June 8, 2015

Madam Mayor and Members of City Council,

I would first like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this process regarding the future of the Harley Clarke site and structures. I recognize and respect the many variables in this conversation, and have throughout this process taken care to keep an open mind and tried to maintain a holistic view of the impacts not just to the property but to the fabric of our community.

I appreciate the time and attention to the work you do as Aldermen and Alderwomen and I thank you for your dedication to that responsibility. I would ask that you also approach your evaluation of this body of work and the assembly of public comment included in this commission's report with the same open mind that this commission has been asked to approach the evaluation and discussion of the options for solutions.

Our charge was to evaluate and recommend viable options for the use, development or rehabilitation of this property to City Council. For the past 4 months we have collected public comment as well as captured detailed discussion as a committee as it related to the viability of most if not all of these in the context of "the options" which are described in the report before you. It is my hope that from this body of work the council and staff may craft an informed RFP for the property in the very near future. I urge the council to take the momentum of this discussion and the attention it may have gathered to solicit viable proposals from qualified parties regardless of the option council elects to pursue.

In the end I am pleased with the work done by this committee and honored to have been a part of it. It has both given voice and platform to established positions on this matter but also to many others who fall between the extremes and has now collected and recognized to many more variables for consideration.

After much reflection and many conversations with community members from many angles of this issue I come to the conclusion that the core issues at hand here are similar between the groups. We all wish to see the building and gardens preserved, we all insist that it remain an accessible part of our community and most importantly we all seek to protect its valuable and prominent role on our lakefront and in our community.

As a 2-term member of the preservation commission, I cannot place enough emphasis on the value of the historic fabric along our lakefront, Sheridan Road and throughout our community. We are surrounded by outstanding examples of architectural history and its evolution in every ward of our community. The Sheridan road corridor and lakefront represent only a snapshot of that richness. As I say that, I will also caution that this is not to say that all that is old is sacred as some might believe of broader preservation goals. I am a strong believer in preservation as an economic engine and that the continued evolution and stability of our historic fabric clearly reflects that growth and change over time. Both remain vital to local property values as well as to the identity of our community. The structures and gardens of the Harley Clarke site are valuable for many reasons. They are clearly valuable both for the physical impression they make but also for the social history they carry. When the historic district nomination was crafted
many years ago these structures and gardens are cited for their importance to the district and Evanston’s broader community context. For that reason I urge council to pursue a path that respects the grandeur of the site, its significance as a local resource, and the economic benefits that may come with preservation and adaptive reuse of this property.

After much consideration I urge you to pursue option 3 in which the building, gardens and site are most likely to be preserved and renovated with the greatest care and intent. I believe that this option affords our community the greatest opportunity to mutually benefit from the value added to that property through investments, added jobs, revenue and amenities available to the general public. This option would maintain access to the site by our community for events, dining and leisure all of which remain consistent and common threads through all of our discussion with so many of our neighbors who have participated in this process.

While I remain concerned about the future of the property should any proposed endeavor fail, I urge the council to consider within the RFP for the sale of the buildings but maintain an option for a transferable long term leasehold for the land which may be more acceptable to some potential investors and in keeping with many of our community voices rather than an outright transfer of ownership for the land. I believe that many of the requirements for access and parking included in the initial RFP should be again included and perhaps refined to reflect more accurately the desire and input of the community for public use of the land and gardens surrounding the buildings. The opportunity herein to develop a public/private solution for this project and property which allows commercial development fulfilling a desired use and continued access to this property is not only a way to boost the economic growth in Evanston but also to signal to others that our community is willing to participate in the continued growth of our city.

While the record will show that my interest in option 5 was noted early in this process and I continue to see great benefit in this option I find that the funding and operational stability of such a future for the building and property is not as certain as the benefits it my offer as a conceptual solution. I would encourage council to develop an RFP for this option as a secondary solution. This RFP should incorporate strict and considered parameters for not only business plans and financing but also for alternative strategies for future stability should the initial endeavors for fundraising and project path falter. Should such an option succeed in the near term I would argue that we as a citizenry are owed as much confidence in the longevity of the plan in 5 years and beyond as we are assured at its introduction.

Respectfully,

Garry Shumaker
Harley Clark Citizens’ Advisory Committee