

To the Members of the Saint Paul City Council:

I am writing to support the appeal of the conditional use permit granted to Dominion development on East 7th street, and to also discuss the broader context in which these decisions take place.

You have and will continue to hear the technical issues regarding this development. The building is simply too tall. It dwarfs other structures. It obstructs the spaces enjoyed by residents and business owners. It does not fit in with the character of our neighborhood. But beyond that, this is about equity.

The city of Saint Paul has made some attempts to throw the word around but has yet to establish any concrete processes or proposals to increase equity in our city. Our region faces significant issues when it comes to racial and economic disparities, and the East Side is the center of many of the issues.

These disparities are not new. They come from decades of disinvestment in communities of color and low-wealth communities. Dayton's Bluff and the East Side of Saint Paul have been at the victims of that disinvestment for quite some time.

Disinvestment comes in many forms. One is through a lack of financial investment in businesses, homes and development. This is clearly noticeable all along 7th street. The particular site in question has been vacant for 10 years. Residents have attempted to fill in the gaps in investment but the city continues to provide inequitable resources.

A key piece of reinvestment in communities is to be intentional about what development comes in. This involves working with neighborhoods to understand their needs, and, more importantly wishes. A community that has not been invested in must be heard. The community's vision must be the standard for what development is permitted. In the case of Dayton's Bluff, the vision for the neighborhood has been clearly established by the residents through their actions. Historic preservation is a clear value. The character of the construction is a clear value. And promoting diverse, small business development is a clear value. This project meets none of those standards set by the community.

This leads to the second piece of reinvestment in communities - a recognition of that community's voice and power. This is where the city of Saint Paul continues to fail and fail miserably. Saint Paul has a long history of not listening to its residents, particularly people in developing neighborhoods. Committees that govern city processes are filled with individuals from all over the city making decisions for particular neighborhoods. Those committees have been populated with people serving for many years, some serving for decades. Those committees have shown a lack of ability to listen to residents. In this occasion, the Dayton's Bluff Community Council Land Use Committee unanimously opposed the conditional use permit. In spite of this, the planning commission supported the permit.

This is the type of result that leads to disinvestment. When a community speaks, it must be heard. To strip that voice and power from a community does not serve the community let alone the city.

Dayton's Bluff is not a community without a voice. It has engagement and it has vision. The actions of its residents speak volumes. To not listen to Dayton's Bluff is to promote disengagement and disenfranchisement. To not listen is to strip it of its power. This is not investment. This is perpetuating the problems that exist and have existed.

One problem that exists in Dayton's Bluff is unemployment, particularly among residents of color. This is not a new problem as the Twin Cities are home to the worst racial disparities in employment in the country. Saint Paul and Minneapolis both have requirements that publicly funded construction projects have a goal to have 32 percent of hours worked on the project to be completed by people of color. Dominion is currently developing a project in Minneapolis. They are falling significantly under that 32 percent goal and only increased their percentage to the current place after a significant push from community members and concerned citizens including myself.

Not only is Dominion not respecting the community, they have a history of not contributing to the communities where they are developing housing. By not listening to the community, the city is not only dis-empowering its residents in need but it is also rewarding bad actors in the realm of equity. This cannot stand.

I spent the last four years working for an organization that promotes racial equity in land use planning and development. I have advocated for communities of color and low-wealth communities across our region to all levels of government. I have been successful in having the city of Minneapolis, the Metropolitan Council and the State of Minnesota make significant strides towards racial equity. I am still waiting for the city that I call home follow suit.

Please grant this appeal, put actions behind your words and step off this path that this city has been following.

Sincerely,

Avi Viswanathan
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