

Dear Mr. Russ Stark and Mr. Chris Tolbert,

My family is in support of the student housing ordinance. When we moved into Merriam Park twenty-five years ago the community had a much different feel. Our block was filled with families with young children. We are concerned about the changes that are happening as the houses are being purchased by absent landlords and overstuffed with college students. A duplex around the corner from us was purchased and divided into a quad; with three times the vehicles. We have seen that up and down the blocks and it is not an improvement to our neighborhood .

I'm asking your help in keeping Merriam Park a community in which families will want to live in. Please vote for the ordinance.

Sincerely,

George Roesler and Bobbi Iverson-Roesler  
1876 Ashland Ave

June 20, 2012

Members of the City Council  
320 City Hall  
15 West Kellogg Boulevard  
St. Paul, MN 55119

Dear Members of the Council:

We very strongly support the proposed ordinance to establish a district within which the density of college student rental housing would be limited to a reasonable and sustainable level.

### Summary

**Our community – Macalester-Groveland and Merriam Park – is balanced on a tipping point. Just a few more residences with college students on our block would force families – including ours – to sell our houses and leave the neighborhood.** If left unchecked, the trend toward blocks dominated by student houses would yield a host of enduring if not irreversible problems for our communities and for the larger City of St. Paul.

**It will be in the best, long-term interest of our communities, and the larger community of St. Paul, to strike a balance between the density of student homes and those of everyone else.**

### Our Perspectives

- We support the educational mission of the University of St. Thomas, and we have good friends among its faculty, alumni, and students, including some who have lived down the street from us. One of us grew up across the street, idolizing its athletes, and participated in one of its professional development programs.
- We understand the challenges the Council faces in weighing this proposal. We have served as policy aides to elected policymakers and worked with them on dozens of similar issues around the country. One of us advised the U.S. Energy Department on its relations with communities surrounding nuclear waste sites. In other words, we have been in your shoes and the shoes of the universities and colleges.
- We moved to St. Paul and into Macalester-Groveland in particular for only two reasons: 1) family and 2) the world-class community in which we now live, including first-rate schools and lots of families with children.
- We are former students. We have done some of the juvenile things we see our neighboring students doing.
- Members of our extended families – people we love dearly – have been landlords. We understand the perspective of absent owners.
- From early 1999, when we moved into our house, to 2002, we saw few if any problems relating to college student rentals. Beginning in 2002, we

have seen a steady slide downward in the quality of life on our block, directly related to the rising number of college rental units.

•Finally, and this is crucial, we have the perspective of folks who moved here for the community, to raise our children here, and who may very well leave if the situation deteriorates further.

## Problems in Current Trends

### 1. Exodus of Community Leaders and Volunteers

While some have focused on the inherent public problems that accompany college students living together off-campus, we want to make clear that the greatest problem with student houses is their displacement of other adults and children.

That is to say that our greatest public challenge, Councilmembers, is silence. Fewer and fewer children are heard during the day.

What does the City of St. Paul miss, when landlords in Wisconsin and our exurbs buy houses for college students? As has been documented extensively around the world, we would miss the following healthy benefits of families who live here:

•Communication among long-time residents: regarding crime, community, the landscape, recycling, the environment, schools, social and other opportunities and problems, you name it. Understandably, college students are not invested in our community, nor do they have time and interest in such communications.

•Community work and voluntarism: we organized our blocks to put in a traffic circle, which 95 percent of our neighbors love, for example.

•Cleaning and Upkeep: we take care of our yards and properties; we clean up the trash the students leave behind, including their vomit, their broken hard liquor bottles, and their disposable cups. In contrast, some (not all!) landlords ignore properties until the rest of us have devoted too much time to raising some City public servant's attention to it.

•Schools' populations: will continue to drop as families move out and young families refuse to move in. This is perhaps the gravest of dangers. As realtors tell you, as goes a school, so goes the neighborhood and vice versa. Declining school enrollments lead to declining funds and reputations, and communities suffer in home sales. It is a downward spiral, and we are staring into it.

In short, the trend toward student residences hollows out a community and leads directly to visible and hidden decay. College students are – generally speaking with clear exceptions – usually not immediate and lasting stakeholders. They are not active citizens in their local community, in the main. While a few outstanding students receive acclaim for their good works, most of their peers are here for two to four years before moving on to other places. Even the best students usually leave the area.

### 2. Growing Problems

- ???????? In the past ten years, at least five houses or duplex units on our block have been converted to student residences. (It is possible that others converted early on, but we are not sure of the dates of conversion.)
- ???????? In that period, we have witnessed college students vandalizing our car, our house, and our yard on more than half a dozen occasions (their identities confirmed by police or campus security officers). Thefts have taken place in association with late-night parties.
- ???????? Late night parties extending until 2:00 or even 4:00 a.m., with revelers loudly shouting and relieving themselves on our lawn, occur regularly in the early fall, December, and spring, not only on weekend nights but also on weeknights. This is perhaps the second greatest problem, in our minds. Far too often, students' noise has awakened us in the middle of a night before a day on which we are expected to a) be fully rested and b) able to perform at a high level in our jobs and as parents. All too often, we have suffered from too little sleep on such nights.
- ???????? Absent landlords continue to buy houses that come up for sale. Some are responsive. Too many are wholly unresponsive. They neglect their tenants, the rest of us, and the City of St. Paul. Some do not have funds to make necessary improvements. Others live too far away to do anything themselves. Still others do not have time to deal with property issues.

#### On Human and Institutional Capacities and Behaviors

You will hear that all of us – colleges, students, neighbors, and others – simply need to do more to get along or improve behavior or fix processes.

Councilmembers, hundreds of dedicated University administrators, alumni, students, neighbors, organizations, companies, and public officials have spent thousands upon thousands of hours addressing what are chiefly symptoms of the larger problem – too many students living off campus. As one dean memorably said, “My biggest problems are the sophomore boys.” There is only so much you can do at that age to change behavior. The University has done much of what we have asked of it over the past ten years, but it cannot change the biological makeup of an 18-year old brain. It is a biological fact: the pre-frontal cortex of the brain does not finish maturing until students are 25 (or later). The special problem for colleges and students is this: they are living together, and their houses and units are nearby. That critical mass is what differentiates college student houses from those of other young adults who may be working for a living. We understand that they are living together and – at the same time – completely free of adult supervision, for the first time in their lives. In our view, this is why college freshmen and sophomores should be living on campus.

Moreover, and this is critical for all to grasp: every fall brings a fresh crop of students who have to go through the entire orientation, slew of mistakes, and consequences all over again. They do learn. But they learn at our expense. It's like the film *Groundhog Day*, folks, only in this movie it's real life and things don't get better -- they get worse.

Similarly, some have suggested that the City and/or University can or should be able to reform the behavior of offending landlords. After a

decade of work on that front, we have concluded that such measures and processes are both necessary and insufficient. They are not enough – not by a long shot. We have friends among our landlords nearby. Unfortunately, other landlords seem to have learned nothing; they are not accommodating; they do not maintain or repair their properties; they do not enforce laws and policies among their student renters. They are part of the problem, and after ten years we have concluded that they are incapable of reforming their own behavior. Too, the City’s processes for enforcing its ordinances are too slow, cumbersome and underfunded to allow for adequate enforcement.

This last factor points up one of the reasons we strongly support the proposal: in a situation in which authority, responsibility, and enforcement are divided among students, parents, the university, landlords, and the City, accountability is diffuse.

That is one reason why the proposed ordinance is called for: it is a systemic and effective response to a growing urban problem with multiple roots.

### Other Options

We have seen many, many measures taken to address all of the concerns above. All concerned have done heroic work in many ways. Others have listed them elsewhere. We find none of them as persuasive, based on worldwide evidence, as the proposed ordinance.

...and yet, the situation grows worse. It is a numbers game, Councilmembers.

We are happy to consider and even embrace other alternatives to this systemic and strategic challenge to our communities. But no other viable and effective option presents itself today, and this is a community challenge of critical urgency.

### Understand This Decision

Councilmembers, this is the section of our letter where we would like to frame the decision you are about to make, where we wish to make clear what is at stake, and where we ask that you consider very carefully what we are reporting and suggesting to you.

First, what is this decision about? We would suggest to you that it is about the following questions, among others:

- a. What kind of St. Paul, and Merriam Park, and Macalester Groveland do we envision in the years 2015, 2020, and beyond?
- b. What are the rights of the adults, families and children in these communities to continue to enjoy the quality of life that has made their neighborhoods such attractive locales? In other words, what is our collective right to the pursuit of happiness?
- c. What kind of schools, businesses, and community organizations do we wish to foster over the next ten and twenty years?
- d. What are university responsibilities in this regard? To be more precise, what can the City of St. Paul expect from a university that does not pay property taxes and enjoys the ability to cause 55 percent of its students to live off campus?

e. In light of the above, where should so many college students live, when they live together? On-campus or off? If off-campus, where?

Second, we want to make clear that inaction on this proposed ordinance would have a dramatic effect: it would allow the trend toward more and more student residences to continue at its current high pace. We predict that it would signal the beginning of the end of our communities as we know them.

Finally, we would like to share with you a decision-making tool we have employed in similar cases elsewhere. It is based upon the wisdom that we are all mortals and therefore certain to make mistakes.

If we accept the notion that we will make mistakes, and that we cannot know, now, which of our decisions will be in error, we are well advised to consider the consequences of our potential errors. That is, we have to choose carefully on which side we will err, weighing potential harm and benefits.

Councilmembers, on one side of this decision you face the possibility that you will err by turning down the proposal, with the potential consequences including the loss of families, deterioration of schools, decay in the community's activism and landscape, a hollowed out shell of a community defined, like Dinkytown, by the absence of a vital core of longtime residents, along with all the accompanying urban decay we see on such blocks.

On the other side, you might err by causing a university to build additional dorms on its campus for its freshman and sophomores, or by causing landlords and students to search for housing on blocks not already dominated by student houses.

It seems to us plain that the risk of erring on the latter side is far lower than the risk of erring on the former.

We see much greater potential reward, too, for the larger community of St. Paul in the proposed ordinance.

We would ask you to consider these scenarios, the rights of all of the stakeholders, and the best paths forward. In our view, passage of the ordinance combined with additional dorms on campus would yield the greatest benefits and fewest risks.

In all cases, however, we would plead with you: Please do not risk erring on the wrong side. Do not err against children, families, and our thriving, healthy community. Err on the side of preserving the best possible quality of life for our children, families, and active, longtime St. Paulites.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Tom Vellenga and Julie Schmid

Dear City Council Members -

We have fought hard to keep this a wonderful neighborhood, and along with our neighbors have put COUNTLESS HOURS into policing student behavior, dealing with St Thomas officials, writing letters, circulating petitions, calling the police, talking with student renters, cleaning up beer cans, and thinking of ways to improve the situation. WE ARE AT A DEAD END. We are demoralized by the easy passing of the private student dorm at Finn and Grand - frankly, if you DO NOT pass the student rental ordinance, you will essentially have given up on our neighborhood. DO NOT PUNISH US for fighting to make our neighborhood a great place to live. This ordinance makes sense, doesn't push the problem to other neighborhoods, and as far as I can tell will actually INCREASE the value of current rental properties. I honestly believe it is a win for the families that live here, a win for St. Thomas (by keeping it a lovely, livable, safe community for their students), and a win for landlords (by not glutting the market).

We wish to communicate our support for approval of the student-rental restrictions near UST. As seven-year residents of Mac-Groveland, we have grown to accept the tradeoffs inherent in living close to a university. We are part of a wonderful community with great neighbors and older housing that has been nicely maintained. There are quite a few rental homes and duplexes on our street. Most are inhabited by St. Thomas students. A few present continual problems (noise, litter, vandalism, etc). We wish that wasn't the case, but understand that it comes with the territory and work with neighbors, UST and the police (when necessary) to improve conditions for all.

What concerns us is the drift we've seen toward more and more student occupied housing. With each owner-occupied conversion to student rental the chances of our neighborhood maintaining a balance between families, single professionals and students diminishes. Buyers are wary of moving into our neighborhood for fear that it will become a "Party Block." Current residents are anxious to leave for exactly the same reason. Unfortunately these responses produce exactly the result we fear--more rentals, lower property values, more noisy parties, more vandalism and more properties falling into disrepair. To those who claim that this is not a student-rental problem, but more broadly a rental problem, we beg to differ. Student rentals turn over faster. Residents are less likely to treat the rental with respect if they don't plan to stay there past a year or two. And, let's be honest, college students don't typically show the same respect to their neighbors that older and more mature renters do. In reasonable numbers, student rentals are part of a balanced neighborhood, but when they dot streets in large numbers, the balance is lost. What might be a single loud party becomes streams of drunken students wandering from house to house several nights a week. We are teetering on that edge today.

We have heard that the problems related to student rentals are issues for UST and the police. Believe us, we use those resources and the problems remain.

We have heard that limiting rentals near UST will only "push the problem to other neighborhoods." This argument makes no sense. Unless UST expands its student numbers, there is no need for new rentals. What we are seeing is a transition from a broad geographic distribution of rentals serving students to a much denser packing of student rentals around the campus. Limiting rentals near UST won't force students out, it will only reduce the numbers moving in.

We have heard that an ordinance limiting student rentals is unenforceable and potential unconstitutional. I'm not a lawyer and don't know the details, but it seems to me that limiting rentals is no different than any other zoning restriction. Identifying the renters as students is on par with limiting the number of unrelated residents in any other rental.

Lastly we have heard that limiting homeowner options (homestead or rent) will depress home values. Maybe it will, but we value the balance of our neighborhood more than the resale price of our home.

My final statement: in the past few months, THREE HOMEOWNERS (families) on OUR BLOCK ALONE have decided to move because of the St Thomas student problem. Two families have decided just this week (in the wake of the council decision on the Grand-Finn dorm complex) to sell. If those homes become rentals, student-occupied homes will total 40% of homes on our block. THIS IS RIDICULOUS, and saddens us immensely. PLEASE FIGHT FOR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD WITH US!!!

Sincerely Yours,  
Kelly MacGregor  
2128 Lincoln Avenue

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Kelly MacGregor  
Geology Department  
Macalester College  
1600 Grand Avenue  
Saint Paul, MN 55105  
[\(651\) 696-6441](tel:6516966441)



