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By MELL MONROE

Tillman dropped the ball on recreational center

March 30 was the drop-dead date for 3rd Ward Alderman Dorothy Tillman to reconsider her rejection of the Kroc Recreation Center. It would have been a state-of-the-art community center, only the second such center opened by the Salvation Army and the widow of the founder of McDonalds. It could have been a magnificent model for Chicago and the nation, common ground in a community undergoing rapid economic and demographic change. The alderman is wrong and I need to say it. I am Mell Monroe, community activist and entrepreneur, and I take her decision to reject the center for our kids, families, and future personally. The fact is, someone needs to speak out about the lack of power held by Near South Side residents.

The Kroc Center is just one example of the flawed relationship between area residents and many of our political representatives, including Alderman Tillman. We as a community need to be certain our elected officials represent our voices and not their own clan of decision makers. As clichéd as it may sound, I still believe in people: in their strength and their wisdom. That belief is reaffirmed when residents come to me asking how a \$135 million gift for our community could be refused. It is a question I can't answer. I do know at least eight neighboring communities within a two-mile radius of the proposed facility are in need of common space where all residents, regardless of their race or income, can co-exist. I do

know the lack of community voice would not be tolerated in other neighborhoods in this city and should not be tolerated here. But I am not without blame. I remained silent during a critical period because I represented a community organization and needed to take the responsible course by remaining neutral and apolitical. I know now I should have taken the children I mentor to the alderman's meeting and allowed them to ask their own questions. Do the children of the Near South not deserve an ice hockey floor, indoor skateboard park, or a place to play basketball indoors? Our senior citizens could ask why they don't deserve a space to learn and grow in their golden years.

I attended a number of emotionally charged meetings and engaged in several e-mail discussions on the subject of the Kroc Center. The majority of residents I encountered in those discussions support the Kroc Center. And they didn't have my experience as a 17-year-old community leader who was served by a similar Salvation Army urban community center more than 35 years ago. I was at the opening of that center and I believe that center's programs saved my life.

John Blair of the Bronzeville Chamber of Commerce has taken a leading position in arguing for the Kroc Center. But for too long Blair has been the only voice rallying around the center. I now stand side by side with him. It is our right as a people to ask

questions of our elected officials. I have worked tirelessly for more than nine years to help my Bronzeville and South Loop neighbors establish a voice and now is not the time for silence. It is our right as community residents to

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be heard and this visionary recreation and job training center is worth fighting for.

The counter argument to the Kroc Center is that the space is better suited for a supermarket. Bronzeville currently only has one supermarket and the owner of that establishment, Sunrise Foods, has not been able to meet with the alderman despite repeated attempts. Sunrise Foods struggles and the jobs of its more than 40 African-American employees remain tenuous. How could I trust that Alderman Tillman has a real idea for a supermarket when she hasn't produced a single one during her 24 years in office?

I have tried countless times and placed countless phone calls in an attempt to meet with Dorothy

Tillman to hear her unfiltered opinion and to urge her to reconsider her refusal to allow the Kroc Center to be built? Like the owner of Sunrise Foods, I have had no luck. I am left with the belief that my opinion and the opinions of other residents are not valued by Tillman. We should refuse to allow one or two voices to define our neighborhood and its future.

I want to be heard and I want a say in where this community is headed. I've recently resigned my position as president of a community group I established so I can have the freedom to speak forcefully about issues such as this. It is the right thing to do. We must organize if we hope to be included in decisions about Bronzeville's future. And we must do it now. We have allowed our public officials to feel that they are indispensable and more powerful than the voters they represent. We must hold our representatives accountable, and we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by a political machine. This community, with brothers and sisters of all races, genders and sexual orientations, is a collection of talented people with the capacity to turn our neighborhood into a safe, clean, family friendly space. The Kroc Center would have been an important step in that process and an important symbol of our community's reemergence citywide. But the center can serve a purpose. For me, the Kroc Center is the beginning of the end of machine-style politics in the 3rd Ward.