

THE CITIZENS ASSOCIATION, INC.
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Board of Directors:

November 16, 2009

Chair
Cheryl Bisbee

An Open Letter to the Citizens of Kansas City, Missouri:

Secretary
Kevin Thomas

Our current city government is broken. The City Charter of Kansas City provides that the fundamental purpose of city government is to recognize the importance of building a strong government through partnerships with citizens, neighborhoods, businesses and institutions. Our current elected officials and city administrators are not now serving this fundamental purpose of local government.

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In a nutshell, the public interest of Kansas City is not being represented at City Hall. The lack of leadership exhibited by our elected officials and City Manager coupled with their unwillingness to find common ground causes a complete inability to build effective coalitions in support of initiatives critical to moving Kansas City forward. Instead, the political process itself, as well as the policy produced from it, has become divided, confusing and undirected. As a result, the Mayor, City Manager and Council are each being manipulated by unspecified, undisclosed special interests who are not necessarily acting to promote the health and welfare of the general public. Managing municipal decision-making in this ad-hoc manner obscures a unified vision, creates contradiction and confusion and puts Kansas City at a great disadvantage on an increasingly competitive local, regional and national stage.

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When elected, Mayor Funkhouser promised a financially sound city government dedicated to "regular folk" and an end to "business as usual" at City Hall. However, in actions purportedly designed to deliver on these promises, the Mayor has ignored the City's growing financial difficulties, delegated the budget process almost entirely to the City Manager and forgotten that "regular folk" need jobs and a city government that can effectively deliver basic public services. In ending "business as usual", the Mayor has essentially ended any effective business at all from occurring at City Hall, public or private. So far, Mayor Funkhouser has proven to be a one-man-show who seeks to advance his own agenda by running city government in isolation and with little or no input requested or accepted from the Council. Cliché political soundbites are not leadership. Leadership involves vision, a cohesive plan and the ability to inspire - not force - others to believe in the vision and ultimately support the implementation of the plan.

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The City Manager, also operating in isolation, is likewise failing to effectively fulfill his role under the Charter. The Charter demands professionalism by the City Manager and staff and requires the City Manager to keep the Council informed of the City's financial condition and its needs. However, it is generally acknowledged that Mr. Cauthen does not regularly attend City Council Legislative Sessions or individual Council Committee meetings – even when specifically requested to do so by council members. Mr. Cauthen has also been widely criticized for obstructing council members' efforts to obtain additional information from staff on important issues,

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and, in some instances, has reportedly gone out of his way to keep information from the Council, routinely instructing his staff not to provide information without his approval. This divisive style of management is counter-productive and has no place in our council-manager form of government.

Two years ago when this Council was elected, they promised action on a number of critical city projects. However, midway into their term, the Council has made little progress in replacing crumbling city sewers and other infrastructure, correcting imbalances in the City's budget, lowering the crime rate, improving neighborhoods, developing a manageable transit plan, attracting sustainable economic development projects and taking aggressive, positive action on many issues that have come up since the election. Individually, many current members of the Council are strong leaders, capable, smart and hard-working. Collectively, however, these individual attributes are not as apparent and the Council as a whole is ineffective, easily distracted and uninformed. The Council must develop cohesion and unity if it is to counteract the divisiveness and distraction encouraged and supported by the Mayor and City Manager.

Good government calls for the Mayor, Council and City Manager to work together to run the City efficiently and economically. However, given the current climate of distrust and division permeating City Hall, this is not happening and no one is being held responsible. For instance, how can it be that a current fiscal year budget shortfall in the millions remains unaccounted for or that hundreds of thousands of dollars may have been reallocated by city staff without the Council's knowledge or consent? This is neither good government nor good business.

Our elected city officials and city administrators must be held to act in accordance with the City Charter. They must act in a nonpartisan manner – certainly beneficial these days since neither Republicans nor Democrats have a monopoly on good ideas. They must be dedicated to the council-manager form of government and must hold themselves and others accountable for following and enforcing the law. Our city politicians and administrators are falling short of their duties and Kansas City deserves better.

The Citizens Association has fought for reform and good government at City Hall for over 70 years. The Citizens Association's purpose, as stated in our original constitution, is "to organize the citizens of Kansas City in order to work for the maintenance of business-like, honest, efficient, enlightened and nonpartisan administration of the city government." In the past, our fight was against corruption and machine politics. Now, however, our fight is against apathy, disillusionment and imprudence. No less important and certainly just as difficult, we must win this fight as well if we are to hold our current city government responsible for acting in the public interest.

While the Citizens Association endorsed many of the current Council members during the 2007 campaign, our future support for these individuals is not guaranteed. Nor is our endorsement guaranteed for any other individual now thinking about running for city office in 2011. We believe our current elected officials and City Manager must be accountable now to do what is best for Kansas City as a whole and we will not support any candidate in future elections who is not committed to the principles of sound government, nonpartisanship and the council-manager form of government.

Rather than remain disengaged and sidelined, the Citizens Association is issuing a call to each and every resident, employee and city official – elected, appointed or otherwise – to become recommitted to cooperation, honesty, efficiency and transparency. We also call for the people of Kansas City to become more involved in demanding accountable, transparent and effective city government – a government that truly works for all of us.

Sincerely,



The Citizens Association, Inc.
Cheryl Bisbee - Chair