

**From:** [Rob VanRenterghem](#)  
**To:** [CityCouncil: Beaudry, Jacqueline](#)  
**Subject:** Letter for June 17 city council meeting - Time Sensitive  
**Date:** Sunday, June 16, 2019 2:01:35 PM

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Council Members & City Clerk-

I am writing as follow up to my appearance at your June 3 council meeting to share additional thoughts on the proposed sidewalk on our property at 1425 Pontiac Trail. As I will be out of town for the upcoming council hearing to share my formal protest, I ask that this letter serve for me as my "appearance by letter" delivered to the city clerk as well as the city council. Please let this letter serve as my appearance and protest to the proposed special assessment for the Argo sidewalk.

This process has provided little transparency and I have received virtually no guidance on how to advance our objections. Fortunately, my council members, Anne and Jeff, proactively reached out to ask if I needed help and generously shared their guidance on how to navigate this difficult process that apparently almost cost us our opportunity / right to be heard and affect this decision. It leaves one feeling befuddled on how to be heard and engaged in our effort to protect this historic property.

As background, we bought the property from our sister and brother-in-law in May of this year and are thrilled to have the opportunity to be the next stewards of this piece of history. The property built in 1842 by Guy Beckley is recognized by the National Park Service (NPS). On its website the NPS says, "The Guy Beckley House is significant as an anti-slavery center and station on the Underground Railroad from 1842, when Beckley move onto the property, until his death. Beckley worked tirelessly to sway public opinion through sermons, lectures, articles and participation in political reforms. From 1841-1847 Beckley co-published the anti-slavery newspaper and national Liberty Party voice, Signal of Liberty. The Guy Beckley House, nearly unchanged in appearance since 1844, is the most prominent Underground Railroad site in Ann Arbor, a center of anti-slavery activism in Michigan and home of the man who sacrificed his time, financial security and health to the Cause."

When we began talking about buying the property Bethany VanDuyne Steinberg (previous owner of the property and my wife's sister) alerted us to the proposed sidewalk project and encouraged me to reach out to Jane Allen to share any concerns. I did that in April and was simply told that my first opportunity to speak on the matter would be the three-minute window available June 3.

I shared with city engineering at that time that we did not support the project and would appreciate knowing anything we could do to leave the property as in tact as possible for the following reasons:

1. We wish to preserve and protect the history and character of the home and property as our family has for nearly a quarter century. Many of you may have participated in an African American History Tour, either walking through the property or driving by on one of the bus tours. We are working to preserve the properties historical character and the experience the many people that come to see it have, by protecting everything from the trees to the smokehouse. Cutting a sidewalk in down the full length of the property will dramatically change its historic look and feel. For the many tours to come, where we welcome people to walk through our back yard as those on the trail to freedom did so many years ago, please preserve the property without a

formal, concrete sidewalk.

2. We the property owners oppose this change and are not aware of anyone, other than city engineering, advocating for this project that will negatively impact the history and character of the property. I have spoken with our neighbors and none I have spoken with see it as a need given the abundance of other nearby sidewalks. I understand that staff may be using the “Non-motorized plan and complete streets” to justify this discretionary project. I would ask that you please modify that plan to allow for a more thoughtful, better-prioritized plan that addresses the most critical safety needs first.
3. This project does not appear to solve a critical safety need and appears a discretionary spend for the city. Given the needs for improved crosswalks and sidewalks in several other critical need areas, it seems better for all infrastructure spending to be prioritized by need vs. convenience – that being a location where work is already being done. Having lived in Arbor Hills and had children going to Huron when Justin Tang tragically died trying to cross Fuller to get to school, we are keenly aware of the many more critical needs for sidewalks and cross walks in locations throughout the city. Please utilize all discretionary funds, both from the city and those additional costs driven on the individual taxpayers, for critical safety projects that should be prioritized for dangerous crosswalks and lighting issues instead of that proposed for 1425 Pontiac Trail.

I am asking those that voted in favor of the project (resolution 2) to change their vote for the third resolution to no and protect this historic property.

Also, prior to this last week, the only input I’ve received regarding how to best address this had been from Jane Allen and centered on the city council meetings. It feels that city engineering should have alerted myself as well as my city council members that we objected to the project instead of us having to connect after the June 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting. I would have appreciated knowing how I could have stopped the process weeks or months ago. I would greatly appreciate your input on what else I should do to help build the case to preserve the property and am happy to work with the historic commission and get signatures in support of leaving it as is vs. cutting the sidewalk in.

While I am expressing frustration with this process and its lack of engagement with us, our neighbors or the African American History museum going in just down the street, I want to be clear that I am deeply grateful for the help of my council members, and in particular Anne Bannister. Their assistance has helped restore some of my hope for a fair and open progress.

I look forward to your input and thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Rob VanRenterghem