

A Lack of Transparency

My name is Heather Williams and I am the President of the Riverside-Normal City Neighborhood Association (RNCNA), a homeowner and a landlord with several rentals within the neighborhood. I bought my first home in the neighborhood in 2006 and have lived in RNCA for fourteen years. I am committed to the success of the neighborhood as a tax-payer, as a parent, and as a leader.

Three of my properties are adjacent to Tuhey Park. This little triangle is my home, it is my past and it is my future.

I would like to clarify the comments made by Mayor Dan Ridenour in the Star Press on November 7th. I reached out to the Mayor via email on May 12th to gauge the City's interest in working alongside the Riverside-Normal City neighborhood in an immersive learning class with Ball State landscape architecture students to create a plan for developing Tuhey Park by enhancing the amenities available to residents of Muncie. I helped connect BSU and the Halteman neighborhood with funding to work on the Halteman Park project. I was very excited by their designs and how they were able to energize the neighborhood residents. I wanted this for Tuhey Park. The Mayor responded, "I think it would be important for you and I to chat about Tuhey Park as we are looking into something also."

The Mayor and I met via Zoom on Monday, May 18th. At that time the Mayor showed me the YMCA's plans to build at Tuhey. I was overwrought and expressed my overwhelming opposition to this proposal. After the meeting, I sent the Mayor an email to formalize my concerns and asked to be kept in the loop on the project as it progressed. This was the entirety of The Mayor's response:

"I appreciate your email and thoughts. This was shared with you as a goodwill gesture as a result of early discussions with the committee. By the way this idea was started by the City long before I took office and joined this committee. I have always, and will continue to do my best to do the right thing for the City of Muncie. That includes communicating with key players long before any decisions are reached. That was not the case before I took office- just ask the Halteman Neighborhood about their pool and Mitchell. I continue to feel it is important to chat with a few reliable and confidential people for proper feedback and that is what I am doing. I appreciate your fear and urgency. I respectfully ask you provide me with some grace and time to work through this."

I was told that Tuhey was one of several sites that the YMCA was considering and that he trusted that I would keep our conversation confidential. I did. I did not hear anything from him for several months so I reached out on July 16th with the following brief request:

"It's been nearly two months since we spoke on the phone about the YMCA's plans for Tuhey Park. My understanding of our discussion on May 18th is that the YMCA was considering several potential sites for their new facility, one of which is in Tuhey Park. Can you please provide me with an update on those plans?"

To which, the Mayor replied:

“Sorry about that. With the community engaged more with police / prosecution / sentencing questions, the whole YMCA plan moved to the back burner. Our focus adjusted but I will re-engage it. Thanks for moving it back to front of mind.”

I did not hear from the Mayor again. The next time I heard about the City’s plans for Tuhey was after they had been presented to the Parks Board at their October 20th meeting. The Mayor emailed me the next morning requesting a meeting with me. I asked to involve the Riverside-Normal City Neighborhood Association Executive Committee as they were unfamiliar with this project and needed to be informed.

The RNCNA Executive Committee met with the Mayor, Brian Stephens-Hotopp, the Executive Director of the YMCA, Chad Zaucha, and several YMCA board members on October 27th. Our mission was to gather information to share with our residents at our regularly scheduled meeting the next evening. We did not provide feedback on location of parking lots, whether the historic bath house should be demolished for parking (yes, the Mayor actually suggested this), or if we would be happy with a 6’ or 8’ buffer between the houses and a sea of parking. There was no feedback to offer. We do not want Tuhey developed but we did not know how residents of our neighborhood would respond to the plan. We could not speak for them, or any of the other residents of the Muncie community, without seeing their input.

The next evening, Oct. 28, we presented the information gathered to the neighborhood association at our regularly scheduled meeting. We presented that information in a straightforward manner and did not interject our own personal opinions. Then we asked our neighbors to speak. There was no support for this project to move forward among the membership at this meeting. There IS no support for this project to move forward.

The Mayor implied in his Op Ed that we had several conversations about this project. This is untrue. He asked for my confidentiality and then pushed the project forward. I am VERY disappointed by his lack of transparency. I am very disappointed that he did not reach out to those who would be most affected by this decision before he tried to make it for them. Although Tuhey Park is in my neighborhood’s backyard, it is EVERYONE’S park.

I created a survey to gauge reaction to the City’s plan to lease Tuhey for development. Originally this survey was distributed to our residents, but others began requesting information and the survey, so it was distributed more widely on social media. I do not understand why this was not done by the City. As of today, I have received 417 survey responses from residents all across the City and they are overwhelmingly against this proposal.

The YMCA will close its Northwest and Downtown facilities and consolidate. It will build a state of the art gym for its members. We understand the YMCA’s very real needs and do not oppose their decision to consolidate and create a new facility. However, that facility does need to be located in Tuhey Park for the YMCA to be successful. There are other, better options for the YMCA to remain in the center city that do not include destroying a city park.

Who benefits from the YMCA relocating to Tuhey? NOT Riverside-Normal City. Our residents are overwhelmingly connected to the University in one way or another and have access to top-notch work-

out facilities. We do not need a gym. What will be the impact on my neighborhood if the YMCA develops at Tuhey?

- Traffic – Moving hundreds of people in and out of this small triangle bordered on two sides by the river and the other two sides by primarily homeowner occupied housing will be a nightmare for everyone involved. The city’s proposal to move the playgrounds to a small section of greenspace on the northwest corner of Tuhey will require children to cross a large parking lot to play. Families that once swam and then played on the playground will now have to traverse a hot swathe of parking to do both. They won’t. There will be no swimming days filled with play and picnics.
- Storm water problems – Our basements and streets already suffer from flooding during rains. After the large green space is paved, we will be MUCH worse off due to the overwhelming amount of hardscape involved in this plan.
- Pollution – Trash. Light. Noise. Imagine the sounds of wind in the trees and birds chirping replaced by the sound of hundreds of car doors slamming and car alarms blaring. The stars we once saw from the park will be obliterated by fluorescent parking lights. Discarded papers and bags will lay across a sea of black asphalt.
- Safety concerns – It is a well-known fact that thieves target the YMCA parking lot because of their middle-to-upper class clientele. Now they will prowl the parking lots, and OUR cars, and OUR garages, and OUR homes.

The City of Muncie’s own 5 Year Park Plan pointed out that, “One of the best ways for Muncie to improve its overall character is to continue to enhance its park system. A preeminent park system will set Muncie apart from other cities in the state. This would enhance the livability of the community for residents and the marketability of Muncie for prospective businesses.” I want to work with the City to improve Tuhey. I WILL work with the City to improve Tuhey. What I will not do is sit idly by while the City privatizes our precious public space and gives it over to development.

This park is our past. Built during the Depression, Tuhey was a space for residents to gather. It was a place filled with hope. This park is our present. It is filled with families gathering for picnics, residents walking their dogs, and with the gleeful cries of children at play. Children who need a place to feel free and to play freely. This park is our future. What is our legacy if we build and pave this park? There will be no turning back – it will be lost.

Please help us save Tuhey. Please help us save our park.

Heather Williams
Muncie Citizen