by stately, residential neighborhoods and on a fourth side by the Mississippi River. A less appropriate site would be hard to imagine for a sports arena with square footage equaling two Target stores, bringing with it about the same amount of traffic. Note I accented *multi-purpose* for good reason as you will see.

The desire to expand is strong at UST—an institution so willful that it has no regard for even its own storied past. The two remaining, original campus buildings designed by Cass Gilbert and funded by James J. Hill will fall in order to make way for a bloated Megachurch, dedicated to the worship of basketball and hockey.

At every step in the development of this arena UST has practiced a pattern of deception—first with the City, then with the community.

1.

In the Environmental Assessment Worksheet or EAW that UST prepared for the City UST deviously understated the impacts of the arena. Among UST's many deceptions this one has proved to be the most consequential of all.

Though UST hired a reputable firm to do a traffic and parking study the report is woefully inadequate. Here's why. UST under-played the facts in the assumptions it put forth at the beginning of the study. Namely: **the size of events**, the **frequency of events** and **the actual number of parking spaces on campus**. Doing so, narrowed the scope of the study, to a few capacity-size events, which in turn led to the conclusion of fewer cars, and lower impacts on the environment. Most of the events that will take place in this venue are totally ignored in the study, as if anything less than a full house will have zero effect.

Even the best engineering firm might produce a misleading study if they began with false assumptions. Good engineering requires good data. They didn't get it.

Once the City approved the EAW, though it was profoundly flawed, the fact it had been "approved" seemed to mean that no other department or agency would bother ever to question it. You should.

2.

Without an approved plan or a building permit (or even notification to students living in the Cretin and Grace residence halls, or to professors teaching in the Brady Education Center) in January 2024, UST began demolition and site preparation for the arena. A grove of mature trees fell overnight. Acres of concrete were jackhammered and carted off. An endless parade of dump trucks removed thousands of truckloads of soil and replaced it with engineered sand. A complex underground infrastructure, specific to the arena was laid. A deep excavation was made in a former parking lot and a construction crane was erected. All this work took place out of either; a) extreme arrogance on the part of UST, or b) the confident foreknowledge that the City would approve the plan. No private party would be so foolish to invest millions in an uncertain outcome. UST had no hesitation.

3.

UST's public relations propaganda regarding its deep community involvement is fantasy. The institution boastfully tallies the number of public meetings held as evidence certain of their transparency and willingness to collaborate. But UST's

public meetings are little more than scripted presentations by the school or Ryan Companies. There is no collaboration whatsoever. After neighbors became fed up with this nonsense and demanded an open forum to discuss neighborhood concerns, a WSNAC Zoom meeting was scheduled. Questions were required to be submitted in advance. No follow up questions would be taken. Several ARD members submitted questions that were never addressed. Without the ability to ask follow up questions it was obvious we were just getting rehearsed pat answers, and even then, only answers to “easy questions” nothing controversial. Chalk up another public meeting on the board.

4.

ARD, a neighborhood non-profit established to re-site the arena filed an Appeal to the Planning Commission. The Appeal was filed after the arena plan was approved. The Appeal stated eight points of objection to the plan and suggested more appropriate, alternative sites.

The very first point was that no site plan should be approved because UST was out of compliance with the existing CUP. Though demonstratively true, the Planning Commission was oddly unmoved.

The second point was that the plan included development within the setback area laid out in the Minnesota River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) established by the Minnesota Legislature in 2017. Although the guidelines are posted to the St Paul website as if they had been enacted, they have not yet been adopted by the City. Another charade, so moot point.

A second Appeal written by two other ARD members citing, among other things, the fact that the drive-in arena would produce so many tailpipe emissions that it was completely at odds with the City’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan. During our Zoning meeting a woman who worked for the City said to the Zoning Committee, that “The 2040 Plan was a recommendation, not a law.” I was dumbfounded.

During the Zoning Committee meeting, where ARD oral arguments were heard in prelude to the full Planning Commission, UST had students speak to their perceived benefits of the arena. I recognized one of them from picketing outside the UST campus. We spoke one day and told me he thought the arena would increase property values. I thought he was delusional. But now I understand he is simply on his way to becoming a skilled propagandist as President of the Student Council. In the course of his remarks, and I am paraphrasing here, he said that if neighbors didn’t support what UST did, then they should pick up and move elsewhere! One of those neighbors, when he had his own turn to speak, took time from his comments to call the boy out for making such a foolish and insulting statement.

Beyond the embarrassment I felt for everyone involved, it struck me that this young man was really no different from a now familiar caricature of a semi-literate, white guy draped in a flag, screaming at a person of color, who may be a third generation

American, to “Go back to where you came from!” The kid’s statement was exactly that ignorant. No comment from the school. I guess “the common good®” excludes the neighborhood.

5.

In a community meeting, I asked Jerome Benner of UST Community Relations if the Traffic Management Task Force he was convening, would begin their problem-solving from a baseline that agrees that there is a parking crisis today? “We have no parking crisis” he replied.

In the same meeting, I asked Amy McDonough, Chief of Staff at UST how many campus parking spaces they had in total, since this number is not published anywhere. Rather than provide a number she told me it was on page 37 of the EAW. Funny she knew the page number off the top of her head but not the number of spaces. So I checked. Maybe I had missed it. On page 37 is a chart showing Supply, Demand and Deficit numbers based on the UST parking shell game I mentioned earlier where lots already committed to students, faculty and staff would be “cleared” for the 2-4 capacity events. The chart, like the premise of the EAW, upon which all City decision-making is based, states only 0-2 full capacity events per year, which is incredulous. No one builds a 5,500-seat arena not to fill it.

The idea UST has tried to plant in the public mind was that, well yes, there would be disruptions, anyone could see that, but that there would be so few of them that the impact would be inconsequential. In first public meeting UST talked about only 0-2 major sports events. By the second meeting they admitted to 35 or so events, not all anticipated to be “at capacity.”

Meanwhile, in the press, UST revealed what it termed “other uses” for the multi-purpose arena. As you’d expect, they mentioned commencements, then high school athletics, because ice arenas are in demand. Then there was a passing mention of rental events like conventions and concerts.

We asked about them. In a neighborhood meeting Amy McDonough told neighbors that UST would have its hands full with sporting events that first year or so, and that they had no definite plans to rent out the arena. One meeting later, in a deck presentation Ryan Companies showed a variety of seating layouts for concerts. I think it was supposed to allay our concerns over how many people would fit in an event when the arena floor was open. Instead it confirmed their plans for concerts.

Neighbors were assured by Ms. McDonough that UST would not be serving alcohol in the arena. Let’s see how long that takes.

In mid-April UST announced a budgetary shortfall of \$10.5 million along with staff cuts. Something tells me that arena rentals might be critical to UST’s future. So why would Amy McDonough downplay rental events? Simple. ***It contradicts the entire premise of the EAW, upon which the house of cards is carelessly built.***

On May 15, shortly after the Planning Commission denied our two Appeals to rescind the arena plan, UST announced that they will be moving to a different hockey conference in 2026. The NCHC includes several powerhouse regional teams. The result of which is that these games will have increased attendance. Boy, I'll bet nobody saw that coming—all those big “at capacity” games and all those out of town cars and buses.

Opposing the arena, as we have for months, introduced members of ARD to a surprising number of UST faculty, students, and seminarians who privately cheer us on and urge us to continue in our fight. Sadly however, they find themselves unable to express their opinions openly because it might expose them to the school. I can't say what reprisals they fear, but fear inside the institution is rampant. Fear of being dismissed, expelled, excoriated for expressing any dissenting opinion to the party line is real. Even tenured faculty are fearful. “It's All for the Common Good® dear” begins to sound like a lame explanation rather than an altruistic pledge.

I spent a long and successful career in design and branding. I can tell you we'd never allow any organization adopt a tagline, so utterly inconsistent with its true nature. Copyrighting a false claim only amplifies the lie. But deception rises to an art at UST.

By supporting our Appeals the St Paul City Council has an opportunity to do something both historic and of benefit to your constituents.

The Council is the last remaining firewall between the community it serves and the rabid ambitions of this private institution. They say that faith is in the present and hope is in the future. Direct experience warns me to have little faith the City Council will stand against UST and the army of consultants and agencies that played their roles in supporting UST's false narrative. But still, I hope a majority of councilmembers might bravely exercise some degree of independent, common sense in reviewing the facts of this case and deny St Thomas for once.

UST's next expansion is almost certainly being planned. It will be built somewhere else, on a satellite campus, just as we suggested this arena should be.

So I choose to hold out hope for a City Council denial of this site. One must always retain a shred of it. Without hope we lose our common decency.

Sincerely,
Steve Sikora
Shadow Falls