

News

Hill Block Project Takes Significant Step Forward

By LaKeitha Elliott and Bryson Davis

On Wednesday, September 5, as co-chairs of the Hill Block Project Working Group, we signed a memorandum of understanding with Mayor Ted Wheeler, Kimberly Branam of Prosper Portland, Kathryn Correia of Legacy Health, Shannon Callahan of the Portland Housing Bureau and Dr. Steven Holt, our group facilitator, which outlines our respective commitments and responsibilities related to the potential development of the Hill Block, a 1.7-acre block bordered by Vancouver Avenue, Williams Avenue, Knott Street and Russell Street. This community-led process began more than a year ago to identify how the Hill Block could be transformed from a vacant lot into a neighborhood asset. The Project Working Group formed through the collaboration of many

organizations and community groups within or with a strong connection to the North/Northeast community. We've established a charter to guide our work. We've conducted public meetings and listening sessions to hear what community members had to say about how a development process would evolve. Your community voices are so important – we have been grateful for the participation of so many people with ties to the property and the neighborhood, who shared their attachment to the site and its history and their interest in being involved in what comes next.

We each have our own connections to the property.

LaKeitha, a fourth-generation Oregonian with deep ties to Portland's black community, got involved because members of her family were among the displaced decades ago. She's worked for local Black-led or-

ganizations including the Urban League of Portland and Portland African American Leadership Forum and advocated for the return of the property for community benefit. Her hope is that the site will become a place where her grandchildren can be involved and engaged.

Bryson has been in the community for more than a decade. In addition to his commitment to the Project Working Group, he volunteers as an attorney coach with Jefferson High School's mock trial team. He also supports local businesses as a board member of the Soul District Business Association, the local business association for N/NE Portland, and as the board chair of Ascent Funding, a community development financial institution focused on helping local black businesses weather the recession. He sees our work representing a shift in focus from equality to equity and is excited to be a part of that shift and



Top L to R: Dr. Steven Holt, Kimberly Branam of Prosper Portland, Mayor Ted Wheeler, Shannon Callahan of the Portland Housing Bureau, Kathryn Correia, and Charles Wilhoite of Legacy Health. Bottom L to R: LaKeitha Elliott, Bryson Davis, Hill Block Project Co-chairs.

lay the groundwork for projects to come.

We've come together to take on this task collectively and deliver a project that matters to our community.

The signing on September 5 marks a milestone, one that keeps us moving forward with clear intentions and understanding of what each partner will bring to the process. While the project funding details are far from established, we want to point out that the MOU calls for Legacy Health, the current property owner, to "convey the Hill Block for no consideration to the body selected by the Project Working Group to implement a project that supports and honors Portland's African-American community, a priority of the Legacy Health Board." This means that the Project Working Group and the community will decide what neighborhood-serving projects rise from this long-vacant land.

The community has been asked to take the lead, and we'll continue to look for and provide ways for your voice to matter. Please follow the work online at www.prosperportland.us/HillBlock, join us at the PWG meetings held at New Song Community Church each month; or reach out to any of the PWG members (they are listed on the above weblink). We can write a new chapter in the story of this neighborhood, one that acknowledges the past, charts a path forward and makes it clear what's possible when we come together.

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