

Joe Kelly, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Director
State of MN Emergency Operations Center
Department of Public Safety
445 Minnesota Street, Suite 223
Saint Paul, MN 55101

June 3, 2020

Dear Director Kelly,

On behalf of the Ramsey County Board, we are writing to express our alarm and concern regarding your decision to purchase the former Bix site (1415 L'Orient St.) for use as a morgue during the COVID-19 emergency. We fear that this location will only exacerbate the challenges facing the surrounding community, which is already one of the poorest, most vulnerable, and most disinvested in Minnesota.

The location of the Bix site creates major challenges for nearby residents. Townhouses in the McDonough Homes public housing complex are located directly across the street from this building, with some units separated from the site by less than 150'. The community in the McDonough Homes has some of the lowest per-capita incomes anywhere in Minnesota, and it is overwhelmingly populated by people of color, especially our Black and Asian neighbors. 60% of children in the surrounding area live in poverty. Many of these residents hold beliefs that make proximity to a morgue especially problematic. Residents have reached out to express fear of religious pollution from dead bodies, the presence of ghosts or evil spirits, and many other substantive concerns. In the midst of our ongoing housing crisis it is impossible or impractical for most of these residents to relocate, and to the extent that they can move this decision will help fragment the community power and solidarity they have been able to create in McDonough.

This decision also has potentially severe implications for the commercial viability of this site and of broader redevelopment in the area. The Bix building is mere steps away from the former Kmart site, which is one of the largest single-site redevelopment opportunities in the City of Saint Paul. Several other nearby parcels are also ripe for redevelopment, including numerous large parcels along Jackson St and L'Orient St. It is no overstatement to say that this decision could adversely impact these redevelopment efforts and could even create a permanently blighted building on the Bix site which would further drag down the fortunes of the surrounding community.

We also note that the Bix site is adjacent to one of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' most-used trails, the Gateway State Trail, and that all access to the site crosses over either the Gateway trail or the related Trout Brook Regional Trail. We see potentially serious safety concerns arising from the heavy truck traffic envisioned, and also a potentially depressive effect on use of the trail caused by the taboo of dead bodies. Many of us worked hard to win funding for the DNR to rehabilitate the Gateway State Trail in this area, and it is dismaying to see that significant state investment potentially overwhelmed by the effects of this decision.

As Ramsey County commissioners, we are all extremely sensitive to the racial and economic impacts of decisions made with the best of intentions. For decades, the State has fallen into a pattern of making decisions that hurt our indigenous communities and people of color only to apologize decades later. The routing of Interstate 94 through the Rondo neighborhood is only the most visible of these hindsight mistakes. We urge you not to repeat this cycle again. While we acknowledge the need to be prepared for our needs as the death toll rises, it cannot come at the expense of this community. We request that you reconsider this decision and enter into a conversation with us so we can begin to address this issue with the community centered.

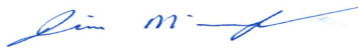
Sincerely,



Toni Carter
Chair of the Ramsey County Board



Mary Jo McGuire
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners



Jim McDonough
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners



Victoria A. Reinhardt
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners



Trista Matascastillo
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners



Rafael Ortega
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners



Nicole Frethem
Commissioner, Ramsey County Board
of Commissioners

cc: Governor Tim Walz
Lieutenant Governor, Peggy Flanagan
Chris Schmitter, Governor's Chief of Staff
Alice Roberts-Davis, Commissioner of Administration
Rebecca Lucero, Commissioner of Human Rights
Senator Carolyn Laine, Co-Chair of the Ramsey County Legislative Delegation
Representative Rena Moran, Co-Chair of the Ramsey County Legislative Delegation