

FutureHeights

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Superintendent Talisa Dixon
2155 Miramar Blvd.
University Heights, OH 44118

Dear CH-UH Board of Education Members and Superintendent Dixon:

At the Nov. 6 school board meeting, you discussed the fact that none of the tenants of the Coventry School building have returned the month-to-month leases that the district has offered them. We would like to explain to the board—and the public—why we have not signed and returned the month-to-month leases.

I'd like to do so by first stating some facts. George Petkac informed tenants on May 10, 2017 that the school board had entered into an agreement with the city of Cleveland Heights to sell the Coventry property, which includes the building, playground and parking lot—for \$1 once the city found a developer. What wasn't taken into account in this deal is that the property is occupied—and not just by tenants in the traditional sense, but by community organizations. You and the city don't just have an arms-length relationship with us, we are your constituents.

After our initial shock, six organizations formed the Coventry PEACE Campus (Ensemble Theatre, Artful, Family Connections, Lake Erie Ink, Reaching Heights and FutureHeights) to work together on a plan. Meanwhile, the city of Cleveland Heights has said that it will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with us that will enable us to be in the building until June 30, 2018. We have not yet received that MOU from the city.

Because of the announcement in May, a couple of the tenants in the building have secured other locations: Coventry Village Children's Center is moving to a location on Lee Road and Urban Oak School, which had been planning to move anyway because it needed more space, has an agreement to purchase property and relocate to a building at Fairmount Blvd. and Lee Road. We learned from the report George gave at your Nov. 6 meeting that 1) these tenants are behind on their rent and that 2) the amount of their rent represented more than 50% of the total rent the district is collecting from tenants. While I am sorry to hear that this is the case, the Coventry PEACE Campus members can't be held responsible for the actions of these other tenants.

The six Coventry PEACE Campus tenants have continued to pay their rent and operate on good faith. Our rents are below market rate, but I would like to note for the record that the amount of FutureHeights' rent—half of \$150/month because we share space with Reaching Heights—was offered to us. We did not negotiate it down. It was such a good deal that we accepted it, and when we did so we felt valued by the district, grateful for the district's generosity and its willingness to partner with us.

As a partner, we felt that the district was valuing our contribution to the community: the fact that we work to enhance communication about our schools and enhance the reputation of the community through the *Heights Observer*; promote economic development in the city through special events, such as the Heights Music Hop and Kids Candy Crawl; and that we support our cities' neighborhoods through many programs, including our neighborhood leaders workshops, public forums and mini-grants.

Each month, the *Heights Observer* devotes two to four pages to Heights schools, and 95% of the stories that appear on those pages are about our public schools. We believe that a strong community needs strong public schools and that providing the community with information about its public schools helps ensure that our community remains strong. We have provided this service, free of charge, for almost 10 years now because we are a community partner and it is the right thing to do.

We understand that the district would like to resolve this issue as soon as possible, and we would, too. We know that because the district still owns the property—it has not yet been able to transfer it to the city—that it is responsible for any necessary maintenance that the building may need and will continue to bear the operating costs, which because of the announcement in May have become more costly for the district.

We share the district's frustration that the process hasn't moved along faster. As you know, Coventry PEACE Campus has been working on a development idea for the site that would enable the park/playground to be preserved for the community, enable new housing to be developed to generate new tax dollars, and enable the Coventry building to be renovated to better serve as an arts and cultural center. We have asked the city to forgo an RFP/RFQ process and work with us to further develop the plan. If, after a thorough evaluation, the city concludes that our proposal isn't feasible, the city can issue the RFP/RFQ; however, the city has not given us the go ahead to sit down with city staff to further develop the plan. And, we still don't have an MOU from the city. And, again, we are not just your tenants, we are your constituents and your partners.

So we really don't have anything. We've presented our plan to the city. We've gotten community input. The city has told us that you are the decision maker because you own the property. You have told us that you are not interested in hearing our plan because you have an agreement with the city. We don't know where to go or who to talk with to resolve this issue, and we are feeling that our partners no longer value us.

We are small nonprofit organizations, trying to run our businesses while dealing with the looming prospect of losing our base of operations in the near future. We are trying to act in good faith and trying to get the best outcome for our community and for our organizations. Like any business, we are planning our budgets and our activities for 2018 now. We will need to plan for the certainty that our rents will increase.

When FutureHeights entered the Coventry Building in March 2014, we had one full-time and one part-time staff member. With a secure space at reasonable cost, FutureHeights has been able to expand its staff. We now have two full-time and three part-time staff members, and an intern. We also have four contractors who work on the *Heights Observer*. All of the people FutureHeights employs are Heights residents. Four of us currently have children in the CH-UH school district. Our board members, volunteers and donors have many ties to the Heights community. I can only speak for our organization, but as I plan for 2018 and anticipate higher rent costs, I am looking at reducing staff and activities. I simply have to.

I know that you are looking out for the best interests of district and the community by disposing of an underutilized asset. But recognize that we are an asset—not just the park, but also the community-serving organizations that are housed in the Coventry Building. I know you care that these organizations exist in our community and recognize the value that we add to families in the district. I know you wouldn't want to see these organizations cease to exist or move to a location outside our city.

Please help us. Please sit down with us and the city so that we can all work together to resolve this issue as quickly as possible, for the benefit of our community.

Sincerely,



Deanna Bremer Fisher
Executive Director, FutureHeights