

City councilman wants superblock project rebid

by Ryan Sharrow, *Baltimore Business Journal*, September 18, 2009

City Councilman William H. Cole IV is requesting the stalled so-called “superblock” project on Baltimore’s westside be rebid due to concerns over its developer.

In a letter dated Sept. 14 to Baltimore Development Corp., President M.J. “Jay” Brodie, Cole asks the city to terminate its partnership with Lexington Square Partners, the development team picked five years ago for the 3.6 acre project.

Cole wrote New York’s BLDG Management, part of the superblock development team, has a “disturbing track record.” Cole said several historic redevelopment projects by the firm in New York and New Jersey were not preserved as planned.

In addition, Cole wrote there a number of concerns expressed by the Maryland Historical Trust, Baltimore Heritage and Westside Renaissance over the preservation of the historic buildings involved in the superblock.

Plans to remake the superblock into a vibrant commercial and retail center have been in the works for more than a decade. But the project remains indefinitely delayed amid legal battles over historic preservation issues and whether the city properly awarded the project.

Cole wants to ensure a 2001 memorandum of understanding to preserve the buildings “while allowing for redevelopment” remains intact.

“I know that we absolutely agreed on the important of the superblock development to the continued revitalization of the Westside,” Cole wrote. “However, given the concerns about the current developer’s performance and track record elsewhere, it would appear that ending the relationship and rebidding the project would be the most prudent course to take.”

Lexington Square must resolve two major issues before it can move ahead with its development plan, Bailey Pope, vice president of design and construction for the Dawson Co., the Atlanta-based lead developer for Lexington Square, told the *Baltimore Business Journal* earlier this month. The developer is working with the city and the Maryland Historical Trust on resolving opposition to Lexington Square’s plans to tear down a number of historic buildings.

The possible re-emergence of a lawsuit by Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos has also stalled the project. Angelos sued the city in February 2007 over its awarding of development rights to Lexington Square, claiming the deal was illegal and violated the city’s competitive bidding requirements. The Circuit Court for Baltimore City dismissed the suit Aug. 14, but representatives for Angelos have said they plan to appeal the ruling.

That lawsuit has kept the city from selling the land it promised to Lexington Square. Pope said he can't go ahead with other details of the development, including getting commitments from hotels and retailers to take space in the superblock, until those groups know the project will actually happen.

BDC President M.J. "Jay" Brodie said earlier this month the city hasn't been able to turn the land over to the developer until now because of Angelos' lawsuit.

The city has also had to contend with other issues, including relocating merchants from the superblock to acquire their properties and, ultimately, sell them to Lexington Square for its development.

Pope declined immediate comment when reached Friday. BDC officials could not be immediately reached for comment.