



10400 Detrick Avenue
Kensington, MD 20895-2484
(240) 627-9400



November 2, 2018

Dear Reverend Dr. Adebayo,

The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOC) is in receipt of your September 4, 2018 and October 10, 2018 letters. HOC continues to be open to discussions regarding efforts to honor and memorialize the history of African American communities in Montgomery County, MD. Moreover, we recognize that much of the country's and the county's history around race is uneasy and gives way to multi-layered issues of race, equity and inclusion. Nonetheless, this history is part of this County's rich tapestry. This history belongs to the County and this is a primary reason for the Commission's commitment to memorialization.

As background, as part of its mission to provide affordable housing throughout Montgomery County, HOC signed a lease in 1997. This lease included an option to purchase the Westwood Tower property in the 20th year of the lease. In January 2018, HOC completed the \$20 million acquisition of Westwood Tower (consisting of a 212 unit multi-family building and the adjacent parcel 175). The funds used for the acquisition were not county or federal tax payer dollars. The Commission will continue operating Westwood Tower as multi-family housing and has no plans for development at this time.

The history of the former River Road African-American community, the importance of Macedonia Baptist Church as a community institution, and the former use of certain properties as a cemetery were all included in the very first draft of the Westbard Sector Plan ("Sector Plan"), which was released in August 2015. The Montgomery County Council-approved version of the Sector Plan includes a requirement for memorialization.

Following the July 2016 Montgomery County Council approval of the Sector Plan, Westwood Tower (then owned by Equity One) was included in concepts presented to myriad community stakeholders by Equity One, which laid out a comprehensive redevelopment of numerous properties in the Sector Plan. Those concepts included key community public benefits: memorialization, Willett Branch naturalization, and expansion of Westbard's affordable housing inventory. A series of meetings, between July 2016 and the end of that year, among Equity One, HOC, and those community stakeholders – including the Macedonia Baptist Church – provided opportunity for stakeholder feedback and discussion among all parties that yielded revised concepts and the formal filing of a Sketch Plan application by Equity One.

As part of the approval of that Sketch Plan application in early 2017, the Planning Commission explicitly added, as part of any further development entitlements, a requirement for further

archaeological study of any properties with questions surrounding potential former burial use. However, the interested parties were never able to reach agreement on the scope and provider of the study. Given the lack of progress over the remainder of 2017 toward an agreement on a development path forward that would produce those key community benefits of memorialization, Willett Branch naturalization, and the expansion of Westbard's affordable housing inventory, the Commission terminated pursuit of development plans at Westwood Tower. Regency Centers, now the owner of the other properties included in the original Sketch Plan submission, has subsequently submitted a new development application that does not include Westwood Tower.

We understand the sensitivity of the issue in relation to the history of this area. HOC has listened and will continue to listen to the concerns of the Westbard community. However, the Commission will operate congruent with its mission and partner with the broader community and stakeholders (including Macedonia Baptist Church), while supporting its customers. The Commission has no plans to pursue development and consequently no plans to pursue a historical/archaeological evaluation of the property at this time. If HOC decides to pursue development in the future, it will conduct an evaluation at that time - which the Planning Commission will require before *any* development can occur.

As for HOC's current efforts, the agency is working to increase the level of affordability at Westwood Tower to roughly thirty percent of units affordable to families who earn 50% of the Area Median Income and below. Increasing affordability at this property ensures these and other families can continue to enjoy the excellent schools, jobs and recreational opportunities the Westbard community has to offer. Serving Montgomery County's most vulnerable residents remains at the center of our work. As the owners of the Westwood Tower property and as a member of the Westbard community, HOC is committed to making responsible decisions about how to serve the people of Montgomery County as well as memorialize the history of the neighborhood.

As noted in our July 11, 2018 Commission meeting, HOC is committed to working with the entire descendent community as well as Regency Centers, Montgomery County Government, and Montgomery County Park & Planning. In working toward memorialization and honoring Montgomery County history, HOC believes that any memorialization effort should reflect the values of this entire community and therefore include an advisory board consisting of members of the descendent community as well as other stakeholders. We do not believe and do not support the notion that a single entity or group holds claim to memorialization. Finally, HOC believes that memorialization cannot be successful without active participation from the broader community and stakeholders, Macedonia Baptist Church, Montgomery County's local governmental officials, Montgomery County Park & Planning and Regency Centers.

On September 30, 2018, HOC attempted to start this coordination by attempting to invite Regency Centers to our meeting with members of the descendent community and Macedonia Baptist Church. We do not believe isolated conversations will move us toward a memorialization solution. This effort was rebuffed by the Church; however, we continue to be willing to work together with all stakeholders for a unified solution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'S' followed by a horizontal line that extends to the right and then loops back under the 'S'.

Stacy L. Spann