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May 11, 2009

Mr. Bertram De Souza
The Vindicator
107 Vindicator Square
Youngstown, Ohio 44503

Dear Mr. De Souza:

The Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC) and Idora Neighborhood Association (INA) are writing to clarify the purpose of the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative and Idora Neighborhood Association's Corner Store Campaign and to respond to the article titled "Will Store Closings End Crime in Y'town?" which appeared in the Vindicator on Sunday, May 10, 2009.

The MVOC, in partnership with the Idora Neighborhood Association and City of Youngstown, launched a Corner Store Campaign on the southwest side of Youngstown in August of 2008. The Corner Store Campaign, which continues to this day, has multiple goals including the following:

1. To create a culture of accountability and neighborhood among business owners along the one mile stretch of Glenwood Avenue that is occupied by five corner convenience stores.
2. To work with responsive store owners to clean up their business establishments to enhance the aesthetics of the deteriorated corridor.
3. To provide opportunities for residents to access fresh and healthy food and other general grocery commodities.
4. To enhance safety at the stores and along the corridor through the reduction of loitering and other criminal activity at the stores.

The campaign began with a general understanding that not all business establishments along the corridor are bad. The reality, however, is that the majority of the stores along the targeted stretch of Glenwood Avenue were not in compliance with many city codes and were the sources of hundreds of calls for police service over the past five years. The stores are simply not productive for the surrounding neighborhoods and have become breeding grounds for criminal activity. The neighborhoods and organizations are under no illusions that closing these stores will solve the crime problem. Cleaning up these stores, whether through productive partnerships with owners or ballot initiatives, will, however, go a long way to begin taking back the Glenwood Avenue Corridor (from Warren Avenue to Canfield Road).

The Idora Neighborhood Association and Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative began the campaign in August 2008 with a public meeting attended by 120 plus residents from the surrounding neighborhood. The owners of the local corner convenience stores were also invited, but only one (owner of Big A's) attended the meeting. At the meeting, city officials committed to inspecting every store along the one mile targeted stretch within one month. The owner of Big A's also committed to working with the neighborhood group in any way possible to mitigate the negative effects of his business and create one that is productive for the neighborhood. The owners of Park 'N' Shop and Gina's later came forward and offered to work with the neighborhood.

After the first meeting, the stores were inspected and several (Park 'N' Shop and Party Pantry) were not in compliance with many health code and other regulations. Park 'N' Shop eventually addressed its violations, but Party Pantry chose not to address the major issues at their establishment. During this time, multiple stores began cleaning up: Gina's painted their entire store and consolidated their signage; Big A's began to finish an unfinished building project and installed vinyl siding on their structure, in addition to a new storefront; Park 'N' Shop painted their store and removed signage that was not in compliance with the local zoning code. Party Pantry did nothing.

A second meeting was held in October 2008 and the results of the inspections were given by city officials. Store owners also appeared and discussed planned improvements and efforts to stem loitering and criminal activity. Party Pantry did not appear at this meeting and seemed to not take the grassroots effort seriously.

The residents decided to address Party Pantry by placing a special option on the November ballot, so residents would have the opportunity to choose if they wanted alcohol sold in their neighborhood. The sale of alcohol by these establishments is a privilege not a right. Residents collected the necessary signatures and the special option election was placed on the ballot. On November 4, 2008, 63.7 percent (265) of voters in Ward 5 Precinct I voted against the sale of alcohol. The 25 percent margin of victory made a clear statement to the store and Ward 5 Precinct I. Unfortunately, through 5-R election regulations Party Pantry was able to place a special option election for the sale of alcohol at Party Pantry, Inc on the May 2009 ballot.

The residents remained committed and continued to organize. They researched criminal activity at the business establishments and documented a long history of criminal activity at Party Pantry, Inc. -- some of which the owners of the store and their family were involved in. Only a handful of these incidents were reported in the Vindicator article titled "Residents to corner food stores: We're fed up", which appeared on Sunday, May 3, 2009. Nonetheless some of the incidents are worth repeating.

1. March 21, 2009: Officers were called to Party Pantry in reference to a fight in the parking lot. Officers confiscated a loaded ready to fire 9mm Glock handgun from the **owner's son, Zaher Sarsour**, who said he carries the weapon, so he doesn't get robbed. Sarsour **does not have** a concealed weapons license.
2. March 6, 2009: Fight at the Party Pantry where both parties involved pulled guns on each other. One of the suspects was **Zaher Sarsour**.

3. January 26, 2008: Two customers of the Party Pantry got into an argument with store clerk. Upon leaving the business the two men **were shot at by an employee who was leaning out the drive-up style window.**
4. Youngstown Vindicator article: “7 indicted in arson, 4 jailed” The article provides details of an attempted arson fraud scheme that included Party Pantry (2732 Glenwood Avenue) in 2006.

The list of criminal activity in which the owning Sarsour family was involved is much more extensive, but you get our point. In addition to the criminal activity, neighborhood leaders determined that Party Pantry, Inc was a cancelled corporation. The corporation was cancelled on January 4, 2007 due to nonpayment of franchise taxes. A liquor license cannot be held by a corporation that is not in good standing with the Secretary of State and no longer legally exists. The Ohio Division of Liquor Control provided notice that the license would be cancelled contingent upon appeal.

As residents of the Idora Neighborhood Association canvassed the neighborhood for support of the ballot initiative, they received verbal harassment and intimidation from Party Pantry employees and a mentally ill individual that was used by Party Pantry for intimidation purposes. On April 4, 2009 the Youngstown Police were called to the Canfield Road location due to harassment of canvassers from the Idora Neighborhood Association. Additionally, several young children were caught destroying “Vote No” yard signs and were questioned. The youth responded by saying they were paid by Party Pantry, Inc. Another coincidence took place around this time, when a leader placed “Vote No” signs in his yard and found 15 windows broken out of his home shortly thereafter.

On May 5, 2009 at the Newport Library (Ward 5 Precinct I polling location) voters and members of the Idora Neighborhood Association were met with intimidation and scare tactics from Party Pantry, Inc. owners, employees and associates. Family members threatened to stab one individual and threatened another with a gun. Now, does this sound like a responsible business, one that is productive for the neighborhood irregardless of the neighborhood’s condition? This would not be tolerated for one second in Canfield, Boardman or Austintown and **as of May 5, 2009 it is no longer tolerated in Ward 5 Precinct I of the Idora Neighborhood in Youngstown, Ohio.** Approximately 80 percent of voters voted against the sale of alcohol at the location and sent a strong message to the store. This precinct had by far the highest turnout in the city in an otherwise dull primary.

Will this stop all crime in the neighborhood? No, but it sends a strong message to business owners and criminals alike that destructive and nonproductive behavior will no longer be tolerated. It will also put an end to a breeding ground (Party Pantry) of criminal activity. As one neighborhood leader said, “We just want it closed. It’s not personal. This place has been a problem for 20 years and we just want it closed. We have to live here.”

We hope this provides you with some clarification as to why Party Pantry was chosen as the initial target of the campaign. Yes, there will be more to come.

Additionally, we would like to respond to your editorial titled “Will store closing end crime in Y’town?” which appeared in the Vindicator on Sunday, May 10, 2009. The article begins by saying “naturalized American citizens from the Middle East, did not bring into the world the babies who grew up to become young punks and ultimately drug dealers, gang bangers and society’s misfits.” With respect to Party Pantry, Inc. this statement is clearly ill informed. The owners of Party Pantry have raised wannabe gang bangers and misfits, as the criminal record of their children illustrates. The facts cannot be argued or ignored. Additionally, the owners of Party Pantry do not live in the neighborhood or the City of Youngstown, which speaks to their lack of concern for the neighborhood and its people.

With respect to pointing out that most store owners are “naturalized American citizens from the Middle East” – what relevance does this have to the campaign. These stores would be targeted regardless of whether the owner was yellow, white, black, brown, red or green. All businesses should be held to the same standard established by law regardless of their national origin. To suggest sympathy for people because they work 12 hours per day 365 days a year to peddle the tools of destruction to a neighborhood is simply ridiculous. Epidemiological studies have clearly linked sales of alcohol to increased crime rates.

With respect to the following point: “To blame the owners of neighborhood markets for the gunfights that occur outside their stores in broad daylight, or drug deals that take place...is to give the destroyers of the community a pass” – the store owners are responsible for what occurs on their property, as is everyone. In the case of Party Pantry, Inc., the family has been involved in many of the gunfights and violent acts. The owners also allow these criminal acts to fester and, in fact, their business thrives off it. How else would they sell forty ounce bottles of beer, Philly blunts, mad dog 20/20, cigarettes, and crack pipes in such quantities to have a profitable business? They would not without allowing the criminal element to loiter and take part in criminal acts on the store property.

To your next point regarding the fact that some stores owners run responsible businesses – we are aware. The campaign is not targeting them. The campaign is meant to target businesses that are irresponsible and act as though they operate in a state of modified anarchy. We use Conroy’s on Glenwood Avenue (picture enclosed) as an example of what all corner stores should aspire to be. The store is well maintained and loitering and criminal activity is not tolerated by the owner. This store is located only four blocks away from Party Pantry and should be used by Party Pantry and other stores as a model.

To your point about tax dollars and corner stores paying taxes – please consider the following points: Party Pantry was canceled corporation due to nonpayment of franchise taxes. This may lead one to wonder about payment of other taxes (income tax, etc.). Party Pantry uses their children to work at the store. Are they paid employees of the store? Are income taxes paid on their behalf? The track record suggests probably not. One must wonder whether, their income tax dollars are enough to cover the many hours of police time used for calls for services to their establishment. One must also wonder, if their tax dollars cover the decrease in property values caused by the establishment. These are all valid questions.

To your final point about the black community and suggestion that they will no longer have places to shop – this is simply ridiculous. The overwhelming majority of residents don’t set

foot in corner stores and if they do it is not to buy groceries. These stores do not sell traditional and healthy groceries: lean meats, fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, juice and bread. Residents must already travel outside their neighborhood to buy these goods. Have you ever set foot in Party Pantry or Park 'N' Shop?

As part of the Corner Store Campaign, the MVOC is conducting extensive research on access to healthy food in Youngstown. A policy brief is currently being developed on the topic at the moment. One of the goals of the Corner Store Campaign is to increase access to healthy food. The Idora Neighborhood Association is currently working with one store along Glenwood to bring a healthier variety of products to the community.

Again, this campaign is not targeting a particular group of people, but targeting issues that affect the daily lives of residents in these neighborhoods. We hope, that as someone who regularly discusses the need for reform and the need to end corruption, you will act as a partner as we work to strengthen neighborhoods, build healthier corner stores and remove the corrupt and festering business establishments that only exist for the sole purpose of milking any last drop out of our neighborhoods.

We would like this letter to be posted in its entirety in the Vindicator and look forward to the opportunity to discuss it further.

Sincerely,

James London
President
INA

Joe Hardy
Member
INA

Ian Beniston
Director of Policy
MVOC

Cc: Vindicator Editor
Mayor Jay Williams
Police Chief Jimmy Hughes