



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Passion, determination are the real powers behind healthy, stable, growing neighborhoods

October 17, 2017

Remarks at the groundbreaking for Ella Fitzgerald Park and the HomeBase center in Detroit.

I'm happy that so many of you could make time in your work schedule for us.

As you can see from what we have here (gesturing toward dirt box and shovels, veiled murals and drum kit) we have a little more going on than at a typical media and community event.

And not just inside the tent at this slice of Ella Fitzgerald Park on Prairie Street between Grove and Florence, but also in the broader Live6 District, encompassing a span of assets and opportunities across an area of northwest Detroit defined by the McNichols and Livernois corridors.

Because within that district we are bearing witness to so many developments of power and potential:

- There is Mayor Duggan's Fitz Forward initiative – a set of investments and activities that hold the promise of being a game-changing model for revitalization that builds *with* community.
- There is the Reimagining the Civic Commons effort, part of a five-city effort to reanimate parks and public spaces.
- There is the new site of HomeBase, a renovated storefront on McNichols that will house the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, the Live6 Alliance, city planning activities and other community groups.
- There is the new coffee shop next door to the HomeBase, which is a signal of the great revitalization yet to come along McNichols,

Each of these energies is a precursor to something larger:

- Residential renovation, reclamation and repopulation.
- Commercial vitality radiating out from key intersections and all up and down the great corridors of Livernois and McNichols.
- Attractive meadows and trails and plantings connecting residents to areas of tranquility and beauty.
- Community gathering places reflecting the contributions that block clubs, neighborhood associations and individual residents are making every hour of every day to the renewed vitality of their neighborhoods.

Let me stop on that last piece – the extraordinary power of people well-organized where they live. Because it is ultimately that factor that will determine the arch of ambition and accomplishment that will make Live6 a model of health, stability and growth for the other neighborhoods of our city.

So, we are deeply honored and privileged to be among so many of you who are so dedicated to, so passionate about, how to build a sense of common purpose – resident to resident, neighborhood to neighborhood.

You can see on the banner the names of some of our closest partners in this work. But I want to call them out because their contributions deserve to be underscored:

- First, our thanks to the Reimagining the Civic Commons partners: The JPB Foundation; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, represented by Katy Locker; The Rockefeller Foundation – and our own Carol Coletta, Benjy Kennedy and Chantel Rush of The Kresge Foundation.
- Second, our thanks to: the Live6 Alliance and the Detroit Collaborative Design Center; The Greening of Detroit; the San Juan, Prairie and College Core block clubs; the Fitzgerald Community Council; and our educational anchors of Marygrove College and University of Detroit Mercy.
- And third, I'm honored to share the stage today with three extraordinary people who deserve a special call-out: Mayor Mike Duggan; Dr. Antoine Garibaldi, president of the University of Detroit Mercy; and Darnetta Banks, president of the Prairie Block Club.

I've just had the chance to meet Darnetta, but her reputation precedes her. She is a neighborhood dynamo, stitching together progress in this neighborhood's tapestry one strand at a time. It's neighborhood-rooted leaders like Darnetta, block club captains and presidents and members, and community-based organizations and nonprofits that fuel the energies of revitalization and renewal in every corner of the city.

Mayor Duggan you of course all know. I should have saved the word "dynamo" for him, I guess. But it doesn't do justice to the ambition, the accomplishment and the zeal with which he has applied himself to improving the opportunities for every Detroiter and every Detroit neighborhood.

I tried to count the number of times Kresge has been engaged in collaborative efforts with this mayor: the Detroit Home Mortgage Program; the Motor City Match small-business development program; the Detroit Neighborhood Revitalization Fellows; the new Detroit Office of Sustainability – the list goes on and on. Indeed, it leads us to the work we celebrate today.

And Dr. Garibaldi has emerged as one of our most conscientious, thoughtful and visionary educational leaders. On a similarly sunny day two years ago on the lawn of the University of Detroit Mercy along Livernois, Dr. Garibaldi, Mike Forsyth – then of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp. – many others and I gathered to announce the formation of a new alliance committed to tackling the challenges of the Livernois/Six Mile district: the Live6 Alliance.

Dr. Garibaldi will describe the alliance's work since then. But it was initially conceived as a way of migrating a neighborhood steward model that had served us well in Midtown – Midtown, Inc., led by the inimitable Sue Mosey – to the neighborhoods of Detroit.

But, turns out you can't really "migrate" a model of community organizing and development from Midtown to a neighborhood. You can be inspired by. You can take your bearings from. You can steal an idea or two. But you can't expect a carbon copy. Probably not even a facsimile.

Because the act of neighborhood stewardship must be rooted in the specifics of place – in the fiber of culture and traditions of service that have been layered over time and that define how a community works, how individual identity is formed, how informal networks of support and mutual assistance are forged.

That is why the Live6 Alliance is so terribly important. It will be a reflection of community impulses, a channel for community aspiration.

Kresge believes in this model enough to have made a grant of \$2.2 million to it – \$1 million for the renovation of HomeBase and another \$1.2 million for the alliance's core operations.

Those investments represent not just an acknowledgement of the alliance's progress and promise, but also of Kresge's heightened focus on, and investment in, the neighborhoods of Detroit.

That means working with partners across the city to:

- Stitch together a comprehensive and effective system of early childhood development;
- Strengthen the problem-solving capacities of community-based organizations;
- Ensure the availability of safe, affordable housing;
- Promote the return of vibrancy to neighborhood commercial corridors;
- Help repurpose blighted and vacant land to constructive community uses;
- Support the ability of artists to creatively deconstruct a community's challenges and identify new pathways to social well-being.

We will put our institution's money to work in pursuit of these purposes. In the Live6 district alone, we intend to spend in excess of \$20 million over the next five years.

It seems appropriate that one of our first of those investments is a \$1 million grant to contribute to the creation of green spaces in this neighborhood, including Ella Fitzgerald Park.

What a wonderfully named park – for a musician my mother once told me was the most gifted singer of the 20th century. For a musician who epitomizes bringing people together. She was as comfortable in Harlem's Apollo Theater as she was in Carnegie Hall. She moved effortlessly between swing, blues and bop. She even recorded a Motown tune – a redo of Temptations' "Get Ready." So every time I visit this park, I'll remember that it is Ella's place – a place intended for us to come together as a community, to connect across our differences, to see the possibilities in working together.