

Copy of Thre watt Testimony to the E3 Committee - Submitted as PDF

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To: Carter, Jill Senator <jill.carter@senate.state.md.us>

Cc: STEPHEN WARD <sspward@comcast.net>

Esteemed Committee Members,

I am writing in favor of SB 0849, Baltimore City – Modifying or Closing Public School Facility – Review by Community Task Force. At its simplest, this bill allows for the Citizens of Baltimore City to have a voice in the development of their community. Over the past 10 years, schools have been systematically closed as part of a cost-saving and remodeling agreement brokered by the City, State, and quasi-independent Baltimore City School Board. This agreement is known as the 21st Century Schools Initiative.

The closure of these schools has come at the expense of the communities where each school sits. In Grove Park, this has meant that a historically Jewish, middle-class community, now made of mostly Black and Latino individuals are living under the stress of facing devalued properties, increased traffic, and development uncharacteristic of what has been stylized as a "suburban neighborhood in the City". That is the impetus for this bill. Citizens of Baltimore City, just like anyone else, expect to have a voice in the equitable development of their community. This includes changes in parking, zoning, and the repurposing of schools.

In January 2020, when the Grove Park Elementary building was placed on the surplus list and put up for a RFP process via the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Grove Park community was systematically ignored by DHCD officials including Teresa Stephens, Deputy Commissioner Kate Edwards, and Commissioner Alice Kennedy and our own councilman, Isaac "Yitzy" Schleifer. The Grove Park Improvement Association, led by Karen Braden, Stephen Ward, and I [- as a consultant], asked for a school and community multi-purpose center- a rec center for our youth and seniors. These are resources that are needed to help our community help itself. Baltimore City District 5 is the only councilmanic district without a public rec center for its youth. We courted qualified, Black-led nonprofits who had structure and funding to take on the project of reopening the school building, as a school. This would serve the goal of educating children in a community school format and help to attract young homebuyers to replace the seniors who have raised their families and pass their homes on to the next generation.

Alice Kennedy, DHCD Commissioner, enjoined a panel of five members without community input and without a member of the community on the panel. She received the panel's recommendation and the recommendation of the Grove Park Improvement Association (GPIA). GPIA specifically endorsed the Business and Economic Academy of Maryland which aims to teach young people business skills and self-sufficiency. Instead, Ms. Kennedy, without consulting the Grove Park community, entered into a non-binding agreement with a rehab center developer who aims to demolish a 16-room school building on 5 acres and replace it with 150 beds and a 100-space parking lot. This is not in line with the residential character of the community endorsed by the City's own Chief Planner, Mr. Chad Hayes. If the City approves the contract of sale and its corresponding ordinance, which they still have time to withdraw from, it will lead to (1) the commercialization of our neighborhood (2) devalued homes (3) increased traffic (4) the demolition of a historical marker that graduated hundreds- if not thousands- of students from 1958 to 2019 (5) the destruction of a functioning, low-crime, middle-class neighborhood.

We have brought our concerns to Commissioner Kennedy, who ignored us, until her appearance was required at a Community Relations Commission meeting under the Office of Equity and Civil Rights. We have brought our concerns to our councilman, Isaac Schleifer, who has ignored us because we do not reside in his favored communities north of West Northern Parkway. And, yes, we have brought our concerns to Mayor Brandon Scott, whose parents live just two blocks away and whose property will face the same devaluation as they are in our CMA/Appraisal market area.

We are turning to you to push forward this bill to allow not just our own community, but others around Baltimore City, a fighting chance. This is something that transcends the artificial color-lines that divide our City, as this is now happening in communities abutting the County lines down to the Southern regions of the City. I implore you to pass this bill, as I am fighting for my family and neighbors.

I favor this bill, with amendments, to include all the Department of Housing and Community Development, General Services, and Planning. I also seek the amendment to require the City to perform an equity assessment on the disposition of all government buildings or school facilities.

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