Concerned Elmwood Neighbours
Speech by Regan Wolfrom at the Executive Policy Committee
Thursday, September 21, 2006

Good morning. My name is Regan Wolfrom, and I'm the president of Concerned Elmwood Neighbours, a community organization created to assist in the development and delivery of recreational and educational programming in Elmwood. We formed after the decision to declare Kelvin Community Centre 'surplus property'. One of the aims of this organization is to build support around the idea of a revitalized Kelvin, but we also want to increase the quality and quantity of, and participation in, all local programs.

I'm here to speak to you about Kelvin Community Centre and the needs of our community. And I'm here to ask this committee for a recommendation to council to allow the operation of Kelvin Community Centre for an additional three years. Keeping Kelvin open for three years is not only the wish of our organization and our community, but it is also a very good solution for all stakeholders.

Lately, Kelvin Community Centre has had very little formal programming. This has been due to two major reasons: 1) problems maintaining a board of directors, and 2) the changing needs of our community. As you are aware, these problems have been seen at many other community centres in Winnipeg; many centres have had difficulty meeting quorum, while others have had trouble getting enough volunteers to serve on the board or to operate programming. We are well aware of these issues, and we are now taking steps to ensure that Kelvin Community Centre can avoid this problem in the future. Please let me know after my presentation if you'd like me to mention specifically some of our steps to maintain operational stability.

The most recent annual general meeting for Kelvin was scheduled for April 10th, 2006. This meeting had been advertised with notices posted on the doors of Kelvin, and a small text ad in the Herald. I never saw the ad; I just happened to be walking past Kelvin one day and saw the notice taped to the doors. There was no mention of closure, or of problems meeting quorum.

Because of my concerns regarding Kelvin and the Bronx expansion, I contacted the General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres. I spoke with the executive director, Marlene Amell, on April 6th, and mentioned that I was willing to stand for any board positions, including president. At no point in our conversation did Marlene mention past troubles meeting quorum, or the possibility that quorum might not be met on April 10th. The AGM for Kelvin was held the same night as a PATH community consultation meeting about the Bronx Park expansion.

When I arrived at Kelvin, I found that only fourteen eligible voting members were in attendance; therefore quorum was not met. During this meeting, Marlene Amell recorded the contact information of many attendees, including myself, John King, and Darryl Livingstone, the Executive Assistant to Councillor Thomas. We were assured by Marlene that we would be notified BEFORE any decisions were made on the future of

Kelvin. I personally informed Marlene that I was very concerned about the future of Kelvin and that I wanted to be actively involved in any consultation.

After several months with no word on Kelvin, I found out in the Herald that a majority in city council had approved a general council report that included the 'surplus property' declaration. I had not heard anything from Marlene Amell or anyone else from the general council; John King and Darryl Livingstone were not contacted either, and I've yet to hear from one member of the community who WAS contacted by ANYONE about the closure of Kelvin before the council vote.

Meanwhile, a month before the vote, David Love of the East Kildonan Lions had contacted Marlene Amell to mention that the Lions had a definite interest in helping Kelvin Community Centre, including serving as board members if required. The general council never came to the EK Lions to accept or reject the offer, and I know David was just as surprised as I was to find out from the newspaper, and not from the general council, that the centre was slated to be closed. When I spoke to Marlene about the lack of consultation, I was informed that there was going to be consultation at some point in the future. I soon realized that this consultation would probably not occur at all, or would occur long after the centre had been locked up, or it quite possibly would occur after Kelvin Community Centre had been demolished.

In response, we decided to hold our own public meeting. We distributed a thousand flyers to area residents, and we hosted one hundred people at our Save Kelvin meeting. Over fifty eligible voting members attended, and more than thirty residents stepped forward to volunteer. We also started a petition, which when submitted to Community Committee had 589 signatures, and we are still gathering more. This petition speaks to our community's overwhelming dissatisfaction that we were not consulted before the city decided to close Kelvin Community Centre.

Our meeting stands as evidence that it only took basic community notification to reach far more than quorum. Had the general council chosen to notify the residents who had been promised notification, and had those residents been given the chance, a second attempt at quorum would have been successful. But the general council chose to ignore the wishes of those residents, and neglected to mention either the promise of consultation or the offer of the EK Lions to city council. It's no surprise then that the general consensus of Kelvin-area residents is that the general council betrayed its mandate to support community centres. We do not believe that it is proper for the wishes of the community to be ignored by decision-makers, and we believe that the community needs time to make its own recommendation on the future and the viability of Kelvin.

I do want to emphasize, however, that we are not opposed to working with the general council to meet the needs of our community. I have been in contact with Marlene Amell and have been providing her with updates on our progress and our plans, and we have often made requests for information and support from the general council. We hope that this committee will be able to provide some instruction for the general council on how it is to receive and respond to our requests.

The mayor and city policy have made mention numerous times that community centres should not be closed by top-down directives, and yesterday the mayor sent us a letter detailing what he believes to be the necessary criteria for the viability of community facilities. We applaud the strong position that the mayor and the city have taken to support communities that desire to maintain their community centres, and I am pleased to report that our community is united and organized in its resolve to re-establish Kelvin for the next three years, and to make sure that all conditions for a sustainable and effective community centre are met.

Our current situation is that we have a provisional board that is willing and able to operate Kelvin Community Centre, or willing to publicize a new annual general meeting. We have a literacy program in operation, and have two more programs that are set to begin in October. We respectfully request that the Executive Policy Committee recommend that the General Council allow us to continue our programming at Kelvin for the next three years. This will allow us a venue for our programs while the Bronx Park expansion project is still being conceived. We are not asking for additional funding, or staff, or any infrastructure investments to run these programs; we have volunteers, we have fundraising strategies, and we are ready to meet the needs of residents. The only thing we require is the opportunity to use the available space at Kelvin to serve our community.

We have submitted an organizational chart to this committee showing our provisional board of four executive members and six other directors; our directors have extensive experience in fundraising, education, financial management, communications, and in partnering with other community organizations.

We are also developing an Elmwood Community Advisory Committee to study the needs of the Elmwood community. This committee will involve elected officials, community and faith-based organizations, local businesses, school administrators, public safety representatives, and delegates from all three Elmwood community centres. Elmwood is a community with its own unique characteristics and needs, and the advisory committee will provide a strategic view of our community as a whole. One of the most important contributions that the advisory committee will make is to synchronize the visions and strategies of all community groups, so that any overlaps or gaps in services and programming can be highlighted and remedied.

There are many reasons why a vibrant Kelvin Community Centre is beneficial and cost-effective for Elmwood and the city as a whole. While a centralized community campus model might work well for some areas, neighbourhood community centres within walking distance are necessary for high-needs communities such as Elmwood. I've attached a list of high needs factors for Elmwood at the end of the transcript of this speech, and I welcome any questions you may have about this. The three community centres that are currently in Elmwood are smaller than the city's ideal, and they each serve a smaller population. However, three small clubs does not necessarily translate into a lower benefit-cost ratio than would be seen with a centralized recreational facility. The

success of any facility depends on usage; a larger centralized location will not accommodate as many low-income residents due to transportation constraints. Any consolidated multi-community facility would require extensive travel, and many residents of Elmwood cannot afford the cost of bus fare. Bronx Park Community Centre is a five kilometre round trip for many Kelvin-area residents. By having smaller community centres, or perhaps one community centre with three campuses, the unique needs of Elmwood will be better met.

City policy states that unique inner city needs and geographic barriers are to be considered in the mix and number of facilities in a community. There has been debate in the past about whether Elmwood is to be termed "inner city", but I can't imagine that the city wishes to discriminate against one high needs community because of geographical location or ratio of owner-occupied homes. In addition, Elmwood contains several geographical barriers that prevent easy resident access to community centres. These barriers include heavily-used railway lines and several busy streets, such as Henderson and Watt. Crossing one of these streets for community programming is an expected necessity, but crossing two becomes daunting for young children and anyone with mobility issues.

Another advantage of neighbourhood community centres versus community campuses is the level of private sector funding. A large multi-community centre is an impressive undertaking, but the end product will be seen as a city-wide facility, and not as a project for and by any one community. This will make fundraising more difficult than with community-specific centres, which will have higher relative fundraising levels. In the case of Kelvin, we have identified private funding partners and sponsors for programming and for facility improvements.

Also, a vibrant Kelvin on Henderson Hwy will increase pedestrian traffic. The placement of civic facilities such as libraries and community centres in older commercial districts has been recommended in an Ontario study in order to increase the economic viability of those districts. Henderson has been suffering from an increased commercial vacancy rate, due partly to a decrease in pedestrian traffic and to a limit in parking availability along Henderson and its back lanes. The frontage at Kelvin will increase local real estate values and business profitability if it becomes a draw for pedestrians; a big-box-style commercial development WILL NOT create more foot traffic.

Other benefits to a revitalized Kelvin include:

- lower petty crime rates due to better programming, mentoring, and entertainment for youth

- fire safety and health awareness programming at Kelvin can reach all residents (as opposed to only school-age children) by holding these programs during popular events such as barbecues and festivals

- a Police Community Service Centre could be located at Kelvin, in keeping with the city's commitment to improvements in policing

- other organizations could have office space at Kelvin; Henderson frontage gives better exposure to these organizations

- Kelvin can be a focal point for providing information and guidance to students who wish to purse a trade; young people from lower-income families are more likely to attend colleges and vocational schools than universities

- Kelvin can serve as a gathering place for businesses in the Elmwood area, whether through the creation of a Business Improvement Zone or through existing endeavours

- an active community centre will discourage vandalism of the hockey rinks and other recreational facilities, and can provide income through canteen revenues to offset rink maintenance and programming costs

- Kelvin can provide space for Bronx Park programming during any time in the expansion project when the original Bronx building may be closed or demolished; Melrose Park Community Centre is already well used, and probably will not be able to accommodate the needs of Bronx Park residents

Kelvin Community Centre is an important part of our community; this isn't just because of fond memories and a long history, but because Kelvin can provide space that is sorely needed in Elmwood. The lack of programming and leadership that was once the status quo at Kelvin has been corrected, and our provisional board is ready and willing to operate the community centre for the next three years. No other community centre can provide programming for our community more efficiently than Kelvin; high-demand programs at Kelvin will attract far more local residents than the same program hosted in another community, and many of the residents who will only use Kelvin are those with the highest need and the highest risk.

We are a grassroots organization with a strong local support base, and we are working to meet a proven need in our community. These are the criteria that the mayor has listed for us, and these criteria have been met. We are willing to consult and work with the general council to provide programming at Kelvin, but the general council needs guidance to work with us, and that guidance can be provided if this committee makes a recommendation for continued operation of Kelvin for the next three years. We, the residents of Elmwood, are willing and able to revitalize Kelvin and to refocus its programming and purpose to meet the changing needs of our community. We know that our community is not best-served by an outside community centre, and we know that the general council does not know better than we do as to how best to meet our needs.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about Kelvin, our community, or our programming. Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX:

Elmwood is a high-needs community:

- the average household income of Elmwood is only 71% of the average household income in Winnipeg
- Elmwood has the lowest school readiness in Canada
- Over half of all Elmwood residents between the ages of 15 and 24 are not in school, compared to thirty-nine percent in the city as a whole
- Only around 5% of Elmwood residents have university degrees, compared to 15% for the rest of Winnipeg
- Elmwood families are less likely to be living in a married relationship than families in the rest of Winnipeg, and children are considerably more likely to be raised in a common-law household or a household with a lone female parent
- Elmwood is a primary settlement area for immigrants