



# Payne-Phalen

COMMUNITY COUNCIL

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Ms. Jenny Wolfe  
City of Saint Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority  
c/o Department of Planning and Economic Development  
1300 City Hall Annex  
25 West Fourth Street  
Saint Paul, MN 55102

November 16, 2020

Re: Request for Charter School Lease Revenue Bonds for Hope Community Academy  
720 Payne Avenue

Dear Jenny,

I am writing to you to in reference to the upcoming public hearing concerning request made to the Housing and Redevelopment Authority by Hope Academy, 720 Payne Avenue. Our office has been fielding questions and hearing concerns from community members in District 5 about this project. Many folks are interested in knowing more about what Hope Academy intends and what role the City plays in Hope's project. The questions and concerns we've heard so far are based on variety of issues – and in some cases overlapping concerns have been expressed to our office. For the purposes of this letter, I have tried to sort these into three groups.

***On the matter of financial tools and investments***, we've heard several concerns that need to be addressed – but as an organization, we do not have adequate information to respond to:

- We've heard that the City's intends to extend bonding authority to charter schools and that this might be in some way problematic relative to the function and capacity and well-being of schools in the St Paul Public School System (SPPS).
- On that topic Jenny, as you know when I reached out to you, I was very concerned to learn from you that the City is actually considering a *moratorium/study* on conduit bonds – but that somehow this project is being considered by the HRA anyway and that there is a possibility that it will be approved by the HRA *before* that study begins. Beyond the particulars of what the scope of the study entails, it is concerning that the City/HRA would consider making an investment on the East Side (whether through actual dollars or by extending its bonding authority) without making such a decision based on the knowledge and insights gained from such a study and community participation on that study.

Many of the concerns we've heard revolve around one or more components of the proposed project in relation to the physical, economic, and environmental character, potential, and well-being of the surrounding area:

- ***Demolition of housing***: We've heard great alarm that this project intends to demolish housing units in the neighborhood – and that the City's bonding would actually enable that.

We've heard that this is particularly concerning when the city is facing a chronic shortage of housing and when there has been a dramatic rise in the homeless population and new encampments of unhoused populations growing dramatically – particularly in and around Dayton's Bluff and Payne-Phalen.

- ***Creation of a new surface parking lot in residential neighborhood:*** We've heard great concern that housing units would be demolished specifically for the purpose of creating a new surface parking lot for the school – something that would interrupt the fabric and character of an older residential neighborhood.
- ***Conflicts with adopted land use and transportation policy:*** There has also been concern that the proposed parking lot would be within a quarter mile walking distance of a major transit stop on the Rush Line BRT (at Payne Avenue and Phalen Boulevard). This intersection is a short walking distance from Hope and a major new a major new TOD opportunity – one that's specifically called for the in the City's newly adopted Comprehensive Plan.
- ***Conflicts with adopted sustainability, resilience, and transportation policy:*** It has been noted that the proposal for this parking lot comes at a time when the City is working hard to launch a greater number of transportation options for our communities – options such as the HourCar Electric Vehicle Car Sharing project slated to open next Spring. More on that below.
- ***Conflicts with adopted water-quality policy:*** We've heard concern about the potential water and air quality environmental effects of having a new parking lot situated on the edge of the bluff overlooking an important resource in the community - Swede Hollow Park. This is especially concerning since many residents worked closely with the Parks Department last year on the Swede Hollow Master Plan. Environmental quality and restoration have been a hallmark of that project. Likewise, it should be noted that many allied organizations (including PPCC and the City of St. Paul) are working closely with our colleagues at the Lower Phalen Creek Project and the Capital Region Watershed on how to daylight Phalen Creek and connect the actual flow of water from Lake Phalen to an through Swede Hollow and Wakan Tipi on its way to the Mississippi River.
- ***Incomplete information on transportation impacts:*** We've heard concerns about the traffic and circulation issues that may arise in the neighborhood and on Payne Avenue with the expansion and reconfiguration of Hope's campus.

Finally Jenny, I would like to register our own concerns – from a staff perspective - about the challenges of helping the City to engage and bring forth community voices and community engagement relative to the City/HRA decision-making process:

- As mentioned, there has been a good deal of concern and anxiety about this project in our communities. But in hearing and talking with others, I am also aware that there may be many folks in Payne-Phalen's diverse communities who are not yet aware of this project and the details of what is proposed. From our perspective, there has been inadequate amount of time for PPCC to serve our role in facilitating community engagement of the City in an effective and timely way before the HRA public hearing.
- As you know, Hope's application and drawings include a great deal of information (on-paper information) for community members to take in, absorb, and consider. And with this particular proposal but as you know Jenny, we only received the public hearing notice from PED one week ago, on Monday November 9th. And though we have met with Hope's consultant, we only received current drawings on this project last Tuesday, November 10th!

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We've been working hard to make those documents accessible to the community especially because they cannot be found on the City's website or Hope's website. Our goal is so that others might learn more about the proposals and comment directly participate this week's HRA public hearing, but that has been a challenge to say the least.

- In all, I am writing to let you know that as PPCC's Executive Director, I have a great concern that the City/HRA might consider acting on financial investments that would have great impacts *before* the actual people in our communities have had the chance to learn about the project and share their thoughts.

With all of that said, I think it is important to note that while our office has heard many, many questions about the project, its financing, and how such decisions would affect the neighborhoods in and around the district, up to this point our office has not heard any specific concerns or grievances about Hope Academy as an institution and community partner. The Payne-Phalen Community Council values Hope Academy as a key organization in District 5 and we appreciate their many contributions to the communities of Payne-Phalen over many years.

Thank you for your consideration and please include this letter in the record for the public hearing of the HRA's upcoming meeting on November 17, 2020.

Sincerely,



Jack Byers  
Executive Director

cc. Commissioner Chris Tolbert, Chair, St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority  
Council President Amy Brendmoen, Ward 5  
Councilmember Nelsie Yang, Ward 6,  
Councilmember Jane Prince, Ward 7  
Maychy Vu, Executive Director Hope Academy  
J. Kou Vang, JK Vang  
Nicolle Goodman, Director, Planning and Economic Development  
Bill Dermody, Planning and Economic Development  
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Damian Schaab, Co-Chair Railroad Island Neighborhood Group  
Don Lorr, Co-Chair Railroad Island Neighborhood Group  
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