

William Zajicek; President MCFGS
1492 East Shore Dr.
St. Paul, MN 55106

Paul Xiong; CEO of Hmong 18 Council
1068 Payne Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55130

February 26, 2022

Dear Mr Xiong:

The missions of our two organizations have overlap regarding our focus on sharing cultural values of various peoples through education, performances, poetry, etc, in the setting of a China Garden art form, and your focus on enhancing traditional values and practices. We differ with our focus on sharing this through cultural art forms and your having a strong social action component which seems entirely appropriate. Our overlap helps explain why the MCFGS wishes to include Minnesota Hmong features in the garden. In some ways, one could say the stars have aligned for this garden, this being from the start an effort of cultural sharing through cooperation between sister-cities: Saint Paul in Minnesota and Changsha in Hunan and between peoples: Minnesota Hmong and ancestral Hmong still residing in Hunan. It seems totally appropriate that a Minnesota China Garden designed by Changsha architects should reflect culture and traditions of the Hmong and Han Chinese in both locations. This at least is our goal and this goal makes this particular garden unique in the country.

I wanted to address some points where I believe there may be some misunderstanding, perhaps on everyone's part. I wanted to address first the issue of community engagement.

There was a community engagement process for Phase I starting early in 2016 carried out by St. Paul Parks & Rec and the Payne Phalen Community Council. That process reviewed the Master Plan for Phalen Park and took suggestions for design of the Phase I of the garden based on Hunan Jianke's garden design. As a result of that process, MCFGS decided to establish a Hmong Cultural Advisory Group (later became the Hmong Advisory Committee: HAC) and a Chinese Advisory Committee (CAC) to advise the MN China Friendship Garden Society on a wide variety of topics from fundraising, to design ideas, to event planning. The role of the HAC and CAC is to make recommendations to the Board. Sole decision-making authority rests with the MCFGS Board, in consultation with Parks & Rec and the Changsha Architects.

If Mr. Chuyangheu was not aware of that Phase I process I wouldn't be surprised, because he took the chair of the HAC at the very end of the process. He wasn't personally involved in it. Regarding the stone project in particular, small budget projects will not receive the same broad community engagement process that a Phase of the project would receive. One would end up spending all of the grant funding on the process with nothing concrete to show for it. It's for that reason that the HAC had a member of the Hmong 18 Council on the committee. I think at this point we should all take a deep breath and cut everyone a bit of slack including the representative of the Hmong 18 on the committee. The grant for the Art Stone project was given in 2020 during the middle (I hope) of the present pandemic and in-person meetings were no longer practical. Everyone had to learn new forms of technology as a substitute, and I would guess the Hmong 18 Council had far more serious issues to deal with than updates on an Art Stone project in the Phalen China Garden.

You said that Mr Chuyangheu stated he “was not under any obligation to engage and/or consult with the Hmong MN Community”. I wasn’t there so I have no idea what context that response was given but my own personal experience is that at every opportunity to engage the Hmong community both locally and nationally Mr Chuyangheu has always brought up the garden project and if anyone had questions they would I’m sure be welcome.

Mr. Kongsue Xiong stated that there is a guideline for the roles and authority of the HAC. He is correct and I have attached that. It’s also worth pointing out that Mr. Kongsue Xiong has been on the HAC for a number of years during which the white Hmong dialect was approved for the Garden Naming Stone (“Lub Vaj Phooj Ywg”) in 2019 and approved for the “Hmong Heritage Wall” signage using “Hmoob” for Hmong (“Hmoob Puav Pheej | Hmong Heritage Wall | 苗族文化墙”) in 2020. There were no concerns expressed until the green Hmong dialect was to be approved for use in 2021.

Could the community engagement been carried out more effectively; yes, I believe it could. Will it in the future; that is certainly our intent. There in lies the value of doing an analysis of how we got to where we are: what did happen, what should have happened, what do we do now, and how do we do better in the future. An objective analysis of the situation has value but much of what I have seen on Facebook and in conversations feels more like a personal attack on Mr. Chuyangheu, and particularly his leadership of the HAC. It’s frankly unseemly. Your letter is the first direct communication the responsible organization, MCFGS, has received regarding this issue. Thank you.

Brett Hussong, Linda Mealey-Lohmann, & I have received a number of emails regarding the use of Hmong dialects in the garden and though I suppose I could take solace in the fact that they support the use of green Hmong dialect in the garden. I don’t because I agree that this has become a very divisive issue in the Hmong Community. I don’t believe that this benefits either of us and I don’t envy your role as CEO of the Hmong 18 Council and managing this issue. It was never our intent to create this sort of issue. That said, we are not the ones on Facebook and other media channels making a divisive issue of this.

I have to share a bit of the conversation I had with Tong Vang shortly after our own conversation a couple of weeks ago. I may be wrong, but for me it feels like the crux of the issue. Tong and I share something in common, we were both wearing a uniform during the Vietnam war. He was seeing combat; luckily, I was not. Regardless, it was a searing experience in my young adult life and I have a tremendous respect for those who served. The MCFGS mission is one of education and cultural understanding and sees diversity of the various communities as a positive and enriching experience. Tong sort of turns the word diversity on its head. He sees the word “diversity” in fact as unity of the Hmong culture or, maybe better put “inclusive”, not white or green, but Hmong. I have the impression that he feels exposing the historical diversity in the larger community exposes the Hmong to division by others. The Hmong people is who he fought for. I suppose that is always the danger of focusing on diversity, that it can be used to divide people. My personal view is: how can we manage to live together even in Saint Paul if we cannot appreciate our differences as well as what we share in common? We see the white and green dialects as enriching the understanding of the Hmong Community. I really don’t know how to resolve those different points of view on diversity and I certainly respect the need for inclusivity. I await the Council’s advise on how to resolve this in a way that would be meaningful to Hmong Community. It may be too early to suggest this but the main feature of the Hmong Plaza was to be a Hmong migration story as told in a stone frieze. Could something be incorporated into the Plaza or migration story to mediate this issue.

The best way for the Hmong 18 Council to take an advisory role for Phase II of the garden is to have members of the Council participate in the Parks and Rec Community Engagement Process. The best way for the Hmong 18 Council to have an advisory role in MCFGS decisions is to have an active Council member on the HAC or on our board. They would have to agree to the mission of the organization and make the necessary time commitment. Assuming they are willing to do that, we would certainly welcome their participation. We could also meet periodically with the full Hmong 18 Council to provide status updates if that would be helpful.

I can not speak for the whole board, but I believe they would be open to putting a temporary hold on the use of engraved words for "Hmong" in any language for a period of time. Be aware that we finally have funds for properly adding signage & landscaping for the Hmong Heritage Wall using white dialect Hmong, English, & Chinese characters for "Hmong Heritage Wall, a feature of the garden that does not explain itself to many people, and which we hoped to install this year. That said, we tend to move at a "sails" pace, so if your recommendation is to hold off on this, I will put it to the board and inform you of the outcome. It is also our hope to prevent future misunderstanding and division among the Hmong community.

I am presently out of country until late March. I hope you are still open to my invitation for a tour of the garden at that time. In late March or early April one can have weather that would allow lunch at the garden.

Sincerely,

William Zajicek
President of the MCFGS