

James D. Griffioen

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June 30, 2025

Detroit Historic Commission

Planning and Development Department
Coleman A. Young Municipal Center
2 Woodward Avenue - Suite 1808, Detroit, MI 48226

Dear Commissioners,

It is my understanding that ordinarily, Historic District Commissioners often follow the recommendation in the HDC staff report when making decisions. This is not an ordinary situation, and I urge you to consider the circumstances under which this particular “staff report” was created and why your role as an apolitical, independent body outside of the City Council or Mayor’s Office is so incredibly important to preserve the architectural heritage and historic landscapes of our beautiful city. This “staff report” was not prepared by HDC staff, but Director of Planning and Development Alexa Bush under political pressure from the Mayor’s Office and the City Law Department. This recommendation for a “certificate of appropriateness” is not actually based on any changes made by Detroit Thermal in its application, but the city’s desire to help Detroit Thermal complete this project as cheaply and quickly as possible on behalf of the residents of 1300 Lafayette.

As the evidence presented in this letter will show, this “staff report” recommendation is the result of political maneuvering between the city government and Detroit Thermal. You are volunteers who live in historic neighborhoods yourselves. I ask you this: how would you feel if the City of Detroit aligned itself with a sloppy, unscrupulous contractor to tear apart a portion of your historic neighborhood so that the contractor could save money on an infrastructure project that could be achieved in any number of other, far-less damaging ways? Will you, at the July 2 meeting, play a role in this political game or will you stand independent and require the city and Detroit Thermal to respect the historic district designation and find a way to get steam to 1300 Lafayette without unnecessarily destroying the fabric of a National Historic Landmark?

I know it is not your responsibility to consider that there are other possible paths for this project.

But of paramount importance is this fact ignored by Director Bush and the Detroit City officials aligning themselves with Detroit Thermal: there is an active, adequate connection to a Detroit Thermal steam connection at Chrysler Elementary School across the street and less than one block east of 1300 Lafayette. Detroit Thermal’s own Director of Business Development Rick Pucak has acknowledged that the connection would work for 1300 Lafayette, but it would be “more expensive” than tearing through private property across a

national historic landmark and Detroit historic district. The city and Detroit Thermal are not here because “there is no other way.” They are here supporting a plan that unnecessarily tears apart the landscape in Lafayette Park **because it will save the for-profit Detroit Thermal utility company money.** The city could require Detroit Thermal to connect at Chrysler Elementary School, but for some reason the city has been so concerned about Detroit Thermal’s expenses that it has shepherded this French-owned¹ for-profit utility through the HDC process and manipulated the system to give Thermal its own meeting and a special staff report written not by HDC staff, but by Director of Planning and Development Alexa Bush. Conveniently, the preparation of this “staff report” and the scheduling of this meeting was chosen during the time that Director of Historic Preservation Garrick Lansberg had scheduled his vacation. Mr. Lansberg’s last staff report recognized that this project could not meet the federal requirements for a certificate of appropriateness. Director Bush has taken Mr. Lansberg’s original staff report and butchered it to conclude that Detroit Thermal and Giffels Webster’s superficial and sloppy responses to the HDC’s own demands and concerns now meet the standards for a certificate of appropriateness. This is not factual. It is political. Please see the e-mail I have attached to this letter as Exhibit A, from Alexa Bush to Garrick Lansberg on the day of the original HDC meeting. I received this e-mail as part of a FOIA request, but the city redacted the entire content of the email **because they do not want me (or you) to know what the Director of Planning and Development said to the Director of Historic Preservation on the morning of that meeting.** I also received (as a part of that FOIA request) notes from a meeting Alexa Bush attended with members of the mayor’s office and possibly the City Law Department. This email has been attached to this letter as Exhibit B.

This memorandum clearly shows that the city has aligned itself fully with Detroit Thermal rather than acting as a neutral arbiter here. It says that Ms. Bush should call YOU, the HDC Commissioners, to “see what votes **we** have.” It particularly identifies Tiffany Franklin and uses the name of someone named Melia. Why does the city think it can apply pressure to the Commissioners and the HDC Chair? Even more disturbing, this shows that the city KNEW that the original application would not be decided at the May 14, 2025 meeting and yet they required you, the volunteer commissioners, to sit through many hours of public testimony before accepting Ms. Bush’s recommendation that the actual decision be kicked to the special July 2, 2025 meeting (see “Kick to Next Meeting”).

If the city knew and understood that it was politically dangerous to allow Detroit Thermal’s lazy and sloppy original application to receive a certificate of appropriateness (presumably because Mr. Lansberg stood his ground and defended the conclusion of the original staff report) why did the city make you sit through that agonizing May meeting? Why do they presume that on July 2, you will just go along with their recommendation after Detroit Thermal’s lazy and *de minimis* response to the requirements outlined at the May 14, 2025 meeting? They think they own you. They think you won’t look at this situation and see what’s really going on. But I sat through that May 14, 2025 meeting just like you did. I saw how thoughtful you all are and I am thankful that you give up your time and collective knowledge and experience to protect the historic landscape of our city. Here you have the chance to show the city that you are independent and more concerned about preserving a National Historic Landmark than you are helping some for-profit

¹ Detroit Thermal is currently owned by the French private equity firm Vauban Infrastructure Partners.

French-owned utility save a few bucks by tearing up a jewel of the city rather than go through a perfectly acceptable (if slightly more expensive) route.

Again, I understand it is not your job to look at other routes. It is simply your job to decide whether this proposal meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation when deciding on the appropriateness of proposed work. It doesn't. Here, once again, Detroit Thermal has submitted a slapdash, contradictory proposal full of guesswork and speculation rather than precise and detailed plans to ensure that the landscape will not be irreparably harmed. Most disturbingly, the plans do not take advantage of a large swath of grass near the Macomb excavation and instead extend the work area closer to a number of mature honey locusts and dense landscaping (the northern end of the "Macomb" work area). Many of the tree species in their plan are misidentified and several trees and shrubs within the work area are completely ignored. The plan also fails to acknowledge that Detroit Thermal crews have already killed a mature yew and a 50+ year old star magnolia as Mr. Lansberg noted in his original staff report. Why don't Detroit Thermal's plans explain how they will rectify that egregious and wholly unnecessary harm created during an "exploratory" excavation that has left our landscape scarred and inaccessible for nine months? How do they plan to prevent similar crimes from taking place when their subcontractors are given access to the property? The Detroit Thermal plans are filled with phrases like:

- "possible steps to protect landscape elements" Not THESE ARE THE STEPS WE WILL TAKE
- "what can be done to remediate landscape damage" Not WHAT WILL BE DONE TO REMEDIATE
- "This may include" not THIS WILL INCLUDE
- "These trees should be protected" not THESE TREES WILL BE PROTECTED
- Paragraph 4 of Dave Scherer's (DT's arborist) letter uses the word "should" seven times, but that doesn't mean that DT WILL perform the recommended (and expensive) means of keeping the tree alive after it has been removed from the property. He uses "will" throughout the rest of the letter.
- Mr. Scherer proposes a "multi-year deep root feeding program" to keep alive the trees that will be affected by DT's excavations. Will Detroit Thermal be supervising and paying for that multi-year feeding program? If it is necessary, I see no promises from DT that they will actually do this.

From DT's presentation responding to the HDC requests, I see the following phrases:

- "possible steps"
- "Steps about what can be done to remediate landscape damage"
- "Potential landscape experts"

Approving a plan with this kind of language creates no accountability. No private citizen would be allowed to present such a speculative plan for work on their own historic property and get approval from the HDC. Here, Detroit Thermal should not be rewarded for making very little effort to improve their plan for work on the private property of others. This plan kills trees, threatens many other trees and plants, damages historic landscapes, and lacks all accountability for damage of the type already committed by Detroit Thermal subcontractors on the property. It

cannot meet the standards for rehabilitation required in order to grant a certificate of appropriateness.

It is your responsibility to look at this plan and decide whether it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. It is not your job to help 1300 Lafayette residents get access to cheap heat, a fact lost on the many 1300 Lafayette residents who have written you and who attended the May 14, 2025 meeting (and who will, undoubtedly, attend the July 2, 2025 meeting to plea for you to approve this sloppy plan). It is not your responsibility to even consider the situation that one cooperative high-rise has found itself with respect to its heating bills after years of deferred maintenance on its heating system. You have received dozens of letters from residents of 1300 Lafayette imploring you to allow a French-owned utility known for its sloppy work around Detroit to destroy their neighbors' property so that they can get a source of cheap heat as soon as possible. Many of these letters and pleas refer to the number of residents living on fixed incomes. Well, the Nicolet, Joliet, and Lasalle cooperatives also have plenty of residents living on fixed incomes, but our boards have been consistently responsible when it comes to property and infrastructure maintenance. Over the past few years we have witnessed our neighbors at 1300 Lafayette spend lavishly maintaining two swimming pools, performing exterior renovations, redoing their private tennis courts, and rehabbing their underground parking garage. Their own website describes their buildings as "built with a greater focus on luxury" than the Mies townhouses below. Our neighbors in 1300 Lafayette have forced us to hire arborists to counter the sloppy work presented by Giffels Webster and Detroit Thermal. We have had to hire historic district preservation experts to analyze the plans and present you with their findings. We have now had to hire an attorney and have filed a lawsuit against Detroit Thermal because this company and the city officials that have aligned themselves with Detroit Thermal have never presented any evidence that Detroit Thermal actually has an easement agreement that would allow them to work on our properties (like we have with DTE, Xfinity, and other utilities who actually maintain infrastructure on our properties).

All of this could have been avoided if the city had not immediately allied itself with Detroit Thermal behind the scenes to help this company save money. All of this could have been avoided if, as you DHC Commissioners recommended at the May 14, 2025 meeting, the City of Detroit, 1300 Lafayette, Detroit Thermal, and the Mies cooperatives could have met to hash out a fair and equitable solution. Instead, requests by the Mies Cooperatives for such a meeting were ignored. Detroit Thermal's paid spokesman claimed in the media that they would offer such a meeting but they never actually did. That promise was also made in the June 11, 2025 letter from the general manager of Detroit Thermal to Garrick Lansberg and Alexa Bush. Again, that promise was not kept. Detroit Thermal has never cared about engaging with this community. They only care about their profits and getting the city to carry their water.

The residents of 1300 Lafayette should be angry. But not at their neighbors. They should be angry at Detroit Thermal for not doing its research and realizing the challenge of working in a historic district, especially when you don't have a valid easement agreement. The City should also be angry at Detroit Thermal and Giffels Webster for thinking it can continue to present these sloppy, conjectural plans; the city officials who continue to debase themselves to help this company should be angry that Detroit Thermal doesn't seem to think it has to present actual, concrete plans for the work it hopes to do on others' property. You, the HDC Commissioners,

should be angry at all of us. But fortunately, you don't have a responsibility to any of us. Your only responsibility is to future Detroiters. You are the gatekeepers who stop politicians and profiteers from destroying our heritage to save themselves a little money today.

I urge you to consider the importance of your thankless role in preserving our city's heritage here. I urge you to remember that the many high-ranking politicians in the city and the law department will soon be moving on to other pastures and any pressure they are placing on you behind the scenes is but a temporary concern. The damage that Detroit Thermal has done to Lafayette Park has already been significant—both to the landscape itself and to the relationships between neighbors. Do not let them damage this historic neighborhood any further. The damage caused by Detroit Thermal will be here far longer than any city politician.

Sincerely,

James D. Griffioen

p.s. I will also be sending a copy of the detailed memorandum I wrote and submitted before the May 14, 2025 meeting. Although I submitted it many days before the meeting, it was not posted to the website until the day before.

Exhibit A:

From: Alexa Bush
To: [Garrick Landsberg](#)
Subject: Re: Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe HD
Date: Wednesday, May 14, 2025 6:34:32 AM

Good morning Garrick,



From: Garrick Landsberg <landsbergg@detroitmi.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, May 13, 2025 10:34 PM
To: Alexa Bush <Alexa.Bush@detroitmi.gov>
Subject: Fw: Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe HD

FYI

Get [Outlook for Android](#)

From: Michael Marks <mmarks@giffelswebster.com>
Sent: Tuesday, May 13, 2025 8:25:48 PM
To: Garrick Landsberg <landsbergg@detroitmi.gov>
Cc: Rick Pucak <rpucak@detroitthermal.com>; Harvey Hollins III <hhollins3consulting@gmail.com>; Doug Jablonski (djablonski@detroitthermal.com) <djablonski@detroitthermal.com>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe HD

Hi Garrick,

Sorry for the delay. Here a draft of the plan we shared earlier, please excuse the few mark-ups for my team to correct.

Exhibit B:

From: [Alexa Bush](#)
To: [Alexa Bush](#)
Subject: talking points
Date: Wednesday, May 14, 2025 10:22:33 AM

600 households - vertical nhood

Residents of districts and community
How to adjudicate between this
Out of scope on the "community"
1300 to attend - larger convo about getting heat
Communication after the hearing and not a civil war
1300 Lafayette, thermal
Lafayette park going rogue - children safety to not happen at all
Historic landscape

Garrick to post on website - if you do this, recommend this
Alexa can speak to it and advise

Serve all of our residents
Call and see what votes we have - calling commission members and making calls
Position of the whole community
Reframing competing interests - role is to mediate this
Need to do a survey back to boards to have another meeting
Biweekly zoom or teams to connect on impacts and take suggestions and pain points
Middle road here - minimize impacts in LP, getting heat to 1300
Initial issue was go to HDC, plan has changed, moved the vents
Kick to next meeting
Tiffany Franklin - chair - check with Melia

Alexa Bush, PLA
Director | Planning & Development | City of Detroit
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<https://detroitmi.gov/departments/planning-and-development-department>
Alexa.Bush@detroitmi.gov

Michael E. Duggan, Mayor