

**Renaissance Park Community Association**  
**Official Statement on Community Garden**  
**9/4/20**

*Statement drafted by Per Ellingson, President RPCA and Angie Ostaszewski, Vice President RPCA, with support from Jessica McGhee, Founder, RPCA and Lula Peoria, Adam Gasper, Treasurer, RPCA, and Jay Ritchie, Garden Coordinator*

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Yesterday, September 3, 2020, Renaissance Park Community Association (RPCA) was shocked to learn the community garden was being razed by a City of Peoria contractor. We immediately began a calling campaign to understand what transpired for something so heartbreaking to occur. We would like to outline the facts for our community in the hopes that we can come together to create a solution from this tragedy.

President Per Ellingson would like to share, “This action is not representative of our community. We believe West Main is a diverse and inclusive area that celebrates all of its residents. We are a community of artists, gardeners, volunteers, and more. We believe in dignity and respect for all of our neighbors, and we will find a path forward for the garden because of the incredible support within this community.”

The Renaissance Park Community Garden was founded by Jessica and James McGhee ten years ago with volunteers and community support. The plot is owned by the adjacent gas station land owners who gave permission for the lot to be used as a community space. Volunteers cleared the lot and transformed it into a garden space. Since then, it has served as an urban park, a place to obtain fresh and free produce, a music venue, an art space, and a resting spot for many members of our community. Every object in that space was lovingly created and placed, including, most recently, a stage for performances that was hand-built by volunteers with materials funded by the City of Peoria Innovation Team.

On Friday afternoon, our president Per Ellingson received several calls that the garden was being razed. This was the first time anyone in our organization had been notified that this was taking place. He immediately went to the garden and began a string of phone calls to gather information on how this happened. Below is an outline of what we learned.

- The contractor razing the garden works for the City of Peoria. The city worked with the owners of the lot to arrange for it to be razed in preparation for business expansion.
- When we spoke with Councilman Chuck Grayeb as to why we weren't informed, he said he assumed the organization was defunct. We would like to make it very clear that, although we have not hosted events in the garden for several months due to COVID, it

was still an active space and was tended to regularly by our garden coordinator and community volunteers. City representatives have our contact information as it is listed in the City of Peoria neighborhood association directory, and it is easy to find and contact us via our website and social media, which is still active.

- City representatives on site told RPCA that all equipment would be taken to storage and we would be given the first opportunity to pick them up, while other workers on site notified RPCA that the items had been committed by the city to go to another non-profit. We have heard from Ross Black, City of Peoria Community Development Director, as of this morning that the items are in storage. Again, RPCA was not involved in any discussion prior to this regarding the ultimate destination of our belongings.
- While arranging for the plot to be razed, neither Councilman Chuck Grayeb nor any other city representatives involved coordinated support or alternative options for the homeless individuals who visit the garden on a regular basis.

In order to try to accurately and concisely communicate our position, we would like to share what we believe should have happened.

- As soon as city representatives were aware that the plot would be repurposed for business expansion, they should have notified RPCA. RPCA would have arranged to haul all materials safely, without damage, and began a proactive search for a new garden location.
- We also believe city representatives should have reached out to one of many extraordinary non-profits that support our neighbors experiencing homelessness and arranged proactively for service and support for those losing a resting place. If RPCA had been notified, we would have offered to coordinate the involvement of these organizations as well. During a pandemic, it is even more difficult for homeless individuals to receive basic services, or find places to even use the restroom or obtain water.
- Unfortunately, these non-profits now have to react to this tragedy and coordinate resources as quickly as possible rather than being given the opportunity to be a proactive part of the solution. This is the time we should be coming together to help our most vulnerable rather than shutting out community advocates who are willing to put in the work.
- With notice, the community would also have been given an opportunity to provide input on this decision and have closure. Many of us were shocked to tears seeing a beloved space wiped away without warning. Unfortunately, the manner in which this was done was extremely divisive and we believe this could have been prevented.

We'd like to close our statement by sharing a few calls to action for those who want to take a next step on this issue. We are grateful to the owners of the plot for allowing us to use the space for a decade. We do not take this for granted and understand and support their decision to expand their business. Where our frustration originates is the manner in which this transpired,

and we place that blame on 2nd district councilman Chuck Grayeb. If you are interested in supporting the garden, we ask that you consider doing the following:

1. Contacting 2nd district council Chuck Grayeb to share your dissatisfaction via phone at 309-213-6629 or via email at [cgrayeb@peoriagov.org](mailto:cgrayeb@peoriagov.org).
2. Reach out to [Renaissance Park Community Association via Facebook](#) and volunteer to help us find a new home for the garden. We will be forming a working committee to bring together our energy and passion to create a new and welcoming garden space.