

14W. Administrative Services, LLC., on behalf of The Agora

14 West Mount Vernon Place
100 West Monument Street
105 West Monument Street
212 West Monument Street
702 Cathedral Street
16 West Madison Street
1001 Cathedral Street
819 N. Charles Street
808 Saint Paul Street
1030 North Charles Street
1117/ 1119 Saint Paul Street
1125 North Charles Street
1217 Saint Paul Street

Baltimore, MD 21201 & 21202

March 11, 2021

Councilman Eric Costello, Chair
Baltimore City Council – Ways and Means Committee
100 Holliday Street
Room 509
Baltimore, MD 21202

Re: City Council Bill 21-0029
Commercial Parking Facilities – Annual License fee

Dear Councilman Costello:

The Agora has called Mount Vernon home since acquiring 14 West Mount Vernon Place in 1994. And over the last 27 years, its footprint has stretched from the neighborhood’s northernmost to southernmost edges. **Its publishing portfolio now includes 12 Baltimore-based companies operating out of a “campus” of 11 different Mount Vernon buildings within a 1-mile radius in the heart of the historic district. The group also owns 1 parking lot and 1 parking garage in the neighborhood. Today, its real estate portfolio represents investments totaling more than \$70M between acquisitions and renovations. Prior to the pandemic, more than 1,500 people came to work in these buildings every day. And when it is safe to do so again, they’ll be back.**

Many of these people patronize neighborhood café’s, restaurants, shops, and gyms. The businesses frequently turn to local hotels to host guests and hold conferences and events. In fact, in 2006, The Agora launched an internal marketing and discount program called “Shop Mount Vernon” in partnership with neighboring small businesses and hotels to encourage a workplace culture in which people enjoy and support the community. Many employees, too, have become loyal supporters of neighborhood associations and champions for the historic and cultural significance of Mount Vernon. The campus has been a beautiful and treasured part of the organization’s identity.

But it hasn't been easy. The Agora has invested and endured a lot over the years out of a sense of responsibility and commitment. At some point, the layers upon layers of impracticality need to stop piling up. The City can't address many of them - but the ones they can address, they should. And so, we see the proposition of City Council Bill 21-0029 as a discouraging step backward for the City's relationship with our organization and with all of our fellow Baltimore City businesses and employers.

The City must recognize that bringing so many people to work in Mount Vernon has never been a small feat. Out of more than 1,500 people, roughly 200 of them live in easy walking distance of The Agora's campus. About 50 regularly take advantage of the bike lanes that were haphazardly introduced to the neighborhood in recent years. And only 65 of them can rely on public transportation. In years past when the organization has tried to incentivize the use of public transportation for commuters, the response was dismal at best. Reasons cited include poor infrastructure, unreliable service, and the length that illogical routes and multiple connections would add to door-to-door travel time. **Alas, we find ourselves having to provide reasonably priced (ie. company subsidized) transportation and parking accommodations for more than 1,000 people on any given day. This has been a persistent and at times exhausting challenge for more than a decade – particularly so for the last five years. It's also expensive. These subsidies currently cost the organization \$1.2M annually.** And this is just one of many concessions and atypical soft operating costs that come with the territory.

The buildings are old, quirky, and expensive – and generally not considered to be conducive to running a successful modern-day business, let alone 12 of them. But we've done it. Despite the inflated operating costs, inconvenience and expense of frequent maintenance needs, and general awkwardness at times, our buildings have been a great source of pride and a part of our ethos as an organization.

In fact, in recent years, when two of The Agora Companies experienced growth spurts and weren't able to find the space they needed in Mount Vernon, they each moved large divisions of their businesses into rented office space in Hunt Valley. Anyone can appreciate that this is not an advisable way to operate. It would have been more logical, more efficient, and less expensive to move the whole of each group to the county. They each made the decision to maintain a headquarters in Mount Vernon and keep as many people there as possible for what some business executives or owners might consider impractical reasons, but what our leaders see as commitment to our investments in the community.

Crime has been a deterrent, a distraction, and a perpetual source of frustration for all of our 27 years in the neighborhood. Some years have been better than others. The perception is that in recent years it has only been getting worse. We've sat on neighborhood committees and boards, made calls, written letters, and donated money – all in the name of safety and better surveillance. Now and then we see an increased police presence in the neighborhood. Of course, the force is under a great deal of strain, and so these responses are short-lived. Because we understand that, we've invested in educating our people on how to safely navigate the neighborhood... and still enjoy it.

The rich culture and vibrant energy of the neighborhood institutions and small businesses have always helped to offset other shortcomings. Today, walking our campus is a reminder of struggle and defeat with empty storefronts, homelessness, and moving trucks on every block. And inside our buildings, the pandemic has also left its marks. Of course, the City is not at fault for the pandemic. However, it is worth acknowledging that on top of the sunk costs of open but largely unused buildings over the last year, these companies have collectively invested more than \$300k to prepare their work environments for the eventual return of their people. We expect that to happen in the fall. And the

truth is that despite all of the challenges, the mere glimpse of our homecoming on the horizon has brought a lot of people hope and relief.

The proposition of this bill as a supposed step forward for the welfare of our city – and while the widespread economic wounds inflicted by the pandemic are still fresh, no less - is preposterous without first providing reasonable alternative means of getting people into the city to work or enjoy themselves. This attempt by the City to bypass a long overdue commitment to reliable, affordable, convenient, and responsible public transportation, and leave businesses and people to fend for themselves, is not only an insult but a cause for great concern. And if this bill is not stopped, the City should be prepared for a mass exodus of companies like ours and the lost patronage of their employees.

We believe that you can understand our concerns and our discouragement with the proposition of City Council Bill 21-0029, and we hope that you will vote **NO**.

Respectfully yours,

Allison Benson O'Brien
Director of Communications
14 West
The Agora