

Jefferson Westside Neighbors

A City-Chartered Neighborhood Association
www.jwneugene.org

November 6, 2013

Eugene Mayor and City Council

125 E. 8th Avenue, 2nd Floor
Eugene, OR 97401

Dear Mayor Piercy and Councilors:

As you know, the Jefferson Westside Neighbors (JWN) Executive Board has previously requested that City Council ask the City Manager to have Planning Division staff coordinate with the JWN Executive Board to include the community in planning for future development of the former Naval Reserve site on W. 13th Ave.

Since that request, I've received a number of emails from Planning Division staff, but none following through on our request. On October 18th, I received a broadcast e-mail from Planning Division staff member Heather O'Donnell, stating that a public hearing was scheduled for November 19th on the redesignation/rezoning of the site. It appears staff has no intention of engaging the JWN board or community, other than going through the formality of a public hearing.

A central pillar of Envision Eugene is to "*provide for adaptable, flexible and collaborative implementation*" of city planning policies. This commitment sets the appropriate tone for what should, and *could*, be the basis for a constructive relationship between City staff and residents.

Unfortunately, regarding the former Naval Reserve site in JWN, staff seems uninterested in *engaging* the public. Although public hearings are a legal requirement, most public hearings do not come across – at least to the public eye – as venues where real collaboration takes place. Instead, the public hearing often seems to accomplish little more than confirming City staff's predetermined outcome, without true consideration of public input on the matter at hand.

The details about what JWN has proposed are in our previous letter to you, which is attached. Please consider the following summary of issues related to planning the future for the former Naval Reserve site:

- 1) Our neighborhood organization has clearly stated the desire to participate in a process leading to redesignation, rezoning and development that results in family-friendly, affordable housing;

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- 2) We have even offered to pay for a certified professional planner “to assist community members in producing a recommendation and draft findings to be presented to the Planning Commission for their subsequent review and recommendation to Council” so that City staff do not have to allocate resources out of a constrained budget; and
- 3) Prior experience in other neighborhoods (e.g., in north Eugene) shows how contentious affordable housing development can become when staff doesn’t meaningfully engage the affected community before the gavel has dropped.

A clear choice is before the City and you, our elected representatives. There are groups of neighborhood volunteers throughout Eugene, whose expression of civic duty is rooted in an enthusiasm to improve their surroundings – to build stronger communities. This fundamental ethos, contrary to being reducible to mere NIMBY-ism or nay-saying, is one of outreach and cooperation for the sake of civic betterment. Yet, all too often staff rejects outstretched hands for the sake of expediency.

As an example of how a more receptive staff response can reap great benefits, I want to share with you how my own involvement as Chair of JWN came about, all as the result of one Parks and Open Space employee’s actions. I approached this gentleman with a desire to save a street tree that was scheduled to be removed near my home. He could have pushed back, or simply ignored, the dissatisfaction that I expressed in my correspondence – as some of his colleagues had already done. Instead, he took my suggestions seriously and supported my desire to improve the existing process.

As it turned out, the collaborative relationship we formed led to a whole new method for addressing problematic street trees, as well as saving the one tree near my home. Because of the way this issue was handled, I met with – and ultimately joined – the board of my neighborhood association. In my first year I helped to create the JWN Tree Program; and the following year, I volunteered to become JWN Chair, the position I now hold.

In the three years following that first meeting I’ve gotten to know a fantastic group of people, including many other city employees. JWN has also just completed a project that I initiated – an update to the city’s existing JWN Tree Inventory, funded by a Neighborhood Matching Grant. Not only has this project united volunteers in the neighborhood with that same Parks and Open Space (POS) team, but we’ve proven that such positive relationships save money, too. Enlisting volunteer neighborhood residents, we updated our portion of the City’s street tree database at a considerably reduced cost to the City, saving an estimated \$6,000 or more in City staff time.

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Seeing what JWN did, other neighborhoods have expressed interest in following our model across many parts of Eugene. I hope councilors will see this as an example of how a small change in practice by City Parks and Open Space staff – i.e., taking a collaborative approach to street trees – has led to great outcomes and the renewal of a community's engagement.

Perhaps not coincidentally, we're experiencing another "breakthrough" with POS staff who have done a terrific job of working with JWN board members and residents as genuine partners in the redesign and renewal of Charnel Mulligan Park.

It may seem to some councilors that civic enthusiasm is never stronger than when people feel forced to defend their neighborhood from bad development, but what may be less obvious is that such conflicts are usually the result of many years of denied participation in creating policies that affect their neighborhood.

In this regard, revising a neighborhood refinement plan, as proposed for the Naval Reserve site, cannot be something that's done without community members' substantial participation.

The JWN board and I are very disappointed that staff has rebuffed our repeated requests to collaborate on setting a new designation and development policy for the Naval Reserve site.

Specifically because of this, I am respectfully reiterating the JWN board's request that the City *not* proceed with redesignating or rezoning the former Naval Reserve site until there has been an adequate community process that involves the JWN organization.

We would greatly appreciate your providing such direction to the City Manager so that the Envision Eugene guidance for "*collaborative implementation*" isn't just an empty phrase.

Thank you for your support of our neighborhood community members.

Respectfully,

/signed

Stephen Heider, Chair

Jefferson Westside Neighbors

Chair@jwneugene.org

CC: Jon Ruiz, City Manager
Eugene Planning Commission
Carolyn Burke, Interim Planning Director