

December 7, 2020

To:

Tafarai Bayne, Commissioner, City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks

CC:

Anthony Paul Diaz, Executive Director and Chief of Staff, City of Los Angeles Dept. of Recreation and Parks

Michael Shull, General Manager, City of Los Angeles Dept. of Recreation and Parks

Commissioners, City of Los Angeles Dept. of Recreation and Parks

Belinda Jackson, Executive Director, EXPO Center

### **Open Letter from the CSU/EXPO Urban Mini Farm Defense Committee**

Dear Mr. Bayne,

We are writing to thank you for stepping in as a Park and Rec Commissioner to set up a process to help bring about a resolution to the recent matter regarding the CSU/EXPO Urban Mini Farm. We understand that CSU will continue their work at the Farm unhindered, that the RFI is withdrawn and that you are convening a meeting at the beginning of next year to ensure CSU's ongoing operation of the Farm and delivery of community programs. CSU looks forward to participating in this process and re-building a working relationship with Belinda Jackson in order to best serve the South LA community.

As we anticipate this process and to create maximum clarity, we have addressed below some issues raised by Ms. Jackson in communications about this situation.

- Ms. Jackson did not reach out to CSU before publishing the RFI, despite the fact that she is fully aware that CSU developed the EXPO farm with community more than 15 years ago and has been operating it continuously since then, without any complaint, providing all the services the RFI wants an organization to perform. Standard practice in these situations is for the organization or group currently providing services to be informed if any kind of public process seeking new applicants is to be initiated. Indeed, in a situation like this, where CSU has such a long history of work at the site, with no complaints and only positive feedback from the community, it is common practice to give that organization first right of refusal in any new process.
- While the RFI was published on November 2, 2020, Ms. Jackson brought it to CSU's attention on November 24, 2020, three weeks later, on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday. Why not first reach out to CSU, the long-time caretaker of the EXPO farm and show the respect they have earned.

- The RFI Ms. Jackson released specifically prohibits ‘selling’ produce. Ms. Jackson is well aware that this is an integral part of CSU’s long-standing commitment to build a local food eco system. We have explained in detail in a previous letter how this enables CSU to offer high quality organic produce at affordable rates to local community residents. Details on how produce grown on the farm is shared with the community is available on our website. CSU has been selling produce grown at the farm for the last 16 years. Why the sudden need to not allow this?
- The RFI also specifically requests proposals for programs, already offered by CSU, but that must ONLY serve EXPO Center members. EXPO Center members are and have always been warmly welcome to CSU workshops and activities and some participants are in fact members of the EXPO Center. Furthermore, some local residents have in fact learned about the EXPO Center from engagement in CSU programs at the farm. Why this sudden need to exclude non-members from programming at the EXPO Farm?
- Despite Ms. Jackson’s claim that “there is no lease agreement in place”, CSU has been operating the farm in good faith under an MOU which was negotiated in 2004 with Mary Bingham who was at the time the Senior Center Director, but which Ms. Jackson has always been aware of. As we detailed in our December 1, 2020 letter, Ms. Jackson spoke several times to CSU about updating this document, but never followed through by sending CSU the often promised draft of a new agreement. This existing MOU details CSU’s past and current activities, including specifically selling produce grown at the EXPO Farm. Additionally, over the years Ms. Jackson has asked CSU to submit proposals to expand popular programs, to which CSU has submitted numerous proposals and never received a response. We can provide documentation to these statements upon request.
- All of that said regarding the MOU and the question of documented status of CSU at the farm. The fact is that CSU has been operating at the farm for 16 years! Ms. Jackson has herself purchased produce from CSU over the years and has highlighted CSU activities in past EXPO Center newsletters and on social media. CSU’s MOU is the equivalent in this situation of a lease agreement, and CSU’s presence on the site for so long with so much positive impact for the community is in itself a contract of tenure.
- In our online campaign we have detailed past incidents including the attempt some 5 years ago to turn the farm into a parking lot and the more recent issues earlier this year when Ms. Jackson changed the locks on the gates to the farm without informing CSU staff. CSU has always been willing to engage with Ms. Jackson and EXPO Center staff to maximize the reach and impact of programming on the farm. However, following the community’s strong response to the parking lot plans, CSU has received almost no communication from Ms. Jackson, and have found EXPO staff to be reluctant to engage, or even talk to CSU staff.

We again thank you wholeheartedly for your time and effort in creating a process to resolve this matter. We look forward to a meeting with you, CSU, and Ms. Jackson in the new year so that CSU may continue their work at the farm, growing food and engaging community, and building food justice in South Central Los Angeles.

Sincerely,  
The CSU/EXPO Mini Urban Farm Defense Committee

Neelam Sharma & Heather Fenney, *CSU Co-Executive Directors*  
Cristian Marroquin, *South Central LA Resident, CSU Board of Directors*  
François Bar, *Professor and Associate Dean for Faculty, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, USC*  
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