

The Reverend Helen Wells O'Brien
622 Bidwell Street
St. Paul, MN 55107

To: Legislative Hearing Officer, City of St. Paul

Re: Property at 621 Bidwell St.

Date: June 26, 2023 (amended two dates noted in blue for August 8 hearing)

Background:

I have been a resident of St. Paul's West Side since 1980. I have lived at 622 Bidwell Street since 1995, when my late spouse Alberto Quintela and I bought a vacated lot and built a home here for our family of 4. Alberto and I moved to the West Side in 1980 to be residents in a diverse urban neighborhood. Over the years, we experienced many challenges and blessings to being residents of an older urban neighborhood. But our commitments always outweighed our discouragements.

I have continued to live in my family's home, along with my husband John O'Brien, since 1995. Our neighborhood is thriving with many caring neighbors and young families.

However, our immediate neighborhood has experienced a very disturbing 3 1/2 years of exposure to behaviors, incidents and conditions at 621 Bidwell Street that have been dangerous and deeply troubling, constituting a disturbance of the peace and a public nuisance in our community. A fire severely damaged the property in October, 2022 which led to condemnation of the house and precipitated more nuisance problems, i.e. the property poorly secured and people trespassing on the condemned property

Concerns regarding public safety and well-being:

I have grave concerns regarding the ongoing impact of the 621 Bidwell property on public safety, the health and well-being of our neighborhood (especially elders and children), and the right of home owners and renters to enjoy our own properties without exposure to a years-long public nuisance on our block.

From early 2020 until October 2022, our neighborhood group documented frequent incidents of observed behaviors which were dangerous and indicated probable criminal/illegal activities at 621 Bidwell. We reported these incidents to St. Paul emergency services and to DSI.

Serious examples of incidents and activities from early 2020 until October 2022 included:

- cars and motorcycles racing up and down the street;

- strangers coming and going at all hours of the day and night;
- activities that are commonly observed in dealing drugs, the trafficking of young women, putting children at serious risk for harm, possessing stolen goods, and the presence of weapons

The owner failed to maintain her property to even minimal standards and the activities in her household created a clear and present danger to those inside and out. Some of the incidents, such as a gun fired down our street by a man in front of 621 in the middle of the afternoon, and men fighting in the street with a metal pipe and shovel, were not just pointing towards criminal activity but engaging in dangerous and criminal activity openly on our street.

We were faithfully assisted by caring community police officers (especially Officer Shawn Filiowich) and by Rebecca Noecker and her assistants. In August, 2021, we held a neighborhood meeting in our garden, which was well attended by neighbors, police officers and by our city councilwoman. Following that meeting, and the involvement of city inspectors, there were some improvements that led us to be hopeful that the owner might resolve the extraordinary neighborhood safety issues she had created, not only for others in her household but for our entire neighborhood (which includes at least 10 small children within a couple of blocks of this house).

On May 24, 2022, 621 Bidwell was sold at sheriff's auction, which one of our neighbors attended. The house was purchased by Freedom Mortgage. We learned that the former owner of 621 Bidwell had 6 months from that date to continue to reside in 621 and try to "redeem" her mortgage. The house continued to deteriorate over the summer and people continued to come and go constantly thru the summer of 2022, although some of the observable activities with criminal intent had lessened in frequency. What we did observe, and called emergency services for, were several backyard fires at 621 that could be seen through and over the fence, filling the neighborhood with smoke that smelled toxic. These calls were responded to by fire fighters who were on the property for a few minutes, apparently directing people at 621 to "put out the fire." A few months later, the house was burning.

We do not lack for documentation. I have a 14 page document-journal that I have kept since May, 2020, which details incidents I have observed and/or which have been reported to me by neighbors who live either next to or across from 621 Bidwell.

In addition, our neighborhood used a shared Goggle document to document pages of incidents for much of 2021, both leading up to and following our neighborhood meeting with police and Rebecca in August 2021. I assume there is also copious documentation on the city level of the extraordinary consumption of city services and emergency responses to incidents at 621 Bidwell, including the fire that broke out in the garage on October 4, 2022, and the terrible conditions left behind.

Impact statement:

I am by profession an ordained minister and trained extensively to serve as a professional healthcare chaplain for 20 years at Regions Hospital and Gillette Children's hospital in St. Paul. I served on trauma team activations for the support of staff and families. The pediatric intensive care unit and the pediatric palliative care team were two of my primary care areas for providing spiritual care and ethics consultations.

In my lifetime, I have borne witness to and experienced a tremendous amount of trauma, injury, death and bereavement. I consider myself a resilient person. But this situation, that has spanned three and a half (3 1/2) years, is taxing my resiliency and my hopefulness. I am a mother and grandmother. My children and grandchildren live in Philadelphia and DC. I have long dreamed of my grandchildren being able to spend summer weeks or months with me here in St. Paul as they get older. But this situation across the street is not something I want to expose them to. I have tried my best to be an advocate for our neighbors with young children because they don't have a choice about exposing their children to the incidents precipitated by this property and its occupants, and the terrible conditions of this property that create a public hazard.

It has felt, for a long time, as if the rights of the "owner" of 621, who promoted the destruction of life, peace and community in our neighborhood, were more closely protected than the lives and rights of children and adults who are trying their best to create a caring community.

Now, a huge (billion dollar) out-of-state mortgage corporation, which has multiple locations all over the country, owns property in our urban neighborhood. They have demonstrated no investment whatsoever in this property since it burned. The building was poorly secured after the fire, and insulation and plastic blew all over our neighborhood this past winter. It has been broken into numerous times since the fire that led to condemnation. Police have had to come to address trespassing many times.

Please allow the demolition of this property to proceed. I have contacted both NEDA and Habitat for Humanity about this property and hope that the lot can become a site of restoration instead of ongoing heartache.

Thank you,
Helen O'Brien
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