



Group 14621 Community Association, Inc.

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Executive Director

Group 14621 Community Association is a grass-roots, community-controlled neighborhood organization serving the north east quadrant of the city of Rochester. Founded in 1974, our primary mission is advocacy – working to engage neighborhood residents in collective action to improve the quality of life in this neighborhood. The 14621 neighborhood is about 36,000 residents, nearly a three-quarters of whom are considered low-income, with areas of severely concentrated poverty.

In addition, this neighborhood has about 700 vacant, abandoned structures which cause multiple problems for the residents, the highest police and fire calls for service, and the highest rates of childhood lead poisoning. We also have the highest number of community gardens, a testimony to the resiliency of the residents.

As Executive Director in such a challenged neighborhood, I wear multiple hats. As you look at the budget crisis, and make critical decisions about funding or cutting funds for programs and initiatives, I urge you to consider the following:

Lead Safe Housing:

As Co-Chair of the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning, our goal is to eliminate childhood lead poisoning by 2010. In 2006, over 118 children had Elevated Blood Lead Levels (EBLL) over 10 micrograms/deciliter (ug/dL), and 13 had EBLLs over 20 ug/dL. Lead is a neurotoxin, and causes irreversible damage which can result in learning disabilities, behavior problems including aggression, and numerous other health problems over the lifetime of the child affected. Impacts on education and the increased demand on special education programs within the city school district may be linked to high rates of childhood lead poisoning – a completely preventable health hazard.

By making homes lead-safe, we not only improve the physical and mental health of children living in these, we improve educational outcomes, stabilize housing stock and increase the value of these homes. Statewide legislation to support lead safe housing would be the housing solution to a major environmental health hazard and have a tremendous return on investment.

Increase resources for housing development:

Group 14621 is a Neighborhood Preservation Company, funded through the DHCR Neighborhood & Rural Preservation Program. We work with residents to address housing needs, public safety concerns, partner with business associations on economic development, work to develop and implement neighborhood plans, and seek to improve the housing through administering home repair grants through the City of Rochester's CDBG program.

In the 14621 neighborhood, the impact of vacant, deteriorated housing masks the need for safe, decent affordable housing. Both rental housing and owner occupied homes are negatively affected by the vacants that dot the neighborhood, as mortgages and insurance are more difficult to obtain. In addition, the low income residents lack the resources to

make substantial improvements to their homes, many of which have lost equity in a soft real-estate market.

The poverty level within the city of Rochester increased from 25.9% in 2000 to 30% in 2006 according to the ACS data as analyzed by the Brookings Institute. We have watched as the foreclosure rate has increased, property conditions on rental homes have continued to decline, and swaths of homes have fallen in demolition.

Regardless of these challenges, there is a need for increased funding for rehabilitation of existing residential and commercial properties, and for construction of new rental and owner-occupied housing units. Our waiting list is currently over 100 homeowners, with legitimate emergency needs, with no resources available to assist them.

We urge the NYS DOB to increase funding to the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal to fund the Neighborhood Preservation Companies at the recommended level of \$125,000 per year.

Member: Empire State Housing Alliance

As a member of the Empire State Housing Alliance (ESHA), a coalition of housing advocates and experts from across New York State, we have been working to expand the resources available for affordable housing development. We can no longer afford to fight over increasingly smaller federal resources, and the funds available are woefully inadequate to address the critical housing needs in this community. Therefore, I would respectfully ask that the Department of Budget support the development and funding of a "Housing Investment Fund" – a strategy that will leverage other public and private funds to address the housing crisis that we are already facing.

The goals of this investment fund would be:

- To expand the resources dedicated to addressing the affordable housing needs of low income New Yorkers;
- To establish a flexible structure that acknowledges and serves the diverse housing markets in the state;
- To encourage local investment in affordable housing and the development of local housing trust funds, particularly those that reflect regional or multi-municipal coordination and planning;
- To promote the creation and revitalization of vibrant, mixed-income, accessible communities.

Others will speak about the actual structure of such a fund, and I ask that you carefully consider not just the cost, but the potential return on investment.

Safe Neighborhoods = increased state revenue?

I would also like to point out that, as the state seeks to close its budget gap, that you not forget those who live in neighborhoods like 14621. While much of my testimony has reflected the need for funding of “bricks and mortar” projects, the reality is that a community needs far more than buildings – it needs stronger relationships and a safer environment.

The 14621 neighborhood has been rocked over and over by violence, most recently the senseless homicide of a community activist walking home from a neighborhood meeting. If we fail to invest in increasing the public safety in our communities, I would submit that you are wasting both time and money. People with choices will not remain where they do not feel safe. Investors will not make commitments in locations where they and their employees or customers do not feel safe. Children will continue to struggle in school, as the hazards negotiated to get TO the school occupy far more of their energy than learning to read or write – no child should have to walk past open air drug dealing, or step over discarded heroin syringes as they walk to their elementary school – but they do every day in the 14621 neighborhood. I photograph and track gang graffiti and tags, and share that information with the Rochester Police Department – this is a community with about 60 known gangs.

So, I would ask for your continued support and funding for initiatives like Operation Impact, and the city’s current crime reduction program known as “Zero Tolerance”. I would also urge you to support comprehensive violence prevention initiatives through the NYS Division of Criminal Justice funding. I can give you no recommended dollar amounts here – what is the value of a human life?

Thank you for your time – I would be happy to answer any questions.