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**FW: Ordinance # 260283**

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**From** Public Testimony <Public.Testimony@kcmo.org>

**Date** Mon 3/23/2026 8:22 AM

**To** West, Daliah <Daliah.West@kcmo.org>

**Cc** Sanders, Monica <Monica.Sanders@kcmo.org>

Public testimony

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**Sent:** Monday, March 23, 2026 8:07 AM

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**Subject:** Ordinance # 260283

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Good morning all -

I am writing to you as the President Emeritus of Pendleton Heights Neighborhood Association (2024-2025), as well as the person who originally nominated Smith Hall to be added to the Kansas City Register of Historic Places. As ordinance 260283 reaches the Neighborhood Planning & Development committee, I have felt it is necessary to share both my thoughts on what Smith Hall means to the community, as well as some critical details about the process that led to this point, with the hopes that it might influence your vote. I thank you in advance for taking a moment to read my comments.

Six months ago, Pendleton Heights, and the entire Northeast Kansas City community, was blind-sided when a request to demolish Smith Hall appeared on the Historic Preservation docket, requested by Kansas City University (KCU) with no prior engagement with Pendleton Heights residents or neighborhood association leaders. Unfortunately, this has been the norm, regarding large, structural changes to the neighborhood in and around the KCU Master Plan District - in 2021, a section of Woodland Ave from Independence Ave to Missouri Ave was annexed by the university to extend their contiguous boundary and to create an enclosed block for a new parking lot for students and staff. This planning decision also forced the #11 bus to re-route around the university and cut off a critical walking path used by Pendleton Heights residents to access transportation routes and grocery stores on the other side of the university. I know that this ordinance cannot undo previous damages to the neighborhood caused by the

implementation of the MPD, but I believe this context is important for understanding why neighborhood residents are especially opposed to the demolition of Smith Hall.

When I submitted this nomination on behalf of the residents of Pendleton Heights, I was responding to a request from several members of the community who felt strongly about the importance of preserving Smith Hall. With the end of a 45 day waiting period imposed by the Historic Preservation committee approaching, initiating this nomination was a last ditch effort by our neighborhood to buy time to engage with KCU and talk about alternatives to demolition that would, at least, preserve the aesthetic of the campus by incorporating the historic facade into the building design or by designing a replacement building with similar characteristics. But, as I talked to residents to hear their thoughts, it became clear that what they wanted even more than the preservation of Smith Hall was to put guardrails around the university, to prevent further destruction of historic buildings, to prevent further expansion into surrounding neighborhoods, to prevent them from further transforming the environment where, by their own admission, no one from the university's leadership actually resides.

By initiating the historic preservation process, Pendleton Heights had gained a small amount of leverage over a large institutional force that residents see as destructive to the neighborhood, and shortly thereafter, I was contacted by Jim Bowers, legal counsel for KCU, who had been guiding the project through the historic preservation process. Jim asked me to make a deal - for Pendleton Heights to withdraw our nomination, in exchange for some concessions by the university - so that the construction project could move forward. During those conversations, KCU made it clear that they were not willing to entertain a design that preserved the facade of the building. They also made it clear that they would exercise their right to oppose the historic status, even at great financial cost, and that one way or another, Smith Hall would eventually be demolished. At the time, I really hoped that a deal would be possible and that the relationship between the university and residents could actually be improved. In retrospect, even if a deal was possible, it is clear that the community feels that losing Smith Hall would have been an extremely high cost.

As the leader of the neighborhood association, I asked for two things: 1) I asked KCU to establish a formal communication process with Pendleton Heights Neighborhood Association that would require them to collaborate (or at least communicate, with an opportunity for input) with the neighborhood now and in the future when proposing large structural changes on their campus; and 2) I asked KCU to show that they were committed to improving the neighborhood by dedicating resources to projects in Pendleton Heights, outside of the fence that surrounds their campus, and showing support for projects like the Bi-state Sustainable Reinvestment Corridor, which have the potential to fundamentally alter the economy and transportation in the community. Despite being willing to commit to spending tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars on lawyers and consultants to demolish the building, our request for a modest community benefits agreement with the university was rejected, and all interactions with the university have been suspended. Our request for historic status for Smith Hall would go on to receive unanimous support by the historic preservation committee, forcing KCU to wait at least 6 months (until their summer recess) to begin demolition of the building. Unfortunately, the cost for our neighborhood was also severance of the remaining ties between our residents and the university - no volunteers for help on community projects, no engagement with new students, no space to hold our neighborhood meetings on their campus.

The past few months have given our community time to organize more broadly around issues of preservation. Residents are now holding regular meetings to muster additional support, share information about the history of demolition of historic housing and retail space in the neighborhood, and swap memories about former and current historic buildings in the neighborhood. It was already clear that KCU used the community for cheap land without replacing the retail space or housing that was lost during previous constructions projects, but

more than ever, there is a growing sense that KCU is using its money, power, and connections to undermine the democratic process and influence policy behind closed doors - there are now credible reports that a legislator from the Kansas City metro will be sponsoring state legislation that will prohibit cities of greater than 400,000 residents from imparting historic status and restrictions to buildings on university campuses. Whether you believe that Smith Hall is worthy of historic status or not, and I would argue that it is, the fact is that there is more at stake now than whether the university should be allowed to tear down a landmark building in the community.

I want to thank you again for your time and for considering my testimony as you make a decision regarding the ordinance. I hope that my insight into these events will help you make an informed decision and inform the way that KCMO approaches both historic preservation and city planning in the future. Please contact me if you have any additional questions.

Best,  
Jonathan Cokely  
Pendleton Heights resident  
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