

Court of Common Council

CITY OF HARTFORD
550 Main Street
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06103



Planning and Economic Development Committee
Hon. Matthew D. Ritter, Chair

Hon. Veronica Airey-Wilson
Hon. James Boucher
Hon Larry Deutsch

Hon. Kenneth Kennedy
Hon. rJo Winch

April 13, 2009

Hon. Calixto Torres, Council President
& City Council
550 Main Street
Hartford, CT 06103

On Tuesday, April 7, 2009 the Planning and Economic Development Committee held its regularly scheduled meeting at 6 p.m. in Council Chambers. The following item was discussed:

- I. Communication from Mayor Perez with accompanying resolution de Authorization to select the Ebony Horsewomen, Inc. as Tentative Developer to pursue the development of the Connecticut Equestrian and exhibition Center in Keney Park.

The following committee members were present:

Councilman and PEDC Chair Matthew Ritter
Councilwoman rJo Winch

In addition, the following people were present:

Councilman Luis Cotto
Hyacinth Yennie
Lincoln Davis
Donald Brown
Glenn Geathers
Mark McGovern
Carl Williams
Clinton Arnold
Bill Proffitt
Trude Mero
Edward Hagenbach
Rev. Wayne Carter

Curt Jensen
Jim Williams
Mary R. Pelletier
Al Garry
Pat Kelly
Other community members

PEDC Chair Ritter informed the audience that although an opinion had been requested from Corporation Counsel in December regarding the City's ability to develop an equestrian center in the park, that opinion had not yet been provided. Without an opinion, he said, the committee would not vote on the item. He welcomed public comment, and stated another committee meeting would be held once the opinion was received.

Hyacinth Yennie stated that while she applauded the efforts of the Ebony Horsewomen and the programs offered to young people, she was concerned about the use of so much park land as well as traffic concerns.

Yvon Alexandre, owner of Uptown Vibz and ACA Foods, past economic development chair of the Northeast NRZ, and Vice Chair of the MetroHartford Alliance, spoke in favor of the equestrian center, saying it would bring jobs through existing businesses.

Bill Proffitt asked if the city had done any due diligence of its own, i.e. a traffic or feasibility study. Mark McGovern responded that because the resolution only provides tentative developer status, the city has not taken those actions. He indicated such measures would follow approval of the resolution.

Trude Mero asked how the Council could expect to determine if the equestrian center is in the best interests of the city in general and the neighborhood in particular without at least a traffic study in hand. She also stated concerns with the impact to wildlife in the park, which she is familiar with as her home borders the proposed development site. She added that Tower Avenue already has flooding issues, and asked how this development might exacerbate those issues. She also felt that much of the resistance residents had to the project centered on the lack of transparency and specific information. Lastly, she stated that she was insulted that a city staffer referred to her and others who raised concerns about the project as "Amos and Andy folks," stating that as residents they had a right to speak about their concerns without being disparaged.

Lincoln Davis stated that a traffic study was critical given the magnitude of the project. He questioned whether the 1300 parking spaces would be adequate for a proposed 6,000-seat stadium. If the spaces indicated in the plan were insufficient, additional park land would be taken.

Rev. Carter as pastor of Mount Moriah Baptist Church on Barbour Street stated that he and his church supported the project, saying he would rather contend with traffic and renewal than unemployment and crime. He also stated there was a need for diverse development in the North End. He added that the project provided an opportunity to educate African American children about their equestrian culture and history.

Curt Jensen of the Greater Hartford Convention and Visitors Bureau stated that as a representative of an entity that seeks to promote the city, he supported the project as an effort that would help sell Hartford beyond New England. The equestrian center would

attract visitors and help sell Hartford's "neighborhood experience." He added that while the project starts at the neighborhood level, the project could speak to the neighborhood's ability to create a world-class destination.

Jim Williams said he was concerned with the broad generalizations that have been given to the community. He said he has yet to see specifics on how the equestrian center would do anything for the residents of the neighborhood, and until someone can provide him with specifics, he was unwilling to support it. He asked that the stakeholders for the project demonstrate how many jobs would be created for Hartford residents if the project went forward. He also asked how many people who had a vested interest in the project were residents of the city or the neighborhood.

Councilwoman Winch said that one of her colleagues on the National Association of Black Local Elected Officials is from Orlando and that they have an equestrian center downtown, but that it lacks the youth programs the Ebony Horsewomen's project would. She agreed with Jensen that Hartford needs to be a destination and also felt that traffic was a small price to pay, particularly when businesses are closing in the North End. She also said that the equestrian center was the only shovel-ready North End project and that it wasn't funded because the resolution had not been approved, and that both Reps. Douglas McCrory and Ken Green supported the project.

Donald Brown said as a resident of Tower Avenue, he was concerned that no one has spoken to those who would be directly impacted by the project. He was also concerned that the center would negatively impact the wildlife in the park and the neighborhood as a result.

Ms. Mero added that she was among the community members who supported the Ebony Horsewomen's original program and supported the entity and its offerings for young people. She also wanted the parents who attended to understand that the equestrian center would not impact the programs currently being offered, as they are two separate projects. She thanked Councilmen Kennedy, Ritter and Cotto for attending the community meetings where the issue was discussed, and expressed disappointment that no state representatives attended, yet were willing to support the project without any input from the residents who would be impacted.

Pat Kelly stated that Deborah Barrows, Mayor Mike and Sandra Kee Borges were among the community members who supported her efforts to establish the Ebony Horsewomen program, and that the community at issue is not what is seen in this room. She added that people in the North End have always suffered from people who call themselves leaders in the community but are generations removed from the up and coming leaders. She added that those stated leaders were or would soon be passing on, and a new crop of leaders is emerging. She cautioned the committee members not to believe that those in the room are the only ones with community influence.

Councilman Cotto disputed Councilwoman Winch's contention, stating that the equestrian center was far from being a shovel-ready project. He added that he could not assume that he would complete his Council term without upsetting one constituent or another, and would not make decisions based solely on that factor. He did believe that younger people should get involved and encouraged interested residents to sign up for boards and commissions.

Mary Pelletier applauded the efforts of the Ebony Horsewomen and their programs, but voiced concern that the city had not conducted a good-faith effort to identify land that was not parkland for the center. She asked the city to consider a study on the possibility of putting the center outside of park land, and that the gift of the park should be respected.

Carl Williams informed the committee that the Parks and Recreation Commission voted unanimously against the project, largely based on concerns for traffic and wildlife. He added that there are historical sand dunes in the park that cannot be disturbed.

Sharon Lewis stated that she has lived in the neighborhood for 55 years and wanted the committee to know that the Northeast NRZ does not represent the community. She said that some residents have talked about walking dogs in the park, and that's the only way you can walk through the park safely is with protection. She added that Mr. Keney did not envision crime and drug dealers when he bequeathed the land for a park.

Butch Lewis said that Keney Park has the lowest crime rate of any park in the city and that people are making the park out to be worse than it is. He advised people to check with the police department statistics for details.

Jeremiah Jackson, who participates in Ebony Horsewomen programs, said that as a 26-year-old, he hasn't seen many positive activities in the park. He said that if the community is concerned about the wildlife, why not create a museum in the park where the wildlife can be enjoyed by everyone.

Seth Lawson said that he has been riding horses since he was 5 and the concept of pricey horses and classist separatism in the equestrian field is outdated, saying the Ebony Horsewomen have had expensive horses in their stables. He also asked people to consider what might be done to improve the park should this project not go through. Councilman Ritter stated that the layoffs of 50 workers in the Department of Public Works have adversely impacted park maintenance.

Mr. Proffitt stated that the equestrian center would not be the factor that sets North End youth free, and that people should not have unrealistic expectations about what the center can create or reduce in terms of jobs and crime respectively. He stated that the community is not against creating opportunities in the city, but want those things to be well thought out. He added that the park's condition should be seen as the city's failure, not a call to trade parkland for structures.

Hearing no further comment, Councilman Ritter postponed action on the item pending an opinion from Corporation Counsel.

Respectfully submitted

Matthew D. Ritter
Chairman, Legislative Affairs Committee