



Starkville Strong - Better Together - Starkvillestrong2020@gmail.com

An Open Letter to Stop & Rethink American Rescue Plan Allocation of Funds

September 21, 2021

To whom it may concern:

The allocation of funds provided to the City of Starkville by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) was a central focus of tonight's Board of Alderman meeting.

The agenda contained extensive research supporting the police dept's request for the hire of two additional officers, for the total amount of \$150,000 of ARPA funds, but only contained a single page containing the request for over \$4 million to "redesign, rehabilitate, expand and improve municipal parks located in and impacting qualified census tracts." There are no additional details about which parks would be affected, what kinds of improvements or redesigns would be made, and which parks would be expanded and how. ARPA regulations, as laid out in the detailed FAQ document authored by the US Treasury Department, repeatedly emphasize that these funds are intended to address immediate needs specifically brought on by the pandemic, and that they need to be first and foremost administered to those populations most directly negatively impacted by the pandemic and its related economic downturn.

Parks are absolutely vital to the health and happiness of a community, but Starkville faces a number of pressing, immediate needs that only stand to get worse if the city continues to ignore them. Since the start of the pandemic, the citizens of Starkville have experienced a near-3,000% increase in active homelessness, an over 600% increase in those who are at-risk of homelessness, and dozens of low-income families are being displaced due to mass-eviction actions. One in every three Starkville residents lives either at or below the poverty line. Oktibbeha County is among the most food-insecure areas in the entire state.

The city had an opportunity to decide to be *proactive* rather than *reactive*, and to invest in the strength and safety of Starkville's community for the long-term. While Starkville Strong supports investments in public spaces and public safety, the current allocation of ARPA funds is an unfortunate missed opportunity to improve the wellbeing and meet the immediate needs of Starkville's underserved population and those negatively and devastatingly impacted by the current pandemic.

Should additional funding be received through matching funds provided by the state legislature, we propose and encourage distribution of funds for the following initiatives:

- **Library:** Use some of this money to invest in much-needed upgrades to the Starkville Public Library, specifically to improve and create new programs to assist with important public services related to employment, housing insecurity, and access to technology and other resources. The

Starkville Public Library would partner with Starkville Strong, the Discovery Center, and other local non-profits/community organizations to become a central resource hub for educational workshops, job fairs, health fairs, and more. Additionally, providing low-income residents with free access to reliable computers and the internet will help them apply to jobs and other necessary programs more easily. This is something that Starkville Public Library has already been working toward (reported in January of this year in the Dispatch).

- **Mentorships:** Use some of this money to invest in programs that work with Starkville youth to mentor, educate, and support their emotional growth. Such mentoring programs could be especially beneficial to juvenile offenders, who, as we know, have a much lower rate of future criminal activity if they receive this kind of help.
- **Homelessness Prevention:** Because ARPA funds are specifically intended “to help meet pandemic response needs and provide **immediate stabilization for households and businesses,**” we urge the city to devote a portion of the funds toward rental assistance, utility payments, and those facing or experiencing evictions.
 - Starkville Utilities already has a Warm Neighbor Fund designated to assist residents with utility payments - the City should consider finding a way to invest in that.
 - Starkville Strong has developed a thoughtful and effective approach to assisting people who are homeless and at-risk of losing housing on a path to stability. We ask that some of this money go toward expanding that system and approach to other eligible non-profit or community organizations.
- **Please train one or both of the new proposed Starkville Police Department hires to serve as a code enforcer, so housing standards in the city can be properly maintained and enforced.** Increased enforcement and fines for non-compliant landlords would also bring added revenue to the city.
- **Create a permanent position within the city to address housing.** This employee could oversee and assist with the production and preservation of affordable housing; help establish housing counseling or support services to provide info on options and alternatives to homelessness. This person would also be a valuable liaison if the City decides to create an ad-hoc committee on housing insecurity in Starkville, which Starkville Strong requested at a Board of Aldermen meeting earlier in September.
- **Hire social workers as city employees** to respond to non-emergency 911 calls instead of or in addition to police officers already being dispatched. *Other cities that have done this have found a significant reduction in 911 calls, and employing a full-time social worker to respond to non-emergency 911 cases costs the city around half what hiring and outfitting a full-time police officer does.* (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/19/alexandria-kentucky-police-social-workers>)
- **Temporary Homeless Shelter(s):** This was brought up at a previous meeting as well, and it is something the city desperately needs. The County Board of Supervisors was unable to allow Starkville Strong to use the county storm shelter as a temporary shelter for the evicted tenants

of Catherine Street, because it was not outfitted or equipped to house people longer than a few hours. We ask the Board to work with the County Board of Supervisors to work with them to use a portion of the \$8 million Oktibbeha County is receiving in ARPA funding to make the necessary upgrades or improvements that might allow the storm shelter to be used as a temporary housing shelter for more than a few hours. The city could engage the MSU Architecture Department faculty and senior students in creating a number of non-congregate (separate) temporary shelters for individuals and families.

The number of Starkville residents who are homeless, at-risk, and/or food-insecure is rapidly growing, with no signs of slowing down. They are our neighbors and they are part of our community, whether or not we see or encounter them on a daily basis. We are disheartened and disappointed with the outcome of tonight's Board of Aldermen meeting. The Mayor and the Aldermen, who were elected to represent and work toward the best interests of all Starkville residents, had not only an opportunity but a *responsibility* to ensure a fair, transparent, and equitable distribution of two-thirds of the \$6.2 million in ARPA funding. We urge the City to remember that tourism and public safety, while certainly important, do not fully represent what's best for Starkville during this crisis, and that when we invest in the stability, safety, and well-being of everyone, our entire community benefits.

Sincerely,

Starkville Strong