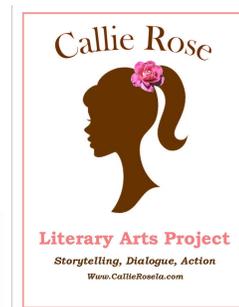


UNIDAD UNITED NEIGHBORS IN DEFENSE AGAINST DISPLACEMENT





July 29th, 2020

An Open Letter to City Leaders: Build Affordable Homes, Not A Hotel at the Former Site of the Bethune Library

Dear Los Angeles City Council Members and Mayor Eric Garcetti:

On behalf of the undersigned community-based organizations, affordable housing developers, community land trusts, public interest lawyers, policy organizations and the communities we serve in South Central Los Angeles, we call on the City to prioritize public land for public good by committing to use the site of the former Bethune Library, a vacant 34,000 square foot city-owned parcel located at 3685 S. Vermont Avenue, for the development of affordable housing, as residents have continuously called for over the last decade.

The need to preserve public land for public good is even more important now amid the global public health crisis, ensuing economic devastation, and civil uprising in response to decades of police brutality. These crises have laid bare deep systemic racial disparities and exacerbated the conditions in Black communities in South Central—housing instability, lack of

quality economic opportunities, inequitable educational institutions, insufficient healthcare, dearth of resources, and a culture of criminalizing and over-policing the community. As the world mourns the loss of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other members of the Black community, the nation is calling for investment in, rather than criminalization and neglect of Black communities, to eliminate these disparities. It is imperative that the City of Los Angeles take bold actions now to protect and invest in our communities to ensure a just recovery. The City can begin by reversing its current plans to use the Bethune Library site for a hotel and instead commit to using it for affordable housing in alignment with previous community-led plans and pressing community needs.

History of the Bethune Library Site

The site of the former Bethune Library has a long-standing history in the community. The former Bethune Library opened on the site in 1975, named in honor of Mary McLeod Bethune, a prominent black leader in education, civil, and women's rights. The library offered crucial resources and a vibrant community meeting space to the South Central community until it was demolished in 2009.¹ In the absence of this integral community asset, the City and other local entities have over the years supported an affordable housing project in its place. In fact, a local community land trust conducted a multi-year community design process for affordable housing and community-serving amenities to be built on the site that seemed likely until the community redevelopment agencies were dissolved in 2011. In 2016, the City sought approval to convert the site into permanent supportive housing.² Still, in 2018 City Council voted to enter into an exclusive negotiating agreement with a developer for a proposed mixed-income development that would have contained primarily workforce and affordable units.³ This development would have also included retail space, a restaurant, and an urban farm, demonstrating the ability to generate jobs and community resources while simultaneously addressing the dire need for housing in the neighborhood. Despite years of community efforts to advance affordable housing there, the City recently decided to consider a luxury hotel project on the Bethune Library site instead.

COVID-19 Has Exacerbated the Housing Crisis, Especially in Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color.

Even before the onset of the current public health crisis, the housing crisis in Los Angeles County was severe. As of 2018, L.A. County had the highest average rent in all of Southern California.⁴ Council District 8 (CD 8) in particular faces a critical need for affordable housing development. In the census district where the Bethune Library site is situated, approximately

¹ A replacement library was constructed off-site in South Los Angeles in 2009.

² Mariana Lem, HCID Request for Approval of the Disposition Plan for the Bethune Library Site, November 8, 2016, pg. 2, accessible here: http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2014/14-0425-s9_rpt_MFC_11-18-2016.pdf.

³ "Vacant Lot Near USC Poised for Mixed-Use Development," Steven Sharp, Urbanize LA, April 25, 2018, <https://urbanize.la/post/vacant-lot-near-usc-poised-mixed-use-development>

⁴ 2018 University of Southern California, Casden Real Estate Economics Forecast.

22% of the residents are Black, and more than 50% are Latinx.⁵ Rents rose 14% in CD8 between 2011 and 2017.⁶ Approximately 40.2% of CD 8 tenants are rent burdened,⁷ meaning they pay more than 30% of their income towards rent. CD8 experienced a 76% increase in unhoused persons since 2016, the second highest increase among Council Districts.⁸ The Council District has also lagged in construction of affordable homes. Over 99,000 households in the district earn less than 80% of county AMI,⁹ yet at the end of 2019, less than 5,000 units of affordable housing existed in the district.¹⁰ CD 8 also has less non-TOC affordable housing production than six other districts, producing only 325 units, 68% of the average district.¹¹

Worse yet, since the beginning of 2020, the country has been contending with the worst public health crisis in a century, which has exacted a disproportionate impact on low-income communities and communities of color. Communities in Los Angeles County with a higher percentage of people in poverty have nearly three times as many COVID cases as more affluent communities.¹² As of early June, areas in Los Angeles County with higher Latinx populations had 2.5 times the number of cases as communities with lower Latinx populations; and areas with a greater number of Black residents had 1.5 times as many cases as areas with fewer Black residents.¹³ Coupled with this health crisis is an economic crisis. According to recent estimates, less than half of Los Angeles County residents are still employed.¹⁴ Lower-wage workers in California—who are disproportionately made up of Black and Brown people—have a particularly elevated unemployment rate during the pandemic.¹⁵ These statistics paint a dire picture for low-income tenants of color, especially those in CD 8 who have been unable to pay

⁵ United States Census Bureau. American Community Survey. ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates. 2018. Accessible here:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?d=ACS%205-Year%20Estimates%20Data%20Profiles&table=DP05&tid=ACSDP5Y2018.DP05&g=1400000US06037222600&hidePreview=true>.

⁶ Analysis prepared by SAJE, using data from HCID, Dec 2019.

⁷ National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS) 2018 Census Data by Los Angeles Council District.

⁸ Comparison of LAHSA 2019 and 2016 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count results for CD 8.

⁹ SAJE cross-tabulations of U.S. Census Bureau 2017 ACS Data.

¹⁰ According to a comprehensive citywide dataset of tax-subsidized affordable housing projects produced from California Housing Partnership, HCDILA, and Los Angeles DCP data, combined with TOC figures from DCP's Housing Progress Reports data obtained through request.

¹¹ Analysis prepared by SAJE, using data from Department of City Planning Entitlement Applications including Transit Oriented Communities, Dec 2019.

¹² Cabildo, Maria, Elycia Mulholland Graves, John Kim, and Michael Russo. "How Race, Class, and Place Fuel a Pandemic." Race Counts. 2020. <https://www.racecounts.org/covid/>.

¹³ Cabildo, et al., "How Race, Class, and Place Fuel a Pandemic."

¹⁴ "Less than half of L.A. County residents still have jobs amid coronavirus crisis," Jaclyn Cosgrove, Los Angeles Times April, 17, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-17/usc-coronavirus-survey>.

¹⁵ Gary Blasi, UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. *UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles*, p. 9.; Janell Ross, *NBC News*, "As economy struggles amid coronavirus, low-wage workers of color taking a major hit," March 25, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/economy-struggles-amid-coronavirus-low-wage-workers-color-taking-major-n1168731>

any or all of their rent for more than three months, whether from illness or unemployment. They are at imminent risk of displacement.

Public Land Must Be Utilized as a Valuable Resource to Protect Black and Brown Residents of Council District 8 from Displacement

The majority of Black residents in CD 8 are renters and face the most adverse impacts from the lack of affordable housing, which has already led to massive displacement. A 2013 study conducted by UNIDAD member organizations determined that more than 80% of families that lived on the two blocks of 36th Place between Catalina Street and Vermont Avenue—half of a block north of the Bethune Library site—were displaced between 2003 and 2013. The City should not exacerbate the ongoing gentrification of the area by using public land to build more luxury developments.

Public land is a critical resource necessary to ease the housing crisis, and it has been underutilized in CD8 for affordable housing production. CD 8 has only produced 96 units across three projects on public land since 2016, below the average of 108 for all districts, and less than four others.¹⁶ Just last year, the City Council recognized the potential of public land to ease the housing crisis by calling for affordable housing development on City-owned land designated for housing purposes.¹⁷ And as mentioned above, affordable housing development was seriously contemplated for the site of the former Bethune Library before this current luxury hotel proposal.

Several members of the City Council, in attempts to dismantle the effects of institutionalized racism, introduced a motion on June 9th to require the City to identify underutilized public land that can be donated to community land trust organizations for affordable housing, open space, and other community-serving uses in several Council Districts to meet the needs identified by members of the community.¹⁸ CD 8, where the former Bethune Library is located, was included in this motion.¹⁹ The City now intends to advance a proposal for a 168-room luxury hotel with ground floor retail and a media room to serve the nearby USC Coliseum and other professional sports stadiums in the area.²⁰ The City should not be prioritizing accommodations for tourists while long-standing community members are being displaced out of the community or onto the streets. This motion presents a tremendous opportunity to invest in the housing stability of Black and Brown communities, including those in CD8. The Bethune Library site, as a publicly-owned asset, should only be developed to serve the local community and their biggest needs.

Los Angeles Officials Need to Take Action Now

¹⁶ According to data provided to SAJE by HCIDLA through a public records request.

¹⁷ City Councilmember Herb Wesson. Motion introduced November 5, 2019, CF 19-1362.

¹⁸ Councilmembers Wesson, Cedillo, and Harris-Dawson. Seconded by Councilmember Price. “Surplus Property/Community Land Trust Organizations/Council Districts 1, 8, and 10. CF 20-0713.

¹⁹ CF 20-0713.

²⁰ <https://planning.lacity.org/pdscaseinfo/search/encoded/MjM1MDIw0> City Planning Case:DIR-2020-301-SPR

COVID-19 has underscored the housing instability experienced in Black and Brown communities in South L.A. A recently released report by the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy on the intersection of the long-standing housing crisis and the new COVID-19 crisis warned that “[w]ithout intelligent planning and immediate action, Los Angeles faces the prospect of many thousands of people, including families with children, joining the thousands already on the streets or living in their vehicles. Unless Los Angeles officials take immediate action now, they will then be forced to scramble to erect something like refugee camps, on a scale never before seen in the United States.”²¹

As Los Angeles and Council District 8 recover from the numerous layers of damage exacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more imperative that the Bethune Library site be developed into affordable housing to prevent this nightmare from materializing. Moreover, the City must be deliberate in its efforts to correct the legacies of harm done to the Black and Brown communities of South L.A. and ensure that its current actions and policies create a more equitable, safe, and prosperous community than the one that existed before the onset of the pandemic. The stability and well-being of the residents of CD 8 and South L.A. more broadly can no longer be sacrificed for the interests of developers, corporations, tourists, and mega-institutions. The City must realize a just recovery by prioritizing the recovery of long-standing communities in South L.A.

Sincerely,

²¹ Gary Blasi, UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. *UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles*, p. 6.