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25 May, 2021

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

Dear Committee Members,

Before the fall of 2016, I had never heard of the Brightside Neighbourhood that once provided homes for hundreds of workers and their families in the heart of Hamilton's industrial zone. Then, in the course of doing research for a graphic history about the 1946 Stelco strike, my colleagues Matt McInnes, Rob Kristofferson and I interviewed Lino Trigatti, a retired second-generation blacksmith who worked his whole adult life at Stelco. Lino's story was both fascinating and emblematic of the experiences of a generation of workers whose families had immigrated from southern and Eastern Europe, before and after World War Two, seeking employment and a better life. Lino's father was from Italy, and brought his family to Hamilton in the early 1930s. Lino was about two years old when he moved to Brightside, which provided an important landing zone for many immigrant workers and their families. The neighbourhood contained many rooming houses where a worker could live while he saved enough money to bring his family from overseas. It was also the site of a lively culture of bootleggers, musicians, gamblers, shopkeepers, urban farmers and amateur athletes.

Lino grew up in Brightside. His played in the fields and the dump that flanked his neighbourhood. He and his friends explored the surrounding inlets on rafts made from streetcar ties, crafts that they hid in the sewer intake pipes. They found fun and adventure in a landscape that to many outsiders seemed uninhabitable. Lino's first job was at Dominion Glass. During the shortage of workers caused by World War Two, he lied about his age and was recruited before finishing high school to help make lids for glass jars. After a stint at Dominion, he followed his father's profession and became a blacksmith at Stelco. He helped fashion the spikes that were used to plot the trans-Canada highway. Lino has lived over ninety years as a Brightsider. He has seen the transformation of the landscape as the inlets were filled in with slag, and as the surrounding fields, trees and wetlands were claimed by heavy industry. He participated in the historic strikes of the summer of 1946 and remains a dedicated member of USW Local 1005. He witnessed the slow, steady dismantling of Brightside from 1950 – 1970, as houses and businesses were bought up, one by one, and as families moved away to be replaced by transient boarders to whom Stelco rented the houses before they were torn down for ever.

From the second floor of Lino's house, one has a view of the Industrial Parkway Overpass that cuts through where the Brightside Hotel once stood. The hotel's late-night drunken shenanigans have been replaced by a different sound: the passing cars and trucks that have rattled Lino's windows for over fifty years. Mr. Trigatti is the last Brightsider to still inhabit what is left of the old neighbourhood. The hydro corridor that runs behind his house still has a couple fruit trees that speak to the creative ways Brightsiders turned their neighbourhood into a liveable, flourishing community based on principles of self-reliance and mutual support.

Brightside was built on land that Hamilton's elite had once considered using for a gentleman's club. The willow trees and marshlands of Huckleberry Point made it a popular, picturesque spot for hunting and fishing. Long before being colonized by Europeans, an Indigenous peoples called the Attawandaron were the caretakers of the bay front land, which was recognized as a rich and important resource—too important, in fact, to be claimed by any one group. The Attawandaron, or "Neutral Nation" as they were called by settlers, treated the bay as an irreplaceable resource to be shared by all in a spirit of gratitude and humility. When settler culture imposed its ideas of private property on the area, it simultaneously devalued the land, calling it "worthless" and in need of industrial investment to render it "productive." The Attawandaron narrative of sharing and respect was replaced with an ideology of productivity that recognized value only in the form of monetary profits. In the name of "progress," this narrative has transformed the bay front into the polluted, devastated industrial landscape we know today.

Brightside emerged and all but disappeared in the midst of this transformation, and Brightsiders witnessed it happening. In a landscape designed by city elites to extract profits from workers and the environment, Brightsiders managed to create a liveable and flourishing space of culture and refuge. Estranged from their communities and relatives overseas, employed at factories that cared minimally for their well-being and safety, they built homes and relationships that resisted the dehumanizing tendencies of Hamilton's industrial heyday. The majority of Brightside's homes and businesses were bulldozed over half a century ago, but the relationships forged there remain. My colleagues and I realized this when we helped start the Brightside Neighbourhood Project in 2016, and were able to participate in lively community memory and mapping sessions. These sessions helped reconstruct the neighbourhood and record some of the stories and culture of Brightside, but what they most strongly impressed upon me was the way the fabric of relationships forged in Brightside, which had remained dormant for so long, could suddenly spring back into life. As friends and neighbours were reunited, some of whom had not seen each other in several decades, the spirit of Brightside emerged at our lively meetings.

There is a special magic that was fostered in Brightside, and it still lives in the memories and hearts of Brightsiders. It was an ordinary magic of extraordinary people, helping each other survive and flourish under challenging circumstances

and in difficult environments. It seems fitting to me to name a park after this magic. Though the site is not *in* Brightside, many Brightsiders, such as Lino Trigatti, had connections to Dominion Glass. The factory was part of the industrial landscape that framed the Brightside neighbourhood.

I am wary, however, that in our enthusiasm to celebrate Hamilton workers' culture—so well illustrated by the people and stories of Brightside—we might overlook the contemporary struggles of Hamiltonians. Brightside was a neighbourhood of about 260 homes that was levelled in service of industrial infrastructure. A project of similar dimensions, and even greater potential for the displacement of Hamilton's working-class people, is currently underway with the light rail transit plan (LRT). A 2019 survey conducted by the King Street Tenants United advocacy group estimates that properties expropriated by the City of Hamilton and Metrolinx in service of the proposed LRT line includes 72 businesses, 12 homeowner households and 168 tenant households. The same group counts 168 tenant households that have been directly displaced due to the LRT project, and we can predict many more will be pushed out of their neighbourhoods due to transit-induced gentrification. At a time when severe housing shortages and increased market pressure have pushed rents and mortgages out of reach of many downtown residents, Hamilton has pursued the LRT project in such a way as to all but guarantee that many of the people living along the King Street corridor—the most concentrated swath of rental properties in the city—will be forced out of their homes and communities. No funds or planning were put into building social housing units prior to the start of the LRT construction to accommodate displaced tenants. Those forced out of their homes were given, in the best circumstances, a one-year subsidy to help cover the cost of their increased rents, but this subsidy has now expired.

When I listen to proponents of the LRT, I often hear the same disregard for workers' culture and community fabric that accompanied the dismantling of the Brightside neighbourhood and the transformation of Huckleberry Point into one of the most polluted sites in the Great Lakes. Much like north end neighbourhoods such as Brightside were described as "blighted" in post-war redevelopment plans, the east end of Hamilton is currently disparaged as "underdeveloped," "blighted" and "run down," and LRT is offered as a fix-all solution that will attract development and resources. Behind these claims is blindness to the relationships and cultures that truly make Hamilton unique and liveable. If the story of Brightside can help us here, it is in reinvigorating our understanding of wealth and community. Rather than interiorizing the stigma that outsiders might like to level at Hamilton, as being "uncultured," "poor," "run-down" and "polluted," we might learn to take pride in putting the needs of people and communities over the imperatives of money and investors. In the 20th century, Brightsiders stood up to industrialists and city elites in their struggles for the right to have a decent home, a decent wage, paid vacations and safe working conditions. In the 21st century, these same struggles continue, but the area has shifted: to the struggles of workers on the shop floor have been added the struggles of tenants organizing their buildings to resist landlords and governments who would let them be

displaced.

In our post-industrial milieu, rarely are the class divides revealed with such clarity as the LRT debate offers. The “pro” side champions an ideology of progress and a model of belonging organized around upscale coffee shops and technological futurism: a sleek and environmentally friendly electric railway cruising down a reinvigorated King Street corridor that has been efficiently stripped of its working-class, affordable housing. We could call this faction an emergent “creative class,” though this term is more descriptive and aspirational than sociological, since many of this group struggle with precarity and displacement themselves. The anti-LRT camp is composed of two opposing factions: the established suburban “middle-class” who want to choke downtown of any resources, and the tenants and activist who have realized that the LRT is designed to be a vehicle of gentrification and displacement. If the proposed Brightside Park is to be more than a nostalgic landmark that covers over an ongoing disregard for the material realties of immigrants and working people, we need to pay careful attention to the lessons of the past, and to stop sacrificing neighbourhoods and communities on the altars of “progress” and “development.” This means building ample affordable social housing, instituting meaningful rent control, promoting co-ops and community land trusts that can curb real estate speculation, and protecting existing local businesses and cultures rather than implementing infrastructures that will largely benefit only a new group and class of people.

If we don’t do this, fifty years from now we might well be naming a new, East-end Park in memory of Hamilton’s King Street Corridor, and the resilient immigrant and worker neighbourhoods that it once housed.

Sincerely,



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