

Councilman Cole wants Superblock project re-bid

By Robbie Whelan, Daily Record, September 17, 2009

Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV wants the city to consider starting over from scratch on the Superblock, a complex redevelopment project that its supporters say could change the face of the city's West Side.

In a Sept. 14 letter to the president of the Baltimore Development Corp., Cole urged M.J. "Jay" Brodie to "consider action necessary to terminate the Superblock partnership with Lexington Square Partners," the group selected in 2004 for the \$100 million-plus project.

The reason, Cole said, was that BLDG Management, one of the development team's New York-based lead partners, has a poor track record in historic preservation, and can't be trusted to preserve the historic buildings that stand in the way of the Superblock, which is within his district.

"I don't want to wake up one day and they've knocked down half the block against the city's wishes," Cole said Wednesday. "I've come to the sad conclusion that the only way to move forward on this project is to start from the beginning again...Really, if they're the best developer, if we re-bid the project and ensure that the historic properties are part of the bid, then they'll be willing to come back."

Brodie said Wednesday afternoon that he had not yet seen the letter and declined to comment before considering it in detail.

But Bailey T. Pope, vice president for design and construction for the Dawson Co., the Atlanta-based partner in Lexington Square, said that the councilman's words were "disappointing."

"I also want to point out that the Dawson Co. was one of the companies that developed the Centerpoint project, where there was a lot of historical preservation, so I think that there's inadequate credit given to our track record," he said, referring an \$85 million converted apartment building on Howard Street that opened in 2006 just blocks from the proposed Superblock.

"There's a question of feasibility that is not a simple thing to resolve," he added. "There are buildings [within the Superblock] that have problems that make it unfeasible to preserve them. These buildings have been vacant for years. They've not been properly maintained."

The lynchpin of the argument made by preservationists for maintaining the Superblock's historic structures is a 2001 Memorandum of Agreement signed between the city and the state. This document identified 16 contributing historic properties on the site, and urged

the city to make sure they are preserved under any development plan that was adopted.

Pope said his company was “working within the context of the memorandum,” but Johns Hopkins, executive director of the preservation group Baltimore Heritage, said that Lexington Square’s current plan preserves only three of the historic buildings in question.

“I think that the councilman has stepped forward and put his finger on the fundamental reason that we haven’t seen the project go forward,” Hopkins said. “He’s addressing the problem which is that the development plan does not address the MOA.”