



Daniel K. Glazier
Executive Director and General Counsel

Neighborhood Advocacy
2700 N. 14th Street, St. Louis, MO 63106

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - October 31, 2023

MEDIA CONTACTS: Peter Hoffman: pjhoffman@lsem.org, 314.256.8744

TWO CITY NEIGHBORHOODS PROPOSE PLAN TO DEAL WITH VACANT PROPERTIES AND PROMOTE INVESTMENT

St. Louis. When the City of St. Louis began acquiring property in 2016 for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) it relied on broad use of its eminent domain power. As a result, residents and businesses were forced to move, a traumatizing event for long-time stakeholders. “It felt like we were collateral damage,” said Sheila Rendon, a lifelong resident of the St. Louis Place Neighborhood who was made to relocate for the NGA development. “It was gut wrenching.”

Given that history, many residents were alarmed when news broke this May that the City had conducted a Blight Study for the Jeff-Vander-Lou and St. Louis Place neighborhoods that surround the NGA. “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me,” said Miguel Alexander, advisory board member for the Jeff-Vander-Lou (JVL) Neighborhood Association, who has been a longtime advocate to curb eminent domain uses.

Since then, the St. Louis Place and Jeff-Vander-Lou (JVL) neighborhood associations have worked alongside attorneys from Legal Services of Eastern Missouri to understand the pros and cons of legal blighting and learned how blight studies were typically coupled with a redevelopment plan that provide how the City would be able to use its eminent domain and tax abatement power. The result of that engagement is a redevelopment plan with terms proposed by the community organizations and their residents for consideration by the City.

Peter Hoffman, Managing Attorney for Neighborhood Advocacy at Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, who represents both neighborhoods, says that the law allows anyone the ability to propose a redevelopment plan, “it just hasn’t been done this way in St. Louis. In Kansas City, neighborhoods regularly take a more hands-on approach to redevelopment plans” citing a recent campaign by the West Side Neighborhood to allow tax abatements (freezes) for existing residents to prevent gentrification. The redevelopment plan proposed by JVL and St. Louis Place neighborhoods would offer similar incentives for existing long-term community residents.

“There are families and businesses who have lived here for generations. They’ve continued to invest in this community and in their homes despite little return on that investment. It’s these folks who we need to make sure to protect,” said Virginia Druhe, President of the St. Louis Place Community Association. The proposed redevelopment plan would prohibit the use of eminent domain against existing residents whose homes are being maintained. “At the same time, as a result of the NGA development, we’ve seen rampant land speculation. There are outside land owners here who refuse to keep their properties maintained or actually develop them. We’re hopeful this plan will give the City the power to put a stop to that practice,” Druhe said.

Druhe says that their Alderpersons and the City’s development arm, St. Louis Development Corporation (SLDC), have been receptive to the neighborhoods’ proposal thus far. In addition to the limited use of eminent domain and the development incentives for existing residents, the plan includes a proposal for a “Community Advisory Panel” to give residents a greater say in how development around the NGA plays out in the years to come. “No one has a greater stake in this community than the people who already live here,” said Druhe. “If the City is serious about inclusive and equitable investment, SLDC and the Board of Alderman should not only support our plan, but work alongside us to make sure that it’s implemented in a way that includes residents of both neighborhoods.”

The City’s Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority and Planning Departments need to approve the plan before it can move through the Board of Alderman for a vote. If approved, the City could begin accepting applications for tax abatements and initiate proceedings to address the problem properties as soon as next year.