Good Morning Ladies and gentlemen of the Manatee County Board of County Commissioners,

For the record, my name is Stephanie Petersen and I am a disabled United States Marine Corps combat Veteran, Veteran advocate, and mother. I am here to bring forth concerns regarding a decision made on May 23, 2023. On that day, a motion was approved unanimously to move $1.5 million dollars from Veteran Homeless Project and added to $51 million dedicated for ‘office design’. Commissioner Ballard, during the deliberations, expressed, "I am in favor of option B here, my understanding is that that's a project that is likely moving forward in a different way and those funds are not needed at this point, so we can use those uncommitted funds towards our other projects that we've proposed at this point."

This statement raises crucial questions. If Commissioner Ballard believes that the funds earmarked for the Veteran Homeless Project are not needed, I would like to know on what basis she makes that claim. What types of programs and services are currently available for homeless veterans in Manatee County that would lead her to conclude that no further assistance is necessary? As concerned citizens, it is our right and responsibility to seek transparency on decisions that directly impact the welfare of our community's veterans.

It is important to note that at the time Commissioner Ballard made this statement, Tunnels to Towers had not been solidified as an alternative project. This raises concerns about the foresight and thorough consideration that went into the decision-making process. If the alternative project was not firmly in place, how could Commissioner Ballard confidently assert that the funds were not needed for the Veteran Homeless Project?

Homelessness among Veterans is a complex issue that requires ongoing attention and a multifaceted approach. Rather than assuming that existing programs are sufficient, it is crucial for our commissioners to stay informed about the dynamic needs of the Veteran community. I urge Commissioner Ballard to provide clarity on the existing support systems for homeless Veterans that led her to believe that the allocated funds could be redirected without detriment.

Our Veterans deserve nothing less than our full commitment to their well-being and success as they reintegrate into civilian life. I request that Commissioner Ballard, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, shares the specifics of the programs and services currently in place for homeless veterans that prompted her to support the reallocation of funds.

I'd like to direct my attention to Commissioners Jason Bearden and Mike Rahn: How can you sleep at night knowing that the decisions made may not fully stand for the well-being of our Veterans?

As public servants, entrusted with the responsibility to represent the best interests of our community, it is essential to ensure that the decisions made align with our values. Veterans, who have sacrificed so much for our nation, deserve unequivocal support. Redirecting funds away from a project dedicated to addressing veteran homelessness sends a distressing message about our community's commitment to those who have served.

I implore Commissioners Bearden and Rahn to reflect on the impact of their decisions and consider the long-term consequences for our Veterans. It is not only a matter of fiscal responsibility but also a moral duty to ensure that the welfare of our Veterans remains a top priority.

I invite Commissioners Bearden and Rahn to share their perspectives on this matter and provide assurance to the community that they are actively working towards the betterment of Veterans' lives. Transparency and open dialogue are crucial in building trust between elected officials and the community they serve.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to a thoughtful and transparent discussion on this matter.