

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE WOOD STREET COMMUNITY

August 23, 2022

Dear Governor Gavin Newsom, Mayor Libby Schaaf, City Administrator Ed Reiskin, Director of Caltrans Taks Omishakin, Caltrans District Deputy Director of External Affairs Cheryl Chambers, BNSF CEO Kathryn Farmer, and Alameda County Administrator Susan S. Muranishi:

We, the community of Wood Street invite you to join us in partnership in creating and implementing solutions that will meet the needs of the State of California, Caltrans, Alameda County, BNSF, the City of Oakland, and the residents of Wood street.

On July 22, 2022, Judge William Orrick stated that all involved parties in the Blain et al v. Caltrans et al case must work together to create a plan.

Our time in the streets, under freeways, and along the rails has taught us which City, State, and County interventions are most helpful and harmful. We have ideas and solutions that will not only make *our* lives better but will improve the overall safety and progress of the Oakland community at large. We welcome this opportunity to collaborate.

We want our voices to be heard, we want our ideas sprung from years of lived experience to have a seat at the table. "Nothing about us without us." We live our struggle and therefore know it more intimately than anyone else and have the clearest understanding of how to resolve it. We are inspired, hopeful, and teeming with the possibilities that could be actualized through the combination of our ideas and the resources readily available to your agencies. This is not a bureaucratic exercise for us; our lives and wellbeing are at stake.

Over the years we have made conscious efforts to remediate the safety concerns held by ourselves, Caltrans, and Oakland at large. We are part of the history of Oakland. We are citizens of Oakland, we are builders, we are parents, we are chefs; and we have been let down by failed systems that put us on the streets. Nonetheless our investment in Oakland has not faltered. We have worked to remove debris buildup on Wood Street to reduce fire and health risks on top of meeting our survival needs day to day. In this way we have compensated for Caltrans and The City of Oakland's negligence and failure to work with us in the past. We have reached out numerous times to your agencies for access to dumpsters, fire extinguishers, sand buckets, hoses, and assistance creating markers throughout Wood Street so that emergency service providers can quickly respond to the locations of emergencies.

We urge you to join us in taking immediate action to remediate fire danger in the community as we work together to come up with long term solutions. Our immediate and long term proposals can be found in the document, attached with this letter, that we shared with Judge Illman on August 1st, 2022 and which was also included in our briefing.

So many of us in curbside communities such as Wood Street have grown weary and let down by temporary band-aid solutions. Our fostered sense of community and stability is nearly impossible to retain when you evict us from our homes, destroying our belongings, to pile us into programs for a time, just to filter us back out into the streets. So many of the existing interventions tell us where we cannot go and cannot be. This is why we feel it is crucial for the city, the county, and the state to designate land in the long term for housing crisis solutions where we *can* be. We need land where residents can stay for as long as they need without fear of being kicked out on some arbitrary timeline. We need solutions that center, foster, and integrate the communities we have made for ourselves. That way these spaces can be governed by the residents' own pre-made social agreements while also giving us access to social services and amenities that will help us to thrive. Such as access to electricity, clean potable water, bathrooms and showers, regular medical care, therapy options, and consistent access to housing navigation.

The current temporary solutions are expensive and ineffective, we have long term solutions that work and are more fiscally responsible. For example, we calculated that with the 4.7 million dollars alone that the state granted the city to shelter 50 people temporarily on rented game changers land we could permanently house 120 people in refabbed shipping container homes with electricity and running water on designated land for long term living (ex. Texas Community First Village). Part of the land could also be set aside to create space for individuals who wish to continue living in their tents, RVs and other vehicles. We can implement the centralized cooking model we developed at Wood Street to cut down on individual private use of propane and other accelerants near people's belongings and homes.

With our social and sustainable living innovations combined with your agencies' social services and resources we together can create a stable base for people to live in a community that alleviates our focus beyond survival and empowers us to thrive. Through this court process we have been reaching out our hands in partnership, but have been dismayed to find your palms closed with finger pointing. We want your help in this struggle to make our communities caring, safe and self-sustaining. We have ideas and tools for its birth and with the aid of your agencies' resources we could create a more compassionate and humane road to housing.

In Solidarity and Love,
The Wood Street Community

Steps to Address Safety Issues and Residents’ Immediate Needs:

By addressing immediate safety needs, Defendants could mitigate the risks posed by allowing the residents of Wood St to remain there while a workable, permanent solution is developed – instead forcing a rushed, temporary solution that will put lives at risk.

Increase fire safety

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove trash & debris in coordination with resident leaders • Provide several dumpsters spaced throughout Wood St* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just as Caltrans pays crews to do cleaning, could pay residents to begin cleaning their areas • Could allow residents to fill dumpsters themselves • Could bring cleaning crew in to work with residents to identify refuse 	<p>Caltrans</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place pet friendly gravel on roadways to facilitate both clean up and emergency response efforts 	<p>Caltrans</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish marked zones within Wood st to help emergency personnel respond promptly 	<p>Caltrans in coordination with Oakland Emergency Service Providers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide fire extinguishers and sand buckets to residents. Have hoses on sight. 	<p>Oakland Emergency Service Providers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold fire safety and basic emergency response (CPR, Narcan use, etc) trainings 	<p>Oakland Emergency Service Providers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish more centralized cooking areas like the area at Cob on Wood where residents can come together to cook so that individual use of propane and other accelerants is discouraged. 	<p>City of Oakland and County of Alameda</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide some centralized access to electricity so residents can charge cellphones and other necessary items <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would reduce residents' need to find electricity through other means • Would increase residents' ability to connect with service providers and thus expedite the housing navigation process • Could be done using solar panels 	City of Oakland and County of Alameda
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*Providing dumpsters would NOT lead to increased illegal dumping by non-residents. While individuals do sometimes come to Wood St to discard incriminating or unwanted items, the presence of dumpsters would not make those people any more likely to do so, and would immensely enhance the safety and sanitation of the encampment.

Increase sanitation & safety

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access points where residents can get clean water throughout the camp 	City of Oakland and County of Alameda
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more regularly cleaned portapotties with handwashing stations to reduce spread of illness 	City of Oakland and County of Alameda
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a shower truck that visits different areas of Wood St frequently 	City of Oakland and County of Alameda
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide solar powered lights throughout camp to increase safety 	City of Oakland and County of Alameda

Long Term Solutions

Permanency

- Short-term solutions DO NOT WORK
- When forced to move frequently, residents lose belonging, lose community, and cannot build a sense of stability
- People need to be able to stay for as long as they need – not kicked out based on arbitrary timeline

Community

- Plan must allow residents to stay together in community
- Community guidelines and governance should be crafted by residents – they know what works best and how they can thrive

Flexibility

- No unnecessarily rigid rule structures like those found in shelters
 - No curfews
 - No visitation policies
 - No lockouts
- Different living options
 - RV and Vehicular options
 - Tiny Homes
 - Support to transition to permanent housing like apartments, homes

Property management

- Return of taken property
- Management of stolen cars - but not cars that belong to residents that just need updated smog check/registration/other

Wood St Residents Vision:

Land & Location

- Residents need another space to move to together as a community
 - **Proposal: 22 acre parcel of Oakland City land near Wood St or any other large parcel**
 - Spacious – many people could be there and this would not lead to crowding conditions that lead to safety risks
 - Could be initially set aside for residents of Wood St, but in time could accommodate many homeless residents in Oakland.
 - In the same neighborhood
 - Residents receive support from housed neighbors in their community who know them and care about them
 - Residents have jobs near Wood St and need to remain local
 - Other options:
 - Parcels of land Governor ordered agencies to designate as possible sites for temporary encampments (Executive Order N-23-20)

- Tax-defaulted land in Alameda County

Housing Options

- Space for RVs, boxcars, trailers
 - Part of the land could be set aside to create a community for individuals who wish to continue living in their RVs and other vehicles. Individuals could have a small, designated yard surrounding their RVs. Community guidelines could be in place to dictate spacing between RVs and yard maintenance.
- Tiny Homes
 - Tiny Homes are immensely preferable to Pallet Shelters. They are warmer, more secure, and can be customized to truly feel like homes. They could be spaced appropriately far from each other to prevent overcrowding. Could also use shipping containers - fire proof, can be customized.
- Community Center
 - There should be centralized community spaces where residents can gather, do their cooking, and access resources. This space could be far from any fire hazards. Centralizing cooking would prevent residents from needing to use propane/generators in their own spaces, reducing fire risk.

Staffing

- The community should be led by its residents.
 - Classes on manners and community building to promote being good neighbors
- It could function like a job training site.
 - Contractors could help teach residents how to build the tiny homes, giving needed job experience.
 - Residents could be trained in the housing navigation process so that they can assist each other.

Resources

- Electricity
 - At a minimum, there should be charging stations for residents' phones and lighting for safety.
- Access to clean water
- Access to bathrooms and showers
 - At a minimum, well-maintained portapotties and shower truck present daily
- Access to regular medical care
- Access to housing navigation