

March 8, 2021

The Honorable Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms
Jon Keen, *Chief Operating Officer*
Carmen Chubb, *Chief of Staff*
City of Atlanta
55 Trinity Avenue SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Dear Mayor Bottoms, Mr. Keen, and Ms. Chubb,

We, the undersigned, represent voices of residents and organizations from the community surrounding the Westside Park, including Grove Park, Center Hill, Almond Park, and Howell Station. We write today as deeply concerned and frustrated residents and stakeholders of neighborhoods most directly impacted by Westside Park development. As the largest infrastructure project in the City of Atlanta, the Westside Park, now compounded by the new Microsoft development, is already having massive inequitable gentrification and displacement effects on our community, particularly on our black and brown residents of Grove Park, Center Hill, and Almond Park. These neighborhoods have predominantly renter-occupied populations with a median income of less than \$27,000 and are intensely vulnerable to displacement. We are horrified, outraged, and heartbroken to see the impacts of this gentrification and dissolution of our community daily as our residents are having their rents doubled and tripled by landlords, legacy families forced to move away due to housing instability, and leases being broken as developers flip houses in the community, many without proper permits. The non-profit organizations in our community get dozens of calls daily from residents in distress.

We have united around a deep fear that our community is becoming just another repeated instance of the inequitable development and displacement of communities around Atlanta, such as the Old Fourth Ward, Kirkwood, Summerhill, and East Atlanta Village, and we are fighting that fate tooth and nail. As the City of Atlanta Deputy Commissioner of Parks and Recreation recently reminded us at a community meeting, the City has been working on Westside Park for over 15 years. Our community has tried to engage City leadership for years on the concerns around this Park around displacement and housing, as well as other impacts of the park including equitable access, transportation, safety, and how to uplift economic development and mobility of residents so that they are able to stay. In fact, the [completion of the Westside Reservoir](#) this past month marks over six years of community advocacy around these issues since the project gained traction. We have regularly dedicated hundreds of hours listening to and considering feedback from City and community individuals alike and expressed our concerns to the City in advisory committees, task forces, virtual and in-person meetings, letters, emails, and on calls. We want our neighbors who currently live here to be able to stay here, safely and peacefully, and enjoy the benefits of city improvements for which they have advocated so long. This is a vision we share with you, Mayor Bottoms, when you affirmed, *"A key pillar to the Administration's comprehensive affordable housing plan is ensuring long-term residents are not priced out of the neighborhoods they have built."* However, this is a battle your Administration and our community is swiftly losing in the face of massive infrastructure investment and development from the City and Microsoft.

A year ago, City leadership attended a neighborhood association meeting and committed to doing a better job at engaging the community and mitigating the impact this catalytic project was having on our neighborhoods. We were hopeful. We believed that the City would see this as an opportunity to demonstrate to metro Atlanta and the nation how to do equitable, catalytic development the right way, hand in hand with community. Almost immediately, we saw progress with your [Executive Order](#) placing a moratorium around the Park, calling for a “*robust community planning effort, which will include all relevant City departments and agencies,*” the development of an Equitable Development Framework, re-engagement of the Westside Park and BeltLine, aligning activities in the One Atlanta Housing Affordability Action Plan, developing a Westside Park Transportation Plan, and identifying City or other public agency-controlled land located in the immediate impact area. Exactly one year later, we remain frustrated that the City has yet to develop deeply committed plans with the community or allocated significant City budgets to implement actions that fulfill the Executive Order and address residents’ top concerns around equitable development, anti-displacement, transportation, economic development, Westside Park access, and other critical needs.

We demand immediate relief for our community going forward. We present here community needs for an Equitable Development Framework and highlight a few of the immediately obtainable, critical demands, elaborated below.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Members of this community have joined and willingly engaged with the City through multiple avenues, but two particular City designated avenues within the past few years stand out: the Westside Park Advisory Group and the Westside Equitable Development Task Force. While both started with promise in improving city-community relationships and developing joint collaborative projects, to date, neither of these City-led efforts has been particularly fruitful in producing critical results this community have long been advocating for.

The Westside Park Advisory Committee

The Westside Park Advisory Committee is a City-led engagement forum that was established to enable community members to provide input into the planning, development, and equitable south side access to the Westside Park to ensure it met the needs of current residents, to improve relationships between the surrounding neighborhoods and the Department of Parks and Recreation, and to create a sense of community ownership and empowerment around the Park. Community representatives dedicated numerous hours of their time to meet with the City in over a dozen advisory committee meetings and public meetings from April 2019 to February 2020, as well as worked in sub-committees to develop recommendations around the Park’s naming and history, mission, playground, sustainability, uses and programs, and conservancy. However, after the meeting in February 2020, the Committee seemed to disband without notification to community members. There was one email update on May 30, 2020 with a rough draft of the Westside Park Masterplan and then no additional contact with the group until September 2020 with a brief email update announcing the pending completion of Phase 1A and start of Phase 1B. No other updates were provided to the Advisory Committee after that date until Grove Park community members discovered construction on a south side access trail in Grove Park and urgently convened a meeting with the City.

This south side trail construction is exceedingly distressing to community members for several reasons. The community members of Grove Park have been advocating tirelessly for equitable access to the Westside Park and Proctor Creek Greenway Trail from the south side for *over four years*. When the only proposed entrance to Westside Park was located on the north side, near \$400,000 newly built homes, we requested a south side entrance to the park that would serve the residents most impacted by the Park. With continued community advocacy, the Department of Parks and Recreation committed to building out a south side entrance and neighborhood access *with* engagement of the community, especially the neighbors nearest to the ingress and egress points. In October 2019, Parks & Recreation presented at the Grove Park Neighborhood Association meeting with [three proposed access points](#) to the Westside Park from the south side and held an engagement session with residents of Grove Park Place and Hortense Way. Representatives assured the community that, *“All options are open,”* and made commitments to come back to the community with further details and options around trail alignment, parking, and more. For over a year though, the Department of Parks and Recreation did not return and during that time selected *its* preferred access option, designed, permitted, contracted, and commenced construction of an access trail through Grove Park, without providing notice to the Advisory Committee, Grove Park Neighborhood Association, or Friends of Grove Park Group, and in spite of community members reaching out to Parks. When trail development became evident, community members worked to track down answers from the Department of Parks and Recreation because of community concerns that the selected and constructed alignment is incomplete in scope and does not fully serve the residents of the impacted neighborhoods, especially in regards to parking and connectivity to Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway; impacts nearby homeowners who were not consulted; and creates safety concerns for children. To residents and volunteers who have invested enormous amounts of time and effort advocating for equitable south side access and were assured that they would be included in the design and planning process of this trail, this build out was, in the words of one resident, *“a slap-in-the-face”*.

On Tuesday, February 9th, 2021, representatives of the City attended a community engagement session that included over 100 invested residents and stakeholders around Westside Park. Residents engaged with the Department of Parks and Recreation in hopes that a conversation would result in an apology for the lack of engagement, fruitful dialogue on the shortcomings of the trail and access point, solutions for how to move forward with better community engagement, and resources to ensure that future construction and planning would better meet the needs of the community. Instead, the meeting publicly turned to a showing of dismissal as the concerns, thoughts, and lived experiences of community attendees were disregarded and community members left feeling disappointed and disrespected. Moreover, in that meeting community members learned that in the past year the City started building a second entrance on the north side. As our neighbor, Timothy Freeman said in one meeting with the City, *“This park isn’t for us to enjoy. You are building the city’s largest park in the middle of our neighborhood with no regard for us. This is anything but equitable development.”*

Residents who have participated in prior meetings and in the Advisory Committee left with no sense of how their feedback, dedication, and hard work were being used by the City to meaningfully and substantively inform its actions for equitable development and access, and there is a deep concern that people’s energy, time, and efforts were wasted. With these actions in the past weeks and the past year, the Department broke the trust with many community residents that it was working to re-build. We knew this work would be tedious. We knew this work would require excessive communication and

collaboration. We knew this work would require trust from all invested parties. Never did we imagine having to ask the City to approach this work with dignity, professionalism, empathy, concern, and respect -- yet here we are.

The Westside Park Equitable Development Task Force

The Westside Park Equitable Development Task Force is yet another instance where there is deep concern over the level of commitment from the City to respond to community needs. In response to Mayor Bottoms Executive Order and Ordinance commitments in February 2020, community representatives from 4 neighborhoods -- Grove Park, Center Hill, Almond Park, and Howell Station -- convened to work collaboratively with the City to develop and implement an Equitable Development Framework that would ensure that both public and private investment would support the current residents and address their top their concerns. Though initial progress was slowed by COVID-19, community Task Force members met with City officials virtually to express concerns in July 2020. In early September 2020, the Mayor's Office committed to the development of four Westside Park Equitable Development Working Groups around Housing, Transportation, Economic Mobility and Development, and Quality of Life. The Working Groups were intended to be a collaborative space where City staff and key partners could work jointly together with community representatives to provide updates from City projects, respond to community questions and concerns, negotiate priority action items to jointly create a binding Westside Park Equitable Development Framework, and then participate together to implement Equitable Development Framework initiatives.

Once the Working Group premise was established, community representatives across the four neighborhoods mobilized and invested hundreds of hours into engaging neighbors and organizations to understand their top concerns and critical needs, reading plans for the community, and utilizing community feedback and planning documents to develop a list of top priorities and initiatives of residents to present to the City. Recognizing our limited resources, we asked the City to assign a skilled planner to help us with the complicated work of informing Framework initiative proposals and to help us create and implement a comprehensive community engagement plan. Instead, we were left to figure it out for ourselves, using our personal resources to try to reach the thousands of neighbors who reside in the immediate vicinity of Westside Park.

In 6 months since the City committed to the Working Groups, no Working Groups have been convened by the City, despite repeated requests from community representatives for their initiation. In the year since the Executive Order, there is still no substantive anti-displacement strategy, transportation plan, or agreed upon Equitable Development Framework for vulnerable neighborhoods around Westside Park.

We understand that City resources are tight, especially in light of COVID-19. We understand that equitable development is difficult and that gentrification is a challenge that no city has conquered. However, Atlanta's goals of equity, engagement, and community empowerment must not be allowed to devolve into merely lip-service, with no substantive and funded commitments and deliverables to address urgent community needs as gentrification and development continue to bear down on our neighborhoods.

We are calling on the City to RISE UP. Meet this challenge head on. Be big, bold, and visionary. Be an example for the *country* and commit to doing equitable development right. You have Microsoft at the table, as well as foundations, non-profits, and most critically our community who remain committed

to working with the City and do right by our residents. There is promise here -- our community believes that we can do this together with the City but the City must *commit. Commit leadership, time, and budget.* This will be One Atlanta's legacy. More importantly, this will be Mayor Bottoms' legacy. Do you tackle this challenge head on and live up to your values of equity? Or does the City let yet more black and brown communities get swept away?

NEXT STEPS

Immediate and aggressive actions must be taken by this Administration to protect our community and ensure they thrive. The community representatives of the Westside Park Equitable Development Taskforce have developed a list of critical and high priority community requirements (attached) based on months and years of community engagement activities, spanning across the areas of housing, transportation, economic development and mobility, and quality of life. These requirements for a robust, thriving, and beloved community serve as a basis for collaboration with City staff members and key partners to develop a binding, jointly agreed upon Equitable Development Framework. Of those top critical and high priority items, here we highlight a short list of immediate, most critical initiatives that our community demands. While these highlighted items do not encompass the full scope of protective measures that will mitigate the damage this regional park is wreaking on our neighborhoods, they will at minimum show that the City will uphold the public promises made by your Westside Park Moratorium Executive Order and Ordinance and are working with the community towards the creation and implementation of a true Equitable Development Framework.

1. **Develop and implement an immediate and measurable anti-displacement strategy that is specifically tailored to the community surrounding Westside Park, as outlined in the commitments made in your Executive Order.** The anti-displacement initiatives within the strategy should ensure safe, decent, and affordable housing for all homeowners and renters, with an emphasis on protecting and serving low-income families, legacy residents, and elderly and disabled households. The strategy should include deep and permanent affordable housing and direct support for low-income and legacy residents who are the most vulnerable to displacement. One immediate action toward deeply affordable housing alluded to in the Executive Order is to identify all City and public-agency controlled parcels and dedicate these parcels to workforce and low-income housing. For example, the nine acre parcel within the Perry Bolton TAD area and other infill parcels should be made into housing for residents below 60% AMI.
2. **Develop a comprehensive traffic plan for the neighborhoods surrounding the Westside Park as committed to in your Executive Order and implement critical safety, parking, and traffic transportation initiatives as soon as possible.** Immediate transportation initiatives should ensure *safe* multi-modal transportation infrastructure that links residents to employment, goods and services, health care, education, social, recreational, and cultural activities. The initiatives should ensure that traffic and parking around the Westside Park does not necessitate current residents to relinquish their rights to quality of life, safe habitat, and personal wellbeing. There need to be sufficient self-contained parking for the Westside Park and protective parking solutions for neighborhood residents. In multiple documented engagement sessions, these four neighborhoods have requested and been promised a traffic, transportation, and sidewalk plan

for areas surrounding Westside Park. This commitment from City officials has not been fulfilled for more than two years despite ADOT Commissioner Josh Rowan's concerns that, "We're breaking records for pedestrian fatalities," on Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway. Yet the City is still moving forward with egress and ingress for Westside Park plans based on assumed traffic flow, with a lack of community engagement around concerns for local residents' safety; quality of life; and bike, pedestrian, or public transportation considerations.

3. **A re-envisioning of the Donald Lee Hollowell Corridor** that supports the master visions of Almond Park, Center Hill, Grove Park, and Howell Station; retains, supports, and incentivizes small, black-owned business development and growth to create a thriving economic corridor that provides needed community services and good jobs for residents; and restricts additional gas stations, storage facilities, dollar-style convenience stores, and auto shops.
4. **Equitable access to the Park: develop a Westside Park South Entrance that creates safe connectivity between Westside Park, Grove Park, residents that live South and West of the Park, and physical connection from the Westside Park to the economic corridor of Hollowell Pkwy.** The entrance should include the redevelopment of Grove Park that is safe for neighbors, includes adequate parking, and revitalizes the Grove Park Recreation Center. The entrance should also ensure the connection of Westside Park and Grove Park physically with paths, sidewalks, and parking to Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway to support economic development of local businesses on the Hollowell Corridor.
5. **A comprehensive strategy and dedicated capacity for community engagement and project implementation for the initiatives of Westside Park Equitable Development Taskforce.** As the Mayor's Executive Order states: *"During the moratorium, the Administration will engage in a robust community planning effort, which will include all relevant City departments and agencies."*
 - a. Immediate funding and dedicated full-time city personnel and a Mayoral leadership team for true engagement and project implementation between the City and deeply impacted community members, voters, and taxpayers of Almond Park, Center Hill, Grove Park, and Howell Station.
 - b. The start of the four Westside Park Equitable Development Taskforce Working Groups for Housing, Economic Development and Mobility, Transportation, and Quality of Life in the next 30 days with City staff and partners to ensure that community needs are heard, initiatives are developed, and budget is allocated to fund initiatives by June 2020 for inclusion in the Fiscal Year 2021 budget.
 - c. Oversight by the Chief Equity Officer to ensure both equitable processes and outcomes for the Task Force.
 - d. Our community deserves and demand the respect of City elected officials and staff who are selected to represent the City's interest and respond to community concerns. We

require that appropriate and prepared representatives join meetings who are willing to receive and respond to community concerns and questions and are determined to achieve outcomes that ensure equity for community members. We will not tolerate City officials who deflect, disrespect, and demoralize our residents.

This critical work and these partnerships must move forward forcefully and rapidly in the next few months to ensure that Equitable Development Framework initiatives are included in the Fiscal Year 2021 City budget, so that residents are not forced to wait yet another year for meaningful change. We do not have that kind of time. Our community continues to suffer as it loses neighbors, friends, and family to gentrification and displacement brought on by the impending Park opening and Microsoft development. We have been solid advocates for housing, transportation, economic mobility, safety, and more. It's been said many times that people do not choose to become advocates. They are forced to, often as a result of experiencing repeated trauma. Our hearts are breaking for how tired our neighbors already are because of all the laborious advocacy they've been compelled to do to stay, protect the community that they built, and to be given the chance to thrive. Yet, we persist -- because we must.

Considering the magnitude of this project, and the tremendous impact it has had on our already-vulnerable community, we are requesting a meeting with Mayor Bottoms, Chief Operating Officer Jon Keen, and Chief Equity Officer Qaadirah Abdur-Rahim. The neighborhoods surrounding the Westside Park will vocally withhold our support of the Park's opening until we have heard directly from Mayor Bottoms her plan to prevent the Westside Park from pushing out our neighbors and to meet our most dire needs. Collectively, we expect commitments in writing within 10 business days in order to endorse or declare this a successful relationship between our community and the City of Atlanta.

Respectfully submitted and looking forward to your prompt and thoughtful response.

Signed,

Community Members of the Westside Park Equitable Development Task Force

Brandon Pierre-Thomas, President, Grove Park Neighborhood Association

Erin Nickson, Treasurer, Center Hill Neighborhood Association

Ola Reynolds, Chair, NPU-G representing Almond Park Neighborhood

Naomi Green, Howell Station appointee to the WPEDT

Debra Edelson, Executive Director, Grove Park Foundation

Carol Ross, Grove Park

Gail Mapp, Northwest Business Association

Karen Rose, Grove Park

Timothy Freeman, Grove Park

Yeou-Rong Jih, Grove Park

cc: LaChandra Burks, Deputy Chief Operating Officer
Qaadirah Abdur-Rahim, Chief Equity Officer
Amy Cornell, Deputy Director of Special Projects, Mayor's Office of Innovation and Performance
Councilmember Antonio Brown, District 3

Councilmember Dustin Hillis, District 9
Councilmember Michael Julian Bond, Post 1 At-Large
Councilmember Matt Westmoreland, Post 2 At-Large
Councilmember Andre Dickens, Post 3 At-Large
Elizabeth Thompson, Chair, NPU-J
Eric Harrison, Chair, NPU-K