

Dr. Isabelle Lange  
1567 Summit Avenue  
Saint Paul, MN 55105

St Paul Planning Commission Zoning Committee  
City of Saint Paul  
Department of Planning and Economic Development

Re: Proposed Historic use variance for the Summit Center for Arts and Innovation

3 August, 2018

Dear Committee

The public hearing for the historical variance use of 1524 Summit Avenue took place yesterday at City Hall in St. Paul. At the meeting the issue of parking, traffic, and noise were discussed. Testimonies also touched upon the possibility of housing values decreasing as the result of living next to a commercial entertainment center and the risk of the next owner of the 1524 Summit having even less consideration for the spirit of the community than the current owner.

The committee seemed not to take into consideration the fact that Summit Avenue is different from other streets in Saint Paul. In addition to it being a popular running, walking and cycling path between downtown and the river, residents know that its housing has been highly regulated for decades. Each small home modification requires prior approval. It seems inane that a new commercial enterprise seeks outside rights for major modifications for building usage and is granted them rights over individual residents. This hearing has shown me how naive I am, but is this the way our world really needs to work?

Why is it up to Summit Avenue to change and accommodate the businessman's agenda? If he is as interested in saving this church as he has claimed, why doesn't he use his considerable, hard-earned skills at creating a not-for-profit institution out of the space – why is it up to non-commercial Summit to host his business plans? Surely, with his savvy abilities and dedication to the acoustics of the church (as he said during the hearing), he could work with the community instead of against it? He has said "innovation" (a good buzz word to attract investors) is central to this center – why not really be innovative for the arts and find a way to foster their growth and make this work without running a wedding-reception business (an example activity of the new commercial center) and cashing in off of his clients? As the church had difficulty finding a buyer, residents could see it as positive that he arrived on the scene – but he has been manipulating the process step by step in his favor to deviate from previously articulated plans.

Approving this project sets a precedent for Summit Avenue. If he can do this, cannot other organizations use his case as an example to conduct their businesses out of Summit Avenue as well?

As it stood after the hearing, I believe the committee moved to approve of the application pending 2-3 items: the need for a parking study, a narrower definition of activities, and refined clarification on hours of use.

If this moves forward, I suggest that the intensity of use also be defined. During the discussion, committee members repeatedly circled back to the fact that the church once held services, attracting community members and associated traffic. Historically, local residents were on the whole satisfied with this as these events were once a week, and the number of attendees in vehicles was manageable. Equating the previous church services with the current owner's proposed activities to show that similar arrangements have worked in the past is really a sham, as we know that hosting frequent evening culinary and musical events for 300 (or more) people arriving from a distance is different than a church service on Sunday morning.

The frequency of daytime and evening events can make a considerable difference to the character of this project, and there was very little discussion about this in the hearing. The owner mentioned that he didn't anticipate frequent concerts (what does "frequent" mean to him?), but as a profit-oriented business with no regulation and incentivized to host more events, "anticipation" is not enough to assure what the activity level will actually be.

Most worrying for me was the process of this public hearing. Sure, there can be differences in opinion, certain special interests will always gain more traction than others. Change is necessary, and business often is more powerful than non-business citizens. We know this. But as an observer of this process in Saint Paul for the first time, I felt profound disillusion after the hearing. The committee members – who fill a vital, challenging role in the workings of this city and I am in admiration for the attention to protocol – seemed to be able to gloss over big-picture issues in addition to the testimonies with which they were presented. It was a fascinating look at how policy is created and restructured, but ultimately alarming to witness how the discourse could be swayed by one or two participants able to steer the discussion. This can lead to other committee members turning a blind eye or to only focus on certain pieces of testimony presented. At the city level, at the global level, we read about this in the papers and in the news, and we hear about it from those more active than the couch-activists, but seeing it in person was illuminating and disheartening.

The church should be saved, but why allow this underhanded method of doing so to come through? During discussions about another case heard at yesterday's hearing, a board member commented, more or less: *"We screwed up, now we have to figure out how to make it work"*. Why "screw up" again by granting a commercial business the right to influence a residential neighbourhood, which has actively sought to remain a not-for-profit avenue, until it is too late again?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Isabelle Lange', with a stylized, cursive script.

Isabelle Lange