

News article about our 6/28/06 response to Mayor Koelker's letter of 06/26/06

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Highlands offers to work on neighborhood with city

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RENTON — The Highlands Community Association struck a conciliatory note in a letter to Mayor Kathy Koelker on Wednesday, offering to work together to revitalize their neighborhood.

The letter was in response to a memo Koelker presented at Monday's City Council meeting in which she said she will recommend the city not use its power to condemn property to create an urban village in the aging part of town.

Koelker and some association members, especially its secretary, Inez Somerville Petersen, have had some tense standoffs at council meetings over the city's pursuit of an urban village — and perhaps the use of its power of eminent domain.

In his letter, approved by the association's board, Terry Persson wrote:

"By shelving the threat of eminent domain, the city and the community can now move forward on several positive fronts to achieve what I believe is a shared vision for a safe, healthy, vibrant and affordable Highlands community."

He titled his letter, "Burying the hatchet."

In an interview, Persson agreed that discussions with city officials got heated.

"We really didn't want to see that happen," he said. "We wanted to work with them as a team."

He said the city was taking a top-down approach to laying out a plan for the Highlands, rather than one relying on residents' opinions. However, the city has offered numerous opportunities for public input in the Highlands.

Koelker was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

In her memo to the council, Koelker wrote that "many residents and property owners have galvanized around a desire to clean up their own neighborhood, but they want to do it on their own terms."

Koelker and the city's chief administrative officer, Jay Covington, were in Washington, D.C., talking with financial institutions about the millions of the dollars in bonds the city will sell to finance roads, utilities and other infrastructure to support The Landing, a major new development in north Renton.

However, Alex Pietsch, the administrator for the city's Department of Economic Development, Neighborhoods and Strategic Planning, said the city will talk with any residents "who are interested in bringing about the revitalization of that neighborhood."

For years, the city has considered an urban village for about 360 acres of the Highlands near the Hi-Lands Shopping Center on Sunset Boulevard just east of Interstate 405. Some of the World War II-era temporary housing there is in desperate need of repairs.

The Highlands association has offered to help look for money to assist low-income residents in making repairs or improvements, to identify violators of city codes and to help establish zoning that encourages redevelopment, but preserves the landowner's rights.

The association is no longer officially recognized by the city, but whether that might affect how involved it can get in official business in the Highlands is unclear.

But Persson points out that the association has about 350 members and he said it's recognized by many as the voice of Highlands residents in that area.

In his letter to Keolker, Persson wrote that Highlands residents are already reroofing, painting, cleaning up yards and planting flowers.