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November 18, 2013

The Honorable David Chiu
President, Board of Supervisors
City and County of San Francisco

Dear Supervisor Chiu:

This letter is again written in support of the resolution to accept the State HCD loan for renovation of this property as an urgent addition to our emergency public shelter system in a part of San Francisco vastly underserved by this system. While there has been both agreement and misunderstanding around location of new shelter services at 2111 Jennings during recent public forums, testimony was nearly unanimous in support with former Supervisor Willie Kennedy also favoring this proposal as Chairperson of the Southeast Community Facility Commission. Many neighbors, businesses and community members have signed petitions supporting this modest expansion of shelter services to meet an exceptional unmet human need in District 10.

The concentration of poverty in District 10 is historic and it is increasing for the aging homeless population in district streets, parks and doorways. There is a fraying network of social services, not a surplus of resources ~ no concentration or array of shelter services here. District 10 reports the second highest concentration of homeless residents while our public services are highly concentrated in the central city districts. The public should also be aware that the City's emergency public shelters are open to all. Recent steps were taken to facilitate easier and more equitable access to our shelters, in compliance with a legal obligation to provide equal access to any shelter. However, it defies logic anticipating an exodus of those with shelter reservations from the central city to the outskirts seeking shelter at Providence or the proposed site. The argument that shelter constitutes housing is specious, clouding the issue of housing as a basic human right in America.

The shelter configuration at Mother Brown's operates on a contingency and a string. The situation remains untenable for reasons of decency and accommodations. The shelter crisis is made more vivid by the 367% increase in District 10 homelessness since 2007 (349 to 1,278) with a corresponding increase of only 3% across the City in the same period ~ clearly a troubling trend in migration patterns between districts in seven years. Our 2013 annual point-in-time count has also revealed that 52% of homeless residents report an emergency room visit during the prior 12 months and 61% report two or more disabling medical and mental health conditions. Nearly 22% also report a serious mental illness (SMI); cross-tabulation of our PIT data would show that many clients served by Mother Brown's fall into these categories.

To inadequately meet this exceptional unmet need in District 10 (with 30% of the City's homeless population), there are 105 shelter spaces (mats on the floor) of an overtaxed faith-based agency to provide brief shelter to less than 9% of the homeless in the district ~ one of the lowest ratios of sheltered to unsheltered citywide; the UCHS site is discounted in the tabulation of shelter spaces. This project needs to move ahead as a small step to relieve the poverty of our shelter stock capacity and supportive housing resources, helping serve the needs of our more marginalized and vulnerable populations which can't be addressed by far-flung shelters and faith-based institutions alone. Part of the solution can be met through acceptance of this loan instrument.

These are some of the reasons that clearly outweigh last-minute objections that have surfaced after highly supportive public forums and transparency from the start of this sorely needed partial solution. There has been no political subterfuge or machination behind this project, only human need – which a citywide conversation (Shelter Access Workgroup) identified last year and the Local Homeless Coordinating Board seeks to resolve as well. And so I must urge moving forward with this small increase to our shelter stock capacity and looking toward the community for further solutions to related issues. Perhaps a supportive housing and shelter resource workgroup can be useful to address these areas, both as a reach-out and to create dialog.

These policy conversations have already produced recommendations to expand shelter stock capacity for single-adults; create a rolling waitlist lottery to access shelters; stabilize shelter populations with longer 90 day stays; integrating shelter reservations with our 311 system; and some funding for City-mandated Standards of Care for shelter operations. Some of these initiatives were included in the current budget cycle. The Local Homeless Coordinating Board has also included new goals for shelter expansion; more supportive housing resources; and a 30% reduction in homeless populations district by district to help address these critical, growing needs in District 10 as part of its' new draft Five Year Plan Toward Abolishing Homelessness.

This conversation will again be revisited when developing the City's renewed Ten Year Plan to Abolish Chronic Homelessness in replacement of our currently expiring Plan; all interested parties are encouraged to participate in these ongoing forums to collaboratively reach smart and realistic, humane and genuine solutions to a variety of concerns that relate to poverty and homelessness in San Francisco.

These comments are made as a private citizen and not as a Member of the Shelter Monitoring Committee or the Shelter Access Workgroup. Thank you for your time, consideration and support with this very modest step in solving an unaddressed need and human right for shelter, growing larger each year in our southeastern neighborhoods and throughout San Francisco. My backyard is the City in my backyard.

Respectfully yours,


Matthew L. Steen

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