

Submitted as public comment in January 2015.

We live in an age where authenticity is becoming commodified and privatized like oil, like gas, like water, like any other money-maker. The problem is, you can't hold the authentic, see it, touch it. You only feel it, know it to be true. Some are better judges than others, and unfortunately, to the money-makers, the truth of the thing doesn't matter. To the consumer, if it isn't real and lasting, and when the shine has worn off, they will eventually move on.

I have just moved home after six and a half years in New Orleans, a city bursting at its sandy seams with absolute culture and authenticity, and even there, maybe especially there, the culture vultures have descended. It seems to be the thing to do these days, to look to the music makers, the dreamers of dreams, to lift us up not just song and beauty, but with economic development and high-priced lofts. It's the same in nearly every town and it breaks my heart in Lawrence as much as it does in New Orleans. To see dollar signs in the eyes of a few, stars in the eyes of those sold on these ideas, and deaf ears turned to those who sound a warning, a call to caution. I've seen entire swaths of cities I love turned into meccas for "culture" and the upper-crust creative class, while the people who made that area so enticing, the people who were previously ignored and denied basic services, are priced out and sent to the outskirts, scattered and struggling to pay bills and build community once again. The "district" is then used up, turned like an overripe peach, loses its flavor, its authenticity, and the consumers and developers move on.

I'm here today as one of those artists, those dreamers of dreams, to urge consideration in your E. 9th Street dealings, and any future projects. You cannot force culture. You cannot manufacture authenticity. And you cannot exploit the very people who have made this town what it is. We are not to be written off as naysayers. We are not over-reacting or getting in the way of progress. We are voting, tax-paying citizens who urge consideration of ALL citizens, inclusiveness, and long-range thinking. If you want your so-called arts district to sincerely thrive and live on, consider the people, consider the future, consider what it takes to be a working artist, a low-income family, a student, a single mother, a middle-income couple, all of us. We are what make up this specific place at this specific time and our cries for silly things like grocery stores, laundromats, health care, and well-paying day jobs fell on deaf ears before, but consider these things before you drive throngs of culture-seekers through our streets. Consider how day-to-day living happens just outside this proposed corridor before you try and sell us on the benefits. But, if this is just about money, by all means, ignore the very people you're relying on to cash in on culture.

Thank you.

Jill Ensley

Local artist and East Lawrence resident