

AN OPEN LETTER TO LOS ANGELES CITY AND COUNTY OFFICIALS

By Timothy Watkins, President and Chief Executive Officer

Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC)

This summary is written for the benefit of elected officials, journalists, reporters, and anyone that cares about the future of a community under siege and crying for help.

I have taken the initiative as a long-time resident of Watts to defend its interest in a local development scheme that would undermine the future of Watts and the full potential of its people to harness economic development strategies that lead to self-sufficiency.

The problem revolves around a major development in Watts scheduled to be built on cherished public space. The project involves two major federally registered historic landmarks, the Watts Towers and the Watts Train Station. Although successive administrations—including current Councilman Buscaino, who represents Watts—have promised a park, the City Council unilaterally decided to relinquish the project to the County of Los Angeles without any public engagement. We have sought answers on how a site of such important cultural and historic magnitude, could be sold without full public disclosure and engagement. Neither Mayor Garcetti, Councilman Buscaino, nor [former] Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, the City Planning Department, or any of their representatives have answered this question. In a direct conversation with Thomas Safran about the possibility of selling the project back to the community, he first told me he was open to the idea; however, immediately afterward, he decided to forge ahead without further discussion.

What I am recommending as a solution is that the mayor direct a small portion of the \$88 million taken from the police budget to pay the \$3 million currently invested by the developer in the property in order to recapture it for ownership and management by a new non-profit Watts Historic Land Trust, set up with help from the Neighborhood Land Trust and The Trust for Public Land.

Watts is deep in the throes of gentrification: proposed affordable housing that provides majority moderate-income units (over 70%) are not meant for the current residents. In a community that is home to one of the most critical domestic uprisings in American history and to the world-famous Watts Towers, it is unconscionable that publicly elected officials would approve the sale of historically and culturally relevant public land without any public discourse, town hall, zoom meeting, or any other form of suitable community engagement—all during a pandemic that severely restricts many ordinary forms of public engagement.

In conclusion, amidst our elected leaders embracing and hailing this moment in history as an awakening for social and racial justice, a historically and structurally disenfranchised community should have the opportunity to determine its own destiny, regardless of the legality or procedural legitimacy of recent decisions. The marginalization of the community's voice in its own future is the real issue. One cannot credibly claim solidarity with the movement while at the same time permitting structural culpability and supporting the kinds of decisions that prevent the Watts community from

controlling its own destiny. As the nation grapples with how to stop yet another innocent youngster from being shot in the back, we simply say stop pulling the trigger. This is no different. It can be reversed.

WHY THIS PROJECT HURTS WATTS

- It takes away acreage of open green space in a community that already has among the lowest per capita green space in the City.
- According to the City Health Atlas, life expectancy rates in Watts are among the lowest in the City.
- Infant mortality rates are among the highest in the City and County.
- Watts already has a density rate higher than most other parts of Los Angeles
- More housing only advances the exploitation of renters in perpetuity
- The absence of CEQA reporting requirements exposes the community to additional health consequences without its knowledge.
- Losing healthy green space in an already impacted neighborhood further decreases positive health consequences.

WHAT CAN BE DONE BY THE CITY TO MAKE IT RIGHT

- Buy land back from the developer and fund design and implementation of public redevelopment for the entire Cultural Crescent from 103rd Street to Wilmington Avenue.
- Designate additional area icons for ownership by a community-controlled non-profit Heritage Trust.
- Provide funding for CEQA Analysis.
- Allow the community to plan its own destiny through standard community engagement methods.
- Provide a Master Plan for Watts that enhances the visitor's experience to the Watts Towers and improves cultural tourism possibilities along with new economic development initiatives.
- Provide Protected Class Status for long-time underserved Black residents.