

May 11, 2025

RE: Detroit Thermal project application in the Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe Historic District
Detroit Historic District Commission - May 14, 2025 meeting

Dear members of the Detroit Historic District Commission,

I am writing as a resident of Lafayette Park Historic District neighborhood. We moved to the neighborhood from Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 as I took a leadership position at Wayne State University in 2014. I was just elected to the Board of the Nicolet Cooperative Association in April of this year.

From a personal perspective, this community – the people, the mature and rich landscape, the architecture and the location - was the signature feature of why we chose to live in Detroit and I am sure that these factors have similarly influenced many others as they made their choices on where to live in the metropolitan Detroit area.

I believe that the Historic District Commission has extensive familiarity with the Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe Historic District and that the community members and others have provided extensive and excellent on-target information on the impact of the Detroit Thermal project on the community and its historic designation through submitted letters and materials as posted on the Commission site for the upcoming meeting this Wednesday. Given this submitted information, rather than reemphasize the specific points made to date, I will touch upon a few additional points on why I believe that allowing the Detroit Thermal project proposal to proceed is an impact risk not worth taking.

First of all, the 65 year old landscape ecosystem is central to the life of the community and the families that form the community. The fragility of this landscape ecosystem and the overall infrastructure cannot be overemphasized as mentioned in several of the submitted letters of concern and all of the cooperative associations in the community have worked hard for many years to maintain and nurture this landscape ecosystem and community infrastructure in a manner that will assure their sustainability.

The breadth of the proposed Detroit Thermal project will most certainly negatively impact this community in the short term and also in the long term as the stress on the landscape ecosystem and community infrastructure with this proposed project will play out for years to come. I have great concern that the magnitude of excavation with the project as proposed will have irreversible impact on the fragile landscape ecosystem, which is an item codified in the historic designation of the neighborhoods.

Given the signature importance of the Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe Historic District in the cultural and community life of the city and the contribution of this district and its historical significance to the national and international recognition of the City of Detroit as a special destination and cultural heritage site -- I am not sure this is something we would want to put at risk by proceeding with the Detroit Thermal project proposal.

Particularly as there are other alternatives available to extend the planned services of Detroit Thermal.

Secondly, as I considered this project and the overall historic aspect of the Lafayette Park Historic District neighborhood, I reviewed many, many materials including all of the items and public letters as posted at the Detroit Historic District Commission site for the May 14th meeting and the plans for the project as recently posted by Detroit Thermal as part of the application to the Commission.

I also spoke with many individuals that live in the Lafayette Park Historic District and visit the community from the broader neighborhood and from across the country and from abroad. We also had several meetings of the cooperative association board to discuss and share information on the background breadth and impact of this project.

From these interactions, I was struck time and again by the passion that individuals shared for this district and the uniqueness of the historic district and a sense that proceeding with the Detroit Thermal project proposal just did not feel like the right thing to do.

I also reviewed, in detail, materials related to the actual designation of the Lafayette Park Historic District as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. This included the complete final report in 2002 from the City of Detroit and the Detroit City Council where it was determined that the site met the criteria of a National Historic Landmark and advised the city to proceed accordingly with the eventual designation of Lafayette Park as a National Historic Landmark by the United States National Park Service on August 4, 2015.

<https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2018-08/Lafayette%20Park%20Mies%20van%20der%20Rohe%20HD%20Final%20Report.pdf>

My review also included the material provided as part of the nomination and subsequent designation of the Lafayette Park Historic District as a National Historic Landmark consideration by the National Park Service at <https://miesdetroit.org/National-Historic-Landmark>.

From the latter site I extracted a couple of statements from the Executive Summary – see italicized text below - from the National Park Service that caught my attention and that I believe may have resonance relative to the matter at hand for the Detroit Historic District Commission.

I took the liberty of adding the red color on one section of text below for clear consideration. Of additional note, Mies van der Rohe worked closely with the noted landscape architecture Alfred Caldwell from Chicago as the architectural and landscape design were so closely integrated. It is also my understanding that while Alfred Caldwell had many landscape design contributions in Chicago - the Mies Historic District and Lafayette Park is the only known work of Alfred Caldwell in the City of Detroit.

Executive Summary from the National Historic Landmarks of the National Park Service - page 2

- *“Lafayette Park is the largest collection of Mies van der Rohe residential architecture in the country; and, depending on how the buildings are counted, is the largest collection of his work anywhere in the world. It is also the only realized grouping of low-rise townhouses by Mies.”*
- *“Lafayette Park’s integrity is equally based on its architecture and landscape, which together create an urban neighborhood within a lush, mature setting. The strong verticality of the high-rise buildings is balanced with wide horizontal planes created by clusters of townhouses and the open green space of the park. The landscape design provides a series of public open spaces, semi-private, and private outdoor spaces in a variety of scales and characters.”*

Finally, as I reviewed all of this material, I gained a further appreciation of what a major accomplishment the Historic Landmark Designation was and how important it is for the City of Detroit as well as how many dedicated individuals and organizations worked tirelessly to bring this designation to fruition. I am deeply grateful for their commitment to the vision and all that they do to sustain this vision into the future.

I am sure that there is additional information that I may have missed in my consideration of the issue and that there are multiple aspects of the proposed project for the Commission to consider. Nevertheless, I believe that the information I have reviewed and considered strongly indicates that the proposed project by Detroit Thermal through the Lafayette Park Historic District neighborhoods will negatively impact the communities both in the short term and long term and potentially compromise the Historic Designation landmark as such.

The risk for long term consequences is just too great and thus, as a resident of the community and a strong advocate for the City of Detroit, I cannot support this proposal as put forth by Detroit Thermal.

I believe that allowing this project to proceed as proposed is an unnecessary and unacceptable risk for the city and the cooperative association communities.

Thank you very much for your kind consideration and for all that the Detroit Historical District Commission and the City of Detroit do day in and day out for the communities served.

Stephen Lanier

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