

April 6, 2018

The Board and Staff of ELDI are quite aware of the social media firestorm precipitated by the removal of the most recent message on Jon Rubin's billboard project in East Liberty. Previously, ELDI provided technical assistance and financial support to Jon Rubin in his efforts to open first the Waffle Shop and then Conflict Kitchen in East Liberty. We also provided financial support to Mr. Rubin to structurally modify and convert an abandoned billboard into his current message board. We understood and supported his efforts to use public art to spark community dialogue. It is unfortunate that the recent turn of events has sparked accusations of racism towards Eve Picker, the property owner, who invested in the East Liberty community twenty years ago when others were unwilling to do so. She acquired and historically renovated the Liberty Bank building which had been vacant for many years, had several large holes in the roof, rotten floor joists, and was home to only pigeons.

It is also frustrating that this firestorm started when we sent an email to both Mr. Rubin and Ms. Picker asking about the meaning of the message in question and suggesting that the message was ambiguous and could be considered tone deaf given the gentrification debate underway in the neighborhood and the need to bring back the displaced Penn Plaza residents. We never demanded that the message be taken down, but simply asked how long it would remain. No one in the neighborhood knows why or when messages are changed, who the authors are or the context of the messages. Ironically, our email was prompted by concerns raised by individuals of color who were confused about the context and intent of the message. Perhaps, a sign should be affixed to the billboard directing people to a website that will contain background on all messages going forward.

Lastly, personal attacks are never productive or helpful and do not foster open dialogue or discussion, much less understanding. There always have been and always will be people of color in East Liberty. The 1999 and 2010 East Liberty Community Vision Plans delineated and celebrated East Liberty as an open, inclusive, and welcoming community; and ELDI is committed to East Liberty being an inclusive community in every area, and will continue to work towards maintaining housing, employment opportunities and amenities for all residents, regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, economic status or any other demographic.

