



October 9, 2016

Dear Ellendale Neighborhood Association Members:

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch recently published an article about development plans currently underway for the former Wilkinson School, located in our neighborhood at 7212 Arsenal Street:

[www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/st-louis-teachers-may-soon-find-affordable-housing-by-living/article\\_ea317cab-a03a-555a-98d6-97431de8cfdd.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/st-louis-teachers-may-soon-find-affordable-housing-by-living/article_ea317cab-a03a-555a-98d6-97431de8cfdd.html)

In light of this story, I would like to offer some additional context by sharing with you the efforts of your Neighborhood Association — both to the present and for the immediate future.

When we as Ellendale residents met in July 2015 and decided to revive our Ellendale Neighborhood Association (ENA), one of the primary reasons for doing so was to provide a community voice for us. We wanted an opportunity to have input whenever circumstances affected us. This is particularly important when developments are being considered for our area.

There was an open house held at Wilkinson School on June 10, 2015. St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) explained the purposes were to promote development interest in their former school buildings and to engage the community for comments and recommendations for the reuse of these vacant spaces. Along with many other neighborhood residents, I met with Walker Gaffney, SLPS Director of Real Estate, at this Wilkinson session. Recommendations given by the community then included “condominiums, office space, community center, mixed-use, senior housing, healthcare facility.” These were outlined in a July 22, 2015, presentation to the SLPS Special Administrative Board. At this public meeting Walker Gaffney also included his own comments about Wilkinson School:

*The property is well-located in Ellendale near the city limits and is in good condition. SLPS has received offers from several developers close to asking price for multi-family uses...a market-rate apartment [proposal] was [previously] approved [by SLPS Special Administrative Board] but never went forward. Wilkinson seems best positioned as a multi-family project, but we should remain open to office and community-use recommendations put forward by the community.*

Regarding Wilkinson School, the SLPS board decided at this meeting to “market as multi-family housing or mixed-use [residential and commercial] but remain open to community interest in office space with public meeting space.”

After the ENA reorganization became effective in September 2015, SLPS promised us opportunities to remain engaged in the process of considering and selecting developers for the vacant Wilkinson School building and site. Nevertheless, the building was still for sale by SLPS, and terms such as final sales price would remain ultimately the decision of its Special Administrative Board.

SLPS hired Development Resource Partners to facilitate the sale of the Wilkinson School and several other vacant schools. This building has a listing price of \$602,000. However, it is interesting to note that — as of the date of this letter — the SLPS website still after many years continues to indicate that Wilkinson School is unavailable and off-market: [www.slps.org/Page/28262](http://www.slps.org/Page/28262)

In March 2016, ENA established by member vote a Housing Committee. Among its duties are the advocacy for membership and other residents of the service area, including but not limited to housing programs, quality-of-life issues, and development opportunity areas. Because the site is zoned “Single-Family Residential” and because SLPS was targeting it for residential reuse, this committee was fully prepared to evaluate potential development proposals for Wilkinson School from interested parties. It is our understanding that a zoning/use variance would be needed from the City of St. Louis for any development that would result in a use other than a single-family dwelling. ENA would then have an opportunity in the variance process to support/oppose or to set conditions.

Members of the ENA executive board were contacted in early July 2016 by representatives of Greater Goods, a social enterprise company specializing in the design and sale of household items. They partner with specific non-profit organizations in revenue-sharing agreements for certain items. Their team expressed interest in relocating their offices from St. Charles to the Wilkinson School site. While not able to make ENA’s general membership meeting that month, the business was invited to meet instead with members of the ENA Housing Committee to discuss their proposal. This meeting occurred on August 10, 2016, with members of the ENA executive board also attending as invited. It was decided that the housing committee would send a letter of support to SLPS for the Greater Goods proposal to assist their efforts towards the purchase of Wilkinson School. The ENA Housing Committee shared the details of this meeting and the support letter to membership at the September 2016 general meeting. This is the only development team interested in Wilkinson School that has approached either the ENA Executive Board or our Housing Committee.

I was informed September 28, 2016, that SLPS rejected the Greater Goods offer in favor of another, higher price offer. It was at that time that I also learned from Walker Gaffney that this competing proposal was planning affordable housing that would be marketed primarily to teachers. I encouraged the development team to contact me, and I heard from Kathy Sorkin, one of the development team members identified in the St. Louis-Post Dispatch article. When we spoke, I invited her team either to attend an upcoming ENA general membership meeting or to meet with the ENA Housing Committee so that we could learn more about them, their strategy, and their plans for our neighborhood. As of the date of this letter, a meeting has not yet been set. However, details will be shared with you as soon as available.



It was not until reading this news article that I learned about a Request for Proposals (RFP) having been issued this past summer by SLPS for the conversion of vacant school buildings into affordable housing for teachers. It appears that this proposal for Wilkinson School is the first building considered for this concept.

ENA's Executive Board and Housing Committee certainly prefer the building to be occupied in some fashion rather than remaining vacant indefinitely. Though this development proposal was not our first choice, it is still my hope that Kathy Sorkin and the other members of her development team continue the current dialogue with our Neighborhood Association. I am further hopeful that we can work towards a successful Wilkinson School concept that will be harmonious with the existing streetscape context, neighboring residents, and overall diversity of the Ellendale neighborhood. And it is my promise that we will continue to update you whenever new information is available.

Thank you for your interest in the proposed Wilkinson School development efforts. If you have any additional questions or concerns, I invite you to attend our next general meeting on Monday, November 14, at 7:00 p.m. We meet at Abbott EMS, located at 2500 Abbott Place. You can also visit our website for additional updates: [www.ellendalena.wixsite.com/ellendale](http://www.ellendalena.wixsite.com/ellendale)

Sincerely,

Matthew Sisul  
President, Ellendale Neighborhood Association