

City Clerk, Hamilton City Hall
71 Main Street West, First Floor
Hamilton, ON L8P 4Y5
Email: clerk@hamilton.ca

24 May 2021

RE: Brightside Park – Correspondence for Facility Naming Committee/GIC

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing this letter on behalf of a group of Brightsiders. We are men and women, lifelong friends since childhood, now in our late seventies and eighties, who would like to express our thoughts about what it means to have Brightside Park, located on the former Dominion Glass factory site, named after our childhood neighbourhood that was demolished long ago. To put it simply, we are all delighted to have the name 'Brightside' finally put back onto the historical record in this way, but the story about what happened to our former homes and old neighbourhood provides an important lesson and cautionary tale for Hamilton's citizens, politicians, and planners. Remembering Brightside, its origins and fate, is wise in these troubling and unprecedented times, as people struggle for affordable and dignified housing during a global pandemic that reminds us each day about the severity of social and environmental inequalities that exist locally in our city.

Let me tell you a bit about Brightside and our search through the years for meaningful recognition of our old neighbourhood that lay along the industrial waterfront, just beside the steel mill and other factories. Until the mid 1960's, when most of us were young adults, Brightside was a thriving community of about 1,500 people. When it was first planned in 1910 it aimed to attract working class people with British backgrounds, using street names evoking England's great industrial cities - Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham. Within a decade, its population shifted as some Brits left the area and families like ours – including immigrant Italians, Ukrainians, Poles, among other Eastern Europeans - came to work and live. At its peak Brightside had some 260 homes and small businesses. After the war, as Stelco's steel mills grew bigger and bigger, we saw our neighbourhood demolished bit by bit to make way for industrial expansion. By the late 1960s almost all our homes were bulldozed to accommodate industrial road improvements, including an arterial road overpass, and a factory parking lot. Where Brightside once stood there are now only a small handful of houses on the south side of Burlington Street, while just one business, Homer & Wilson, remains where it began back in 1913.

Ignored and forgotten after the destruction of our family homes, many of us Brightsiders have taken it upon ourselves to tell our story about our old neighbourhood in our own way and with our own words. Over the years we have had reunions, and many get together for our families and old neighbours. In 1978 nearly 1,000 people came together to mark the decade anniversary of the demolition of our neighbourhood. We had been scattered to other places, but we remain Brightsiders. We survived the ordeal and had much

to celebrate, which is our way. In 1983, at yet another reunion, we gave everyone a keepsake – a lovingly crafted 32-page booklet filled with photographs, stories, cartoons, and trivia about the people and places of Brightside. We left copies of it in local libraries, hoping that other Hamiltonians would read it and set our neighbourhood into its rightful place in the city's historical record. We hoped, too, that if people heard our story, that such a tragedy would never again strike other families in our city. Seemingly, few heeded our tale.

Recently things have started to change ever so slightly, as people have started learning lessons from the story of Brightside, a place name now firmly on the public record. An award-winning book on Hamilton's environmental history, *The People and the Bay*, shows the environmental inequalities associated with our old neighbourhood, much like how the recent *Spectator* Code Red Series connected where people live in our city and the quality of their health. A graphic novel, *Showdown! Making Modern Unions*, cast a light on some of the bitter legacies left for us from the hotly contested Stelco Strike of 1946, much of which played out in our neighbourhood at the factory's Manchester Street gate. We fell on both sides of the conflict as our families found themselves between a rock and a hard place. To this day some of us believe that the destruction of our homes came in retaliation for our support of workers in the strike. In 2019-20 the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre exhibited *Notes from the Brightside Neighbourhood Project*, to showcase our huge hand-drawn memory map inscribed with sites and stories that we created through many collaborative mapping sessions that began in 2016. Stephen Lechniak's ever-popular *Brightside Memories* Facebook site gives us a forum to touch base, gather our thoughts and record our stories, and keep connected with each other with family announcements and tributes to those who have passed on. In 2021, a new book, *Reclaiming Hamilton*, included lengthy and well-documented chapter, "Look on the Brightside, 1910-Present," that places our story as historical context for its treatment of "the fault lines that run through the city today." It shows how power and influence shaped both our city and the Brightside neighbourhood. It also shows how Hamilton's search for 'progress' all-too-often involves bulldozers and dumpsters to the detriment of workers and their families. What happened to Brightside reveals how *not* to undertake major changes to our city's built environment – changes that affect people's lives in a harmful way.

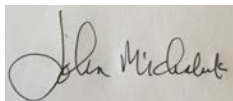
Through the years we have tried to make sense of this great loss that we all experienced, seeking solutions to long unanswered, at times haunting questions, about how our parents turned their homes over to be demolished. We wonder how our families got to be there in the first place - how could a city allow the building of a residential subdivision for workers to lay between two polluted inlets, right next to a steel mill, a sewage treatment plant, an incinerator that burned truckload after truckload of garbage, and adjacent to a city dump and major hydro substation? We wonder, who championed the building of Industrial Drive right through the heart of our residential neighbourhood? And we have been at a loss to find anyone on record who stood up to the powers that destroyed our community.

But despite the lack of humanity and transparency associated with the destruction of Brightside, we acknowledge that this place nevertheless left us wonderful legacies. Childhood neighbourhoods make an indelible mark on people; this is something that we see ever so clearly as we get on in years. Our Brightside Neighbourhood Project, remembers, documents, and celebrates many good things that our old neighbourhood gifted to us. For us, Brightside

still flourishes in our minds and in our once vivid but now blurring recollections of a place so well loved by so many people. As resourceful as we were in our childhood, and in the absence of the supervised recreational facilities that Hamilton gave its more prosperous neighbourhoods, these toxic places – garbage dumps, polluted inlets, and hazardous factory sites - became our playgrounds. The waste and rubble from industry became our toys. To us this was a paradise to be explored, one that taught us so many important things about ourselves and the world around us, yet to city planners and politicians our neighbourhood was just a *blighted area*.

When we think of Brightside we think of optimism, respect, community, families, and children. We hope that the naming of Brightside Park in memory of our old neighbourhood will help give kids and others a chance to play outdoors as we did, to flourish and be happy, and healthy. This would be a most valuable legacy for the Hamilton of tomorrow. For us and those interested in the evolution of our city, it is wise to remember the struggles and the resiliency of Brightside, to cultivate and measure our progress with finer tools than bulldozers and dump trucks. “Hear our voice...”

Sincerely,

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "John Michaluk".

John Michaluk

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