

Re: Need to relocate Food for Friends away from Reed Avenue Neighborhood

To Whom It May Concern:

When the City Planners presented their blueprints for a future site of Food and Shelter for friends, tucked deeply into my low income neighborhood, far from any major street, where it is too dark for my children to go trick or treating, I was appalled. I noticed that its center was directly opposite my front yard, and living room and bedroom window. Unlike the Griffin field area a few blocks north on Carter, there was no buffer area, let alone a fence, hedges, and sidewalk that is present on that side of Main Street.

The Planning Committee, in June, mentioned that the building site was in a "flood plain", so while it was a rainy season, I walked across the street, The ground water was so high that even the raised, dirt road running across the field had little streams running down it. Walking to the side of the road, I was in mud to my ankles. The drainage ditch that sustains the wooded tree line had neck deep water with a strong current. Where the pipe fed out under Main street, the drainage water spilled out, deep and strong, down a concrete waterfall of a dozen or more feet into a whirlpool.

The map that the Planning Committee presented failed to show the 3 schools in the immediate vicinity. The map showed the large field, but only a narrow strip of homes, making it seem rural and isolated. This could not be further from the truth. Dimensions High School (and its associated elementary classes) is about a block northeast. Jefferson Elementary School (public school) is about 4 blocks directly North West. Also, Longfellow Middle School is one block east of Jefferson. These schools are densely surrounded on all sides by houses of students that walk regularly to Jefferson and Longfellow (that feed Norman North). There are 3 public parks with playgrounds within 5 to 15 minutes' walk of the Food for Friends area, and countless yards where children are expected to play safely. In our neighborhood, the main alleys have adjacent smaller alleys, and abandoned storage buildings. My two daughters walked to Jefferson and

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Page 1 of 4

Longfellow, both from kindergarten to eighth grades. Had Foods for Friends been in its planned location, I never would have allowed that.

During the Planner's presentation, I was shocked when it was blatantly stated that no criminal background checks would be conducted on any Food and Shelter client. It was also announced that no monitoring/help would be provided for drug and alcohol abuse or for any psychiatric issue. Attention was drawn away from the vast homeless population that would relocate in our neighborhood, by the emphasis on the precious few cottages that would be provided for families.

I feel that most of my neighbors, like myself, would be able to accept the few cottages for homeless families, were they set back from the road; and if we were fairly compensated for loss in property value. The Planning Committee lawyer implied that we weren't loving and caring enough. His closing comment that we (the opposition) were just "afraid because we are ignorant", was a lie and based the fact that we live on the East side. This never happens in West Norman, ever.

The truth is that hundreds of homeless, mostly men, are going to relocate if this project happens. They are now closer to downtown, to the police department, and busy well lit streets. They stash their belongings in places that children do not pass by unaccompanied. If their dining room, their gathering spot, is moved to the middle of a backstreet neighborhood, built in a dense school district, the homeless will follow it. Statistics show that the homeless rank higher than average in drug and alcohol abuse, psychiatric problems, and criminal behavior.

When the homeless are not eating in the Food for Friends dining area, what will they be doing? Walking our children to school? It only takes one catastrophe to ruin a circle of lives.

I am one of four women that I know personally in this two block area that has gone through a custody battle. The lawyer appointed for my daughter independently, examined the living areas provided by each parent in detail. If the City had chosen to build Food for Friends across the street, at that time, where do you honestly believe the child's custodial home would be? Her father lives well away.

The doctor who lives on the corner had his life tragically derailed when his father's hip was broken and he could no longer live independently. This father had been volunteering at a soup kitchen when a client attacked him causing the fracture. My friend that lives 3 houses down Reed, was held at knifepoint and robbed by a transient. Another woman, an RN who lives within the 350 foot radius of the proposed dining room, worked for Food and Shelter for 2 ½ years. After being physically assaulted, threatened, and blackmailed by members of that population, she was compelled to find new employment. There are frail, elderly people on my block, two with small apartments in their backyards. My neighbor wants to sell his house if the homeless are brought into our neighborhood. We are a vulnerable population.

I am disabled, forced to retire from nursing due to back injuries. My disability is also due to depression. I am being treated for anxiety/PTSD after being held hostage for 3 days. When I was rescued by police, I was told that the perpetrator was not a fellow college student as I had been led to believe, but a transient with a record of violence. Years later, my house was broken into, and I was raped in front of my baby by another man who happened to be homeless.

That is why I moved to Oklahoma. I thought I would be safe here. My brother lives here and there are many churches. I bought my house at 148 Reed Avenue, 20 years ago, and have raised two daughters, ages 14 and 21.

Each year we have gardened my front yard and have put in several 100s of bulbs. I have planted all the trees and bushes, paved the driveway and remodeled the house, inside and out. Since my ability to work and my marriage were terminated suddenly and unexpectedly, I am unprepared to retire but unable to work due to severe, chronic health problems. My only security in life is this house, which was paid for last spring.

When I mentioned the planned impending wave of homeless persons to gather for meals across the street to my psychiatric healthcare provider, knowing about my PTSD and Disability, they have advised me to move. A real estate professional has urged me to "sell your house as soon as possible" to retain its monetary value. Am I to dump my house and children and drive away to live in a tent?

Most homeless people are harmless and just down on their luck. I have known my share. But in general they are at a higher risk than people with homes. This is not a good location to provide their meals. There are no safe public places for them to spend their days, let alone nights. Many will be forced onto private property. It benefits no one.

We of this neighborhood are the next tier up from the homeless. We were here first. We deserve protection and encouragement too. Relocating Food for Friends here makes it less visible to the wealthy, but by putting it in this vulnerable area, countless new socio-economic woes are inevitable.

Please look at the big picture. Thank you.

Sue Sanders