



Sunnybrook Development responds to criticism of Mayor Walker to proposed residential area

by Andrew Carruthers
June 16 2018 6:46 AM

Following the announcement on Thursday by Alton Mayor Brant Walker that he has withdrawn his support for the proposed Sunnybrook Development, an attorney and spokesperson for the developers issued a press release in response to the Mayor and to address what he referred to as misinformation appearing in print and on social media about the project.

Andrew Carruthers, an attorney and spokesperson for the group, stated “There is a lot of misinformation being circulated in the community and on Facebook regarding this project. Let us be clear, this development will not be government owned or operated. The ownership will be 100 percent private, comprised of long time area resident Ed Hightower, long time area business Morrissey Construction Company, and the highly respected and experienced Laborers’ Home Development Corporation, an affiliate of Laborers’ International Union of North America of which many people in the Alton community are members. There will be no publicly owned housing units or public ownership of this development. Period.”

As for anticipated rents, Carruthers stated “Residents will have to pay fixed rents no different than tenants in any other residential developments, ranging from \$700 to over \$1,000 monthly, which is in excess of rates charged by public housing authorities. Eleven of the 40 units will be assisted with rental vouchers that will limit rent payments based on family incomes, three of which will be set aside for veterans only. This has been part of the plan from the beginning, so we do not understand the sudden expression of surprise from the Mayor.”

Regarding the tenants to be selected Carruthers added, “All of the tenants will be screened by the Laborers’ management team, not a government agency. The project will

also give ownership opportunities to tenants in good standing after the financing compliance period has lapsed. So while this will begin as leased residential units, within a number of years it is anticipated there will be as many owners as renters in this development.”

Turning to the Mayor’s comments Carruthers expressed disappointment. “The Mayor signed a Memorandum of Understanding and at least two letters fully supporting the project. In the Mayor’s own words ‘This project is directly in line with Alton’s growth and revitalization efforts....As Mayor of Alton, I affirm that the City strongly supports this project and the efforts of the development team. Our community wants a quality, affordable option for families and looks forward to partnering with this development team to make this a reality.’”

Carruthers added “Clear representations of support were made by the Mayor from the time of the execution of the Memorandum of Understanding on June 15, 2017 (one year ago today) through a meeting on Monday night of this week at City Hall. At the meeting, one City official even stated ‘the Mayor wishes you success and good luck.’ It was for this reason that Ed Hightower did not give his planned presentation to the committee given the Mayor’s reported continued support. Yet, on Thursday of this week a statement was released by the Mayor in which he reversed himself, allegedly based on information he received back in May. I find it odd that, in just three days, the Mayor can go from fully supportive, wishing us good luck, to being against the project based on information that he has been sitting on for a month. At present, the development is 100 percent compliant with the terms of the MOU and what has been discussed with the City over the past year. It is unclear what has suddenly caused the Mayor to change his position. If there were some additional terms or restrictions the Mayor wanted in the MOU he should have suggested they be included in that document. After all, the MOU was prepared by the City.”

Carruthers also took issue with the Mayor’s reference to the group’s funding application and the rumor circulating that the Mayor was somehow misled. “The Mayor stated that a copy of the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) application was never provided to the City of Alton and they had to obtain it through a FOIA request. The City never asked for a copy of the application in the first place and the development group would have certainly been willing to provide it if requested. Regardless, the Mayor and the City have been advised throughout the process and provided input over the past year that led to several changes in the plans, including smaller building footprints, townhouses instead of all duplexes, longer setbacks to allow for more greenspace, and additional parking spaces.”

Carruthers added “Despite involving the City from the beginning and the clear expressions of support throughout, the Mayor has flip-flopped on the project,

presumably following complaints from residents operating on misinformation spread on social media and unwarranted fear. However, the most disappointing aspect of the Mayor's sudden reversal is that he did not even bother to pick up the phone and personally notify the development group or give them an opportunity to address his still unspecified concern. Instead, the group had to learn about the Mayor's change in position through his press release on Thursday. By his actions this week, Mayor Walker is telling potential developers seeking to do business in Alton that he will be enthusiastically supportive for over a year, cause you to invest time and money based on that support, and then pull the rug out from under you when everything is ready to go."

As for the future of the project, Carruthers indicated the development group is moving forward. "There is clearly a need for a residential development like this in Alton, for people earning between \$12 and \$20 per hour looking to improve their living conditions with the opportunity to become homeowners. Over 900 people working in the enterprise zone live in the Alton area and comprise the work force that we believe will be the future residents of this development. The group looks forward to working with the City as we advance through the phases of the project. We have a plan that complies with Alton's zoning ordinances. If the Mayor wants to continue providing input to the development team, or even to specify his sudden unspecified concern, he knows how to reach them and they are willing to meet."