



Statement regarding the plans for additional housing planned for 438 Dorothy Day Place

July 14, 2024

Since 1856, The Church of the Assumption has been an important presence in the heart of St. Paul. We are a vibrant and generous community who has a great history of reaching out to those in need especially those affected by homelessness, food insecurity, and poverty. Catholic Charities Twin Cities originated at Assumption, and other organizations such as Listening House were founded by parish members. Through volunteers and financial support, we regularly assist organizations and community partners who recognize the dignity of every person and provide essential services. We also offer experiences and educational opportunities to learn about Catholic Social Teachings, which always include a preferential option for the poor.

On June 17, 2024, Assumption received notice of a variance application submitted by Aeon, a real estate development organization, to develop an 88-unit supportive housing project at 438 Dorothy Day Place, also known as Mary Hall. Aeon will serve residents with extremely low incomes and those who have experienced homelessness. Half of the homes will serve people leaving homelessness.

To be clear – Assumption does not oppose supportive and affordable housing. We support the principles and goals of creating and preserving affordable homes. However, until there is more conversation, research, and a longer-term plan to address other key issues, we felt the need to appeal the zoning variance at this time.

Adding more housing seems like an easy solution. However, solutions to these issues are much more complex, especially when there is already an extreme concentration of vulnerable populations, including those who are unhoused, suffering from poverty, food insecurity, mental illness, and substance abuse. According to Aeon, they have been working on the Mary Hall project for years, but it does not appear that neighbors have had a voice in their project plans. We are curious about how their plans fit into the larger picture for the city.

We join Ramsey County, the St. Paul City Council, the Minnesota Catholic Conference, and other community partners in acknowledging the housing crisis in our city and region. We recognize the need for individuals and families to find and secure affordable housing and support efforts to ensure everyone has a place to call home.

However, zoning laws relating to the concentration of congregate living exist for a reason, based on the experiences of cities and communities. Allowing a major zoning variance for Aeon has broader implications. With several large vacant buildings in the area, including the former St.

Joseph's Hospital, we are concerned about the precedent a variance sets. We hope our appeal fosters more discussion around these important matters.

We look forward to conversations with Aeon to learn more about their plans, the experiences of residents at other locations, and the communities in which they serve. The population Aeon hopes to serve at Mary Hall is also vulnerable. Successful outcomes for them will depend on factors beyond the services Aeon may provide, including the neighborhood they reside in. Right now, conditions outside Mary Hall, Catholic Charities, and Assumption are very concerning.

Neither poverty nor homelessness is a crime. However, over the last few years, there has been a dramatic increase in crime, illegal drug sales and use, and other problematic behavior on our streets and campus. As pastor, along with parish leadership, we have a responsibility to provide a positive and safe experience for the thousands of people coming to Assumption each week. We have added more campus security but have very little control over what happens on our streets and sidewalks.

All our neighbors, including other churches, residents, Catholic Charities, and local businesses, are experiencing the same strain. Every support system and organization, including public safety, is overwhelmed. This is compounded by the pattern of other communities around the metro, the state, and beyond sending more of their vulnerable residents to St. Paul or Minneapolis. It is a national problem, but having access to affordable housing in every community would help.

Our decision to appeal this variance approval was driven by a desire for a pause, even if just to allow this and other parts of our city to stabilize. We want current residents, businesses, churches, and others, including those who need help, to not only survive but to thrive and flourish. For long-term success, we need healthy neighborhoods, which is why we seek more conversation and commitment from the city, county, and state. Local churches, communities of faith, businesses, residents, and other supportive organizations such as Aeon all play a part.

Our faith calls us to love God and to love our neighbor, no matter their situation. We prayerfully seek the wisdom we need to work for the good of each individual and for the city we love. We have 168 years of serving this neighborhood, including the poor.

We would have preferred a path other than a variance appeal, but we are grateful if this leads to meaningful conversations. We hope even more of our parishioners and others are motivated to serve the poor in our community. We would also be privileged to join others in broader, longer-term plans and explore positive options and solutions to the challenges and opportunities in this important part of our City of St. Paul.

Respectfully,

Fr. Paul Treacy, Pastor - in consultation with Parish Leadership