

As Adopted 05-28-09

Date: May 28, 2009

To: Mayor Paul Schreiber and members of the Ypsilanti City Council

From: City of Ypsilanti Human Relations Commission

Re: Use of the word "Ypsitucky"

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

During audience participation at our April 27, 2009, meeting, citizens opposed to the use of the name "Ypsitucky" in conjunction with a music festival being proposed by the Depot Town Community Development Corporation (DTCDC) brought this issue to our attention for consideration. Therefore, the HRC decided to hold a special meeting (on May 18, 2009) in order to learn more about this issue from the DTCDC board of directors, as well as to gather additional public opinion on the topic. Since that time, we have received a significant number of letters and e-mails from residents, business owners, community organizations and others — on both sides of this issue — as well as a formal resolution opposing the use of this name from the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority. We have devoted significant time to studying both sides, and in this letter, wish to discuss our understanding of the issues involved, and to make some recommendations we hope will aid you in addressing this issue.

On one hand, we appreciate the DTCDC's intention to create a "hip" and "provocative" name to help promote the proposed music festival. According to their testimony, it appears the DTCDC board believed that using the name "Ypsitucky" would help to attract a larger and more youthful audience. However, from their comments, it is also clear the DTCDC felt that while some individuals might view the name as derogatory, they believed those who felt so would be only a small minority, and that, in fact, any "controversy" the name might generate would actually help to promote the event.

On the other hand, based on the many comments we received at the May 18 meeting, as well as the many written comments we have received since then, it is increasingly clear that, in fact, a substantial and significant portion of our community strongly opposes the use of "Ypsitucky" to name and promote the music festival — primarily because they find the term to be negative, derogatory and evocative of unflattering stereotypes about Ypsilanti and its residents.

The reasons expressed by those who have spoken or written in opposition to the use of the term "Ypsitucky" are many and varied: Some, whose families either came to Ypsilanti from the South, or who have relatives from Southern states, say they find the term to be directly insulting to them and their culture. Some

African-Americans suggest that the term evokes outworn and negative attitudes about our community, and about a difficult period in Ypsilanti's history fraught with conflict between some newly-arrived migrants and our community's then-existing black community. Still others suggest that, because so many people perceive the term so negatively, as a slur against Ypsilanti and its residents, using the term to promote a "community" event was simply bad for the community and its image.

Furthermore, their use of the term "Ypsitucky" is not only a matter of perception among offended individuals, we heard several comments which referred directly to incidents where the term "Ypsitucky" was intentionally and expressly used derogatorily by individuals to deride the City of Ypsilanti or sub-groups or individuals within or associated with the City of Ypsilanti.

In light of the significant community tension and division this issue has generated, we suggested, following our May 18 meeting, that a representative of the DTCCDC board of directors meet with the HRC to determine if there might be a way to find a compromise regarding this issue. Instead, we received a written statement from the DTCCDC board. We were pleased to see that, in their statement, they have pledged to take steps to attempt to honor the history of the southern immigrants who came to Ypsilanti, and that they have agreed to evaluate and reconsider using the name "Ypsitucky" for future events. However, in their letter, the DTCCDC also made clear that they remained committed to using "Ypsitucky" to promote this year's event. After studying the issue from many points of view, we have come to the conclusion that the DTCCDC's proposed compromises — although helpful — are simply not enough to resolve this issue in a satisfactory manner.

As members of the HRC, we believe it is in the best interest of Ypsilanti that all members of our community — whether residents, visitors, business owners, or others — be respected in our community and welcomed to participate in community events regardless of any personal characteristic — including national origin or race. Furthermore, we believe that because the term "Ypsitucky" has, for so long, largely been used in a very negative and demeaning way, using this word to promote an event that has any official connection to the City is simply not advisable.

It is our understanding that the arrangement between the City and the DTCCDC has, until now, been largely a positive one. In exchange for assuming the management of (and receiving the proceeds from) special events in Riverside and Frog Island parks, the DTCCDC has also assumed responsibility for maintaining and improving both parks. In addition to benefiting the community by sponsoring and promoting an ever-widening variety of events, this arrangement has allowed the DTCCDC to make substantial capital improvements to our parks — including new lighting, walkway repairs, and rebuilding the riverfront "stage" — many of which are projects the City cannot currently afford to undertake because

of budget constraints. The HRC commends the outcomes of this arrangement so far, and we are eager to see it continue.

However, we also would like to make the following recommendations:

1.) That the Mayor and/or members of the City Council meet with the DT CDC board as soon as possible to recommend changing the name of the music festival to something that both accurately conveys the spirit of the proposed event, and more accurately reflects our city's character and diversity.

2.) That, if the DT CDC board rejects the City Council's recommendations, the City should exercise its oversight powers (under Section 6 of the Memorandum of Understanding between the City and the DT CDC) to preclude the DT CDC from using the term "Ypsitucky" to name, promote, or market the City or any event held here.

3.) That, given the overall positive track record of the City's arrangement with the DT CDC thus far, City Council should maintain this arrangement; but in the future, work more closely with the DT CDC board to guarantee there is adequate community input into the planning and marketing of both existing and new events.

Signed this 28th day of May, 2009,

The City of Ypsilanti Human Relations Commission

Tyrone Bridges

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